

II

PRIMITIVE THEOLOGY

“God is my desire.” TOLSTOI.

IN all the primitive ritual so far examined, in the rites of Totemism, of Initiation Ceremonies, the King-God and the Fertility Drama, one surprising fact stands out clean and clear; we have nothing that we in our modern sense of the words could call the worship of a god—of sanctity we have abundance, of divinity nothing. Yet all the while if we examine the matter closely there are present elements which must and did go to the making of a god. Only it is important to grasp at the outset firmly this fact, that it is possible to have a living and vigorous religion without a theology.

Man, the psychologists tell us, is essentially an image-maker¹. He cannot perform the simplest operation without forming of it some sort of correlative idea. It has been much disputed whether the myth arises out of the rite or the rite out of the myth, whether a man thinks something because he does it or does it because he thinks it. As a matter of fact the two operations arose together and are practically inseparable. An animal first perceives, perception immediately sets up reaction, that reaction is two-fold, perception sets up action in the body, representation in the mind. A rite is not of course the same as a simple action. A rite is—it must never be forgotten—an action *redone* (commemorative) or *predone* (anticipatory and magical). There is therefore always in a rite a certain tension either of remembrance or anticipation and this tension emphasizes the emotion and leads on to representation².

It is moreover, psychology tells us, mainly from delayed reactions that representation springs. In animals who act from what we call instinct action follows immediately or at least swiftly on perception, but in man where the nervous system is more complex perception is not immediately transformed into action, there

¹ For the analysis of magic and its dependence on ‘free ideas’ see my *Alpha and Omega*, pp. 187–195.

² I have elsewhere analysed the psychology of the *δρώμενον* or rite. See *Themis*, pp. 42–49, and my *Ancient Art and Ritual*, in the Home University Library, pp. 35–44.

is an interval for choice between several possible courses. Perception is pent up and, helped by emotion, becomes conscious representation. In this momentary halt between perception and reaction all our images, ideas, in fact our whole mental life, is built up. If we were a mass of well combined instincts, that is if the cycle of perception and action were instantly fulfilled, we should have no representation and hence no art and no theology. In fact in a word religious presentation, mythology or theology, as we like to call it, springs like ritual from arrested, unsatisfied desire¹. We figure to ourselves what we want, we create an image and that image is our god.

A god so projected *is* part of the worshipper and is felt and realized as such; divinity has not yet separated off from humanity. The dancer in the sacred rite cannot be said to worship his god, he lives him, experiences him. The worshipper at this stage might communicate with his god, he would not offer him sacrificial gifts or prayer. The question arises, by what process did severance take place? We cannot answer with certainty, but two points suggest themselves. The process of personification led to severance and personification was undoubtedly helped by two things: (1) the existence of a leader to the band of worshippers, (2) the making of puppets and images.

Collective group-emotion is strong, but, dominant though it be, it might never be strong enough to induce personification but for a nucleus of actual fact. The band of dancers has a leader, *that* leader is in a sense separate and about him emotion focuses. Once elected as representative spokesman and chief-dancer, he is in a sense insulated; the rest of the band regard him with contemplation and some incipient awe, he is sacred and on the way to become separately divine. He is what the Greeks called a *δαίμόνων ἀγούμενος*, *leader of daimons*, and not far from being the accomplished *theos* or god. In this matter we are on safe ground for in the famous *Hymn of the Kouretes* Zeus himself as chief dancer is addressed as Greatest Kouros or Young Man, head of the initiate band².

¹ This remains equally true if, with the new psychological school of "Behaviourists," we regard the primitive element in desire as an impulse away from the actual rather than an attraction towards the ideal. See Bertrand Russell, *Analysis of Mind*, p. 68.

² See *Themis*, pp. 30-49.

The seasonal character of all these rites helped on the process of personification that led to severance. A perception that is recurrent is apt to lead on to a conception. The plural generates the abstract. The recurrent May-Kings and Jack-o'-the-Greens and Deaths get a kind of permanent separate life of their own and become separate beings. In this way they help to beget a kind of daimon or spirit; from being annual they became a sort of perennial though not yet immortal god. We are apt to think and speak of the King of the May or the Death as "personifying the Spirit of Vegetation" or of Death. But primitive man does not first conceive an abstraction and then embody it. The process is the reverse. He first *perceives* the actual leader and then helped by frequent repetitions *conceives* a daimon of the dance.

There is another practical help to the determination and stability of his image. We find in many rites an actual puppet or animal refashioned or rechosen from year to year. The puppet or animal is a nucleus, a focus for emotions and floating conceptions. If the puppet be a human doll the daimon will take human form, if an animal the god will be theriomorphic. Out of the puppet arose the idol and to the idol certainly among the Greeks the gods owe much of the beauty and the fixity of their forms. Moreover the puppet necessarily fosters the notion of separateness. You may identify yourself with the leader of the band, the common dance and song compel that, but, though the puppet is the focus of your emotion, you know it is *not* you, you are outside it, you contemplate it and you may ultimately worship it. "Le dieu c'est le désir extériorisé, personnifié"¹.

