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978-0-521-38599-2 - Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine

E. R. Dodds

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

## MAN AND THE MATERIAL WORLD

*The meaningless absurdity of life is the only incontestable knowledge accessible to man.*

TOLSTOI

**T**HE Wiles Trust, to which this book owes its origin, was established 'to promote the study of the history of civilisation and to encourage the extension of historical thinking into the realm of general ideas'. In what way the present volume of lectures can hope to serve that aim I can perhaps best indicate by quoting two remarks made by eminent ancient historians. In the last chapter of his *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, after examining and criticising the numerous theories, political, economic and biological, by which men have sought to explain the decline of the Empire, Rostovtzeff finally turned to psychological explanation. He expressed the view that a change in people's outlook on the world 'was one of the most potent factors'; and he added that further investigation of this change is 'one of the most urgent tasks in the field of ancient history'. My second quotation is from the closing chapter of Professor Nilsson's *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*. He writes: 'The study of the syncretism of late antiquity which has been actively pursued in recent de-

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caedes has concerned itself mainly with beliefs and doctrines, while the spiritual soil from which these growths arose and drew their nourishment has been touched on only in passing and in general terms; yet that is the heart of the matter, its weightiest element.' And he goes on to point out that for a study of the religious experience of late antiquity 'in William James's sense' there is abundant material available.<sup>1</sup>

I hope that these two quotations sufficiently suggest what I am attempting to do in these lectures. Fully to explain the change of mental outlook and its relationship to the material decline would be a task far beyond my competence; but within the particular field to which Nilsson points I shall try to contribute something towards a better understanding of what was happening, and even—in certain cases—of why it happened. These are lectures on religious experience in the Jamesian sense.<sup>2</sup> If I touch on the development of pagan philosophical theory or of Christian religious dogma, I shall do so only to provide a background for the personal experience of individuals. With the external forms of worship I shall not deal at all. I shall not, for example, discuss the so-called 'mystery-religions' and their supposed influence on Christian ritual, since with rare exceptions they provide nothing germane to my present purpose: apart from the controversial statements of Christian Fathers, the evidence

<sup>1</sup> M. Rostovtzeff, *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (1926), p. 486; Nilsson, *Gesch.* II, p. 682.

<sup>2</sup> James defined religion, for his purposes, as 'the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine'. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), Lecture II, p. 50 (Fontana Library edition).

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for them is chiefly inscriptional, and inscriptions seldom tell us much about the underlying personal experience. The most striking exception is the famous account of Isiac initiation in the last book of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*; and that has been so thoroughly discussed by Nock, Festugière<sup>1</sup> and others that I have nothing to add.

Even with these limitations the subject proposed by Rostovtzeff and Nilsson is still far too wide. A story which begins with Philo and St Paul and ends with Augustine and Boethius is much too long to be told in four lectures, even if I were competent to tell the whole of it. I have therefore judged it best to concentrate my attention on the crucial period between the accession of Marcus Aurelius and the conversion of Constantine, the period when the material decline was steepest and the ferment of new religious feelings most intense. In calling it 'an Age of Anxiety' I have in mind both its material and its moral insecurity; the phrase was coined by my friend W. H. Auden, who applied it to our own time, I suppose with a similar dual reference. The practice of chopping history into convenient lengths and calling them 'periods' or 'ages' has of course its drawbacks. Strictly speaking, there are no periods in history, only in historians; actual history is a smoothly flowing continuum, a day following a day. And even when hindsight enables us to cut it through at a critical point, there is always a time-lag and an overlap. When Marcus Aurelius came to the throne no bell rang to warn the world that the *pax Romana* was about to end and be succeeded by an age of barbarian invasions, bloody civil wars, recurrent epidemics, galloping

<sup>1</sup> Nock, *Conversion*, ch. ix; Festugière, *Personal Religion*, ch. v.

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inflation and extreme personal insecurity. For a long time the majority of individuals must have continued to think and feel as they had always thought and felt; the adjustment to the new situation could only be gradual. More surprisingly, a time-lag of the opposite kind also occurs: moral and intellectual insecurity can anticipate its material counterpart. C. G. Jung remarks somewhere that 'long before 1933 there was already a faint smell of burning in the air'.<sup>1</sup> In the same way we can recognise a foretaste of things to come in the last chapter of the treatise *On the Sublime*, in certain passages of Epictetus and Plutarch, and most clearly of all in Gnosticism, of which the best-known representatives—Saturninus, Basilides, Valentinus and (if we count him a Gnostic) Marcion—constructed their systems in the prosperous years of the Antonine peace.<sup>2</sup> For these reasons I shall treat my chronological limits with some elasticity where the evidence demands it.

