

Whom Ye Ignorantly Worship

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IT IS difficult to tell by observing men whether they are worshipping in ignorance or out of ignorance. To outward appearances they may all be going through the same motions and professing the same creed. The best clue to the difference in worship is to be found by turning from the worshippers to the beings that are worshipped. There is a striking difference between particular gods to whom particular offerings are brought and the nameless being about whose altars men of all nations may gather without knowing precisely what offerings to bring. Gods with proper names not only have distinctive attributes which indicate what offerings are demanded on their altars, but they are holy to a particular group of people. The-God-of-Israel, for example, was "One" even in ancient times, but he was distinctively the god of Israel. Other people had their gods or even their One-God, and there was jealousy among such gods as well as among their peoples. The claim that Israel's God is the only true God had to be put to the test by appealing to rival groups of sacrificers at separate altars. At what point in the development of Prophetic theology The-God-of-Israel became God-Universal is not clear, for even the God of later Judaism, who is known as "King of the Universe," seems to bear this title still as an individual world-ruler or sovereign, and this title is a substitute for his proper name, known to his chosen subjects. The more vague term "Heavenly Father" which the Pharisees used and

which Jesus and the Christians universalized, is not a proper name and this Father is not bound to particular altars, temples, and peoples.

Meanwhile, in ancient India and also in Greece a related theological development was taking place. Among the worshippers of particular gods and many gods there arose the teaching about an impersonal, transcendent divine being, known among the Brahmans as **brahma** (as distinct from the Vedic god, **Brahma**), among the Buddhists as **buddha-essence** (as distinct from individual Buddhas), and among the Greeks as **theos** (as distinct from the many particular divinities, Olympian and others). These are not proper names for beings with temples and altars, but more or less abstract concepts for a "fullness of being" which served as a context for the gods themselves and which human beings felt to be present though they failed to grasp it mentally. Later, the so-called metaphysicians used the term "God" as a technical concept in philosophical doctrine quite independent of religion and worship.

It is meditation on God rather than sacrifice to a god that leads to theism and theology. Men try to understand this God in terms of definitions, attributes, "essence" and the other means of philosophical clarification. But the usual outcome of such attempts at clarification has been mystification and mysticism. What are ordinarily symbols for understanding become expressions of wonder, so that such meditation naturally leads to adoration. The high caste Brahmans regarded such meditation as a superior substitute for temple rites and sacrifices, and taught the lower castes to look upon their meditations and even upon their persons as something wonderful, holy, un-touchable. The Greeks, too, listened reverently to their "sages" and mar-

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velled at their sayings. There was something exalted and exalting in these high and hidden teachings.

The story of Paul's preaching at Athens and of his declaring to the Athenians a god whom they were ignorantly worshipping puts in concrete and dramatic form the situation that is created when those who are accustomed to worshipping gods with proper names meet those who pray to God as learned seekers. The point of the story seems to be that Paul did not reveal to the Athenians the proper name of a new god to whom an altar had been erected though his name was unknown, rather, Paul declared unto them that the Christian God is "without name and form" (to use a Brahman expression) and that he must be "ignorantly worshipped." It is impossible to assign either image or particular symbol to this nameless God; he is *deus absconditus*, God-hidden, whose being can be declared but not revealed; before Him all men can bow for He knows no chosen sect or people to whom he has revealed himself exclusively.

To worship ignorantly was for the ancient Greeks and Hebrews not only foolishness but practically impossible. For a form of worship implied an altar and an altar implied a dedication by those who sacrificed at that altar to some divine being in particular. It might be possible, to be sure, to use the same altar for sacrifices to several gods, as it is intelligible to dedicate a tomb to "the unknown soldier," who is not some unknown being but a symbol for any and all soldiers. However, such impersonal homage was hardly consistent with rites of sacrifice, which had to be precise in order to be effectual. To worship an unknown god would be a waste of sacrifice and probably the profanation of an altar. Pagan piety, then, implied knowing precisely what was being done at whose altar.

