

THE ART OF RELIGION

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TO art has traditionally been assigned the position as handmaid of religion: even a cursory acquaintance with the vast amount of writing in this field will make the general acceptance of this relationship apparent. Only as recently as the positivist school, art was postured in this subordination to religion, and still anthropologists have been reluctant to consider art and religion as being more closely related both in origin and career: to them religion has always been the womb that conceived and the breast that has nourished art.

Religion, however, had its genesis in the same impulses as art: before ever art was, was the germ of the esthetic need of art, and the emotional fountain head of the arts received its first expression in the art of religion. For religion has been a syncretism of the arts, synthesized skillfully and deftly to provide expression for all the emotions of mankind: to primitive man it offered means for the expression of his desire for rain or his dumb joy at victory, to more modern man it has offered a shadowless, glimmering land wherein he may erect his ideals and the ultimate goal of his frustrate aspirations. Religion has been the art of expressing man's emotions and aspirations.

The oldest religions of which we have knowledge are those of Central Australia and though these are remote in time and form from truly primitive religions whatever speculations and notions of primitive religions we may have are conjectural deductions from the religions of the natives of these regions.

It has been observed that a player who throws a ball to the left when he desired it to go the right will lean to the right as if to influence the ball to swerve from its course. The connection of

this psychological phenomenon with imitative rites such as the simple rain ritual is manifest: the making of an imitation shower is merely the instinctive expression of a powerful emotional anxiety caused by a draught which may mean famine and consequent starvation. Thus the motive lies not so much in the hope for the efficacy of the rite as in the relief it offers to the pent up apprehension lest the draught be fatal, for all strong emotion tends and seeks to find expression in action.

However abstruse may be the purpose and character of the present Intichiuma and other rituals, their remarkably imitative nature has been stressed by Strehlow and other investigators, and consequently the problem of the origin of these rituals as emotional expression has been simplified, for it may readily be seen that they had their cause in the same psychological instinct as the swerve of the ball player, and were originally an expression of an emotion.

That the ritual of the Wollunqua snake is still a celebrative affair is obvious and it is not much less manifest that it had its genesis in a purely rejoicing activity such as would occur at the close of the agricultural season or after a victory, and was primarily a spontaneous expression of powerful emotion.

One can appreciate these dances as means of emotional relief: after the men have been chanting awhile the fires all about the clearing are lit, and the whirling, crackling laughter or the huge flames, their fitful, momentary gleams of bright light and beams of white cleaving the gloom of night, the flickering black tracings fluttering over the clearing, the whelming, monstrous roaring of the bull roarers, the exotic, rhythmic, clashings of the boomerangs, the mad cries and hoarse screams of the men and the wild abandon of the dance pulse pizicati through the veins of all.

In its incipience this dance undoubtedly merited the name of art. For to "primitive man, to whom esthetic needs are no more foreign than to civilized man . . . primitive dance is the most immediate, most perfect and most efficient expression of primitive esthetic feeling."¹

And so we perceive that in Central Australia religion and art were indistinguishably joined in this primitive dance, which became a definitely religious celebration as time went on and the periodicity which marks ritual crept in; for questionless, when the dance was

¹ Groos, *Beginnings of Art*.

appreciated as a festivity and opportunity for emotional relief all occasions for revelry found the dance useful. And forthwith the continued repetition of the dance gave rise to tradition, to legendary and half true tales of previous dances, and about the festival was woven the subtle gossamer of tradition and associative legends.

And here art and religion part, to be more distant relatives hereafter, for the life of a true religion could not be the life of an art. For the fine arts became the form for expression of a select few: art entailed virtuosity, restraint, and labor. Religion, with its far flung bournes, offered channels of expression for all, art was fastidious in selecting its votaries. But religion availed itself of its former relationship with art, and employed all the arts from perfuming to architecture, and upon the loom of poetry spun the shimmering silk of mythology to soothe the restlessness which became ever increasingly incurable. For here the interminable hot flow of religions shamelessly and brazenly borrowed from the arts techniques of incense burning and chanting and the various forms of its ritual; and a mythology to satisfy emotions which could find no rest in sensual beauty.

