

HISTORY OF RELIGION

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As we think of religions, we will of necessity ask, "But where and how did all these religions begin?" With this in mind, we shall first deal with the origin of religion as such as far as it is known. First of all, we shall endeavor to answer the question, "What is primitive religion?" So far as time is concerned, the prehistoric period of humanity is almost infinitely longer than the historic period. Man's life on earth probably goes back some 350,000 years B.C. Of all that lies between that remote date and the beginnings of recorded history say four or five thousand years before Christ (B.C.), we know nothing save what is gleaned from the scanty remains of burial mounds.

This is enough to prove that prehistoric man was religious in the sense of believing in the future life, and in the worship of certain powers of nature, like the sun, etc. But, while this agrees with our conviction that man has been incurably religious from the first, it affords us little in detail. It will be seen then that the term primitive, as applied to religion, is only relative. We know only a little more on primitive religion than we know on primitive language even with the help of prehistoric archeology. Nevertheless, what we do have suggests that man's general attitude towards the universe has not changed very radically.

As to the many causes of religion, we may first mention "emotion", from which all religion may be said to have had its beginnings. Emotion, we are told, has two poles, the *mysterium tremendum* and the *mysterium fascinans*. One is the sense of horror in the presence of mystery--the horror which is more often illustrated in the religions of the Orient. The other is that sense of ecstasy, such as St. Catherine of Genoa expressed when she declared that but a drop of her emotion following into hell would turn hell into paradise. Undoubtedly at first the element of fear may pre-

dominate, but it is a fear capable of ultimate transformation into the ecstasy of love. Fear of a sort will, of course, continue in religion as reverence and a sense of dread in the presence of infinite mystery must be considered one of the prominent values of religion. To ignore such an element is simply to weaken its power over the conscience over man. Even from the first there is an awe, the attractiveness of a great challenge, the incitement to a great adventure. Wonder is awakened by the sense of mystery, as well as fear, and he who ceases to wonder soon ceases to be religious in the true sense of the word. The man who is forced to confess, "I am so wrapped in wonder, I can not speak", is not far from the reverence for Him whose name according to the prophet is called "Wonderful".

Primitive man soon learned that this awe was the result not of a single mystery but of two mysteries equally awe-inspiring. The first of these is the mystery which man discovered outside himself in the phenomena of nature. Out of the awe thus inspired, we get the idea of God as the divine power in and beyond nature, and especially revealed in the heavens above. The type of religion thus arrived at, we give the name of "Naturism". The second mystery is that which man feels within himself, the mystery of his own being, of his life, and his death. From man's sense of this, we get the idea of God as spirit, "Theos". We know this type of religion as "Spiritism" and see in its forknowledge what we shall later describe as the "humanness of God". It has been too commonly and unfortunately assumed by some writers on religion that "naturism" and "spiritism" are two things opposed to each other and are mutually exclusive theories of religious origins.

To some the awe produced by the sight of nature's stupendous phenomena has sufficiently accounted for man's tendency to religion. The spac-

ious firmament on high, the glories of the rising sun, the moon swimming in the bank of clouds, the rolling storm clouds--these are the things which first stirred man's soul to awe. To others religion sprang rather from the fear of ghosts troubling the visions of the night. We shall endeavor to set forth clearly here that either of these theories separately set forth is necessarily incomplete. To account for all facts, both "naturism" and "spiritism" must be permitted their proper place, and to a large extent, their separate developments. There must be room permanently for the awe which breathes itself into proud humanity when we stand beneath the magnitude of the heavenly elements above us. There must be equal place for the awe which we feel when we bend in the presence of the dead. We must find God manifested thus on the one hand through the mysterious operations of nature, and on the other hand through the emotions created by the darker mysteries of death; but we think through the veil of nature or through the mystery of his own being, man continually reaches out endeavoring to contact the power, the force, yes the God beyond all nature with spirit akin to his own.

Next, we shall deal with the "creed" of primitive religion. The "creed" of primitive religion was not necessarily a set of "articles of faith", but any conclusion arrived at through meditation, and was necessarily written but rather expressed through symbols and practices. These symbols and practices were numerable, in fact, too many to mention in this brief thesis. In dealing with primitive religion, we speak of it as two-fold--that is, the two poles, "naturism" and "spiritism".

