

CHAPTER I

SOME ANTI-NOMIES OF THOUGHT

WITH the earliest dawn of social life among men arose a belief in higher beings who had power to influence the course of the little world that centred round the community.

Sun, moon and stars, fire and hail, snow and vapours, wind and storm, fulfilled their word. Tree and shrub, bird, beast and fish, were under their dominion; so was the community itself. And because "They" were persons, naturally Their interest was focussed on the community of persons who were so like Them, yet so much fettered by material needs. For the tribe the gods created the world and everything in it, and in its interest all was controlled.

Nevertheless the gods had their own concerns, and they were apt to be distracted from their duty to the tribe by the pressure of private affairs. The sun or moon might be put out by a troublesome fellow-deity, or some monster might swallow the one or the other. Such things had to be dealt with at once, and the

2 *Primitive Religions Personal*

offender punished or made to disgorge. Celestial harmony had no part in the conception of the pantheon. Therefore the gods required reminders, when they forgot for the moment that the centre of the universe could not get enough to eat without their help.

Again, since they were of a touchy temperament, jealous gods, they had to be cajoled into forgiveness of past neglect when they manifested their wrath, and the sickness was sore in the land; when the sun was darkened, or the moon gave no light. Clearly, since they were many, the right god must be appeased. It was easy enough to determine the particular god involved in simple cases, but in more general disasters expert advice was needed. Even in the simplest matters it was important to select the best mode of propitiation. Hence, naturally, arose the rudiments of a priestly system.

Each tribe was perhaps, in its own opinion, the hub around which the universe moved; for whose benefit the sun and moon ran their never-ending race, and the stars swung out to cheer the dark hours that were given for a time of rest. But practical experience taught that there were other tribes all round, with other gods, whose existence and actions could not be overlooked. As the tribes waged war, so did the gods also. Evidently, if the tribe was to retain its position, and even its existence, its own gods must be kept in good humour. They must also

Polydaemonism and Fetishism 3

be kept up to the mark, and be reminded constantly that celestial quarrels afforded no excuse for the neglect of terrestrial duties.

Since there appeared to be design in each detail of the world; since man himself was a designer of tools and an organiser of action; all design was explained as the immediate action of a personal being. And because man was only capable of comparatively simple and immediate acts himself, so each portion of the design of the world must have immediate origin in the will of a special being. In this way probably arose the promiscuous attribution of personality to the spirits of wind and rain, of mountain and river, of tree and cornfield. Furthermore, the whole system was complicated by the idea of individual as opposed to tribal, guardian spirits, which took up a temporary residence in some natural or artificial object¹. From this arose the system of fetishism. A fetish may be defined as the temporary, or more rarely permanent, guardian spirit of an individual which resides for a time in some material object. The spirit is not a god, for its modes of action are limited, and are directed towards the welfare of the individual, often only in regard to some *special* undertaking, which may be contrary to that of the tribe.

¹ Jevons, *The Idea of God in Early Religions*. Haddon, *Magic and Fetishism*, does not draw such a clear line between the individual reference of a fetish and the tribal reference of an idol or totem.

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4 *The many Tribal Gods*

But even when the fetish was used for the purpose of injuring another member of the tribe, the underlying idea was still spiritual. To the savage the spiritual world, peopled by strangely anthropopathic beings certainly, is as real as the objective world around him. And the rudiments of all this are to be sought in the first dawnings of self-consciousness and of realisation of the personality of other men¹.