There is a fallacious notion quite universally current that there exists an emotion intrinsically and quintessentially religious, a notion analogous to that which would classify all melancholy as poetic in its essence because of Shelley's lyric. Thus we find in so standard a book as Parry's *Evolution of the Art of Music* the statement: "It can hardly be denied that music was called into existence by religious feelings as well as by any of which human creatures are capable."

An emotion is essentially a dynamic force, described or formed only by the matter or incident which has aroused it, and religious or poetic only by the expression it receives. Thus awe at the western summer sky where a setting sun rears its splendid state in vivid blood shot clouds and soft roseate distances may be expressed by a poem, making the awe secondarily poetic, or it may be expressed by communion with a god, the emotion being then secondarily religious.

Thus the emotion stirred by the sublime slow swell of an organ in a cathedral suffused by the golden red "dim religious light" of sunlight sifting softened through the rose crimson windows is translated into the terminology of religion because of the religious

setting and the mental associations which cluster about the emotion; the same emotion can be called up again by the sight of a large swollen yellow moon dripping molten gold into the purple infinity of an August night alive with furious stars, and it will not, probably, find expression religiously.

Besides imaginative associations which make certain emotions find expression religiously, there is the fact that for all emotional people there is in every experience something revelatory or noetic. All experience is in its ultimacy mystical, prior to analysis, for it is ineffable: when an experience becomes highly emotional there is always concomitant with it a revelatory quality which is for its experiencer valid and undeniable. Being emotional at core, all esthetic experience also is mystical, and mystics have invariably drawn from the mother sea of pain, beauty, and love for their mystical experiences. In the bitterness of pain and the fierce pulsing of agony they have felt the maiming flame of pain to purge the dross from existence and leave them febrile and tense in the dazzling brilliance of reality. In the moment of stark emotion following the perception of beauty as a lucid and luminous vision they have felt themselves transported for a fleeting tantalizing glimpse of a world fierce with unimaginable flames of color, silver snarls of music holding the soul in an inhuman bewitchment, leaving them struggling and helpless in the warm whelming reality. In a moment of ineffable love everything coalesces into a harmony of mellitous melting loveliness, one forgives everything, and it would be strange not to forgive, leaving the soul burning and trembling in this translucent moment of reality.

Hence, for a person educated in a religious tradition the noetic quality of the emotion is translated immediately into the language of his religion. The delusory sensation of a presence, of receiving divine knowledge, of having known something or someone unearthly is transformed into union with a god, into divine revelation from Christ. Professor Coe has expressed this aptly: "The mystic brings his religious convictions to the mystical experience he does not derive them from it." Lowie has proven quite incontrovertibly that the religious experience is a matter of social tradition: our religious imaginations and emotions and experiences are moulded according to the form of our social heritage.

But religion has utilized the fact that esthetic emotions are al-

ways at their core mystical, and hence religion has been amply supplemented by art. Thus we have the Indian sand paintings, the distinctive Egyptian religious art, and the Greek art. For the history of institutionalized ideals and methods for the expression of emotion pullulates with exemplary instances of the employment of the mystical value of estheticism to augment the religious experiences. Questionless the superior popularity Mahayana Buddhism enjoyed over Hinayanaism finds its cause to a great extent in the introduction of *Bodhisattvas* and iconography.

Music has been universally used by religions for emotional excitation which the circumstances and religious imaginative associations transform into religious ecstasy and fervor. So, in the worship of Cybele, on the "day of Blood" "The barbaric music of the clashing cymbals, rumbling drums, droning horns and screaming flutes"² all playing in an intense exotic rhythm, aroused the on-lookers and holiday spectators to such pitches of excitement that, stirred by the flowing blood of the priests, the men would leap forward and castrate themselves on the spot.

The extensive use of music at negro revival meetings, the importance of the cantor on the more important solemn holidays of Judaism, and of organ music in the church today all testify to the importance of this supplementation of religion by art.

