

Paganism, Superstition and Philosophy

After some uninteresting speculations about the origins of the Jewish people, Tacitus writes of them as follows:¹

Most authors agree that when there was a disfiguring disease in Egypt, King Bocchoris consulted the oracle of Jupiter Ammon to find a remedy and was told to cleanse his kingdom and expel that race of men as hateful to the gods. The people were collected and dumped in the desert; they were sunk in weeping, but one, Moses, advised them to expect no help from gods or men, as they were deserted by both, but with a guide in the sky should trust him, by whose first help they had got rid of the miseries they were then suffering. They agreed and went forward in ignorance and randomly. Nothing troubled them so much as lack of water and they collapsed all over the plain near dead, when a herd of wild asses went from their pasture to a shadowy rock in a grove. Moses followed them and, going by there being grass, found a good supply of water; this relieved them. After six days they founded a city and temple in a place from which they drove out the farmers.²

* The Gildersleve Lecture delivered at Barnard College, February 1984. First published in *The Thoreau Quarterly* 17 (1985), pp. 20–31.

- [1] *Histories*, Book V.
- [2] Plurimi auctores consentiunt, orta per Aegyptum tabe quae corpora foedaret, regem Bocchorim adito Hammonis oraculo remedium petentem purgare regnum et id genus hominum ut invisum deis alias in terras avehere iussum. Sic conquisitum collectumque volgus, postquam vastis locis relictum sit, ceteris per lacrimas torpentibus, Moysen unum exsulum monuisse ne quam deorum hominumve opem exspectarent utrisque deserti, sed sibimet, duce caelesti, crederent, primo cuius auxilio presentes miserias pepulissent. Adsensere atque omnium ignari fortuitum iter incipiunt. Sed nihil aeque quam inopia aquae fatigabat. Iamque haud procul exitio totis campis procubuerant, cum grex asinorum agrestium e pastu in rupem nemore opacam concessit. Secutus Moyses coniectura herbidi soli largas aquarum venas aperit. Id levamen; et continuum sex dierum iter emensi, septimo pulsus cultoribus obtinere terras in quis urbs et templum dicata.

Moses, wanting to establish the people for himself for the future, gave them religious rites which were new and contrary to the rest of mankind. Everything sacred to us is profane to them; by contrast they allow what we see as incest. They consecrated the image of a donkey in their inmost shrine, that being the animal that had saved them from wandering and thirst. They kill the ram, as if to insult Jupiter Ammon. They also sacrifice the ox, because the Egyptians worship Apis. They abstain from pork because of the disease they had once got from swine which are liable to it. They bear witness to their former long hunger by many fasts, and have unleavened bread to recall their snatching at grain. They are supposed to rest on every seventh day because that ended their struggles, and, tempted by idleness, they give up every seventh year to inactivity.³

These practices, however introduced, have antiquity in their favour. Their other customs are sinister, validated by their filthiness. For all the worst of mankind, despising their own ancestral religious ways, came and brought their tributes and presents and so the Jews' wealth increased. Among themselves they are firmly faithful, ready with compassion, but everyone else they hate as enemies. They eat and sleep away from everyone else, and don't associate with alien women though they are extremely lustful; among themselves nothing is illicit. They instituted circumcision of the genitals so as to be recognised by their difference. Their converts do it too, and the first thing they learn is to despise the gods, to shuck off their fatherland, to count parents, children and brethren cheap. However care is taken for the increase of the people. For it is a crime to kill their kind, and they think the souls of those who die in battle or torture are eternal. Hence their love of propagation and contempt for death. They follow the Egyptians in burying bodies rather than burning them, and take the same

[3] Moyses quo sibi in posterum gentem firmaret, novos ritus contrariosque ceteris mortalibus indidit. Profana illic omnia quae apud nos sacra; rursum concessa apud illos quae nobis incesta. Effigiem animalis quo monstrante errorem sitimque depulerant, penetrati sacravere, caeso ariete velut in contumeliam Hammonis. Bos quoque immolatur, quoniam Aegyptii Apin colunt. Sue abstinent memoria cladis quod ipsos scabies quondam turpaverat, cui id animal obnoxium. Longam olim famem crebris adhuc ieiuniis fatentur; et raptarum frugum argumentum panis Iudaicus nullo fermento detinetur. Septimo die otium placuisse ferunt, quia is finem laborum tulerit; dein blandiente inertia septimum quoque annum ignaviae datum.

