

MAN, RELIGION AND ART

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At what stage of human evolution did religion begin? Was the spiritual need for a Deity dictated by an innate artistic impulse, or is art the outcome of the need, that is, was man's conception of God an answer to an instinctive desire to have someone to appeal to, or to blame if things went wrong?

These questions will never be satisfactorily answered, and the following notes are but an attempt to present some basic material for a partial discussion on this controversial subject. The slides, illustrative of these notes, have been chosen to demonstrate that the religious ideas expressed by art are similar, and seem to have a common origin, and relate to the same general theme, albeit created by the imagination of men living under very different cultural, as well as climatic and economic conditions.

Man, like animals, is confronted by awe-full, frightening and mysterious physical phenomena. Man, as distinct from the animals, is endowed with a mind. Yet we have reasons to believe that for immense ages man must have used his mind in one sense only, the sense of Wonder. The colourful sunsets; the frightening storms; thunder, lightning; the cycle of the seasons; night, with all its uncanny noises and shadows; all must have been unexplainable to him, causing him to wonder.

However, another agency helped in the blossoming of the mind: dreams. The dead relatives or friends who appeared in dreams, and the enemies with whom he struggled in dreams, were all real. Modern "primitive" men believe that during dreams the spirit actually leaves the body to conduct a "spiritual" life of its own. It is easy to see how this reasoning would lead to a belief in the immortality of the spirit, who, freed from the mortal body, continues, in the after-life, the life he led upon earth.

Having reached this point, man continued to wonder, but he also began to reason. As there was life after death, the dead had to be supplied with what they needed in order to live on. These were his everyday requirements: food, his weapons, his dogs, and his slaves, who were killed and buried with him. All this, however, had to be done ceremonially in order that it may be acceptable to the deceased. Hence the Priest and the Tomb, which later became the Temple.

Already in the cave-burials of Neanderthal man, of some sixty thousand years ago, there are indications of ceremonies connected with a cult of the dead. Some of the stones upon which the bones repose were smeared with red ochre, possibly representative of blood, this being the "life liquid", or the cause of life to early man. Not only is there red ochre, but remains of food offerings and implements of industry and warfare are found in these burials. And the hole at the base of the skull is always found enlarged by chipping, pointing to the brain having been removed, and, it is believed, to be consumed by the living. If this is so, then it is ceremonial cannibalism, or Communion.

Decorated and neatly arranged bear-skulls are also in evidence in these caves. Are they a trophy of the chase? Or is it more likely that they are a sign of animal worship - bear worship - as was practised by the Ainu and other Northern Asians till only a few years ago?

If it is animal worship, then we have in these burials a beginning of Totemism, and perhaps the belief in the power of some animals to control the forces of Nature. Certain animals are active before rain, others appear to presage different moods of the weather or the seasons. Surely these animals, so intimately connected with natural phenomena, can influence nature, and bring rain, or sunny weather? Modern primitive men take their names from the animals; names indicative of strength, courage, cunning, or swiftness of foot. What better than to believe that renowned ancestors were actual descendants of the animals whose names they took? So the Totems came into being, and the animals representative of the totem became sacred, and gave rise to or regulated social institutions, such as marriage, for instance. Members of any one totem regarded each other as brothers and sisters, and

could not marry because of the law of incest. Wives had to be found outside the Totem. The totem animal could not be killed, and it became the cognisance or badge of the group. Thus were evolved the animal standards of the ancient nations, Egypt, Vedic India, Babylonia, the horse in Britain, the boar and the cock in Gaul, and the eagle and the wolf of the Romans. Is the prohibition of pig flesh amongst the Jews a relic of an ancient boar-worship?

The visible aspects of Nature also were personified. However, these were spirits with no body of their own, but were believed to be able to take the shape of whatever animal suited them best, at other times making their abode in trees or rocks, rivers or mountains. This is Animism. In their animal guise these spirits became connected with certain localities; thus a crocodile could be the spirit of a certain swamp, or a given tiger the spirit of a certain forrest. Some animals were further believed to be able to take human shape, in order more easily to harm men. Such were the Werewolves, and the Familiars of Witches. The nursery tale of Red Riding Hood is a quaint survival of this belief.

