

PRIMITIVE REMAINDERS IN RELIGION

BY W. P. MCGEHEE

AMONG the brief definitions of man that is, on the whole, the most satisfactory which distinguishes him as a rational animal. It recognizes the common nature of man and all other forms of animal life, while it definitely indicates the particular qualification which raises the human species so conspicuously above any other.

Some time after man had become set apart from the lower forms of animal creatures by the capacity to think the germs of the ideas which grew into religion were developed. Mankind conceived objects of cult. Why or how this came about are still matters of controversy.

When early man conceived of higher powers which it was expedient to stand well with, he instinctively carried over into his notions of them the impressions of his daily existence. The unseen and unknown must be greater and more powerful likenesses of the seen and known. Hence at a certain stage of man's long ascent from animalism his objects of cult were theriomorphic or anthropomorphic. Zenophanes said twenty-five hundred years ago that if cows and horses could make gods their gods would have horns or hoofs. A whole philosophy of religion is implicit in that old aphorism.

Much of the history of religion subsequent to that stage is concerned with the efforts humanity has made to shake off and rise above the cruder elements in its beliefs. Whether this has resulted from the working of revelation in the human spirit or from the progress of enlightenment is still in debate, but the historical facts are unaffected by the truth or error of either theory.

While it is wholly understandable that primitive cults should include large material elements, it is surprising at first view that the growth of intelligence has not eliminated a larger proportion of

them in course of time. But religion is timorous and conservative. Primitive man cowed before the unknown and advanced man stands in awe of it. Religious beliefs have been only modified timidly and reluctantly under pressure of unevadable conviction.

When the average person thinks to find something unbecfitting or unreasonable in accepted religious doctrine, he or she is apt to hear an inward voice saying, "Put off thy shoes from off thy feet for the ground whereon thou standest is holy." This whole mental region is tenanted by the spectres of ancient taboos, and at such junctures atavism awakes and arouses them and the prudent intruder is halted on the threshold.

The higher religions, and this is especially true of Christianity, have discarded many elements long embedded in them of ideas and rites originating in periods when material or superstitious conceptions dominated religious thought. Of many of these, such as incubi, succubi, werewolves, ghosts, black magic, the evil eye, and touching for the King's evil, the more intelligent peoples have virtually rid themselves. The Devil has lost his horns, hoofs, tail, and upcurving eyebrows. He is not only no longer "coming among us with great power," but, as a personal being, seems to be vanishing from belief; or, if still apparent there, sunken into a state of feebleness approaching that of Bunyan's piteous old giant Pope.

Many other minor remainders, such as the various methods of divination, the superstitions connected with the moon, the dowsing-rod, salt, sneezing, All Saint's Day, mirrors, itchings in different parts of the body, and various others, are still half believed in more or less contemptuously or somewhat sheepishly by many people. Of course these slighter residues of early ideas and customs have lost their practical force in religion, and are now significant only as showing how difficult it is for humanity to liberate itself from old cultus ideas and habits long embedded in hereditary consciousness.

A number of the familiar objects of daily life may be traced to their sources in superstitious practices which have been so completely lost sight of that the things themselves no longer carry any suggestion of their origins. How many of us when listening to church bells or chimes are aware that they were first rung to scare away evil spirits at a time when they were numerous and rampant? When we see harness decorated with ornamental metal discs, how

many of us know that they were primarily amulets against the evil eye?

Beliefs as to some questions of more serious importance, among them being those of the future states of reward and punishment, have been so much mooted and such diversity of views concerning them have developed that they may be said to be now rather matters of personal opinion than formal doctrine. Every one holds more or less individual notions regarding them, among which there is no longer an authority capable of so influencing belief as to assure acceptance of any.

The trend of thought is toward more logical interpretations of the future life. Heaven is no longer a place of dazzling brilliance, with golden pavements and gates of pearl or jasper; nor is hell a vast murky sea of burning brimstone, whose material flames possess the astonishing faculty of torturing immaterial beings. Indeed reflective minds are beginning to apprehend that light and darkness as being physical phenomena would be extraneous and nugatory in spiritual existence, insomuch as spiritual beings have no retinas, or other physical sense organs, and consequently their perceptions must depend upon the operations of faculties wholly inconceivable to man.

While a large number of minor primitive ideas have died out altogether from belief, and others remain only on somewhat the footing of anthropological curios, certain others much more significant unfortunately still have a firm hold on the faith of the major part of the most advanced peoples. To understand this situation it is necessary to go back in religious history as far as the period of the matriarchy. In that stage, certainly of motherkinship, possibly in some instances of the rule of women, the great deities were females, each one of the Nature Mother, universal ancestresses, sources of all fertility from which all things proceed. In early stages, when the function of the male in procreation is not comprehended, it is not thought that anything can originate save in the creative fecundity of the female.