This analysis of the making of a god lends to our outlook on religion generally a singular unity and clarity. Primitive ritual we saw concerned itself with the conservation and furtherance of life, with the nurture of the individual and the reproduction of the race. It was the expression in action of the will to live, the "desire to have life and to have it more abundantly." What ritual expresses in action theology utters in concomitant representation, the gods are images of desire. Religion then in these its two aspects is no longer an attitude towards the unseen and unknown but an emotion towards the known and experienced; it is the

¹ E. Doutté, *Magie et Religion*, 1909, p. 601.

offspring not of fear but of desire, the gods are human will and passion incarnate. It is only when the god is separated from the rite that he dies down into a sterile, immobile perfection¹.

The daimon is born of the rite and with the rite which begat him he is doomed. The gradual dwindling and death of the rite is inevitable. Magic is found again and again to be a failure. It does not bring the expected help and bit by bit it is discredited. According to Dr Frazer it is out of this discrediting of magic that religion is born. Finding himself helpless in the face of natural powers man tries to pull the strings of higher powers and so obtain control. He imagines gods and tries to influence them by prayer and sacrifice. More recent psychology would state the case otherwise. The rite fails but the daimon projected from the rite remains. The presentation once made still holds the imagination. But because of the failure of the rite the presentation is as it were cut loose. Out of this desolate, dehumanized daimon bit by bit develops the god. He is segregated aloof from the worshipper, but he is made in the image of that worshipper, so must be approached by human means, known by experience to be valid with other human beings, and such are prayer, praise and sacrifice.

This separation of god from worshipper, this segregation of the image from the imagination that begot it, is manifestly a late and somewhat artificial stage, but in most religions it develops into a doctrine and even hardens into something of a dogma. Man utterly forgets that his gods are man-begotten and he stresses the gulf that separates him from his own image and presentation. This is very notable in Greek religion. The Greeks being a people of high imaginative power are at the mercy of their own imaginations. Pindar is instant in stressing the gulf that separates humanity from divinity. To seek to become even *like* the gods to him as a Greek savoured of insolence. "Strive not thou to become a god"². "Desire not thou soul of mine, life of the immortals"³. And yet oddly enough the old reality and actuality even in Greek religion again and again crops up. Man hungers to be one again with the image he has himself made. The old kinship pulls at

¹ See *Themis*, chapter x. "The Olympians."

² Pind. *Ol.* v. 58.

³ Pind. *Pyth.* III. 59.

him. So in the mystery religions the goal is always reunion with the divine. To the initiate it is said at last: "Thou art become God from Man"¹. Nothing short of this contents him.

At first it would seem as if this stage of religion in which the image of the god is completely projected and segregated, a stage which for convenience sake we may call *Olympianism*², is, even if inevitable, a set back. These projected "Olympians" though they are ideals are by no means ideal; they reflect the passions of their worshippers and not infrequently lag behind them in morality. Jahweh is even more unbridled, licentious, vengeful than his people. The average Athenian would have been ashamed to emulate the amours of Zeus. Moreover the fact that these Olympians are completely segregated, that they are the vehicles of all sorts of primitive tabus and sanctities, even the detail that they are lodged in separate and sacred houses, removes them from all chance of wholesome criticism: "Shall not the Judge of all the world do right?"

What then is the biological function of this theology? Does it in any way serve the purposes of life?

Recent psychology is ready with an answer simple and illuminating. In this way.

We recognize now-a-days two types of thinking. The first which Jung³ calls "directed thinking" is what we normally mean by thinking. It "imitates reality and seeks to direct it." It is exhausting and is the sort of thinking employed in all scientific research; it looks for adaptations and creates innovations. With that type of thought, which is comparatively late in development, though in embryo it may have existed from the outset, we have little to do in religion.

The second kind of thought is what is called "dream or phantasy-thinking." It turns away from reality and sets free subjective wishes. In regard to adaptation, because of its neglect of reality, it is wholly unproductive. Giving free rein to impulse as it does, it is not exhausting. Freud calls this sort of mind-functioning the "pleasure and pain principle," it is ontogenetically older than

¹ Orphic Gold Tablet. See *Prolegomena*, p. 663.

² For a detailed analysis of *Olympianism* and its contrast with daimon-worship see two chapters, ix. and x., in *Themis*, "From Daimon to Olympian" and "The Olympians."

³ *Psychology of the Unconscious*, translated by B. M. Hinkle, 1919.

directed thinking, it is typified by the mental operations of children and savages and by those of adults in their dreams, reveries and mental disorders.

It is from this early infantile type of dream or phantasy-thinking engendered by the fertility rite that primitive theology and mythology spring. They do not seek adaptation to fact, they turn away from reality and utter unfulfilled desire. "The gods are libido," says Jung boldly. If we may be allowed to substitute for the word *libido* with its offensive and misleading connotations some such term as "vital impulse," Jung's proposition may be accepted of all the primitive divinities¹. We imagine what we lack, the "dying resurrected gods and heroes are but the projected hopes and fears of humanity." The older mind still buried in all of us, the mind of dream-fantasies is, and always has been, incessantly weaving dream-images of imaginary wish fulfilment. The soul in self-defence, unable as yet to adapt itself to its environment, finding that Fate withholds satisfaction in the visible world, would fain

—grasp this sorry scheme of things entire
And having shattered it to bits
Remould it nearer to the heart's desire.

