

ROMAN IDEAS OF DEITY

IN THE LAST CENTURY BEFORE THE
CHRISTIAN ERA

LECTURES DELIVERED IN OXFORD FOR THE
COMMON UNIVERSITY FUND

BY

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'ROMAN FESTIVALS OF THE REPUBLIC,'

'SOCIAL LIFE IN ROME IN THE AGE OF CICERO

'RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF THE ROMAN PEOPLE ETC.

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LECTURE I

SKETCH OF THE COURSE: DOMESTIC DEITIES

My object in these few lectures is to gain some idea of what the Roman and Italian, learned or unlearned, thought about deity and the divine nature in the age immediately preceding the Christian era. The tendency to-day is to concentrate attention on the Hellenistic age, and on the whole range of mystical Graeco-Egyptian literature which was the natural result of the ideas of that age; or again on the types of oriental religion which obtained a footing, more or less secure, in the Roman world of the Empire. No doubt such studies are more profitable than any that Rome and Italy can supply. On the other hand, the Italian side of the great religious problem of this age has never, I think, been systematically treated on its own merits. I know of no one who has been through the voluminous Latin literature of that time with the special object of ascertaining, if possible, what ideas of divine power were current in Italy, apart from those of Greek philosophers. Even the very instructive edition of Cicero's work on the nature of the gods, by the veteran scholar, Dr. Joseph B. Mayor, does not

exactly answer my purpose; for both introductions and commentary are of necessity mainly occupied with the Greek originals used by Cicero, and all such matter as may throw light on them.

My original plan, it is true, was to use these three books of Cicero as the basis of my lectures. I read them again, as I had often read them before, looking for something to my purpose without finding much. I am well aware of their great value in certain ways, and especially in the presentation, in the second book, of Stoic ideas of religion as held by the Syrian Posidonius, a man who seems during the last few years to have reappeared in the world, and to be made responsible not only for the Stoicism of the next age, but for astrology by M. Cumont, for the sixth *Aeneid* by Norden, for mysticism by Wendland, as well as for the history and geography of the age, through Diodorus and Strabo.¹ In estimating the mental treasures of this extraordinary man, Cicero is in this work and others of the same time undoubtedly of great value. But this was not what I proposed to myself.

And to say the truth the *de Natura Deorum* is by no means wholly satisfying. The subject is one of enormous difficulty, far beyond Cicero's mental reach. We have only to think of the extreme difficulty

¹ Cumont, *Astrology and Religion*, p. 83 foll. Norden, *Virgil, Aen. VI.* p. 20 foll. Wendland, *Die hellenistisch-römische Kultur* (1912), p. 134 foll. Schmekel, *Die mittlere Stoa*, p. 85 foll. Mr. Bevan, in *Stoics and Sceptics*, p. 98 foll., has some very useful remarks on Posidonius. To "make men at home in the universe" was, he aptly says, the real mission of this encyclopaedist.

of fixing the idea of the supernatural at any historical period, to see that a man of the world like Cicero, however gifted, could hardly be qualified for such work.

For that idea is the result of a number of different currents of tradition and reflection, of the intermixture of races and systems of education, of social habits and the beliefs that they have engendered. Amateur's work will not find a path through subject-matter like this, and Cicero may fairly be described as an interested amateur. Amateur we must call him, though he wrote, according to his habit, on the foundation of the works of others who can perhaps hardly be called by that name, save in so far as it is applicable to all the philosophers of that age. Varro, the fragments of whose writings are often of great value for our subject, was probably less of an amateur : he had a wider knowledge and a harder head. Lucretius is less so than either, for he was not a busy public man like the other two, but a real student and in deadly earnest. But Cicero was an amateur not only because he did not think much for himself, but because he did not really believe his subject to be of vital interest to humanity. Meditation on the nature of God did not come to him as a necessity : it came because he was intellectually interested in all such questions.

Yet in spite of Cicero's amateurishness, we must not forget that the *de Natura Deorum*, like all his strictly philosophical works, was written at the close

of his life, when he was much moved by an accumulation of trials and troubles, political and domestic. These culminated in the loss of his daughter, and this last blow put him in a mental condition so emotional as almost to make a mystic of him for a time.¹ Tullia died early in 45 B.C., and Cicero still had two and a half years of life before him. In these years, as a man of sorrows trying to console himself with philosophy, all his philosophical works were written; the *Academica*, the *Tusculans*, the *de Finibus*, the *de Officiis*, and the *de Natura Deorum*,² this last followed by the *de Divinatione* and *de Fato*, subjects closely connected with it. Death, future life, prophecy, duty, deity—subjects like these were now in the mind of this quick and sensitive man. I do not think it has been sufficiently noticed that these writings point to an era in his life in which he was really bringing his mind to bear on great questions of human interest, as he had never yet done, except perhaps when, as a younger man by ten years, he wrote the *de Republica* and the *Somnium Scipionis*,—in another period of recovery from serious misfortune and depression.

So in spite of his habitual diletterism, I cannot but think that the three books on the nature of Deity were the work of one in some sense seeking after God. If he had been living in one of the great oriental cities, he might well have been one

¹ *The Religious Experience of the Roman People*, p. 385 foll.