care about it, with the same belief about the infernal regions; but they differ about the heavenly.⁴

The Egyptians venerate several animals, and multiform effigies; the Jews by their mind alone think of only one divinity; they count profane whoever make images of gods out of mortal materials in the likeness of men: that one is supreme and eternal, neither representable nor perishable. Therefore no images are set up in their cities, let alone in their temples. That flattery is not paid to kings, nor honour to the Caesars. Because their priests used to chant with flutes and cymbals and wore garlands of ivy, and a golden vine was found in the temple, some have thought they worshipped Father Liber, the conqueror of the East; but their customs are not consonant with this at all. Liber established festive and jolly rites, but the custom of the Jews is absurd and sordid.⁵

Historians! Take it to heart that a great historian wrote so. His account has a few vestiges of truth in it. Mostly it is absurd. Where it is a reflection of what happened, it is a distorted one. So, whatever your field or your period, take it to heart — as I take it to heart when I read in Alan Turing mention of the fact (a non-fact) that Muslims believe that women ‘have no souls’.

Tacitus is a talented and sophisticated writer of history. He is about to tell of the war of Titus, and, as he calls it, the death of a famous city — Jerusalem. His account of the Jews is absurd. But it is a

[4] Hi ritus, quoquo modo inducti, antiquitate defenduntur. Cetera instituta sinistra foeda pravitate valere. Nam pessimus quisque spretis religionibus patriis tributa et stipes illuc congregabant; unde auctae Iudaeorum res, et quia apud ipsos fides obstinata, misericordia in promptu, sed adversus omnes alios hostile odium. Separati epulis, discreti cubilibus, proiectissima ad libidinem gens, alienarum concubuit abstinent; inter se nihil illicitum. Circumcidere genitalia instituerunt, ut diversitate noscantur. Transgressi in morem eorum idem usurpant, nec quidquam prius inbuuntur quam contemnere deos, exuere patriam, parentes liberos fratres vilia habere. Augendae tamen multitudini consulitur. Nam et necare quemquam ex agnatis nefas, animosque praelio aut suppliciis peremptorum eternos putant. Hinc generandi amor et moriendi contemptus. Corpora condere quam cremare, e more Aegyptio; eademque cura et de infernis persuasio, caelestium contra.

[5] Aegyptii pleraque animalia effigiesque compositas venerantur; Iudaei mente sola unumque numen intellegunt: profanos qui deum imagines mortalibus materiis in species hominum effingant; summum illud et aeternum neque imitabile neque interiturum. Igitur nulla simulacra urbibus suis, nedum templis sistunt. Non regibus haec adulatio, non Caesaribus honor. Sed quia sacerdotes eorum tibia tympanisque concinebant, hedera vinciebantur, vitisque aurea templo reperta, Liberum patrem coli, domitorem Orientis quidam arbitrati sunt, nequaquam congruentibus institutis. Quippe Liber festos laetosque ritus posuit, Iudeorum mos absurdus sordidusque.

true account of something else. He was a thoroughly civilised pagan. Unknowingly, he gives us a true picture of paganism's hatred of the true religion.

What is paganism? It is having various gods, often quite a lot. It can acknowledge all the gods of others – but not the god of this one people. Sometimes it acts or reacts with the thought that various things might be gods. Two natives of Papua New Guinea were crossing the island forty years ago in difficulty and hunger. They saw a little crocodile in a grove and thought of catching and eating it. The one who lived to tell the tale refused to do this, in case the crocodile was a god.

