

Pagan and Christian Creeds

by

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Introductory

The subject of Religious Origins is a fascinating one, as the great multitude of books upon it, published in late years, tends to show. Indeed the great difficulty to-day in dealing with the subject, lies in the very mass of the material to hand--and that not only on account of the labor involved in sorting the material, but because the abundance itself of facts opens up temptation to a student in this department of Anthropology (as happens also in other branches of general Science) to rush in too hastily with what seems a plausible theory. The more facts, statistics, and so forth, there are available in any investigation, the easier it is to pick out a considerable number which will fit a given theory. The other facts being neglected or ignored, the views put forward enjoy for a time a great vogue. Then inevitably, and at a later time, new or neglected facts alter the outlook, and a new perspective is established.

There is also in these matters of Science (though many scientific men would doubtless deny this) a great deal of "Fashion". Such has been notoriously the case in Political Economy, Medicine, Geology, and even in such definite studies as Physics and Chemistry. In a comparatively recent science, like that with which we are now concerned, one would naturally expect variations. A hundred and fifty years ago, and since the time of Rousseau, the "Noble Savage" was extremely popular; and he lingers still in the story books of our children. Then the reaction from this extreme view set in, and of late years it has been the popular cue (largely, it must be said, among "armchair" travelers and explorers) to represent the religious rites and customs of primitive folk as a senseless mass of superstitions, and the early man as quite devoid of decent feeling and intelligence. Again, when the study of religious origins first began in modern times to be seriously taken up--say in the earlier part of last century-- there was a great boom in Sungods. Every divinity in the Pantheon was an impersonation of the Sun--unless indeed (if feminine) of the Moon. Apollo was a sungod, of course; Hercules was a sungod; Samson was a sungod; Indra and Krishna, and even Christ, the same. C. F. Dupuis in France (*Origine de tous les Cultes*, 1795), F. Nork in Germany (*Biblische Mythologie*, 1842), Richard Taylor in England (*The Devil's Pulpit*, [1] 1830), were among the first in modern times to put forward this view. A little later the PHALLIC explanation of everything came into fashion. The deities were all polite names for the organs and powers of procreation. R. P. Knight (*Ancient Art and Mythology*, 1818) and Dr. Thomas Inman (*Ancient Faiths and Ancient Names*, 1868) popularized this idea in England; so did Nork in Germany. Then again there was a period of what is sometimes called Euhemerism --the theory that the gods and goddesses had actually once been men and women, historical characters round whom a halo of romance and remoteness had gathered. Later still, a school has arisen which thinks little of sungods, and pays more attention to Earth and Nature spirits, to gnomes and demons and vegetation-sprites, and to the processes of Magic by which these

(so it was supposed) could be enlisted in man's service if friendly, or exorcised if hostile.

[1] This extraordinary book, though carelessly composed and containing many unproven statements, was on the whole on the right lines. But it raised a storm of opposition--the more so because its author was a clergyman! He was ejected from the ministry, of course, and was sent to prison twice.

It is easy to see of course that there is some truth in ALL these explanations; but naturally each school for the time being makes the most of its own contention. Mr. J. M. Robertson (Pagan Christs and Christianity and Mythology), who has done such fine work in this field,[1] relies chiefly on the solar and astronomical origins, though he does not altogether deny the others; Dr. Frazer, on the other hand--whose great work, The Golden Bough, is a monumental collection of primitive customs, and will be an inexhaustible quarry for all future students--is apparently very little concerned with theories about the Sun and the stars, but concentrates his attention on the collection of innumerable details[2] of rites, chiefly magical, connected with food and vegetation. Still later writers, like S. Reinach, Jane Harrison and E. A. Crowley, being mainly occupied with customs of very primitive peoples, like the Pelasgian Greeks or the Australian aborigines, have confined themselves (necessarily) even more to Magic and Witchcraft.

[1] If only he did not waste so much time, and so needlessly, in slaughtering opponents!

[2] To such a degree, indeed, that sometimes the connecting clue of the argument seems to be lost.

Meanwhile the Christian Church from these speculations has kept itself severely apart--as of course representing a unique and divine revelation little concerned or interested in such heathenisms; and moreover (in this country at any rate) has managed to persuade the general public of its own divine uniqueness to such a degree that few people, even nowadays, realize that it has sprung from just the same root as Paganism, and that it shares by far the most part of its doctrines and rites with the latter. Till quite lately it was thought (in Britain) that only secularists and unfashionable people took any interest in sungods; and while it was true that learned professors might point to a belief in Magic as one of the first sources of Religion, it was easy in reply to say that this obviously had nothing to do with Christianity! The Secularists, too, rather spoilt their case by assuming, in their wrath against the Church, that all priests since the beginning of the world have been frauds and charlatans, and that all the rites of religion were merely devil's devices invented by them for the purpose of preying upon the superstitions of the ignorant, to their own enrichment. They (the Secularists) overleaped themselves by grossly exaggerating a thing that no doubt is partially true.