One other confession and I shall have done with these

<sup>1</sup> C. G. Jung, *Essays on Contemporary Events* (Eng. trans. 1947), p. 51. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 69: 'Long before the Hitler era, in fact before the first World War, there were already symptoms of the mental change which was taking place in Europe. The mediaeval picture of the world was breaking up and the metaphysical authority which was set above this world was fast disappearing.'

<sup>2</sup> [Longinus], *De sublim.*, 44.6 ff., the world enslaved to passion; Epict., 3. 13.9 ff., the external security of the *pax Romana* contrasted with the essential insecurity of the human condition; Plut. *De superstit.*, 7, 168 CD, on the new sense of sin (cf. my paper in *Greece and Rome*, 1933, pp. 101 ff.), and the radical dualism of *Is. et Os.*, 45–6, 369 B ff. On the chronological difficulty of the view that Gnosticism was simply a reaction to material hardship see Jonas, *Gnosis*, 1, pp. 64 f. In the same way Erich Fromm's speculations in *The Dogma of Christ*, 1930 (Eng. trans., 1963), founder on the rock of chronology; he makes third-century social conditions responsible for shifts of dogma which had in fact set in much earlier.

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preliminaries. The historian's interpretation of this period is inevitably coloured in some degree by his own religious beliefs. It is therefore right that I should declare my interest, so that readers may make the appropriate allowances. It is in fact a kind of disinterest. As an agnostic I cannot share the standpoint of those who see the triumph of Christianity as the divine event to which the whole creation moved. But equally I cannot see it as the blotting out of the sunshine of Hellenism by what Proclus called 'the barbarian theosophy'.<sup>1</sup> If there is more about pagans in these lectures than about Christians, it is not because I like them better; it is merely because I know them better. I stand outside this particular battle, though not above it: I am interested less in the issues which separated the combatants than in the attitudes and experiences which bound them together.

In this first chapter I shall discuss general attitudes to the world and the human condition; in the second and third, some specific types of experience. Joseph Bidez described our period as one in which 'Men were ceasing to observe the external world and to try to understand it, utilize it or improve it. They were driven in upon themselves. . . . The idea of the beauty of the heavens and of the world went out of fashion and was replaced by that of the Infinite.'<sup>2</sup> How did this change come about? Was Freud right in connecting it with 'the low estimation put upon earthly life by Christian doctrine'?<sup>3</sup>

Let us start by reminding ourselves of the physical pic-

<sup>1</sup> Proclus, *In Remp.*, II, 255.21 Kroll.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Bidez, *C.A.H.*, XII, p. 629.

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (Eng. trans., 1930), p. 45.

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ture of the cosmos which later antiquity inherited from Aristotle and the Hellenistic astronomers.<sup>1</sup> The earth was a globe suspended in space at the centre of a system of concentric moving spheres. First came the envelope of thick and murky terrestrial atmosphere which reached as far as the moon; beyond the moon were the successive spheres of the sun and the five planets; beyond these again the eighth sphere, composed of fiery ether, purest of material elements, which in its daily revolution about the earth carried round with it the fixed stars. The whole vast structure was seen as the expression of a divine order; as such, it was felt to be beautiful and worshipful; and because it was self-moving it was thought to be alive or informed by a living spirit. So much was common ground to all the philosophical schools save the Epicureans, and for most men educated in the Greek tradition it remained common ground throughout our period and beyond it. But while the parts of this cosmos were believed to be linked together by *sympatheia*, an unconscious community of life, the status and value of the parts was by no means uniform. Across the cosmic map Aristotle, following hints in Plato, had drawn a line which came to be generally accepted: above the line, beyond the moon, lay the unvarying heavens where the stars moved, 'rank on rank, The army of unalterable law'; below it lay the sub-lunar world, the domain of chance, mutability and death. And in this glittering house of many mansions the earth appeared as the meanest mansion of all: it was held to be

<sup>1</sup> On the general religious influence of this world-picture see Nilsson, 'The New Conception of the Universe in Late Greek Paganism', *Eranos*, 44 (1946), pp. 20 ff.

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compact of the mere dregs and sediment of the universe, the cold, heavy, impure stuff whose weight had caused it to sink to the centre.