And the imaged agent of this remoulding is the god, "our own vast image, glory crowned."

In like manner arises the myth. The myth is not an attempted explanation of either facts or rites. Its origin is not in "directed thinking," it is not rationalization. The myth is a fragment of the soul life, the dream-thinking of the people, as the dream is the myth of the individual². As Freud says, "it is probable that myths correspond to the distorted residue of the wish phantasies of whole nations, the secularized dreams of young humanity." Mythical tradition it would seem does not set forth any actual account of old events—that is the function of legend—but rather myth acts in such a way that it always reveals a wish-thought common to humanity and constantly rejuvenated.

What then is the biological function of theology and myth?

We hear much now-a-days of the danger of "suppressed com-

¹ In every divinity two factors are observable (1) the "vital impulse" common to all nature, (2) the projection of human desire.

² See W. H. R. Rivers, "Dreams and Primitive Culture" in *Bulletin of John Rylands Library, Manchester*, vol. iv. 3 and 4, p. 387.

plexes." It is indeed in the discovery of the danger of these complexes and the methods of their cure that the main originality of the Freudian school consists. Man finds himself in inevitable conflict with some and often many elements of his environment; he shirks the conflict. Just because it is harassing and depressing he forcibly drives it out of his conscious life. But his unconscious life is beyond his control. Into that unconscious stratum the conflict sinks and lives there an uninterrupted life. Now the function of religion is to prevent, to render needless just this suppression of conflict. Man has made for himself representations of beings stronger and more splendid than himself, he has lost all sense that they are really projections of his own desire and to these beings he hands over his conflict, he no longer needs to banish the conflict into the unconscious but gods will see to it and fight on his side: "God is our refuge and strength," "Casting all your care upon Him for He careth for you." The function of theology is to keep the conflict that would be submerged in the sphere of the conscious and prevent its development into a mischievous subliminal complex. Theology thus is seen to have high biological value. Probably but for its aid man long before he developed sufficient reason to adapt himself to his environment must have gone under.

It will readily be seen that for this purpose of refuge a god of the Olympian type serves best. A god of the daimon type is too near, too intimate for relief. The more completely segregated is the god the better he serves as safety valve. Modern psychology has in truth dived deep into the "ocean of insanity upon which the little barque of human reason insecurely floats"¹, and knowing this insecurity and this frailty modern psychology teaches us to be careful how we lightly tamper with the faiths of others, how we try to rid a man of what may seem to us a burden unbearable but may be to him an incalculable solace and relief. And further the new psychology sets theology in a new and kinder light. Those of us who are free-thinkers used to think of it rationalistically as a bundle of dead errors, or at best as a subject dead and dry. But conceive of it in this new light and theology becomes a subject

¹ Bertrand Russell, *The practice and theory of Bolshevism*, 1 127.

of passionate and absorbing interest, it is the science of the images of human desire, impulse, aspiration.

Our consideration of primitive theology has then led to the same conclusion as our consideration of primitive ritual. They are in fact but two faces or modes of the same impulse—the impulse to the conservation of life. Personification, theology is but a natural, inevitable utterance of human desire. As Shakespeare had it long ago

Such tricks hath strong imagination,
That, if it would but apprehend some joy,
It comprehends some bringer of that joy.

It is not surprising therefore that recent writers on religion should tend to define religion itself in terms no longer of knowledge and belief but in terms of life. Thus in *The Tree of Life*¹ Ernest Crawley writes, the permanent source of religion is “the instructive affirmation of life,” and again, “the primary function of religion is to affirm and consecrate life.” Religion “consecrates also the means of life. . . . it surrounds with an insulation of taboo those critical moments and periods in which the sources of life are in danger—birth, puberty, marriage, sickness and death.” God is in very literal truth the Desire of the Nations². “In its widest sense,” says a recent American writer³, “religion means for any species that degree of interest that it can experience in what makes for its own continuity,” and more explicitly: “Religion is the greatest thing in the world of living men. *Twentieth century religion is an enlightened consciousness of the impulse that makes for species continuity, and an intelligent concern for all the values that minister to this end.*” How far such a statement is adequate we have now to consider.

¹ Pp. 258 and 270.

² I do not propose here even to resume my discussion of *mana* in *Themis*, pp. 65–69, and *Alpha and Omega*, pp. 167–173. It is sufficiently obvious that Freud's *libido* and primitive *mana* are roughly commensurate. To primitive man the stuff of the world is neither mental nor material but—as to the new psychologists—a neutral stuff or force out of which both are compounded. See Bertrand Russell, *Analysis of Mind*, passim—a book which only appeared when these sheets were in proof.

³ Orlando O. Norris in “What is Religion,” from *The American Schoolmaster*, Jan. 1919. Ypsilanti, Michigan.