Thus the subject of religious origins is somewhat complex, and yields many aspects for consideration. It is only, I think, by keeping a broad course and admitting contributions to the truth from various sides, that valuable results can be obtained. It is absurd to suppose that in this or any other science neat systems can be found which will cover all the facts. Nature and History do not deal in such things, or supply them for a sop to Man's vanity.

It is clear that there have been three main lines, so far, along which human speculation and study have run. One connecting religious rites and observations with the movements of the Sun and the planets in the sky, and leading to the invention of and belief in Olympian and remote gods dwelling in heaven and ruling the Earth from a distance; the second connecting religion with the changes of the season, on the Earth and with such practical things as the growth of vegetation and food, and leading to or mingled with a vague belief in earth-spirits and magical methods of influencing such spirits; and the third connecting religion with man's own body and the tremendous force of sex residing in it--emblem of undying life and all fertility and power. It is clear also--and all investigation confirms it--that the second-mentioned phase of religion arose on the whole BEFORE the first-mentioned--that is, that men naturally thought about the very practical questions of food and vegetation, and the magical or other methods of encouraging the same, before they worried themselves about the heavenly bodies and the laws of THEIR movements, or about the sinister or favorable influences the stars might exert. And again it is extremely probable that the third-mentioned aspect--that which connected religion with the procreative desires and phenomena of human physiology--really came FIRST. These desires and physiological phenomena must have loomed large on the primitive mind long before the changes of the seasons or of the sky had been at all definitely observed or considered. Thus we find it probable that, in order to understand the sequence of the actual and historical phases of religious worship, we must approximately reverse the order above-given in which they have been STUDIED, and conclude that in general the Phallic cults came first, the cult of Magic and the propitiation of earth-divinities and spirits came second, and only last came the belief in definite God-figures residing in heaven.

At the base of the whole process by which divinities and demons were created, and rites for their propitiation and placation established, lay Fear--fear stimulating the imagination to fantastic activity. *Primus in orbe deos fecit Timor*. And fear, as we shall see, only became a mental stimulus at the time of, or after, the evolution of self-consciousness. Before that time, in the period of SIMPLE consciousness, when the human mind resembled that of the animals, fear indeed existed, but its nature was more that of a mechanical protective instinct. There being no figure or image of SELF in the animal mind, there were correspondingly no figures or images of beings who might threaten or destroy that self. So it was that the imaginative power of fear began with Self-consciousness, and from that imaginative power was unrolled the whole panorama of the gods and rites and creeds of Religion down the centuries.

The immense force and domination of Fear in the first self-conscious stages of the human mind is a thing which can hardly be exaggerated, and which is even difficult for some of us moderns to realize. But naturally as soon as Man began to think about himself--a frail phantom and waif in the midst of tremendous forces of whose nature and mode of operation he was entirely ignorant--he was BESET with terrors; dangers loomed upon him on all sides. Even to-day it is noticed by doctors that one of the chief obstacles to the cure of illness among some black or native races is sheer superstitious terror; and Thanatomania is the recognized word for a state of mind ("obsession of death") which will often cause a savage to perish from a mere scratch hardly to be called a wound. The natural defence against this state of mind was the creation of an enormous number of taboos--such as we find among all races and on every conceivable subject--and these taboos constituted practically a great body of warnings which regulated the lives and thoughts of the community, and ultimately, after they had been weeded out and to some degree simplified, hardened down into very stringent Customs and Laws. Such taboos naturally in the beginning tended to include the avoidance not only of acts which might reasonably be considered dangerous, like touching a corpse, but also things much more remote and fanciful in their relation to danger, like merely looking at a mother-in-law, or passing a lightning-struck tree; and (what is especially to be noticed) they tended to include acts which offered any special PLEASURE or temptation--like sex or marriage or the enjoyment of a meal. Taboos surrounded these things too, and the psychological connection is easy to divine: but I shall deal with this general subject later.