As time went on, this traditional antithesis between the celestial world and the terrestrial was more and more heavily emphasised,<sup>1</sup> and it was increasingly used to point a moral. In the recurrent *topos* of the flight of the soul through the universe—imagined as taking place in a dream, or after death, or sometimes just in waking contemplation—we can trace a growing contempt for all that may be done and suffered beneath the moon. That the earth is physically tiny in comparison with the vastness of space had been noted by the astronomers: it was no more than a pinpoint, a *στιγμή* or *punctum*, on the cosmic map.<sup>2</sup> And the moralists early used this observation as the text for a sermon on the vanity of human wishes: it appears in Cicero, in Seneca, in Celsus, in pseudo-Aristotle *De mundo*, and in Lucian's parody of a celestial voyage, the *Icaromenippus*.<sup>3</sup> That is perhaps no more than literary fashion; all these authors may be copying from a Greek model which is now lost. But the writer who

<sup>1</sup> Logically, Christianity, holding as it did that heaven and earth were alike the creation of God and alike perishable, might have been expected to deny the antithesis or at least attenuate it. But it seems that only John Philoponus in the sixth century attempted this, and his attempt made no impression: the old equation, 'celestial' = 'divine', was too firmly established in the human imagination. See S. Sambursky, *The Physical World of Late Antiquity* (1962), ch. vi.

<sup>2</sup> Geminus (c. 70 B.C.), 16.29, p. 176.7 ff. Manit.; Cleomedes, 1.11.56, p. 102.21 ff. Ziegler. Cf. Festugière, *Révélation*, II, pp. 449 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Cic., *Somn. Scip.*, 3.16; Sen., *N.Q.* i, *praef.* 8; Celsus *apud* Orig. *c. Cels.*, 4.85; [Ar.], *De mundo*, 1, 391 a 18 ff.; Lucian, *Icar.*, 18, where the richest land-owners are seen as farming 'a single Epicurean atom'. Most of these passages are quoted in full by Festugière, *loc. cit.* Cf. also Plotinus, III, ii, 8.6, with Theiler's note. For celestial voyages in general see most recently J. D. P. Bolton, *Aristeas of Proconnesus* (1962), ch. vii.

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really makes the thought his own, detaching it from the artificial context of the celestial voyage and using it in many variations with a quite new intensity, is Marcus Aurelius. As the earth is a pinpoint in infinite space, so the life of man is a pinpoint in infinite time, a knife-edge between two eternities—*στιγμή του αἰῶνος*.<sup>1</sup> His activities are 'smoke and nothingness'; his prizes are 'a bird flying past, vanished before we can grasp it'. The clash of armies is 'the quarrel of puppies over a bone'; the pomp of Marcus's own Sarmatian triumph is the self-satisfaction of a spider which has caught a fly.<sup>2</sup> For Marcus this is not empty rhetoric: it is a view of the human condition, and it is meant in deadly earnest.

Associated with it in Marcus is the feeling that man's activity is not only unimportant, it is also in some sense not quite real. This feeling was expressed in another ancient *topos*—the comparison, staled for us by much repetition, of the world to a stage and men to actors or marionettes. It has a long history, starting from two passages in Plato's *Laws*, where we are told that 'men and women are puppets chiefly, having in them only a small portion of reality'; whether God designed them as play-things only, or for some more serious purpose, remains in

<sup>1</sup> M. Ant., 6.36. Cf. 4.3.3 τὸ χάος τοῦ ἐφ' ἑκάτερα ἀπείρου αἰῶνος: 9.32; 10.17; 12.32. The transference of the idea from space to time is again not new (cf. Sen., *Epist.* 49.3; *Plut.* [?] *De educ.*, 17, 13 A, and *Cons. ad Apoll.*, 17, 111 C). But it is expressed by Marcus with a new vehemence of conviction; and the personal character of his notebooks makes them better evidence for 'the feelings of an individual man in his solitude' than the letters of Seneca, the essays of Plutarch or the sermons of Epictetus, all of which were designed for a public audience.

<sup>2</sup> M. Ant., 10.31; 6.15; 5.33; 10.10, a sardonic allusion to the triumph celebrated in A.D. 176.