The Brahman teachers, the Greek philosophers, and the Prophets of Israel accepted this situation as inevitable for rites of sacrifice, but they conceived the

possibility of approaching God "in truth" rather than in a temple. They could bow before "the Father of gods and men," whose being is boundless and whose service is perfect freedom. In this Being all things move and have their being, but the way to God through knowledge, the *gnosis*, must remain at bottom a confession of ignorance—an ignorance partly veiled in esoteric theosophic learning or in mystical philosophy. Those who pretend to know God best can communicate their knowledge only darkly and distantly; or they claim to be so near to God that the union is ineffable. Such divine wisdom is clearest about what God is *not*; as a form of worship it is largely negative. But among philosophers and seers the reference to the divine or to the divine life, without specifying a particular god, became commonplace.

The suggestion that such a God might be not only an object of meditation but also of worship had both Greek and Hebraic origins. The Hellenistic philosophies and mysteries were using it. There is a vague foreboding of it in Abraham's not sacrificing Isaac. And the word *Elohim*, which suggests the primitive plurality of local spirits and which seems to have become a sort of collective name for "God of gods and Lord of lords," was a less proper name than *Yahweh*. But we first get the suggestion definitely in the curious story of Moses at the burning bush. Apparently a new god was to be revealed to Israel through Moses and Moses naturally expected to learn his name. The mysterious name, later interpreted metaphysically, seemed unintelligible to Moses and he was much relieved when he was told that he could declare to Israel the well-known God-of-Abraham-Isaac-and-Jacob. The haunting theme of ignorantly worshipping then emerges repeatedly in the Prophetic Literature and comes to full expression in the poem of Job. Job and his friends try desperately and in every conceivable manner to understand God, but in the end Job bows down

before a majestic being whom he does not pretend to understand. He humbly acknowledges the glory of the Almighty.

At Athens Paul is represented as addressing himself to this theme for the benefit of Gentile minds. There is a universal father, so he declares, in whom all mankind is of one blood and who can be worshipped under no particular name. The knowledge of him is but a confession of human ignorance. The doctrine of this sermon had become a commonplace among philosophers and Athenians; what was new in the sermon was a new idea of worship. He told the Athenians that Jesus had taught men how to worship the unknown God. In other words, what is distinctive of Christianity is its knowing how to ignorantly-worship without worshipping in ignorance.

In this religious awareness of human ignorance Socrates was an Athenian forerunner of Paul, but his mode of worship was too strange and irritating. He not only made the knowledge of ignorance his chief concern, but he regarded this kind of pursuit as his pious devotion to Apollo, who had ordered him to expose ignorance wherever he found it. Had he found it only in others, he would not have become the patron saint of philosophical worship that he has become, but in recognizing the negative character of his own wisdom and in offering such critical awareness on the altar of the god of wisdom he became the first and classic exemplar of a piety that springs from the knowledge of ignorance. It is no virtue to be ignorant, but it is a virtue to know one's ignorance and it is piety to confess it. It is, to be sure, a doubting kind of faith that leads to worshipping God out of ignorance of God, but it is nevertheless a genuine religious achievement when it is, in Nicholas of Cusa's famous phrase a *docta ignorantia*.

It is neither Socratic nor Christian worship to posit with Herbert Spencer The Unknowable and then to bow before it. Such nineteenth century agnos-

ticism was not an educated awareness of what remains to be known; it was a dogmatic assertion of systematic complacency. It is one thing to deify the unknowable and quite another to be unable to know God. There is no reason for bowing politely as one dismisses the unintelligible, still less reason for confusing such bowing with bending the knee. But there is good reason why man, after worshipping known gods, should find himself compelled to confess what he ought to know and does not know, and to acknowledge a God whom he seeks but cannot see, finds but cannot name. For only he who has understood why God is elusive and hidden for philosophical seeking can worship God "in truth." The fear of this Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the love of this Lord is its fruit.