It may be guessed that so complex a system of regulations made life anything but easy to early peoples; but, preposterous and unreasonable as some of the taboos were, they undoubtedly had the effect of compelling the growth of self-control. Fear does not seem a very worthy motive, but in the beginning it curbed the violence of the purely animal passions, and introduced order and restraint among them. Simultaneously it became itself, through the gradual increase of knowledge and observation, transmuted and etherealized into something more like wonder and awe and (when the gods rose above the horizon) into reverence. Anyhow we seem to perceive that from the early beginnings (in the Stone Age) of self-consciousness in Man there has been a gradual development--from crass superstition, senseless and accidental, to rudimentary observation, and so to belief in Magic; thence to Animism and personification of nature-powers in more or less human form, as earth-divinities or sky-gods or embodiments of the tribe; and to placation of these powers by rites like Sacrifice and the Eucharist, which in their turn became the foundation of Morality. Graphic representations made for the encouragement of fertility--as on the walls of Bushmen's rock-dwellings or the ceilings of the caverns of Altamira-- became the nurse of pictorial Art; observations of plants or of the weather or the stars, carried on by tribal medicine-men for purposes of witchcraft or prophecy, supplied some of the material of Science; and humanity emerged by faltering and hesitating steps on the borderland of those finer perceptions and reasonings which are supposed to be characteristic of Civilization.

The process of the evolution of religious rites and ceremonies has in its main outlines been the same all over the world, as the reader will presently see--and this whether in connection with the numerous creeds of Paganism or the supposedly unique case of Christianity; and now the continuity and close intermixture of these great streams can no longer be denied--nor IS it indeed denied by those who have really studied the subject. It is seen that religious evolution through the ages has been practically One thing--that there has been in fact a World- religion, though with various phases and branches.

And so in the present day a new problem arises, namely how to account for the appearance of this great Phenomenon, with its orderly phases of evolution, and its own spontaneous[1] growths in all corners of the globe--this phenomenon which has had such a strange sway over the hearts of men, which has attracted them with so weird a charm, which has drawn out their devotion, love and tenderness, which has consoled them in sorrow and affliction, and yet which has stained their history with such horrible sacrifices and persecutions and cruelties. What has been the instigating cause of it?

[1] For the question of spontaneity see chap. x and elsewhere.

The answer which I propose to this question, and which is developed to some extent in the following chapters, is a psychological one. It is that the phenomenon proceeds from, and is a necessary accompaniment of, the growth of human Consciousness itself--its growth, namely, through the three great stages of its unfoldment. These stages are (1) that of the simple or animal consciousness, (2) that of SELF-consciousness, and (3) that of a third stage of consciousness which has not as yet been effectively named, but whose indications and precursive signs we here and there perceive in the rites and prophecies and mysteries of the early religions, and in the poetry and art and literature generally of the later civilizations. Though I do not expect or wish to catch Nature and History in the careful net of a phrase, yet I think that in the sequence from the above-mentioned first stage to the second, and then again in the sequence from the second to the third, there will be found a helpful explanation of the rites and aspirations of human religion. It is this idea, illustrated by details of ceremonial and so forth, which forms the main thesis of the present book. In this sequence of growth, Christianity enters as an episode, but no more than an episode. It does not amount to a disruption or dislocation of evolution. If it did, or if it stood as a unique or unclassifiable phenomenon (as some of its votaries contend), this would seem to be a misfortune--as it would obviously rob us of at any rate one promise of progress in the future. And the promise of something better than Paganism and better than Christianity is very precious. It is surely time that it should be fulfilled.

The tracing, therefore, of the part that human self- consciousness has played, psychologically, in the evolution of religion, runs like a thread through the following chapters, and seeks illustration in a variety of details. The idea has

been repeated under different aspects; sometimes, possibly, it has been repeated too often; but different aspects in such a case do help, as in a stereoscope, to give solidity to the thing seen. Though the worship of Sun-gods and divine figures in the sky came comparatively late in religious evolution, I have put this subject early in the book (chapters ii and iii), partly because (as I have already explained) it was the phase first studied in modern times, and therefore is the one most familiar to present-day readers, and partly because its astronomical data give great definiteness and "proveability" to it, in rebuttal to the common accusation that the whole study of religious origins is too vague and uncertain to have much value. Going backwards in Time, the two next chapters (iv and v) deal with Totem-sacraments and Magic, perhaps the earliest forms of religion. And these four lead on (in chapters vi to xi) to the consideration of rites and creeds common to Paganism and Christianity. XII and xiii deal especially with the evolution of Christianity itself; xiv and xv explain the inner Meaning of the whole process from the beginning; and xvi and xvii look to the Future.