Tacitus' paganism was not such that he would have told such a story of himself. It was the paganism of a great part of the civilised world. I once heard a farmer in England speaking contemptuously of a thievish gypsy family which had settled down in a village near him. 'Instead of doing the same as everyone else they act so and so' he said. The same note is struck by Tacitus: Moses invented novel rites, contrary to what everyone else does. The explanation? – that he wanted to fixate that people on him for the future. They are an absurd and disgusting people, allowing what the Romans counted as impious and incestuous (this last may have reference to a man's being supposed to raise up seed for his dead brother) – and counting as profane things others held as sacred. All the worst people, who despise their own traditions, run off to join them and increase their wealth. (The Jews annoyed by receiving runaway slaves from other nations.) They cut themselves off from everyone in bed and at board, but are frightfully lustful and allow just anything in their group or with their own. They despise the gods, won't have statues – though, by the way, they have one of a donkey in their inmost shrine. They go in for a purely mental conception of just one divinity – *numen* – which can't be represented in a picture, is eternal, and won't perish – instead of having gods' images in the likeness of men or of more composite beings, like the Egyptians. *Their* customs can't have anything to do with cheerful and festive ceremonies, their customs are gloomy, ludicrous and sordid – like circumcision, for example, which they do in order to be *recognisably* different.

This account of how objectionable a people the Jews were turns strongly on the unlikeness of their ways to everyone else's. The idea that it is of importance to be and to do roughly like everyone else, especially in matters concerning the gods, we find also in Socrates' *Apology*. Socrates asks his accuser Meletus why one of the charges

against him is that he doesn't believe in the gods of the city but in new deities of his own. The latter indeed Meletus does not seem to maintain, and no other accuser makes an appearance in the *Apology*. 'Do you say' asks Socrates, 'that I believe in no gods?' 'Yes'. 'You surprise me' says Socrates. 'Are you suggesting that I don't believe the sun and the moons are gods, like everyone else?' Meletus says yes, Socrates thinks the sun is a stone and the moon a mass of earth, and Socrates mocks and upbraids him for confusing him, Socrates, with Anaxagoras: Socrates wants it to be understood that he *is* 'like everyone else' in this matter, he doesn't think like Anaxagoras, he does believe the sun and moon are gods.*

In paganism, different tribes, nations and cities may have different gods, sometimes a bit different in spite of basically belonging to the same culture, and though cross-identification is often possible; sometimes different by a quite big difference, as the Egyptian gods were unlike the Greek and Roman ones. What then is the complaint against the Jews? Clearly, that they do not worship the gods. They positively despise the gods. Their singularity is so great that it has to be put into their history that Moses persuaded them to abandon hope of any help from the gods, by whom they were manifestly deserted, and so on purpose to insult Jupiter Ammon they sacrificed rams — for he was represented as a ram; and likewise they sacrificed oxen because the Egyptians worshipped an ox; and they taught their converts loathing and contempt for all the gods. To the elder Pliny they were known as a people distinguished by their insults to divinities; *gens contumelia numinum insignis*.

None of this part of the account is a misrepresentation. The prophet Ezekiel calls the gods of the Gentiles shit or turds, though it is usually translated more prettily as 'filth'. Elsewhere we read the sentence 'Of the abominations of the Gentiles we sacrifice to the Lord our God'. The point is that they called the gods of the Gentiles 'abominations'. These included rams and oxen, for example, which were sometimes worshipped by the Gentiles. So they were saying: what the Gentiles worship we sacrifice to God.

Tacitus' Latin does make it sound as if he was a bit impressed by the idea of 'that supreme and eternal, neither representable nor perishable': *summum illud et aeternum neque imitabile neque interitum*; that single divinity, grasped only by the mind: *unum numen, mente sola intellegunt*. But if he was at all impressed, it was only faintly. This

* Plato, *Apology* 26c-e.

is still part of being wilfully unlike everyone else: just one incomprehensible divinity, an object of thought alone, no images, no decorations, none of the customary honours to Kings or Caesar even. No festive splendiddness, no jollity.

This 'not like everyone else' comprises in 'like everyone else' the whole world where many gods were worshipped with many handsome rituals. One nation doesn't have to have the same gods as another; you may think your tribe's gods are better than the next tribe's, and so feel superior to those neighbours. Still, other people's deities are gods. It might be 'unRoman' to introduce the cult of Bacchus or Mithras. The objection was a sort of respectable conservatism. But it would soon pass away. You wouldn't think that the gods of other nations were not gods; at the least, they had their gods and you had yours. The Romans objected, we are told, to Druidism as involving a frightful enormity, a '*dira immanitas*', because of their practice of human sacrifice, which the Romans only engaged in on rare and desperate occasions. Some Roman author comments sarcastically that the Egyptians worship figures composite of man and beast which would appal us as monstrosities if born of women. No doubt some worships of other nations, also parts of the Roman empire, did not spread into Rome. But upon the whole this marks paganism: it is assimilative. It will at least acknowledge divinities of other nations, and will quite likely swallow them up, take them on board.