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doubt.<sup>1</sup> After Plato the image was exploited by the early Cynics and Sceptics: for Bion of Borysthenes, Chance (τύχη) is the authoress of the drama; for Anaxarchus and Monimus what we call reality is a stage set, and our experience of it is no more than a dream or a delusion.<sup>2</sup> The Stoics, from Chrysippus onwards, use the comparison more conventionally, to point the banal moral that it takes all sorts to make a world, or to emphasise, as Seneca and Epictetus do, that one should make the best even of a very minor part.<sup>3</sup> It is only in Marcus Aurelius that the suggestion of unreality reappears, for example where he jots down a series of images for human life, beginning with 'stage plays and the vain pomp of processions' and ending with 'puppets jerking on a string'; in between come sham fights, the throwing of bones to puppies or crumbs to fish, the futile industry of ants and the futile scurrying of panic-stricken mice. Elsewhere he speaks of the whole of our perceptual life as 'a dream and a delirium'.<sup>4</sup> Much the same feeling underlies the long and

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 804 B, 644 D-E. Cf. Dodds, *Greeks*, pp. 214 f., 229; and H. D. Rankin in *Eranos*, 60 (1962), pp. 127-31.

<sup>2</sup> Teles, p. 5.1 Hense; Sext. Emp., *Adv. math.*, 7.88.

<sup>3</sup> Chrysippus, *SVF* II, 1181; Sen., *Epist.* 77.20; Epict., 1.29.39-43; 4.1.165; 4.7.13. And so also Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.*, 7.11.65. On the various applications of the comparison see R. Helm, *Lucian und Menipp* (1906), pp. 45 ff.

<sup>4</sup> M. Ant., 7.3; 2.17.1, τὰ δὲ τῆς ψυχῆς ὄνειρος καὶ τῦφος, where ψυχῆ must be understood as excluding νοῦς (cf. the threefold division of the personality at 12.3). For worldly existence as dreaming see also 6.31. The comparison of human life to a dream was familiar from classical Greek poetry (Pindar, *Pyth.*, 8.95 ff., Aesch., *P.V.*, 547 ff., Aristoph., *Birds*, 687), but in our period it is reiterated by philosophers with a new earnestness, partly on the basis of Plato, *Rep.*, 476 C. It appears in Marcus' contemporaries, Albinus (*Epitome*, 14.3) and Maximus of Tyre (10.6), but is most fully developed by Plotinus, III, vi, 6.65 ff., and Porphyry, *De abst.*, 1.27 f.: to them the thought has become more than a metaphor. Further examples are quoted by

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splendid passage where Plotinus in his last years, drawing both on Plato and on the Stoics, interprets the grandeurs and miseries of human life in terms of a stage performance. For him, as for the aged Plato, man's earnest is God's play, performed in the world-theatre by 'fair and lovely living puppets'—puppets who mistake themselves for men and suffer accordingly, though in truth they are but external shadows of the inner man, the only truly existent, truly substantial person.<sup>1</sup> This is linked with Plotinus' general doctrine that action is everywhere 'a shadow of contemplation and an inferior substitute for it.'<sup>2</sup> When cities are sacked, their men massacred, their women raped, it is but a transitory moment in the endless drama: other and better cities will arise one day, and the children conceived in crime may prove better men than their fathers.<sup>3</sup> That seems to be his final word on the tragic history of his time.

From Plotinus this attitude of contemptuous resignation was transmitted to the later Neoplatonic school, Christian as well as pagan. To Gregory of Nyssa, for

Merkelbach, *Roman und Mysterium* (1962), p. 315, n. 2. Especially striking is the intensification of the comparison in the recently published *Evangelium Veritatis*, a Valentinian document, where worldly life is elaborately likened not to a dream but to a nightmare (p. 28.26–30.14 Malinine–Puech–Quispel).

<sup>1</sup> Plot., III, II, 15. The theme is further elaborated in chs. 16–18 with reference to the problem of free will (the puppet theory must not be used to evade responsibility). It is significant, as Professor Armstrong points out to me, that in Plotinus only the 'outer man' is a puppet, whereas in the *Laws* the most serious human activities are treated as a kind of play (803 c: cf. *Epin.*, 980 A). On the status of the Plotinian 'inner man' see below, ch. III, pp. 83f.

<sup>2</sup> Plot., III, VIII, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Plot., III, II, 18.15 ff. In A.D. 269, about the time when Plotinus wrote these words, Byzantium was looted by its own garrison; a few years earlier Autun had been sacked by a mob of soldiers and peasants. Cf. also I, IV, 7.18 ff., the eloquent passage from which Augustine quoted at the siege of Hippo (Possidius, *Vit. Aug.* 28).