Courteously enough, the aid art has lent to religion is returned in the imaginative stimulus religion yields to art. On the creative side, the rich mythology of religion and the opulence of legendary figures has been an everlasting source and inexhaustible mother sea of themes for the artist. Art has drawn ceaselessly from the store of religious lore in its search for subjects, and religion has lent its treasures for the genius of art to make use of, it has been a mold into which art has been poured, and about which art in certain eras has centered. In some instances it may be that religion has been one of the impulses to artistic creation, the emotional power of religion finding its expression in poetry, and providing a secondary motive concomitant with the poet's desire to create. Thus apparently John Keble and Gerard Hopkins were actually urged to write their religious poems by an impulse quite apart from the creative desire; thus also Fra Bartolomeo felt that his adoration of God found most satisfactory expression through his painting. So religion has offered both the stimulus for creation from its emo-

² Frazer, *Golden Bough*.

tional power and from its mythology the mold into which the artistic efforts were directed, although religion has more often been the source of subject matter than of dynamic impulse to art.

But in the appreciation of painting and poetry and music religion has been a potent and moving factor. Art, ideally, should be appreciated not for what it says or represents but for the manner in which it says and represents. The degree of success achieved by the artist, in utilizing and conquering his medium should be the norm of esthetic appreciation, if any norm is possible. Deplorably, such esthetic judgment by precision and justice in poetry and painting and music is but a chimerical ideal for most of us. We are too apt to respond sensitively to the object represented, to lose ourselves in *Schwärmerei* upon hearing a Tchaikowski symphony, to exclaim at the emotion of Earnest Dowson and Wilfred Owen rather than at the artistic perfection. Thus the religious periphery about the painting of *The Madonna* sets into motion all the imaginative faculties and arouses the emotional responses which we are accustomed to yield religion. This gossamer and tenuous weaving of emotions plays like a radiant wreath about the painting and yields it a power which otherwise its artistic flaws would prevent. A perfectly executed picture of a dead fish will never arouse the reaction a less excellently done painting of the descent from the cross will evoke. All the love, awe and adoration which our social background and religious training has so sedulously cultivated spring willy nilly to lend lure and enchantment to the picture, all the rich lore of tradition is remembered again, and all the imaginative mythology elaborated about the painting.

As the spontaneity and verve of ritual was lost, there sprang up as interpretations and rationalisations of acts that were once irrational eruptive expressions of emotions an opulence of mythology and theology. This function of mythology is apparent in the explanation it offers for the worship of a mirror in a Shinto temple. The legend runs that the Sun, upon her visit to earth in some way left this mirror behind her and hence it is a symbol of the Sun. But it is fairly obvious that the connection in the legend of the Sun and the mirror has no firmer grounds than their resemblance, and the legend has no other cause for existence than to make explicit the otherwise silly custom of worshipping a mirror. In the same manner the Eucharist, which may be traced to the mystery rite of

drinking and eating the flesh and blood of the slaughtered divine animal in order to obtain its manna, has been the focus of a theology which alone merits Christianity the rank of somewhat a superior among mystery cults.

But the myth is invented in "satisfaction of deep religious wants"³ quite apart from its function of rationalising and interpreting irrational and incomprehensible acts. Mythology and theology should rather be comprehended as artistic imaginary projections of human hunger for a perfection and happiness which are but transitory and illusory in a chaotic reality. Theology and mythology are the balm and opiate to soothe minds troubled with doubts and desiring calm peace and tranquil sanctuary. For many people for whom the world appears as a strident, discordant confusion and turbulence and life is a torture chamber construct for the predeliction of a monstrous saddist, theology and mythology offer another world wherein they may wander in revery without fear of any intruding reality. When this life in the other world displaces the life in reality a state akin to mysticism sets in, and the escape is complete.

But distinct from this desire for complete escape there is another dynamic want which creates this land of mythology. For our warped and thwarted existence on earth leaves us aching and hungering for something which we feel is lacking; our lives seem disjointed and incomplete fragments of some unfinished symphony: as Tweedledum said "We are just part of the dream." But the dream is dreamt by an idiot, it is incoherent; and our lives seem a monstrous anacoluthon, for which only mythology can be the graceful correction. For mythology shows us as real and true our ideals; and shows us our circle of life swinging to a completion in a heaven where all the lacunae of our earthly interlude are found carefully constructed.

