MAN AND HIS SUPERSTITIONS

MAN AND HIS SUPERSTITIONS

BY

CARVETH READ, M.A. (CANTAB.)

EMERITUS PROFESSOR IN THE UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON

SECOND EDITION

CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1925

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107645707

First published 1920
First Edition (as part of
The Origin of Man and of his Superstitions) 1920
Second Edition (as separate book) 1925
First paperback edition 2011

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-64570-7 Paperback

CONTENTS

CHAPTER VII

CHAPTER VIII

EXTRACTS FROM THE PREFACE

TO *THE ORIGIN OF MAN AND OF HIS SUPERSTITIONS*

THE volume now published explains in its first part an hypothesis that the human race has descended from some ape-like stock by a series of changes which began and, until recently, were maintained by the practice of hunting in pack for animal food, instead of being content with the fruits and other nutritious products of the tropical forest. The hypothesis occurred to me many years ago, and was first published (in brief) in *The Metaphysics of Nature* (1905), Ch. XV. § 3, and again in *Natural and Social Morals* (1909), Ch. VII. § 2; but all it implied did not become clear until, in lecturing on Comparative Psychology, there was forced upon me the necessity of effecting an intelligible transition from the animal to the human mind, and of not being satisfied to say year after year that hands and brains were plainly so useful that they must have been developed by Natural Selection. Then one day the requisite ideas came to light; and an outline of the hypothesis was read at the Meeting of the British Association (Section H) at Birmingham in 1913, and printed in *Man*, November 1914.

* * * * * *

The article in *Man* dealt chiefly with the physical changes which our race has undergone. The correlative mental changes were explained in the *British Journal of Psychology*.

* * * * * *

The hunting-pack, then, was the first form of human society; and in lecturing on Ethnopsychology two questions especially interested me: (1) Under what mental conditions did the change take place from the organisation of the hunting-pack (when this weakened) to the settled life of the tribe or group? and (2) Why is the human mind everywhere befogged with ideas of Magic and Animism? They seemed at last to have

the same answer: these superstitions were useful and (apparently) even necessary in giving to elders enough prestige to preserve tradition and custom when the leader of the hunt was no longer conspicuous in authority. A magic-working gerontocracy was the second form of society; and the third form was governed by a wizard-king or a priest-king, or by a king supported by wizards or priests. One must, therefore, understand the possibility of these beliefs in Magic and Animism, and how they arose and obtained a hold upon all tribes and nations; and hence the second part of this volume —on Superstition.

Some results of inquiry into these matters were also published in the *British Journal of Psychology*, and are here reproduced, with the editor's consent, enlarged and, for the most part, rewritten.

CARVETH READ.

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, LONDON.
July, 1920.

PREFACE

TO *MAN AND HIS SUPERSTITIONS*

THIS volume is a corrected impression of the last seven chapters of *The Origin of Man and of His Superstitions*, published in 1920; and the first two chapters of that work (much enlarged and rearranged) are now issued separately in a new edition, as *The Origin of Man*.

The connection between the earlier and later chapters of the work as formerly published is that the origin of Man as we know him, living according to definite customs under some sort of government, cannot be understood until we know not only how he came to exist in the animal world, but also what induced him to observe customs and to submit to the decisions of some men in each tribe as to what were the customs and what the penalties for breaking them. The explanation of this essential characteristic of mankind everywhere is that at first men were sociable because they lived by hunting as a pack, and as a pack they had their customs and leaders determined by personal superiority; but that when the time came (as it always did come) when hunting was no longer the chief means of livelihood, or when by the acquisition of effective weapons the pack was no longer necessary to good success in hunting, a group of men and women was kept together (when it was kept together) by belief in the magical powers of some of their number (generally elders), giving them a reputation for wisdom and power much in excess of their merit, and enabling them to enforce the group's customs and direct its movements. I say "when the group kept together," for conceivably it often broke up and was lost. But with those who did keep together and maintained the 'political' character of Man, what we know of the most backward peoples now extant makes it highly probable that Magic was the sanction of their crude government, supplemented sooner or later by Animism or belief in the influence of spirits, and the consequent growth of kingship and priesthoods. And these beliefs in Magic and Animism (here called Superstition) not only made possible the beginning of government (or its transfer from the pack-leader to the tribal

elder) but ever since have had a potent share in maintaining and directing it: as by a glance over universal history anyone may see. The subject, therefore, deserves our study. What are these beliefs? How did they arise, and under what conditions obtain, everywhere and in every age, their hold upon the human mind? The story is not without edification for ourselves.