We shall now deal briefly with the aspects of "naturism". Nature might well be represented under the figure of a cosmic man. It might, therefore, safely be postulated that the activities of nature must betray the feelings and moods of man. Nature, like man, was sometimes fickle and

must be wooed. Sometimes it was angry and had to be pacified, and sometimes it was deliberately hostile and had better be evaded. Much of primitive religion as distinguished from primitive theology consisted of the human efforts to appease, to out-wit, or to pacify a nature with which man in his own interest needed to be on good terms. On the whole, however, it was man's conviction that nature was not unreasonable, and might ordinarily be treated as one would treat his fellow man. This sense of the general reliability of nature when its operations were not interfered with by failure of power, was from the first one of religion's greatest assets. It is from this point that we start in order to follow the developments of religion as practiced from the days of primitive man until our own.

The first step, under the influence of naturistic, arises from the observation and interpretation of what we call "omens". The "omen nature" is speaking of its own accord making advances for the warning and guidance of mankind. Where the information given implies ill-fortune, we often speak of "omens" as "portents" or "ill omen", but in general the word signifies information conveyed without reference to its being good or bad, from certain indications, each of which might be regarded as a separate account or approach on the part of nature. Man, in course of time, learned either to anticipate success or failure by the peculiar manifestations of nature like the chickens learn to flee to shelter from the shadow of the hawk.

There were also many bodily actions of involuntary sort, such as hiccoughing, sneezing, and the like, which needed interpretation. There were also "omens" from the sight of birds, snakes, and beasts of all kinds. Even today, on the part, there is expressed fear when a black cat crosses one's path-way. The Babylonian "omen tablets" contain hundreds of examples of "omens" upon which men were wont regularly to rely. There were omens derived from the symptoms such as exhibited by the sick, from the members of the body, from fire, flame, light and smoke, from the shape, color and

movement of clouds, the appearance of scorpions, horses, asses, dogs, and from most every imaginable thing. The whole constitutes a huge generalization of which some things are valid, others supported only by tradition or accepted through mere superstition. A description, for instance of Chinese "omens" would fill volumes.

The second step in "naturism" is that of "divination". The use of divination differs from the observation of omens in that in this case we voluntarily and for a set purpose question or examine nature as to what it has to say for our guidance or in our behalf. We are now no longer passive recipients of information, but earnest seekers of nature's favors. There is, for example, divination by dreams, that is, visions induced by the method known as incubation--the seeker wrapping himself, perhaps, in the skin of a sacrificed animal in order to insure contact with his divinity, and reporting to a particular temple there to be served by the God and thus receive special inspiration. To induce such dreams, man would glut himself with the flesh of a sacred white bull, and sleep while four fellow priests chanted over him, with the expectation of receiving divine guidance.

Then we have various forms in which the movements of living birds were studied by so-called experts. The bodies of slain sacrifices were examined for marks of significance, which would have their various interpretations. Another widespread form of divination is that in which the shoulder blade of a sheep or of a deer or a piece of tortoise shell is scorched to provide the cracks which the diviner proceeds to interpret. In all forms of divination, there was a real reliance upon the essential justice and morality of nature. A moral universe, it was felt, would never let her children down. Thus the survival value of all divination lies in the fact that material law in indeed trusted to control the circumstances of man's daily life, our up-risings, and our down-sittings, our going out

and our coming in, our eating and drinking, even our amusements, joy and happiness, are all guided and assisted through the increasing articulateness of nature. With all primitive man's reliance upon nature, he had behind him only a brief tradition of the regularity of natural processes, and therefore he could never be absolutely certain that the operations of nature would continue successfully without some aid from the outside itself. If the "Kelts" of old were not without fear that the sky might at any time fall upon them, and that they would never be surprised if the sun some morning would decline to rise, it is not strange that early man was gripped by the fear that he could not entirely trust nature itself. Yet he knew that upon the regularity of nature depended not only the success of his conquest for food but even life itself. What then was more material than that he should bind himself to the task of cooperating with nature in any way which might seem likely to be effective. He naturally felt that this cooperation with nature became essentially his responsibility and duty.

Next, we shall deal with the "creed" of "spiritism" as to whether religion was the outcome of nature worship or of spirit worship, which has been a question of considerable discussion. Which was prior to the other? One might also ask and argue as to the priority of the chicken or the egg. Quite possibly primitive man did not think about this matter at all, but felt mystified in the presence of both mysteries, impartially as the mood would take him. The same mind which would respond with a sense of wonder to the word, "When I consider thy heavens, the work of Thy hands", would also be able to express wonderment over the mystery within himself, "What is man that thou art mindful of him?"