The appendix on the doctrines of the Upanishads may, I hope, serve to give an idea, intimate even though inadequate, of the third Stage--that which follows on the stage of self-consciousness; and to portray the mental attitudes which are characteristic of that stage. Here in this third stage, it would seem, one comes upon the real FACTS of the inner life--in contradistinction to the fancies and figments of the second stage; and so one reaches the final point of conjunction between Science and Religion.

2. Solar Myths And Christian Festivals

To the ordinary public--notwithstanding the immense amount of work which has of late been done on this subject-- the connection between Paganism and Christianity still seems rather remote. Indeed the common notion is that Christianity was really a miraculous interposition into and dislocation of the old order of the world; and that the pagan gods (as in Milton's Hymn on the Nativity) fled away in dismay before the sign of the Cross, and at the sound of the name of Jesus. Doubtless this was a view much encouraged by the early Church itself--if only to enhance its own authority and importance; yet, as is well known to every student, it is quite misleading and contrary to fact. The main Christian doctrines and festivals, besides a great mass of affiliated legend and ceremonial, are really quite directly derived from, and related to, preceding Nature worships; and it has only been by a good deal of deliberate mystification and falsification that this derivation has been kept out of sight.

In these Nature-worships there may be discerned three fairly independent streams of religious or quasi-religious enthusiasm: (1) that connected with the phenomena of the heavens, the movements of the Sun, planets and stars, and the awe and wonderment they excited; (2) that connected with the seasons and the very important matter of the growth of vegetation and food on the Earth; and (3) that connected with the mysteries of Sex and reproduction. It is obvious that these three streams would mingle and interfuse with each other a good deal; but as far as they were separable the first would tend to create Solar heroes and Sun-myths; the second Vegetation-gods and personifications of Nature and the earth-life; while the third would throw its glamour over the other two and contribute to the projection of deities or demons worshipped with all sorts of sexual and phallic rites. All three systems of course have their special rites and times and ceremonies; but, as, I say, the rites and ceremonies of one system would rarely be found pure and unmixed with those belonging to the two others. The whole subject is a very large one; but for reasons given in the Introduction I shall in this and the following chapter--while not ignoring phases (2) and (3)--lay most stress on phase (1) of the question before us.

At the time of the life or recorded appearance of Jesus of Nazareth, and for some centuries before, the Mediterranean and neighboring world had been the scene of a vast number of pagan creeds and rituals. There were Temples without end dedicated to gods like Apollo or Dionysus among the Greeks, Hercules among the Romans, Mithra among the Persians, Adonis and Attis in Syria and Phrygia, Osiris and Isis and Horus in Egypt, Baal and Astarte among the Babylonians and Carthaginians, and so forth. Societies, large or small, united believers and the devout in the service or ceremonials connected with their respective deities, and in the creeds which they confessed concerning these deities. And an extraordinarily interesting fact, for us, is that notwithstanding great geographical

distances and racial differences between the adherents of these various cults, as well as differences in the details of their services, the general outlines of their creeds and ceremonials were--if not identical--so markedly similar as we find them.

I cannot of course go at length into these different cults, but I may say roughly that of all or nearly all the deities above-mentioned it was said and believed that:

- (1) They were born on or very near our Christmas Day.
- (2) They were born of a Virgin-Mother.
- (3) And in a Cave or Underground Chamber.
- (4) They led a life of toil for Mankind.
- (5) And were called by the names of Light-bringer, Healer, Mediator, Savior, Deliverer.
- (6) They were however vanquished by the Powers of Darkness.
- (7) And descended into Hell or the Underworld.
- (8) They rose again from the dead, and became the pioneers of mankind to the Heavenly world.
- (9) They founded Communions of Saints, and Churches into which disciples were received by Baptism.
- (10) And they were commemorated by Eucharistic meals.

Let me give a few brief examples.

Mithra was born in a cave, and on the 25th December.[1] He was born of a Virgin.[2] He traveled far and wide as a teacher and illuminator of men. He slew the Bull (symbol of the gross Earth which the sunlight fructifies). His great festivals were the winter solstice and the Spring equinox (Christmas and Easter). He had twelve companions or disciples (the twelve months). He was buried in a tomb, from which however he rose again; and his resurrection was celebrated yearly with great rejoicings. He was called Savior and Mediator, and sometimes figured as a Lamb; and sacramental feasts in remembrance of him were held by his followers. This legend is apparently partly astronomical and partly vegetational; and the same may be said of the following about Osiris.

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