Why, then, was it a charge against Socrates that he invented new deities? Well, it was only part of the accusations against him. They included not believing in the old ones. The nation or city must keep its old deities, even if new ones are added. The 'new deity' charge doesn't seem to have been important, or to have been meant at all by Meletus, the only accuser who personally appears in the *Apology*.

Socrates, as I have reminded us, insisted that he was just like everyone else in acknowledging the gods. Tacitus shows us that the ancient Jews earned the hatred of the pagans precisely by not being like everyone else: by not acknowledging but rather spurning and despising the gods and the worship of other nations. The hatred of them was not racist, it was religious.

In our day, paganism, as I have defined it, does still exist. It exists somewhat on the retreat between the encroachments of Islam and of Christianity, in Africa. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana was reported to have poured libations to their old gods. Pouring libations is not familiar to us, even in a shadowy form, but is anciently found as a

sacrificial action in the cultus of the divinities. In India full-fledged paganism is ancient, rampant and pervasive; the sacredness of the cow for example is written into their constitution. I will make two observations about the religion, which is Hinduism. One, that I know it is various: though there are hardly any temples of Brahma the Creator, perhaps he has his worshippers. There are also pious Hindus who are described as monotheistical by sympathetic outsiders. But this monotheism goes, *not* with hostility and disfavour towards that worship of many gods and their divinised images which is the major characteristic of Hinduism, but with a tolerance of such religion of the simple, who are not elevated in mind or instructed enough to have passed beyond it. Nor, from my reading, have I the impression that the high minded Brahminical pundit will not have images of gods in his house, made sometimes for the occasion of a festivity out of some soluble material and hosed away when the festivity is over. I have observed the rather human-faced head (trunk and all) of the elephant-headed god Ganesha in the form of a ceramic hanging on the wall of a bank in Bombay: not itself of course a divinity, but only a picture of one, a pious object. Someone is advised that it is quite good to have a favourite deity and to concentrate her devotion on that deity, but is warned against failing to acknowledge the other deities. And a tale is recorded of someone with an exclusive devotion to Shiva, who was warned by Shiva appearing to him that he should also make gifts and pay honours to the other gods. He neglected this in spite of repeated warnings, and then Shiva appeared to him, one half recognisable as Shiva, and the other half as Vishnu, but he placed his offering only on the Shiva-like side. At this Shiva gave up; though whether that just means that he never more appeared to his votary, I do not know. Jesus the Hindus would readily count as an avatar, one among many.

The many deities are occasionally spoken of as all aspects or significations of the one, the invisible. As some speak, it is that which is really one's inmost self, (though it is intense labour to realise this): 'I am in every religion, as a thread through a string of pearls' – this I have seen as a quotation from *Bagavadgita*, though I have not tracked it down here.

Here I come to my second observation. Considering the large amount of spiritual literature connected with Hinduism, and recalling that the ancient Egyptians had their Book of the Dead, and evidently much that is lost; and remembering the laments for the loss of spiritual religion in the Hermes Trismegistos (a lament because of

Egypt's conversion to Christianity, evidently a sort of atheism) I am surprised at the lack of anything comparable in Greek or Roman paganism: Aristotle, remarking that Platonic forms are nothing but such objects as we have here below, being merely imperishable versions of them, adds contemptuously that this is like the way that the gods are just immortal human beings.

He, Aristotle, had a different conception of deity, much like that of Anaxagoras. Anaxagoras himself was convicted of impiety in Athens for what he said about the moon, which unlike Socrates he did not regard as a god. When sentenced he said to the jurors, 'Sirs, you and I were all condemned to death a long time ago'. He left Athens before he could be executed. Aristotle in turn left the city at the threat of prosecution on the same charge of impiety. Anaxagoras went on to Lampsacus, and when he was dying they asked what to do in his memory. 'Make a school holiday for the children' he said, and so it was done. They also erected an altar to *nous kai aletheia*, mind and truth, because they had gathered that these were his gods (or that this was his god).

