**Native Americans**

The religion and spiritual beliefs of Native Americans played an important role in their everyday life. Each tribe and peoples had their own unique beliefs, legends, and rituals, but they all believed that the world was filled with spirits.

   
*Kachina Dolls*by Jesse Walter Fewkes

**Guardian Spirits**   
  
The Native Americans in the Pacific Northwest believed that all living things were watched over by guardian spirits. This included animals, trees, people, and even some inanimate objects like the wind, storms, and water.   
  
Young boys would have to discover their own personal guardian spirit before they could become men. Each boy would venture off alone to commune with nature looking for a sign from his guardian spirit. Once found, this spirit would bestow a special characteristic or power on the boy and he would return to the tribe a man.   
  
**The Great Spirit**   
  
The Great Spirit was a supreme being that watched over everything including the other spirits of the world. There were different versions of the Great Spirit. Both the Sioux and the Algonquian Nations had the concept of a Great Spirit. The Blackfoot people believed in the "Old Man" who created all things and taught the Blackfoot how to gain spiritual wisdom.   
  
**Medicine Men and Women**   
  
The spiritual leaders of the Native American Indians were the medicine men and women of the village or tribe. These men and women often used herbs to help heal sick people. They also called on the spirits to help the tribe asking for assistance in areas such as healing, good weather, and help in battle. Sometimes the medicine man or woman was a respected elder who was known for being wise and who others went to for advice. 

**Three Worlds**   
  
Some of the Indian tribes in the Southeastern United States believed in the "three worlds" including the Upper World, the Lower World, and This World. The Upper World was considered perfect and pure. The Lower World was scary and chaotic. In between the two was This World where man lived. The spirits were able to travel between the different worlds and man was responsible for maintaining a balance between the three worlds.   
  
**Rites of Passage**   
  
One of the most important times in any Native American's life was their coming of age. This was when they went from being considered a child to being an adult. Different tribes had different ways of celebrating this moment. In some tribes the boy or girl had to undergo an ordeal to prove they were worthy. Young men who passed the ritual would often be given a new name to indicate their status.   
  
**Vision Quests**   
  
In order to get closer to the spirits, some men went on vision quests. They would go off into the wilderness alone. Usually they would fast (not eat) and sometimes they would take drugs or inflict wounds on their bodies. In the end, they hoped to gain a vision from the spirits that would guide them or help them make an important life decision.   
  
**Kachinas**   
  
Indian tribes in the Southwest called their spirits kachinas. They made special decorated kachina dolls that represented the different spirits. They also made kachina masks that helped them to channel the spirits.   
  
**Interesting Facts about Native American Religion**

* The Sioux people called the Great Spirit "Wakan Tanka".
* Many tribes also had a ceremonial pipe they would smoke using tobacco and other herbs. They felt that the smoke provided a pathway to the spirit world.
* Unlike many cultures, Native American religion wasn't overly concerned with the afterlife and death. They accepted death as a matter of fact and believed the afterlife was a happy place with sunny skies and bountiful hunting grounds.
* The traditional Native American religion was revived with the Ghost Dance. The Ghost Dancers believed that the Great Spirit would remove the white men from their land.
* The Sun Dance was a religious ceremony practiced by the Sioux Indians. Sitting Bull saw his vision of the Battle of Little Big Horn while performing the Sun Dance.