And in building this land of all our dreams come true, this quaint tale of Cinderella, man has compensated himself for the minor role he plays in mundane affairs by relegating to himself a lead in the drama he has constructed as being more real than the concatenation of unrelated events life appears to be. For him God has divided waters and stilled the sun's motion; man's sins are the grave concern of divinity, and God has walked among men and suffered the searing

³ Malinowski, *The Myth in Primitive Psychology*.

retchings of torment for man, so that man might dwell in loveliness in the sweet symphony of heaven, the companion of God. In this most dynamic of fairy tales, where no breath of intruding air from reality might flutter the pleasing reticulation of delusions and dreams, religion has found its most efficient aid for the healing by mesmeric necromancy the ever recrudescing wound of living.

Almost numberless are the other techniques the art of religion has employed, subordinate in importance and value to mythology, but nevertheless extremely interesting: there are the techniques of prayer and ritual, of sacraments, and most peculiarly religious is the use of sacred languages. Thus we find Russia using Slavonic, Judaism using Hebrew, and Pali used by Hinduism and Latin by Catholicism. This singular phenomenon of religion has its cause in several psychological peculiarities of the human mind.

The most obvious explanation of the continued use of these obsolete tongues is that of tradition: man has ever been given to an irrational veneration of and disinclination to alter anything which has gathered about itself the cloak of time. Thus we find that while Torahs in the early days of Judaism were written in scrolls as a matter of necessity, they continued to be written in this inefficient manner even after inventions would so greatly have facilitated their reproduction in other forms.

However, this interpretation does not fully account for the use of sacred languages, for even in the case of the scrolls there is the fact that the writing is more difficult to read than ordinary script or printing; and it would seem that a desire for obscurity and mystification enters into the causes for the retention of obsolete languages and forms. Analogous to this desire for obscurity which is clear only to the members of a body is the use of mystic terms, symbols, and Greek letters to lend glamour to the institution characteristic of secret societies and fraternities. Another instance of the use of an unknown language may be found in opera: certainly the presentation of an opera in English detracts from its enjoyment by English speaking people.

Also there enters into the various causes for the use of sacred languages the psychological fact which lends to the objects that are different from those encountered in every-day life a greater holiness and attraction. Thus, a book is manifestly not nearly so impressive as a scroll and the ordinary, undistinguished language

of the profane world lacks the lustre which an unusual language possesses.

Evidently there is something about a sacred language, aside from its practical value as in Judaism, where many of the prayers sound stupid and meaningless in English, that lends glamour and appeal to the institution that employs it and religion has availed itself of this fact.

That the efficiency of most traditional contemporary religions is so poor at present that their demise is close at hand is apparent to any who have given thought to the subject. Reform Judaism is a manifestation of a pathetic attempt to remain "au courant" and in the hasty, sightless eagerness for reform decorum has been blindly substituted for the spontaneity of Judaism, convention for fervor in a deplorable misapprehension of the fundamental purposes of religion. Equally guilty on this score are the majority of modern Christian sects: in the unintelligent anxiety for attendance they have resorted to elision of desirable features and additions of novelties basically valueless.

To prognosticate the religion which will rise up out of the inchoate contemporary religious welter is both hazardous and otiose, but it can be said with some degree of certainty that it will not be the religion of beauty. It is true that at one time there existed and for a brief career flourished a religion of estheticism, but its impress on society was always superficial and weak, for a religion of beauty postulates as prerequisites a highly wrought aesthetic life, an ability to make of all experience an end.

The seed of the sensitive plant of estheticism which bloomed to a religion in the days of Walter Pater and the Pre-Raphaelites happened to fall upon an unusually fertile and immeasurably small plot of land. To escape from a dissatisfying life not by idealism or a spiritual religion but by exploiting the sensations and experiences of life, to lose one's self in the emotional reverie of esthetic experience, to be continually in the vague emotional excitation of mystical experience is a life almost impossible except to a very few today.