Now for my question: was reflection on the divine *only* done by philosophers? Or should we see Homer and Hesiod as the holy books of the Greeks? Or is there a lost literature connected with the Mysteries? Have we perhaps a somewhat false picture of Greek and Roman paganism? When St. Paul addressed the Athenians he remarked on having seen an altar's dedication to an unknown god – '*agnosto theo*'. It would be surprising if he didn't understand such a dedication: receiving a benefit, someone could not think of any particular god to attribute it to – so lest he be apparently ungrateful, he dedicated an altar to the unknown god who had done him this kindness. St. Paul said he would tell them who this unknown god was. Here, I use the example to infer that devotion and thanksgiving of a quite personal nature must have been part of the religion. We never hear anything about that, or hardly. But Socrates' last words were about the cock he owed to Aesculapius.

Tacitus calls the new Christian religion 'superstition', and one would expect that the Romans would tend to reckon the ancient Hebrew religion such too; but I have no quotation that comes to mind, except the saying '*Credat Judaeus Apella*', equivalent to the English 'Tell that to the Marines', and evidently expressing contempt for Jewish credulity. Paganism is practice rather than belief, and the absurdity of the pagan legends would therefore seldom be of significance against paganism for pagans. But the Jews were marked

by belief and so they were thought of as credulous. In one application 'superstition' is a term of abuse for a religion deemed false by the speaker, and calling this religion 'superstition' would be an expression of condemnation as false, in a culture where the acceptable religions were not regarded as true, but simply as the normal human practices. So the term 'superstition' would naturally be applicable only to a religion which was strongly marked by beliefs and also was exclusive, separating its adherents from the rest of mankind.

Christians at a much later date called Islam superstition and paganism superstition and rabbinical (i.e. post-Christian) Judaism superstition. Protestants called Catholic Christianity superstition, and also Russian Orthodoxy, if they travelled in Russia and observed what it was like. Catholics did not return the compliment to Protestants, speaking rather of the many Protestant heresies, and similarly for the other many and various heresies that sprang up in the history of the Christian Church. To those who think they have no religion at all, in the U.S.A. for example, it is a frequent fixed opinion that everything they identify as religion is *eo ipso* superstition. Thus, this old usage survives to a certain degree. On the other hand there is something else which very many people of different religions would agree in calling 'superstition': things like the use of charms, reading tea leaves, the I Ching, thinking it unlucky to have a rowan tree in your garden, thinking that if you break a looking-glass you must throw salt over your shoulder to avert bad luck, thinking certain numbers are unlucky, or the sight of a black cat lucky. About such things people will sometimes say: 'I'm afraid I *am* superstitious', and here it is tempting to make Wittgenstein's remark: 'Don't be proud of *seeming* a fool, you may be one'.

There are sometimes bridges between the two uses of the word 'superstition': fortune-telling may be associated with someone's practising as a witch (i.e. a medium) and that with the religion called 'spiritualism'. Medals and relics probably strike Protestants as like magic charms and so might be pointed at to justify calling the Catholic religion 'superstition'. The Hindu idea that if you sacrifice a hundred perfect stallions in a perfect way on a hundred successive days you will guarantee living for 1,000 years seems to be superstitious in both senses. I once asked Wittgenstein what he understood by 'superstition'. He said that he imagined he meant the same as I did. I thought it was not in the 'false-religion' sense that he was thinking of it, but the other one; he wasn't offering a definition, but would call

the same things superstition as I would. That he did not intend it in the 'false-religion' sense (in which neither am I accustomed to use the word) looks likely from his hostility to the 'science has shown us that this is a mistake' attitude about such things as poison oracles and other magical practices. Speaking of such matters I once asked him whether, if he had a friend, an African whose plan or possibility after being in England for a bit, was to go back home and take a training and then practise as a witch doctor, whether he, Wittgenstein, would want to stop him from doing this. We walked in silence for a space and then he said: 'I would, but I don't know why'. We talked of it no more. I incline to think that a vestige of the true religion spoke in him then; for that religion, whether in its ancient Hebrew or its Christian phase, has always said 'No' to such things.

And now I come to philosophy; more particularly to a certain current in philosophy which has a strong historical connection with Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein himself wrote something in one of his many notebooks denying that – or raising the question whether – it would matter for the Christian religion whether Christ did any of the things recorded of him, or indeed existed at all. He reproved a Jain friend for speaking somewhat contemptuously of the Jain beliefs about the journeyings of the soul after death. He said on other occasions that if someone came to him with religious doubts he would probably raise doubts about the doubts.

