

PROGRESS IN RELIGION
TO THE CHRISTIAN ERA

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BY

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I

INTRODUCTION

FASCINATING as the course of research has been among the religious ideas of primitive peoples—and those who caught the gleam of the *Golden Bough* a quarter of a century since will not readily forget its appeal—the history of Religion includes many races who are not at all primitive. The time comes now and then when it is less urgent to ask *how* religion began than *why* it continues and what changes it has undergone. In some quarters, one guesses, the view has prevailed that, if the origins are lowly, the developed product is discredited—that if religion began in the grossest superstition or in close connection with it, and was for long almost indistinguishable from magic, so much the worse for religion. There has been an air of polemic about the work of certain researchers, which at least suggests this line of reflection. But another line seems equally possible. If, in spite of these unhappy early associations, religion has maintained itself in the respect of the peoples of the highest cultures—if with every advance in thought, in powers of seeing and feeling, in social culture and in morals, religion has kept pace—then it may at least be argued that religion is not a regrettable survival from a bad past, a weakness of the feeblar spirits of the race—an accident at best—but something inseparable from the rational life of man,

something as inherent in human nature and as essential to it as art or morality or any other expression and means of human life. This is arguable, at least. In any case, if the study of origins is a legitimate subject for the human mind, surely the study of what is developed from those origins needs no defence. All our educationists emphasise the value of child-study: can we suggest that grown people are *not* a proper study of mankind?

In any case, there are religions of the higher culture—and, without beating about the bush, I am more interested in them myself; I have studied them, and I propose to continue to study them. So, with no more apology, I turn to my subject—Progress in Religion.

In Cambridge—it is our reproach—we are perhaps a little more matter-of-fact than Oxford people, a little more content to confine ourselves to verifying our references and to recording what we find. I will not defend our habit of mind; it is so obviously useful and so essentially scientific. But in this book my object is something different. I am not aiming at making a complete epitome of the history of religion from Moses to Mrs. Eddy. I am rather pursuing what one of the keenest guides of my undergraduate youth somewhat truculently called “the spirit of History emancipated from the bonds of fact.” I hope not to part company with fact, but I do not want to be in bondage to it; it is the wood and its habits that I wish to understand, not to count the trees. This will involve a tentative use of theory as well as of fact. My endeavour is to get hold of the factors that make for progress in men’s religious ideas—to understand why mankind as a whole is always apt to be revising its religion and cannot let it alone. I also want to master the factors that make for retardation in this progress. I turn naturally to the peoples of the ancient Mediterranean world—the peoples who, since I first

learnt to read, have been my chief study, to whom I am not at all ashamed to have given my life so far—and I propose to draw from them the main part of what I have to say on progress in religion.

The comparative study of religion began a long time ago. Xenophanes, as we shall see, noted the divergencies of men's conceptions of the gods. Herodotus marked coincidences and shrewdly suspected certain religious teachers, whose names he would not mention, of plagiarising their inspiration from Egypt. Justin and Tertullian in the second century of our era remarked similarities between the rites of the Christian Church and the heathens. "This, too," says Justin, "in the rites of Mithras, the evil demons have delivered to be done—in imitation. That bread and a cup of water are set forth in the initiation ceremonies with certain formulæ—you know or may learn."¹ "The devil," says Tertullian, "baptises. He promises remission of sins from his font. If I yet remember, Mithras seals his soldiers on the brow";² and so forth. The current explanation has generally been borrowing. The devil and his dæmons got early word of what Christian rites would be—and borrowed. Or else, say some modern scholars, the Christians, remembering their old ways in religion, borrowed on their side. The explanation of Justin and Tertullian seems a little old and odd; the fashion to-day is to find analogies between Christian practice and the mystery religions, and a little to discredit the Christian in consequence.

The weakness of this line of comparative study seems to me to be that it does not reckon with development. Likeness in rite and ceremony, in phrase and even in ideas, there may be; and it may be of singularly little consequence. The questions to be asked are of the move-

¹ Justin, *Apoc.* i. 98C.

² Tertullian, *De præser. hæret.* 40.

ment, the direction, the guiding spirit, the purpose, the aspiration. Two sacraments may be closely alike—to the distant student—at a particular point of time; and their influence on human history unspeakably different. We have always to bear in mind that there is a stage beyond, and that what matters in the study of a religion is what bears most upon the stage not yet reached. The key is in the last stage, the highest development, as Aristotle said. Our task is not to predict the last stage, but to examine certain stages, and to discover, if we can, the disturbing forces, the factors that have from time to time made the future, that have driven men forward in spite of themselves.

Let us begin by a broad contrast of what have been and what are the commonly accepted conceptions of religion. At the dawn of History, and for very long after, men conceived of religion as a matter of practices—certain things were done, and done in certain ways; the way mattered, and the action mattered, not the spirit, nor the belief that went with it. To-day, on the contrary, we conceive of religion as being above all things belief—as faith; and ritual and ceremony, however desirable, however necessary some hold them, are admittedly only of value as expressions of real belief, of faith. Religion has changed, then, from being predominantly an external thing to being the most intensely inward and intimate of all things, a law, an intuition within. It *was* a traditional thing—inherited, unexamined, independent of reason, unconnected with moral judgment or moral conduct; but it *is* individual conviction, and even where tradition is given the utmost value, it is as a result of criticism and thought, and these are individual; religion without reason is inconceivable to us, and we hold its relation to morality to be vital. It *was* racial or local; it *is*, and long has been, even in pre-Christian times and non-Jewish

circles, universal, independent of race or place. It *was* a system of polytheism with all the inherent disorder that polytheism involves; its gods were at best doubtfully personal, or if personal, arbitrary, non-moral, and irrational. To-day, Religion is primarily monotheistic, or, at the worst, monistic; and where it really lives, its God is personal, and justice and goodness are the first of His characteristics.