This intellectual love of God is quite different from what is known as faith. And the Scholastics, including Nicholas of Cusa, have not done justice to this difference. Faithfulness or fidelity to God need not drive the pious philosopher, as it did some of the Scholastics, to confess, "I believe because I do not know," for no reasonable god or man would accept this as a ground for faith. Credulity is a crude form of worshipping in ignorance, but it is not an intellectual fidelity. There is a difference between "ignorantly believing" and "ignorantly worshipping." He who believes because he does not know imagines he has a religious substitute for knowledge; he who bows humbly in the awareness of his ignorance is still faithful to knowledge as well as to God. The life of doubt, when lived usefully, leads gradually to the discovery of what ought to be known; and the inadequacy of man's knowledge for his needs leads to humility and to the religious expression of the basic need for salvation.

Those who can thank God for revealing man's ignorance will, of course, be pitied by those other Christians who thank God for revealing the whole plan of salvation. And these humble seekers

are indeed to be pitied. However, it would be uncharitable of them to turn on their more fortunate brothers who live as closely and confidently with God as ever did pagans with theirs and to refuse to regard them as fellow-worshippers. There is room in the wide world today as there was in ancient Athens for the worship of concrete incarnations of the divine as well as for the more philosophical ignorantly-worshipping. But it is important for Christians to recognize this latter type of worship as genuinely Christian, since it is in Christianity that it has found its classic Western expression. In the Orient, Brahmanism and Buddhism have long ago managed to assign a respectable place in their "great vehicles" of faith to such seekers. In the West these worshippers of the *deus obsconditus* have been relatively rare; such cultivated ignorance is difficult still, as it was for the Athenians. Paul, or whoever it may have been that preached at Athens, was one of these rare men. He was preaching no mere deism, knowing as he did that at Athens men were following no mere Stoicism.

Such worship of God need not be interpreted as inconsistent with a life in Christ, a life of agony, an intense struggle toward a triumphant death. The Christian life is not like the divine life pictured by Platonists, Epicureans, and Aristotelians; it is the way of the cross. And, as Paul saw clearly, faithfulness to Christ is an experience of crucifixion and rebirth. In Hellenistic times as in our own men have a sense of being lost and of seeking salvation. It is not easy for a Christian to accept and understand the life and death to which he is called. Consequently, the gospel of the unknown, universal ways of God was important for Christians in Rome as well as for gentiles in Athens. The gospel of Christ called attention to the extraordinary quality of Jesus' own life "with the Father." And the atonement of Christ was related directly to the Christians' faith in a universal re-

demption and a new world. To the early Christians as to the Socratic Athenians such themes gave much to wonder at. It was indeed a radically new type of worship to which they were being called—this sacrificing themselves to the world on the altar of a universal God. Such worship was no mere sacramental observance, it was an extreme devotion, as difficult in practice as it was unfathomable in theory. This conception of the redemptive life and agony has remained for all to whom the Gospel is declared something wonderful. Christian declarations and explanations are full of dark sayings and grow out of a world in darkness. But they can still be genuine expressions of a well-informed piety; they come to new life repeatedly as the basic agony recurs in human experience. For whenever men's hopes and systems are ruined, whenever a reasonable existence seems illusory, and whenever the world and the world's best minds get "lost," men find themselves like the ancient Athenians willing to listen to the sermon preached at the altar of an unknown God. Jew and Gentile, East and West, here they meet and find common ground for general humility. This is not a unity of faith and order, for such unity men evidently do not possess; it is a unity more blood-like, a biological, elemental bond of common need. In all faiths men become "brothers" when they become aware sooner or later of the limitations of faith and the even greater limitations of knowledge. In what they need to know for their salvation all men can bow in humble confession of ignorance and in petition for that "saving grace" which is more than knowledge brings. In their learned ignorance men are now pushing their theological pursuits in the most diverse directions, but when they look for the peace and blessing of God, they are obliged to turn, if only to pause, toward that common altar where mankind faces God-unknown in full consciousness of its ignorance of both truth and salvation.

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