To make a religion of beauty does not mean to apotheosize an absolute beauty, to make a monotheistic god of the Beautiful, for beauty is to us relative. A religion of beauty will have to be pantheistic in that it sees all beautiful things as aspects of a beauty in-

trinsic in them. What it actually results in is the availing one's self of cloudy tumultuous emotion of esthetic experience. "To burn always with a hard, gem-like flame." It is essentially and admittedly a way of escape from life, and is hence a subversion of the religious life of ideality.

Religion at present must provide expression for the less obvious emotions of mankind. It must construct a dim, twilit land to be the land of our heart's desire; it must yield comfort and solace to bruised aspirations and must heal them and permit them to flourish unmolested, rising rich and strong from the bare ruins to which the world has demolished them. It must be land of escape from the flecks and flaws of the present world, but it must not be a land in which innumerable murmuring streams run through a dreamland lying forlorn of light, lulling us to an untroubled sleep. It must be a land in which the dreams of perfection and ideality construct, however tenuously, visions of ideal perfections, and it is to these constructions we are to escape. But let not these ideals be too remote: they must be ardent and sincere expressions of vital and affective necessities and desires.

In our present industrial civilization, complicated bewilderingly, and apparently becoming augmentingly complex, a universal religion which will actually be religious for all is impossible. The numberless intermeshing ties and obligations and duties, the increasing and multiplying number of professions and occupations necessitated by our highly involved society create desires and needs and duties which attack each man differently. Aspirations and hopes are not so concentric as they were in a simple agricultural society, or an unindustrialized urban society. Complex organizations and a variety of modes of life create complex ideals. The conditions which necessitated the profound changes their religion underwent in the adoption by a people of an urban life in place of a heretofore rural life are still with us. In our civilization where modes of life are so numerous and deeply various, different religions will have to be constructed to meet the needs of different groups.

Of the religion of piety as Santayana uses the word there is an excellent example in contemporary industrialism in such movements as Rotarianism. Its chief vitalizing current is a loyalty and attachment to the existing order of things as it affects its members. It is a glorying in the actuality of their milieu, and they achieve the

paradox of mythologizing the actual and yet not detracting from its reality. It is the complacent religion of the Rotarian who makes the pieties of his obsolescent religion subserve his more dynamic religion, the religion of industrialism; living entirely and cheerfully in the industrial world, the Rotarian has directed his religious fervour into an incredible attachment to his world. Yet there is an element of idealism in this religion of loyalty which is made manifest in their attempt to better their world, but the idealism is a negligible factor in this religion whose life force is the almost fanatic devotion to the industrialism of today.

In contrast to the religion of "piety" there is the much more efficient religion of industrialism illustrative of Santayana's "spirituality." Thus people who suffer the same maladaptations will group together, united by a common desire for adjustment and having in common ideals and dreams for the abolition of the maladjustments. In the growth of ideals and the procedure of the attainment of these ideals, in the imaginative mythology woven about the expression of their aspirations, in the gradual transpositions of the lives of these people to the realms of realized aspiration and ideal will be found their religion. All the hate and abomination of their environment of lives made frustrate by an uncongenial and hateful surrounding will metamorphose into love for the region in which their imagination is allowed free play with their hopes, and will engender a powerful yearning for the possession of this state, for the coming of their kingdom. In the social expression of these emotions will be the ritual of their religion, in the conception of the ideal state will be their theology.

An existing religion of this kind is the communist movement in Soviet Russia. They have abandoned Christianity, for in their new religion there is a sufficiency of the religious life. Ardent communists cannot be ardent Christians merely because it involves a plethora of religions, aside from any colliding philosophical or moral principles.

Communists in Russia are leading a life guided and pervaded by the controlling light of an absolute Communism, the ideal political state to them. For them, all their strife and energy is directed toward the establishment of the ideal, and all the ramifications of their ideal state, all the activities and duties and manners it implies, all the hopes and loves it generates are for communists their theol-

ogy. In the imaginative construction of this visionary realm the communist finds his escape from a country disrupted by civil conflict and discontent. His religion is eminently Apocalyptic, for he dwells in the coming millenium, after the Revolution. He sees wealth, and immediately it becomes his, the Rolls Royce, the luxury, in the glorious kingdom of the Revolution, where he will be the conqueror and ruler, and the wealthy relegated to the limbus of proletarianism. It is again the ineluctable exaltation of the devotees, the unmistakable stamp of a religion.