Partly owing to the ever widening range of commercial transactions, partly to the recognition that the anthropomorphic pantheon and pandaemonium are peopled by beings whose natures are lower in some respects than those of their worshippers, a change of ideas inevitably comes. Economic intercourse brings a knowledge of parallel religions, and the pantheon grows in complexity as the tribal system gives place to the national. Similar gods seem to be different aspects of the same being, and identification takes place, while others, often antagonistic to one another, are incorporated and go to swell the

¹ I cannot agree (with Jevons) that "common consciousness" precedes "self-consciousness," even allowing for the fact that he uses the words in a more loose and colloquial sense than I am prepared to give them in such a connection, since it inevitably leads to vagueness and confusion of thought. The attribution of personality to the essential nature underlying material objects is the result of reasoning, even if very imperfect reasoning. And the power of reasoning is an attribute of the self-conscious individual, not of the community. I am not sure, however, that more is meant than *herd-instinct* (see ch. III).

merge in One Great Spirit

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confusion of the celestial host. Growing confusion brings with it growing anthropomorphism. The clash and strife of communal and personal interests become intensified as they are translated into the spirit-world. Human actions which are questionable, though immediately expedient, assume a very different complexion when the gods perform them. Propitiation and cult persist, but true worship dies, for the god is lower than the man, in morality, though not in power. The spirit of man wanders further in its search for a higher being. Where so many gods exist, it is difficult to believe that any one of them was the creator; they sink into mere tutelary deities; and the mind finds solution of the deeper problems, and satisfaction of the need of worship, in another Being, further off perhaps from the everyday life, standing out of sight behind the phalanx of minor gods—the Great Spirit; even the All-Father.

In modern phrase we may say that He is transcendent, but He is emphatically not immanent.

Slowly the gods die. The unity of the human soul which is the very core of personality demands unity in that which it worships, and the tribal or national god is merged in the Great Spirit. At the same time He draws nearer, for the search of the mind for a reasonable ordered explanation of everyday happenings does not grow less. The cult of the lesser gods becomes more and more formal, and when

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6 *Spiritual Nature of Primitive Religion*

the rhythm of tradition is disturbed by some crisis, it dies away. He must increase, they must decrease; it is the eternal law. And so the old gods die. The demand for a God who is near, in the house, in the field, in the temple, is met in the idea of a Great Creator who is, and who is yet becoming; the Distant All-Father who is yet the Spirit of Manhood and the very Dweller in the Innermost.

From the lowest to the highest stage it is the spiritual side of man's nature which seeks fulfilment through relationship with spirit. Even in the fetish, it is the indwelling spirit that gives the gnarled root, the fantastic stone, or the pipe bowl filled with dirt and ordure their potency. Even in the grotesque idol it is the God that is worshipped. The spirits of the wind or of the tree are to be feared, not winds and trees themselves. The Linga and the Fig-tree do not themselves confer fertility, but the spirits or the gods that dwell in them. True, the linga may degenerate into an amulet, the fig-tree into a charm. But so too does polytheism degenerate into a mockery of religion. Each stage of thought outgrown brings death to the spirit that clings to it, just as surely as the physical inertia of the unadaptive organism brings destruction in the evolution of the creature that is being prepared for a soul. Greece mocked the Gods before she passed. Rome mocked and prayed while barbarian races drove her in upon herself. Plato

Religion based on Ideals 7

and Marcus Aurelius saw with clearer eyes, but they could not carry the nation with them.

On the other hand the Jewish race was scattered so that it was no more a nation. Twice its spiritual vitality overcame national disaster, and even at the last the soul of Judaism conquered the world, and still lives, a worthy foundation for the Saviour of the world to build on.

The only religion that rests on a firm foundation is the religion which finds an ideal in every aspect of its God. Just in so far as one aspect falls below the ethical and spiritual ideal of the nation, just so far will the seeds of decay manifest themselves; and without ruthless excision the decay will spread beneath the surface until the whole fabric of society becomes rotten and collapses; even as the tiny fibrils of a fungus spread insidiously and all unsuspected in an elm tree, till the tree crashes to the ground in an autumn gale, and the rot is revealed. The prophet is the mycologist of the nation, whose office is to watch for the first indications of decay. Happy the nation that listens to its prophets, and is flexible enough to alter its religious system to suit the advance of its intellectual and moral growth!