Now I can't speak for Wittgenstein, I only report one or two things here from his tongue or pen. But there is an attitude or fairly characteristic strain of thought in some of his followers which seems like a partial reflection of some of what I have quoted, though as I will formulate it I don't mostly claim that anyone has definitely spoken so.

1. There is no such thing as a religion's being true. This is feebly indicated by saying: 'this (religious) proposition (whatever it may be) isn't like a proposition of natural science'.
2. Religious belief is better compared to somebody's being in love than to his believing anything true or false.
3. Someone who has been taught to pray finds out that you have to be completely honest for your utterance to count as prayer. He finds it out by being confronted with a personal problem.
4. So far as *realisation* and *understanding* are concerned, what is in question is an attitude which one man may have and another lack – an attitude towards punishment, for example. *One* regards punishment as a regrettable affliction which he wishes he could have avoided in spite of having done what earned it; another

regards it *as* punishment, which means he takes up a quite different attitude to what he has to suffer, and thinks that he *ought* to suffer it.

5. There is in some cases a running of one's head against the walls of language – a *misuse* of words as far as concerns any sense that can be put on them. (Here I am using Wittgenstein's own words.) 'Nothing that anyone does can harm me' is given as an example of such thought – because in some inexpressible way nothing that might happen to me at anyone's hands would *count* as harm. Why? There isn't a reason. Or again: 'God will not suffer you to be tempted beyond your strength'.* That sounds as if you could be confident, that, though there were things that would break you, God won't allow them to happen. And so I would take it, but I would be called wrong: for – I would be told – it isn't a negative prediction that things of a certain effect won't happen. As that, it might be false. But if you mean it religiously you possess it in a way that is immune to the idea of refuting examples. Now suppose you said 'My bank account can never be overdrawn'. We'd want to know why you think that. Has some Arab oil sheik given orders that your account is to be replenished whenever an overdraft threatens? No, nothing like that. Have you some insane conviction about your bank account? No – but (on the model of 'Nothing can harm me', or 'I won't be tempted beyond my strength') you have given expression to something that 'runs up against the limits of language'. About a bank account, that sounds and is ludicrous; Wittgenstein's own example⁶ was about feeling oneself to be absolutely safe.

I hope I have said enough to indicate the sort of thinking I am talking about. Now it seems to me that it is very closely connected with a conclusion that in any sense in which a religion can be 'true', which is a pretty odd sense, *any* religion is or can be true. It all depends *who* has it and *how* he has it. He may be shallow, even though enthusiastic and argumentative; and then he is missing the boat all the time. He contrasts totally with someone else, who has depth – in character, in attitudes, in his meditations and reflections and reactions to other people and to what happens – and this man has not missed the boat. To alter the analogy a little, he is on some boat of the kind in question. As for the shape and fitment of the boat, they can be of any kind, if we are speaking in generalities.

* 1 *Corinthians* 10.13.

[6] In his 'Lecture on Ethics', published in *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965), p. 3–12.

The view that I have drawn out as such a conclusion is in one way a very common one. In this way it does not aspire to any heights, or pretend to any depth. 'All religions are the same really: they are a lot of different paths to the same end', or 'a lot of different ways of having to do with God', or with what is spiritual. One hears or reads this rather often; more often as journalism than anything else. Upon the whole I judge it thoughtless. It makes me want to interject: '*nice* religions, you mean, don't you?' But it is not much good making such an exclamation because so little thought has been expressed.

The philosophic form which I have described does by contrast have a fair amount of thought in it. My purpose has been to point to it as an expression of what I showed as the heart of actual historical and present paganism: namely having and respecting the various worships of many gods and hating the exclusiveness of the true religion. That exclusiveness branded the ancient Jews as atheists, enemies of the gods. For our philosophic pagans there is no such thing as the true religion or the true god; the many religions can perhaps be like many pearls on a string. That one string which each religion may be hung on, is something rich and significant in the depths of the self. All peoples have gods and it is contemptible to be scornful of them for this: what matters is whether there is this depth (of religion) in a man's heart.

But the question is: Why? Why should it matter?