



## The Religion of the North American Indians Alice C. Fletcher (1893)

*The Chicago World's Fair was held in 1893 to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus's first landing in the Americas. In connection with the fair, a pioneering multifaith gathering called the World's Parliament of Religions was held, for which speakers from around the world were invited to Chicago to lecture on their religions. Indigenous religions of North America were represented by a lecture from white American ethnologist Alice Fletcher. Born in Cuba but reared in New York City, Fletcher became a specialist in Native American cultures; she also helped the US government develop and administer policies intended to "civilize" Native Americans.*

*In fairness to Fletcher, it should be said that these excerpts from her attempt to summarize "the religion of the North American Indian" do not illustrate well her specific knowledge of diverse tribal traditions (of which she gives examples in her full address that are omitted here). At the end of her address, she hopes that the sacred pipe can be for the World's Parliament of Religions a symbol of peace and brotherhood; she is referring to a specific set of pipes on display there at the World's Fair, which had been gifted to her by Omahas among whom she did fieldwork.*

*["Tribes of various mental capacities"]*

The North American continent, extending from the tropics to the polar seas, presents wide diversity of physical aspects and many distinctive environments, which have left their impress upon the arts and cults of its peoples. Within this extended area, there are two races: the Eskimo, which will not come under our consideration today, and the American race proper.

This race, like our own, is composed of many peoples speaking different languages, languages belonging to widely different stocks. In our race, these stocks are few in number; but here in North America, there are more than two score, each varying from all the others as widely as the Semitic from the Aryan.

Among so many linguistic stocks, one would expect to find tribes of various mental capacities, and we do find them. There are some possessing a richer imagination, greater vitality of ideas, and greater power of organization, and these people have impressed themselves upon others less capable of organization and power of growth. Thus it has happened here, as elsewhere, that one people has been permeated by the ideas of another, as with us, who speak an Aryan tongue but have become imbued with the religious thought of the Semites.

*["The unequal development of man's spiritual nature"]*

The people we are considering are very ancient people. There is no reason to doubt that their ancestors were the men whose implements and weapons have been found associated with the remains of extinct specimens of animals. This evidence of antiquity is reinforced by the recent discovery of an eminent Mexican archaeologist, who has found the key to the interpretation of the ancient Mexican calendar, thereby revealing a system of time measurements based upon the recurrence of a certain relative position of the sun and moon, which required for the completion of its grand cycle 1,924 years. By the lowest calculation, this calendar was in use 2,300 years BC.

Thus, 4,000 years ago, the Mexicans were using a highly artificial calendar, one that, so far as is known today, could not have been borrowed from any other people, since nothing like it has been discovered in any other part of the world. How many years must have been spent in the observations which led to its construction, who can say? But we know that, from the completion of this system, the Mexican people had fixed religious rites and that their elaborate worship was regulated by cycles within the great cycle of their wonderful calendar. [...]

The point to be emphasized is that here in North America exists a race of great antiquity that has conserved social and religious forms which, speaking broadly, antedate those of the historic periods of the East. Here we can study not only the slow growth of society, but the equally slow and unequal development of man's mental and spiritual nature.

*[“The vagueness of the Indian's metaphysics”]*

A comprehensive sketch of the religion of the North American Indian cannot be given within the limits of this paper, much less a definite picture. Only the indication of a few salient points is possible, and even these will not be easy to make clear because of our own complex methods of thought. [...] The vagueness of the Indian's metaphysics must never be lost sight of, and to eliminate any scheme comprehensible to us from his mass of poetical and often seemingly inconsequential thought is an exceedingly delicate and difficult task. One runs the risk of formulating something which, although true in the premises, might be unrecognizable by the Indian himself.

The aboriginal American's feeling concerning God seems to indicate a power—mysterious, unknowable, unnamable—that animates all nature. [...] the Indian[, ...] all is mystery. Ignorant of the processes of nature, everything is simply alive to him [...]

The belief that everything was alive and active to help or hinder man not only led to numberless observances in order to placate and win favor, but it also prevented the development of individual responsibility. Success or failure was not caused solely by a man's own actions or shortcomings, but because he was helped or hindered by some one of these occult powers. [...] the Indian seldom thought of himself as being in the wrong, his peculiar belief concerning his position in nature having engendered in him a species of self-righteousness. [...]