From first to last the mainspring of religion is, as we have said, the belief in personal entities dwelling in the spirit world. Personality is the basis of Godhead. The idea that this demand for personality as

8 *Failure of Mechanistic Philosophy*

a background to the shifting drama of the universe may be the result of an anthropomorphic projection of the human mind into the imperfectly understood is a late development of thought. In its logical or modern form it was bound to come, as the result both of over estimation of the importance and universality of Natural Laws, half understood, which seemed capable of indefinite application as fact after newly-discovered fact fell into place, and of the science of comparative Religion. The mechanistic and atomistic interpretations of nature seemed all-satisfying when first they were formulated, and even philosophy was for a time carried away by the seductive simplicity of such views. Mechanism, and the solar myth turned out by a German workshop, proved as fascinating to the half-educated intellect as the clockwork railway to the boy. But as the boy grows he soon tires of clockwork and asks for a train that goes by steam. So man very quickly asks for something that has more living force and reality at the back of it. The artificial simplicity of the solar myth suggests too clearly its lack of reality. It is but a model—a working model, it is true, but still very different from the real thing. It will only work on a small scale; no mechanical spring would be strong enough to drive a life-size universe. The attribution of personality is no “disease of language,” as Max Müller held it to be. The solar myth passes like a meteor, leaving no trace behind.

Pantheism—Spinoza

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None the less, the search for origins must be pursued till rational knowledge becomes coextensive with experience. And so philosophy must play her part, questing through the unknown; blindly perhaps, in as much as she does not know whither her investigations will lead her: she has no revelation, such as Religion claims, to aid her in her search: yet she starts from the sure foundation of the *known*, and works methodically and honestly towards further understanding.

Impersonal pantheism achieves a temporary success, inspired by the genius of Spinoza. For him God is immanent, not transcendent. He is without passions, without will, without goodness, without purpose. One of His attributes is pure absolute thought. He thinks Himself, understands Himself, and so is self-conscious; yet He is not personal, and everything that exists is the necessary result of His nature. God does not *create* the world, He *is* the world¹, and the world is real.

The same that exists in the attribute of consciousness as object (*objective*), as the content of our ideas, exists in the attribute of extension as something actual, independent

¹ Cf. Windelband, *History of Philosophy*, p. 418: "Spinozism is a consistent identification of the relation of Cause and Effect with that of Ground and Consequent. The causality of the Deity is, therefore, not in time, but is *eternal*, that is timeless; and true knowledge is a consideration of things *sub quadam aeternitatis specie*." This idea has much in common with the results to which we are driven in chh. v and vi.

10 *Leibnitz—Empiricists—Idealists*

of any idea or mental representation (*formaliter*). But neither of these two modes of existence is more original than the other, or forms a prototype for the other: both equally express the nature of God (*exprimere*). Hence an idealistic interpretation of Spinoza is as incorrect as a materialistic, although both might be developed out of his system¹.

The doctrine of unity is Spinoza's great contribution to thought.

Leibnitz added plurality, and indeed destroyed unity in so doing, only saving it by the mechanical device of the Pre-established Harmony.

The Empirical School, ruled by recent discoveries in the physical world, left only three possibilities open to the mind by its rationalistic investigation of the data of the senses; agnosticism, atheism and deism. The Deist might believe in a personal god, but he set up a dualism which rendered the idea of infinite personality untenable. His personal God was a limited being: His very personality was in itself a limitation. "God was regarded as standing apart from the world and man in splendid isolation²." Intellect was everything, feeling and emotion nothing.

¹ Windelband, *History of Philosophy*, p. 419.

² Storr, *Development of English Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 202. Consult further Harte, *The Philosophical Treatment of Divine Personality from Spinoza to Herman Lotze*; Seth, *Scottish Philosophy*; Taylor, *Elements of Metaphysics*; Windelband, *History of Philosophy*, etc.