Apparent in all primitive psychology is that which recognized the general distinction of soul from the body. If all outside things had a

soul, it would be obvious that man was not less endowed. Possibly the idea of soul was no more than that of life, but the belief soon became prevalent that this life was in some way detachable from the body. There were times of unconsciousness when, as seemed certain in dreams, the soul appeared to wander. It was easy at such times to imagine that the soul had slipped away temporarily from the body then to return. It was also thought that the soul would slip away from the body during times of unconsciousness in the forms of various kinds of animals. In view of this possibility of the soul leaving the body, it became therefore a necessity to put forth endeavors to keep the soul enclosed in the body. Death was literally the departure of the soul, so precautions against this departure must be taken such as quenching the thirst before going to sleep, or placing charms, in the way of earrings and noserings, upon the openings of the head, lest the soul should slip out that way. Especially must certain spells be used to prevent the violent expulsion of the soul in the acts of--for instance, sneezing, hiccoughing, or coughing.

Much thought was naturally given to the "seat" of the soul. Was it to be identified with breath, as the soul of nature was to be discovered in the wind, or was it as some believed in the shadow, which primitive man regarded as part of his own person? He resented stepping on his shadow lest thereby part of himself should pass under the power of another. Others have supposed the seat of the soul to be in the blood. There was visible evidence, of course, of this when men saw life ebbing away with the flowing out of the blood. Many people were accustomed to seek the seat of the soul in the hair. This is one of the most widespread primitive beliefs. Whether due to the knowledge that the hair often continued to grow after death or to the association, by imitative magic of the hair with the rays of the sun, the idea prevailed that the hair, as in



the case of Samson, was the seat of power of life, and thus the residence of the vital principal. By some again the eye was thought to be the seat of the soul. Others commonly received the soul seat as being the liver. More common in India, as in many other places, including the lands of the West, the heart is thought of as being the "seat of the soul", as well as the seat of feeling and affection. To some the soul was supposed to have been distributed in its function--using the living for the passionate and sensual, the head for the mental and intellectual, and the heart for courage as well as for affection.

The next article of belief in the creed of "spiritism" was that the soul survived the body when the separation took place at death. Death, for primitive man, was naturally a mysterious thing. It was, indeed, unnatural and was always considered as an act of violence whether the instrument of violence was or was not capable of being detected. When by such violence the soul was expelled from the body it had occupied, the question naturally arose, "Would the soul still exist?" Primitive man said, without hesitation, "Yes", and supported his assumption through the evidence of dreams, when dead relatives quite visibly appeared to the living. Primitive man also found evidence for the survival of the soul in the spread of some contagious diseases. Where some individual had died from such, it was easy to explain the spread of the disease in the camp as due to the return of the deceased spending itself on the living. The soul expelled by violence was presumably in an angry frame of mind, and not to be lightly encountered. It is for this reason that in some countries, as in China, the ignorant are unwilling to relieve the dying or to interfere with the struggles of a drowning man. There was no telling what a disembodied spirit might do to anyone near at hand. To meet a disembodied spirit was everywhere a sign of death or disaster, and accord-

ing to theories in some countries, it brought about lock-jaw--thus the dread of places thought to be haunted, even in civilized lands, has remained in the blood.

In China, again, it was an excellent method of revenge for a man to commit suicide on his neighbor's door-step or to wreck the fortunes of a railroad by laying himself across the rails and thus be killed.

It would be foolish, of course, to believe that primitive man had no sense of bereavement. Such an idea would run counter to common animal instinct as well as to many facts of primitive life. We know of the practice of pouring water or blood upon the corpse in what the Chinese would call, "The calling back of the dead." Many other practices were used to restore the soul back to its body. For very many, possibly for most, there was the belief that the soul remained hovering above the grave for several days. Sometimes it was supposed to hover in the form of a bird, others believed it was in the form of a butterfly, or perhaps that of some earth-dwelling animal, such as a serpent or a worm. Mohammedans believed that until the day of judgment the souls of men were in the crops of birds--green birds for the good, black birds for the bad, owls for those who had committed murder. In China it was a common belief that one part of the soul--the earthly part was separated into the air while a certain other part remained in the spirit tablet. There was yet another part in the grave.

For most primitive peoples, the grave was generally recognized as the abode of the soul. Ideas of the underworld for the most part developed from the conception of an enlarged grave or a vast subterranean vault. This is what we call "hell" apart, of course, from the idea of moralized after-life. Hell is literally the "hole", the "hollow, the "sheol of the Hebrews; the "hades of the Greeks".