These contrasts are patent, and certain consequences follow. We obviously give a higher value to-day to personality; to the individual; and religion gains or suffers correspondingly. The strength of the old religions lay in the fact that they were national, and that is the weakness of Hinduism to-day. One might, on the other hand, say that the strength of the modern type of religion is that it is *not* national, it is at once more and less than national. It is above nationality; and in every case of a really living nation and a really vital religion, masses of the nation reject, or misunderstand, or neglect religion; those who are convinced are religious with an intensity unknown in the old days, while the rest make less and less pretence of religion. We cannot have it both ways. The savage emphasised the tribe and had a social religion; the Greek discovered the individual, and we have to put up with the consequences.

Certain things, however, stand out from the contrasts which we have drawn. The emphasis on personality affects all our thought of God and man; while a progressive attention to morality goes with the discovery of the individual, and involves changes as fundamental in religion. To these two points we shall have to return again and again.

At this stage certain observations have to be made on the general subject of the study of religious movements, historical, primitive, and pre-historical.

First of all, as Andrew Lang emphasised, man is not to be caught in a primitive state; his intellectual beginnings lie very far behind the stage of culture in which we find the lowest known races.³ We are in a worse plight by far than the geologists in their worst difficulties. The ichthyosaurus had his day, and lay down and died; and nobody took the slightest interest in him till Miss Anning dug up the first discovered of his tribe at Lyme Regis a hundred years ago. Nobody was concerned through the centuries to explain that he was still an ichthyosaurus, *semper eadem* as it were, or that he never had been an ichthyosaurus at all. If another beast or bird died on top of him, or under him, and their bones got mixed, they were not so very hard to sort out; and I suppose that what applies to the beasts is true broadly of the rocks, in spite of faults and the sea and the volcanoes. It is very different with the anthropologist's evidence. His fossils are graves and offering-pits and sculptures—for inscriptions are as bad as books; and he has to explain his fossils by their living representatives, which are worse again than books or inscriptions. Religion, in particular, in its earlier history and for long after, is to be studied in survivals—in myths and usages and beliefs. But words change their meaning without giving those who use them any notice—change them to fit new outlooks on the world, and in turn affect the beliefs expressed in the words. Rites and usages are corrected to fit a theory of a day—that is to say, they are restored, and we know well how often restoration means complete change. Silent adjustments, small misconceptions, shame, apology—all confuse the evidence. As Professor Lewis Campbell wittily asked, how far do the practices of Scots on Hallowe'en or Hogmanay illustrate or explain Scottish religion? They obviously had some

³ A. Lang, *Making of Religion*, p. 39.

origin; but it is History that will give the clue to it, and History, as we shall soon find, is a much more intelligent witness than Archæology—arrives later on the scene and *thinks*; and that always confuses the evidence.

Words do not very greatly help us; and of words the most treacherous are definitions, and the abstract nouns associated with them. I am constantly impressed with the havoc that our facile definitions, our preconceptions, and our abstract nouns make of our thinking; and one large part of every student's work is to achieve independence of the definitions and technical terms of his teacher. A classification does not necessarily advance knowledge; I find in King George's reign that what I *knew* in Queen Victoria's reign I *know* no longer—that I have no glimmering of things I once knew to satisfaction. In every field of study it is the same—we do not add to our facts by framing theories, even when our theories are definitions. I shall have to speak a little later on of Magic, and I have already burnt my fingers over it and fallen out with my friends. And the definition of Religion is hardly easier. I am not at all convinced that primitive man was stricter about his definitions than his descendants are. I am quite sure that he did not draw all the inferences he might have, and should have, from what he knew. At the same time, it is not safe to assume that primitive man was as simple and unreflective a creature as is sometimes half-suggested. In Pre-History—before what we can call History began—how soon did man begin to think, to imagine, to be an individual? From that date confusion began. His words meant one thing to himself, another to his stupider son, and something quite different again to his bright son. His spiritual experience, the emotions he felt, the laws he observed, may well have been simpler than the inner history of his descendants, just as the colour vision of the savage fails to

distinguish shades and even colours in vivid contrast for civilised man. But he was no fool; and his drawings and his skill in hunting, with all the observation and the reflection which these imply, suggest that we should rate him rather by his progressive descendants than by the retarded or the reactionary. It is extremely hard to be sure what primitive man meant and how much he expressed of what he meant, what were the extra-values of his thoughts, and so forth. In such inquiries neither our evidence nor our definitions take us very far.

What has been suggested as to Pre-History extends to History. It is extremely difficult, even where we are dealing with a race that keeps records and statistics, to get at the history of a religious movement in its early stages and in its formative period; still harder to recapture the impulses, the instincts and intuitions that lie behind it. When we deal with the causes, it is generally the conditions that we mean; and the same conditions produce no effect whatever on minds which seem to us quite as good as those in which the movement began.

Contemporaries constantly miss what matters most, and their words reflect their failure. When they do notice movement, they are surprisingly apt to misunderstand it—to put down as irreligion what is in truth the awakening of reason, the stirring of moral feeling.

Two instances, both illustrative of our general subject, may be taken. If we compare England in 1520, 1620, and 1720, we find extraordinary changes. In 1720, Mr. Lecky estimates, the Catholics were one in fifty of the population. In 1620, whatever the figures, everything was ripe for civil war on a religious issue underlying a political issue. In 1520, to all appearances, England was solidly Catholic. The late Dr. James Gairdner's book on *Lollardy and the Reformation* is a monument of the perplexity that the study of mere records may produce. To