As the ceremonials of the Indians from Alaska to Mexico rise before me, it is difficult to dismiss them without a word, for they are impressive and instructive; and although their grotesque features and, in some instances, their horrible realism overlies and seems to crush out the purpose of the portrayal, yet they all contain evidences of the mind struggling to find an answer to the ever-pressing question of man's origin and destiny.

*[“The ethics of the race”]*

The ethics of the race were simple.

With the Indian, truth was literal rather than comprehensive. This conception led to great punctiliousness in the observance of all forms and ceremonies, although it did not prevent the use

of artifice in war or in the struggle for power; but nothing excused a man who broke his word.

Justice was also literal and inexorable. Retributive justice was in exact proportion to the offense. There was no extenuation; there was no free forgiveness. A penalty must be enacted for every misdeed. Justice, therefore, often failed of its end, not having in it the element of mercy.

To be valorous, to meet hardships and suffering uncomplainingly, to flinch from no pain or danger when action was demanded, was the ideal set before every Indian. [...]

Hospitality was a marked virtue in the race. The lodge was never closed nor the last morsel of food ever refused to the needy. The richest man was not he who possessed the most, but he who had given away the most. This deeply rooted principle of giving is a great obstacle in the way of civilizing the Indians, as civilization depends so largely upon the accumulation of property.

In every home, the importance of peace was taught and the quarrelsome person pointed out as one not to be trusted, since success would never attend his undertakings whom neither the visible nor invisible power would befriend.

*[“Cannot his sacred symbol bring us together?”]*

This virtue of peace was inculcated in more than one religious ritual, and it was the special theme and sole object of a peculiar ceremony which once widely obtained over the valley of the Mississippi—the calumet, or the sacred pipe, ceremony. [...] In the presence of these symbolic pipes, there could be no strife. [...]

The ceremony of these pipes could only take place between men of different *gentes*, or of different tribes. Through it, they were made as one family, the affection, the harmony, and the goodwill of the family being extended far beyond the ties of blood. Under this benign influence of the pipes, strangers were made brothers, and enemies became friends. In the beautiful symbolism and ritual of these fellowship pipes, the initiated were told in the presence of a little child, who typified teachableness, that happiness came to him who lived in peace and walked in the straight path, which was symbolized on the pipes as glowing with sunlight. In these teachings, which transcended all others, we discern the dawn of the nobler and gentler virtues of mercy and its kindred graces.

We are recognizing today that God’s family is a large one and that human sympathy is strong. Upon this platform have been gathered men from every race of the Eastern world, but the race that for centuries was the sole possessor of this Western continent has not been represented. No American Indian has told us how his people have sought after God through the dim ages of the past. He is not here, but cannot his sacred symbol serve its ancient office once more and bring him and us together in the bonds of peace and brotherhood?

**Source:** Alice C. Fletcher, “The Religion of the North American Indians,” in *Neely’s History of the Parliament of Religions* [...], ed. Walter R. Houghton (Chicago: Frank Tennyson Neely, 1893), 584-587, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/cool.ark:/13960/t6m04pp2r>. Public domain.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Italicized section headings inserted by Duffy. A grammatical infelicity corrected (*or* → *nor*). Spelling and punctuation emended in line with modern conventions. A foreign word italicized.

These edited excerpts from Fletcher’s address are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.

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#### Additional sources:

A shorter version of Fletcher’s address appears in the official proceedings of the World’s Parliament of Religions. Alice C. Fletcher, “The Religion of the North American Indians,” in *The World’s Parliament of Religions*, ed. John Henry Barrows (Chicago: Parliament Publishing Co., 1893), 2:1078-1079, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3316178>. The official proceedings abridged various speakers’ addresses to save space. *Neely’s History* gives a longer version, from a stenographer’s transcript made while Fletcher was delivering the address.

On the Omaha sacred pipes that Fletcher displayed at the World’s Fair, see Joan Mark, *A Stranger in Her Native Land: Alice Fletcher and the American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 98-99, 103, 233-234, 238-239.



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