There are a number of other things relative to spiritism, and that is in regard to the attitude of primitive man to death. On the ground of beliefs previously described, a vast preoccupation with death on the part of primitive man will appear to have been inevitable. We must not, however, arrive at the conclusion that the preoccupation with death implied the surrender to the idea of mortality; rather, it serves to illustrate a profound faith in a life hereafter as the ultimate issue. To the natural man life was good, and it was fitting that he should rebel against death as against something unnatural and evil resulting from violence, regardless of whether that violence came from beast or man, from darkness, or from germs. As already noted, the attitude of man towards death and also towards the dead was an attitude of great fear. It was the fear of the evil forces lurking invisibly near there perhaps in some form of contagious disease. It was even fear of the place where death had taken place, and where unknown danger still remained in ambush.

This idea resulted in various types of practices in regard to the dead. First, the disposal of the dead. As might be expected in case of people obsessed with fear, there seems to have been a very general desire to rid themselves as speedily as possible from the body of the person who had died. Sometimes this was affected simply by abandonment, even to the extent of leaving the locality where death occurred. Secondly, we have the burial of the body in the earth. As previously stated, because of fear, the body as well as the place of death was abandoned, and the deserted hut in which the person had lived was left until it fell upon the abandoned body, thus establishing a sort of burial. Among certain tribes in the Congo, the chief on his death has his house for a tomb. His body is left there until the roof falls in, and then the village as a whole is abandoned. There are also evidences of the primitive man burying their

dead in graves, fenced about by the shoulder blades of animals, while the body had been wrapped in a mat or skin, or even placed in a coffin of wood or stone. Cremation came in with the bronze age, and was doubtless employed in order to hasten the departure of the spirit or perhaps to destroy it altogether. In certain cases it was used particularly for criminals and other undesirables, but in some cases as a mark of especial honor to chiefs and men of high rank, and thus to speed their souls upward to their heavenly bliss. Whether the dead were deposited in a grave or upon a funeral pyre, care was generally taken to place them with the knees drawn up towards the chin. This was done in order to restore the dead man to the shape in which he was found as he occupied his mother's womb in view of an anticipated re-birth, or, else by the desire to represent him as asleep.

Then there was the practice of giving of gifts to the dead. The dead must not be left hungry or unattended, or otherwise unequipped for the ghostly life. If this is unprovided for, they might return. As we have previously mentioned, the house, as in China and Japan, was frequently left for such occupation as the dead man might choose to claim it. Food also was a necessity and has to be placed where the soul might readily find it, before the spirit tablet in the house, or particularly in the grave. Then there were implements of all sorts dispatched to the tomb for the use of the dead, many vessels broken in order to set for a realm where everything was dead, were buried in numbers even in prehistoric times. In case of warriors and chiefs, their horses were slain and together with their weapons were buried with the deceased.

Then also the commemoration of the dead was practiced. The commemoration of the dead is variously observed in different lands, but generally includes--a funeral service held shortly after death, as is even practiced

in the Western world, or an annual commemoration commonly in the fall of the year, as the Buddhist Bon and the Christian All Saints Day.

Further, we have the so-called practice of endeavoring to communicate with the dead. Divination by means of communication with the dead is a primitive as well as a widely extended practice. It is based upon the belief that the dead are not entirely out of reach, but may be contacted and conversed with under special conditions. There is generally a revival of such belief in times of widespread mourning such as the period of the World War when young lives went untimely over the Great Divide in such abundance that there was a material desire on the part of the bereaved to reach their loved ones on the other shore. Dreams induced in special ways had been a common means of bridging the gulf between the living and the dead. In China such various methods have been employed as sacrifices to which the dead are supposed to come; the use of the personator of the dead, generally the grand-son of the deceased; the use of the spirit tablet, to which the ghost comes at times of sacrifice; the use of spirit pencil consisting of two long branches held by two people, with a short branch by which the writing is traced in the sand; the employment of the transmedium; and even by such methods as the calling back of the soul. The use of mechanical mediums such as the planchettes or the ouija board is common the world over. Almost equally general is the use of the personal medda in which the medium acts for the human inquirer and a control acts for the spirit on the other side with whom it is desired to consult.

Then, finally, there is the worship of the dead. Ancestor worship was for primitive man quite natural. Ties which had been established on earth are not quickly loosed. There were occasions when an old man having lost his usefulness in this life and was regarded as done with, was even buried alive. But the solidarity of the tribe nevertheless demanded that the father of the clan should be honored in death as well as in life.

Hence, men like that became an object of worship, honor and respect. While the worship of the dead is more or less confined to the primitive and the ignorant, the honor and respect for the dead is being maintained even to the present date.

From the various beliefs and practices which we have sketched, certain general truths will seem to immerge, such as not only contain indications of much that we still claim as the accumulated values of religion, but furnish even more broad hints as to what religion is to be when the primitive has yielded to a more perfect state.

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