When the matriarchy was superseded by the patriarchy these great goddesses were supplanted in course of time by the supreme gods of the new regimes, and fell into subordinate positions, or gradually vanished from belief. Among the more advanced Semites, owing probably to the low estimate formerly accorded to women by that race, the great goddesses were eclipsed comparatively prompt-

ly. Even among them, however, their worship did not succumb without a protracted struggle. The prophets continued to denounce the worship of Astarte as evil and pernicious down to the time of the captivity of Judah. We know from the Elephantine papyri that a great mother was worshipped as Anath in the considerable Jewish colony there remote from prophetic influence down to about 400 B. C., on a footing of practical equality with Jahweh, and in complete unconsciousness of wrongdoing. The Semites of Arabia, more primitive than their northern kinsfolk, continued to worship a great mother as Al-lat down to the time of Mohammed, and the Prophet in the Koran converted her into a daughter of Allah.

Outside the ambit of influence of the more advanced Semites the cult of universal ancestresses persisted longer. During the Roman Empire the worship of Magna Mater was widespread and flourishing, and became a serious competitor of Christianity and Mithraism for supremacy among the western peoples. In this competition it was under the disadvantage of having taken form in a more primitive age. Meantime the critical sense and taste of humanity had advanced to new and more refined viewpoints. Some of the rites of Great Mother worship may well have seemed rude and archaic to educated contemporaries in comparison with later cults. Nevertheless the worship of Magna Mater survived as a matter of record to the death of Theodosius the Great.

The patriarchy once established, religion became as Athene, "all for the father". Male gods were enthroned as the supreme deities, and the leading peoples of the world still worship them. The Buddhists, Jews, Christians and Moslems adore a male being. Whether this change has been beneficial to humanity may be questioned? However solicitous we think of a father's love as being, we feel that a mother's is more tender still. Had mankind continued to worship universal mothers instead of great fathers religions might have been more tolerant and conciliative and less inclined to militancy. It can hardly be questioned that the point of view involved has had its full share of influence in the age long subjection of women. Now that women are beginning to reclaim the position to which they are legitimately entitled in the fields of human thought and action, it seems improbable that a conception so unilateral should be permitted to persist very much longer.

Old and deeply rooted religions ideas have great vitality, and often continue to affect opinion long after they cease to be a part

of doctrine. The effects of the worship of a great mother still play a role in our outlook on existence. We think and speak of Mother Nature as a personal being legislating for creation blindly or sagaciously, ruthlessly or solicitously, according to the mental attitude of the thinker, but always effectively. As the Deity becomes more abstract and inscrutable, Mother Nature, as being more familiar and apprehensible may play an even increasingly important part in our thoughts.

The Roman Church has in some degree readjusted the unsettled sex balance in worship in its adoration of the Virgin Mother, which forcibly exemplifies the instinctive human tendency to appeal to the mother rather than to the father. In Catholic worship more personal prayers are addressed to the Queen than to the King of Heaven. With this consequence of the conception of the Virgin Mother as Queen of Heaven we sympathize because of an inward and spontaneous predisposition. It is not only innate and intuitive, but, when carried into practice, introduces a picturesque and touching beauty into worship without which it is less emotionally charming.

Sex and deity are of course rational incompatibles. Sex is a biologic provision for a necessity contingent on morality, the perpetuation of species. It is wholly unthinkable beyond the physical creation, and to ascribe it the Great First Cause, an incorporeal being, an eternal and infinite spirit, is not only irrational but humiliating to human intelligence of the present.

This attribution of sex to the Deity is perhaps the most deplorable of the remainders of anthropomorphism in religious belief. It is, however, so entrenched there that it will probably prove one of the last to be eliminated. It is fixed in our mentalities by many generations of hereditary transmission, and maintained by the portraiture of God in literature and art. The supreme or sole god of literature from Homer to our day, particularly the Grand Monarque of Heaven of Milton is a transcendent man. The wooden god of primitive art, the Zeus of Phidias, the Eternal of Michelangelo, and the Ancient of Days of Blake with the oceanic beard, are each an effort to portray an ideal of a man-god, a male being of superhuman mold and mein. This statement applies with almost equal force to the representations of divine or semidivine beings employed in connection with the public or private worship of some sects, which serve to maintain anthropomorphic conceptions. Per-

haps the Moslems are wise in sticking by the letter of the law and prohibiting all icons either graven or pictured images.

The enormous extension of the limits of science, and the development of means of communication until almost independent of time and distance have shrunk the conceptual earth until knowledge can almost hold it in its palm. As our earth has contracted in our mental view the universe has expanded but in a greatly increased ratio. In proportion as the vastness of the universe grows in our apprehension, our sense of the nearness of God diminishes. When this earth was the center of creation, the heavenly bodies merely lights suspended in the firmament for its illumination, and human affairs God's all-absorbing concern, the Deity was very near to mankind. Now that the earth is but a fretful midge spinning in boundless space, and God's interest parcelled among myriads of them, the Deity has receded from us immeasurably and is becoming increasingly abstruse and inscrutable. How far is the Supreme Being of today from the Yahweh of 1000 B. C., who fought and feasted, sorrowed and rejoiced with his people Israel.