² See Mayor's *de Natura Deorum*, vol. iii. p. xxv.

of the "God-fearers" (σεβόμενοι), of whom Professor Lake has had much to say in his book on the earlier epistles of St. Paul:¹ men, that is, interested in the worship of the Jews or some other oriental people, such as the centurion who built the Jews a synagogue, or the Roman soldier Cornelius of Acts x.² Such men would join in the worship of the synagogue without actually submitting to become proselytes: men who mark the spirit of the age, in that they have given up the religion of the old City-state as no longer really religion, and are disposed to satisfy their yearnings of heart by taking lessons from other peoples in religion, either intellectually or emotionally, or both. But I am merely fancying for a moment what might have happened had Cicero been what he was not; in reality he was a Roman man of the world, living in Italy, and he never got as far as this. He was indeed the last-born son of the old City-state, and he never, in principle at least, gave up its worship. If you had asked him whether he believed in the existence of the divine inhabitants of the city, I think he would have answered "Yes" without hesitation, but with a mental reservation for all except perhaps Jupiter and Vesta. If you asked him the same question about the deities of the household and the spirits of the dead, I believe he would have answered in the affirmative with little reserva-

¹ Lake, *Earlier Epistles of St. Paul*, p. 37 foll.

² Cp. also Acts xvii. 10 foll. Professor Lake, on p. 65, defines the God-fearers as men who were dissatisfied with their own position, and were easily capable of becoming fervent believers.

tion. The presiding deities of the household were a part of his mental furniture, as definitely fixed in his mind as the trees growing round the ancestral farm at Arpinum; while the great protecting deity of Rome, and the spirit of the everlasting hearth-fire of the city, were simply a part of his life as an active Roman citizen. But beyond this I should not like to attempt to fathom his religious consciousness.

So much for the personal aspect of the *de Natura Deorum*. Now let us look at it for a moment in the light of the thinking power and the religious tendencies of the period. How far does it really represent an actual current either of thought or feeling? How far is it rooted in the life of Rome and Italy?

Not long ago Professor J. S. Reid read an excellent paper to our Oxford Philological Society on Cicero's philosophical works, and his genuine admiration was delightful and stimulating. But he did not mention the one serious defect even of these last works of Cicero's life: a defect which we should probably also find, were they extant in abundance, in the Greek writers whom Cicero followed, Posidonius, Antiochus, Philodemus, and the rest,—that their thinking was not rooted in the life of the world around them. So far as we can guess, these writers only modified old systems of philosophy to suit their own age: they did not grow naturally and organically out of the soil, as did the old Socratic school. But if philosophy is to be fertile, it must not detach itself from life. "Its office," said Dr. Caird, "is to bring life to clear self-conscious-

ness, as the old Greek philosophy did.”¹ I think this exactly suggests the weak point of Cicero, what makes him fall flat to the ordinary reader, if not to a student like Professor Reid. The *Tusculans* for example, and the *de Officiis*, were wholesome and readable, but they have never really roused mankind. They suggest that Panaetius and the others may have been also out of touch with real life, and have gained their Roman reputation rather from their novelty—I mean the novelty of their thoughts for a Roman—than from the living force which mirrors human life. Almost the same may be said of Seneca, and this is, I think, the right way to explain the obvious gulf between his life and his philosophy. Neither with Cicero nor Seneca does philosophy seem to come straight from the only fountain-head of real thought in ethics and religion—the problems of the life around you. The last enthusiast about Cicero, Zielinski, in his book *Cicero im Wandel der Jahrhunderte*, seems to miss this point entirely.²

If this is so in Cicero’s philosophy generally, it is even more so in what we may call his theological writings. The world had long ago entered on an age of theological thought, in succession to an age of simple and almost unconscious religious practice. If theology is religion brought to self-consciousness,³ this was an age of theology; for the old religious rites, and their meaning and object, had all become

¹ Caird, *The Evolution of Religion in the Greek Philosophies*, ch. ii.

² See his account of Cicero’s ethic, p. 70 foll. (ed. 2, 1908).

³ Caird, *op. cit.* vol. i. p. 31.

matter of questioning. Yet Cicero's theology does not really tackle the great problem of Italian religious life—What is the meaning and object of these rites, and to what kind of beings are they really addressed? What can we know of the powers whom we thus worship? Cicero speculates in the modes of thought of his masters and models—he rarely or never, like Lucretius or even Virgil, faces the facts right in front of him. Once only, as we shall see in a moment, does he seem to inherit the earnest spirit of Lucretius—the scorn without the remedy.

If the religion in question, *i.e.* that of Rome and Italy, had been at this time a genuine product, full of life, this theology might have been of real and permanent interest. It would have found a rich soil to grow in. But we must do Cicero the justice to say that in Rome, and very largely in Italy too, there was little life left in the religious forms and conceptions. Lucretius utterly despised them, and so also did Cicero at times, though they used different terms, Cicero calling it all *superstitio*, Lucretius *religio*.¹ This is not indeed generally recognised as regards Cicero, but whoever will read the first few pages of Mayor's introduction to his third volume of the *Natura Deorum* will find strong grounds for this view. Or listen to a passage quoted by him from the second book, *de Divinatione* (sec. 148): "To say the truth, *superstitio* has spread among all peoples,

¹ For these two difficult terms, see Mayor's note on *de Natura Deorum*, ii. 72 (vol. ii. p. 183); and W. Otto, *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, vol. xii. (1909), p. 533 foll.