About twenty-five thousand years ago, long before the beginning of civilization, another religious concept made its appearance. This was Fecundity (Fertility). Magico-religious ceremonies were performed in front of representations of animals painted on cave walls. The object of these ceremonies was to increase the animal species, and to assure luck in the chase. Man also saw fecundity in his own midst, and what better to represent it than a pregnant woman? And so women, fat, with enormous breasts and buttocks, in an advanced state of pregnancy, were modelled from bone, ivory and stone. These Mother-Goddesses, Fertility-Mothers, have been excavated from many parts of Western and Eastern Europe, North Africa, and the Near East. They can be accepted as the first man-made Divinity, made in man's own image, a great advance on the earlier belief in spirit-animal or in natural objects.

The making of these Mother-Goddesses marks an important stage in the history of religion. Henceforth the Unseen, the awe-full forces of nature uncontrollable by men, were envisaged and rendered in effigies of human or anthropomorphic aspect. This trend was to be continued to the present day, where, in Taoism for instance, the spirits of the forest are rendered as trees with human head and limbs, while rough human likenesses are carved into the rocks as representations of the spirits of the mountains.

From the very earliest times the personifications of nature were placated by offerings and sacrifices, these offerings generally benefiting the "guardians" or officiating priests of these cults or the temples dedicated to the various divinities.

These people, men and women, were believed capable of weaving magic, and were able to dispense talismans and charms, the latter often being pieces of bone or of clothing, relics from Holy Men. This trafficking served the dual purpose of providing an income for the priestly class, and of keeping alive the memory of the saint, who after death became even more Holy and powerful than when living. This belief in the omnipotence of the dead, or of their spirit, was tantamount to, and developed into, Ancestor Worship. The early temples, in fact, were tombs of deified Kings and High-priests. Later, of course, the ground around the temples or churches became Holy Ground, and the proper place for the burial of common people. Ancestor Worship persists to this day, and is directed at keeping alive the memory of all dead ancestors, not only of King and High-priest.

Art again came to the fore when the ceremonial connected with the worship of powerful deities mirrored the wealth of its priests. Gorgeous vestments, ornate utensils, and cult objects in the precious metals vie with the earlier but still popular forms of worship, in which Communion, the drinking of wine, or the smoking or burning of certain herbs are still part of the ritual.

Masks, and ceremonial dancing, relics of long gone-ages, are now mainly used in Sacred Plays, performed by all religions, in which the mythologies of the deity are retold. Harvest dancing, a relic of fertility rites, is still practised in most countries including England. Masks are also used for another

purpose, that of Teaching. In many primitive societies the masked priest has the function of Doctor, School Master, Social Preceptor, Law Giver, Judge and Executioner, his teachings or judgements being acceptable to all because in the mask he represents the Ancestor or Deity. The wig worn by modern judges is a relic of the mask.

Artistic ornamentation, of an abstract nature in some cases, although always derived from the human figure or from the animal or vegetable kingdoms, is a necessary adjunct to the efficacy of utensils used in the maintainance of law and order, religion, and social dictates. It also imparts magical attributes to both offensive and defensive weapons; a spear with the right ornamentation is sure to find its mark. These ornamentations, really a form of magic, are the linear successors of man's earliest attempts at controlling nature.

This introduction can be summed up as follows: Man, in his infancy, passed through a phase of Wonder, and because of a belief in the veracity of dreams, formulated a belief in an afterlife (Immortality). This was followed by the identification of himself with certain animals whom he suspected were capable of controlling nature (Totemism). Inanimate Nature was also endowed with a life of its own (Animism). With the advent of art, which originated in an attempt to increase the animal species by magic, man created a symbol for Fecundity in the image of a pregnant woman, and thus, for the first time, conceived the idea of the spirit in human guise. Man had created a God.

It is important to state that these Mother-Goddesses, with all the characteristics of the pregnant woman so greatly emphasized, were never given any facial features. The face was left a blank. This is important, because in the Second Century A.D. Buddha was still only represented by symbols, such as his footprints, or the Wheel (of the Law), and because, up to the Fifteenth Century of our era if not later, certain Christian manuscripts depicting the Crucifixion show the three Crosses on Mt. Calvary, with the two robbers tied to their crosses, but Christ is not shown at all. It seems that after creating a God, man hesitated about giving him a likeness.

To conclude then, men of all races and at all times, have, in innumerable ways, striven to answer the challenge of Nature by the creation of a force stronger than Nature, and have called this force God.

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