If the ascription of sex to the Supreme Being may be considered the most outstanding and unfortunate remainder of primitive thought in the religious teachings of today, there are still many others which reflect almost as seriously on our intelligence. The great mass of mankind continue to think of spiritual beings in terms of our corporeal life, and picture them as having faculties analogous to our own. The Deity is conceived as thinking, "O Lord—thy thoughts are very deep"; as seeing, "God saw everything that he had made"; as hearing, "God heard the voice of the lad"; as speaking, "They heard the voice of the Lord God"; as smelling, "The Lord smelled a sweet savor."

The activity of the Deity which most nearly parallels our thinking is measurelessly beyond our apprehension. Thinking is the process by which rational animals reach conclusions, and by checking and testing them arrive at knowledge. To conceive Infinite Intelligence as thinking involves the self-contradiction that Omniscience may grow in knowledge. That we may make use of the same word to express both activities in spite of the disparity is due to the inadequacy of finite concepts and language. Unable to conceive the conditions and functions of immaterial being, in order to convey our notions of them we are compelled to employ the terms which express those of our consciousness of physical existence.

So far-reaching is the influence of environmental conditions on our thinking that most persons not only assume that spiritual beings communicate by speech, but take for granted the language they employ is that used by them in the version of the Bible with which the thinker is familiar. Until a time comparatively recent but few persons could imagine living beings as moving beyond the earth's surface otherwise than by flight. Hence spiritual beings good and evil were usually conceived and portrayed as winged creatures, and such they remain in the thoughts of the majority today.

That such inferential conceptions should have prevailed in the Dark Ages is understandable enough. Even then, however, some clear-sighted and open minded adherents of even the most rigid creeds could see beyond them. Maimonides, for example, the Second Lawgiver of Israel, though loyal to Judaism, yet, being a clear-headed man, and influenced perhaps by the effect of Greek thinking on his philosophy, explained such scriptural expressions as, "God's mouth—hands—feet," as figurative. That such ideas should still persist today though is occasion for astonishment until we reflect on the reasons which have coöperated to perpetuate them.

The conclusion has been ably supported that to criticize religious teachings because they contain anthropomorphic elements is to challenge the bases of our tests of knowledge. The argument is briefly that, if the presence of anthropomorphic ideas in our conception of the Deity invalidates our knowledge of deity, then our knowledge of anything else beyond experience is equally invalidated, as there is an inherent infirmity in human reason, because human, and therefore none of its conclusions beyond the test of experience can be proven to be free of error. Our knowledge of pure science, for instance, has been attained through the exercise of human reason, and we cannot therefore demonstrate its truth. But, even admitting that this is true elsewhere, it fails to hold good on its supporters own premises as applied to anthropomorphism. All of our positive knowledge, as distinguished from that which is only conjectural or inferential and cannot be tested, of existence beyond the material universe is derived from revelation, and its truth depends not on reason but on the validity of the revelation. We have no infallible means of distinguishing between true and pseudo-revelation. Extra cosmic existence is therefore wholly incomprehensible, if all revelation is false; or we do not know how much of it is true, if only an unascertainable portion of revelation is valid. It is there-

fore demonstrably unknowable. The infirmity of human reason in pure science is a supposition which may or may not be true, but which cannot be absolutely proven. It results therefore that ideas in one field of thought certainly beyond human knowledge are maintained as being on the same footing, so far as their demonstrability goes, with ideas in another field only hypothetically beyond human knowledge.

It has been inevitable in the passage of time that many of the more material elements in belief should become discordant with advancing ideas and been discarded, occasionally authoritatively, but much more often tacitly. That this process is still operative is evidenced by the rise from time to time of a new sect with a newly fashioned creed, and the promulgation of religious neoisms by individuals.

That this development should progress is inescapable and need not alarm timid minds. It is unthinkable that the intrinsic verities of religion are imperilled. Lucid thinking is beginning to take the role heretofore filled by authority in matters of belief, and the trend of faith will inevitably be toward a conception of spirit existence more in keeping with our vastly enlarged apprehension of the universe and clearer conception of the nature of being.

Heaven is no longer in our planetary zenith just above our heads, and the Deity no longer the god of a tribe, a nation, or of this mote in space on which we live, but the Supreme Being of all existence, having nothing of our physical semblance or material functions.

Human intelligence is advancing toward a more enlightened apprehension of being both temporal and eternal, and continually approximating its essential truths. Each forward step confirms the assertion of that sagacious old heathen who said nearly twenty-five hundred years ago, "The gods are unlike man in mind or body."