Even the supernatural, in spite of the strenuous dicta against any such force in Communism by the leaders, is present to a certain degree in the Communism of the masses. For they know not the precise principles of Marxism which make the Revolution and the consequent communism inevitable, and to them these principles are incomprehensible and vague and sacred, and are accepted on hearsay. The "agit props" (agitators and propagandizers) feel that if they continue to propagandize, the Revolution will follow, by the thaumaturgy of some law or other; the intermediary agent is almost in the class of the God of the medieval prayers for the cures of toothache, one must do and say so and so and the relief will come.

Leading the lives of founders and active supporters of a religion, it is inevitable that Communists should have a ritual. And so there are public assemblies and public institutions to expound theology, and for worship and adoration, for already the febrile worship of Lenin and Marx have canonized them, and before long they will doubtless be encompassed by the glowing periphery of adulating myths, characteristic of all the apostles of a religion. There are holy days also, to celebrate important events in the history and development of Communism, and the country is governed as nearly as possible by the doctrines of their theology: it is in effect, a theocracy.

Certainly the religious zeal of the early Christians, and their craving for martyrdom which so distressed the Roman authorities was no more fiery than the Communist's fervor which takes the form (among other forms) of the furious hatred of the capitalist class and the willingness to undergo excruciating privation rather than abate one whit their enmity.

This is the case particularly in America. Comrades who have suffered because of their unrestrained zeal in making themselves

obnoxious to the hated bourgeoisie are admired, and at every opportunity this desire for martyrdom is displayed, as their behaviour at numerous riots will testify. Every action and every thought, is weighted with a significance; all opinions and ideas and people are classed categorically in the terminology of Communism and the class struggle; their meals are eaten together and so far as practicable they dwell in their own communities.

Most recently Communism has erected a system of apologetics by dialectic materialism. At the recent conference for the furtherance of Marxistic and Leninistic science it was made apparent that the scientists attending were primarily Communists and scientists only to advance the work of surrounding Communism by an impregnable apologetics. In the paper that set the tone for the conference was deplored the tendency of scientists to rethrone God upon every new discovery that is inexplicable by mechanism, and the discussion ranged from plangent criticism of the Western dialecticians to feral calls for the foundation of an institution for research to advance dialectic materialism to the utter confusion of the Vitalists, apparently.

At present, Communism is the most vital of our industrial religions. By its mythology its intense Apocalyptic faith, its deification of Marx and Lenin and the minor apostles, by the religious zeal which pervades it in all its manifestations, by the prompt ferreting out and suppression of all heretics, as Trotsky, and its attempt to construct a system of apologetics Communism has proven itself a religion and offers a foretaste of whatever religion industrialism may give rise to in the future.

Our religious hunger in the future will be assuaged by a diet sundered as completely from the old diet of the past as our experiences in the future will be sundered from those of the past, but consciously to endeavor to prescribe that diet for an appetite veering treacherously and uncertainly in the unstable subversive milieu of today is foolish. Our religious palate will suffer no coercion toward this or that satisfaction, will endure no trammeling regimen in its election other than the needs prompted by our experience of life.

The manifest inadequacy of Christianity and Judaism and their utter dissonance with the experiences of tomorrow does not necessarily signify the death of these religions. The new religions will differ, questionless from the old Christianity and Judaism funda-

mentally, yet when one considers the chasm that divides Orthodox Judaism from Reform Judaism, or Christian Socialism from Catholicism, it seems not beyond conception that with another transformation or two Judaism and Christianity will be prepared for the future. Thus, while changing so radically and unrecognizably, they will yet be called Christianity and Judaism, insuring a "specious permanence." At present we must wait patiently to perceive either the metamorphoses of Christianity and Judaism, or the first faint glimmers of the religions that are coming to birth.