My use of the word 'superstition' has been complained of by more than one critic (or in more than one journal) as unworthily disparaging the honest persuasions of simple people—beliefs in Magic and Animism still flourishing amongst ourselves as well as in Papua. My defence is that I am writing in the English language. Not long ago (1921) an address was presented to Sir James Frazer in recognition of his great services to Anthropology and signed by over 200 of those most interested in the subject; and in the course of it *The Golden Bough* was described as "a museum of dark and uncouth superstitions." The phrase, as descriptive of *all* superstitions, is rather deeply coloured; but it implies no contempt for simple people, nor any want of sympathy with their spiritual condition. But there is a sort of anthropologist that poses as unofficial protector of the aborigines (against imaginary detractors), and affects to gather them together as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wing.

These superstitions are described in the text as "imagination-beliefs," and I acknowledge myself not quite easy in mind about the use of the word 'imagination'—briefly described (p. 4) as "unverifiable representation." Every student of Psychology knows the difficulty of using the terms of ordinary language in a technical or quasi-technical way; and 'imagination' is itself an exciting word, the centre of historical controversy, and one which every critic defines in his own way. My use of it is the simplest conceivable and not involved in the controversy. There are other modes of mental representation—memory, expectation, reasoning; and when such processes are not verifiable or are open to doubt we say that they are perhaps "only imagination." This implies that imagination is involved in expectation and reasoning. There is besides a great deal of fiction which is avowed imagination; and although, when good, it hangs together much like sense and reason, no one even thinks of verifying it. But there is this difficulty

that reasoning may result in beliefs that are in their nature verifiable though not at the time or place of their conception. Take the well-known heliocentric hypothesis of Aristarchus of Samos in the third century B.C.: it was then impossible to verify it, though it was in its nature verifiable, and it has since been verified. I know of no marks by which a conjecture can be shown to be in its nature verifiable though, in fact, at the time it cannot be verified. Then, in the meanwhile, between conjecture and verification (say) 2000 years later, is it a reasoning or an imagination? There may not be many such cases; but an adherent of Magic or Animism will assure us that all such beliefs either have been verified or are in the posture of the heliocentric hypothesis 2000 years ago.

In the higher Religions, as popularly conceived and taught, the idea of God or of the soul may comprise some features that are obviously derived from Animism and may be called superstitions. But in the more just and judicious presentation of these ideas they have been so refined or (I may say) recreated by Philosophy that to class them with superstitions would be absurd and irrational. Though no doubt suggested by cruder beliefs, they have in their present form an entirely different origin, with which this volume is not concerned; and according to philosophical canons of proof (though not in the scientific sense) they may be said to be verifiable. If there is any power of legislation concerning the use of words, it may consider whether the word 'Religion' does not need, much more than 'Superstition,' to have its sense determined and its application restricted.

Exception has been taken to a remark of mine that "analogy has no place in science." But taking 'analogy' in its strict sense—"like relations of unlike terms" (p. 27) my statement is true. Analogy may, indeed, suggest a line of inquiry or an hypothesis to explain some fact; but this is only preliminary to science, which consists in proof; and analogy can never prove anything. Unfortunately the word is used so carelessly that the colloquial custom of language leads one (as I often find) to say 'analogical' when it would be correct to say 'parallel,' or to say 'by analogy' instead of 'by parity of reasoning.' However, our interest in the matter is to note that reliance on analogy is a frequent occasion of error to immature intelligences.

I am obliged reluctantly to add a paragraph in repudiation of the opinions attributed to me in a recent very interesting book on *Psychology and Primitive Culture*. At p. 20 the author says of me, referring to this work, "he makes no case—it may be said, indeed, that he does not even attempt to make a case—for the assumption that these mental processes are, as mental *processes*, markedly different in the primitive from what they are in the civilised mind." As I make no such assumption, it is no wonder that I do not try to "make a case" for it. The reader will see that the whole method and contents of my first chapter (on *Belief*) imply the contrary. I do indeed assume that immature minds—children, savages and uncultivated Europeans—are at a lower stage of development than our own. Does anyone dispute that? My critic goes on: What he "finds himself driven to discuss are the differences of the material dealt with in these responses, by the primitive, as contrasted with the civilised man. Thus we get long chapters on Magic, Animism," *etc*....So that I am "driven to discuss" what, in the first paragraph of my book is declared to be its scope and subject. These perverse, groundless and very injurious charges I can understand only by supposing that their highly-trained author wrote under a preconception which prevented him seeing what was in the text. For I believe he was sincere and by no means unfriendly.

There is great need in Anthropology for some recognised standard scheme of grades of culture. It is often necessary to use such phrases as "lower savages," "higher savages," "higher barbarians" and so on; but the reader has to guess as best he may at what these terms imply. In my own writings I generally have in view the classification given by A. Sutherland in his *Origin and Growth of the Moral Instinct*, Ch. VI. It is not entirely satisfactory, but serves me in default of a better. Would it not be a suitable task for a trustworthy committee to draw up a scheme of this kind that might be fit for general acceptance?

CARVETH READ.

SOLIHULL.
February, 1924.