

PRIMITIVE REVELATION AND THE RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD

BRO. VICTOR FLANAGAN, O. P.



HE idea of God and of religion is universal among all nations and all peoples of the earth. This is a fact that can be little controverted in the light of present-day history. Man, a rational animal, is at the same time an essentially religious animal. It was Plutarch who said, "you may find communities without walls, without letters, without kings, without money, with no need of coinage, without acquaintance with theaters or gymnasia, but a community without holy rite, without a God, that uses no prayer, without sacrifice to win good or avert evil—no man ever saw or ever will see." Whether or not we will ever see such a community, we shall not here discuss; the contention that such a community has ever been seen in the past has gone the way of all dead controversies. Man of his very nature is ever seeking after, and being influenced by the sense of, the supernatural. The less he knows of it, the more does he try to find similarity of it with his own notions and ideas.

That the defence of a natural and revealed religion is rational and logical, is evident from the comparative study of some of the more ancient religious creeds of the different races and nations of the world. And although the student of comparative religion finds himself entangled in a vast jungle of myth and fable, due to a play of the imagination without control, yet the mythology of these ancient people can fall away and be disengaged without ruining the reasoning beneath the merely fanciful decoration. It is thus that we can see the bridge holding, though the ivy of mythology may be removed.

The fundamental reason and notion of religion is based upon the idea of a Supreme Being upon which all creatures depend. This notion of the deity is prevalent among the savage tribes of Africa as well as among the cultured gens of the Roman and Greek, the Jew and the Christian. All hold in common the idea of one supreme personal Being who is ruler of the world, the rewarder of the just, the avenger

of the wicked.¹ Religion, considered objectively, and it is thus that we here are to consider it, may be defined as the ensemble of truths and precepts by which we ordain our life to God.²

The existence of a God is a universally accepted article of faith and experience, yet the attributes and nature of this God are as varied and as far removed from truth according as each nation and each people wandered away from the primitive revelation which we believe, and reasonably so, as we shall attempt to show, was made to Adam and at various times to the Patriarchs and forefathers of the nations.

Thus in the Bantu tribes of Western Africa, among whom are placed the forest Pygmies, a people farthest removed from the light of civilization, who can neither read nor write, and who dwell in huts made of branches, whose food is chiefly birds and animals which they can shoot, we find the belief in an invisible God who dwells in the sky and who made all things. The Australian aborigines adore the Great Spirit whom they believe is manifest in the form of a tree or in the images of earth. The idea of sacrifice is also common among them, their chief holocausts being human victims, generally children.

The Chinese, descendants of Jobab, son of Sem, often regarded as representing the oldest civilization, is noted for its diversity of religious cults, among the most important of which are Confucianism and Buddhism. In these two systems of morality, for it is with moral and social precepts that most of the oriental religions are concerned, may nevertheless be found a distinct idea of God and of the spirit world, the latter being exemplified in the famous ancestor worship. The God of the Chinese is called the Sublime Heaven, and although their religion is not monotheistic, it admits a certain superiority of one great spirit over the other inferior gods. The Buddhist religion, which had its origin in India and is now spread out in China, Japan, Thibet, and Ceylon, was founded by Guatama in the sixth century, B. C. It is in many ways pantheistic, due mainly to the doctrine of transmigration of souls, yet it holds for belief in gods. And although the temples of the Buddhists are filled with statues of Buddha, yet they have never deified him, but simply hold him up for veneration in many ways similar to the honor given to the saints.

Among the Hindoos the chief form of religious belief is that of

¹ The various ideas of religious belief as contained in this article have been gathered from various sources, chief among which may be mentioned: J. L. Meagher, *The Religions of the World* (New York, 1896); Bertram C. A. Windle, *Religions, Past and Present* (New York, 1927); S. M. Schmucker, *History of All Religions* (Philadelphia, 1881).

² Garrigou-Legrance, *De Revelatione* (3a ed., Roma, 1925), p. 54.

Brahmanism. It was founded about fifteen hundred years before Christ. The Supreme Being is called Brahma, and his priests, the magi, are called Brahmins. They possess a complete ritual of sacrifice and have a tradition of the flood. Brahmanism teaches that God is the very source and foundation of all things, whereas Buddhism makes gods of the material forces of nature.

Turning now to the religion of the ancient Egyptians, we are in the ranks of the descendants of Cham, or Ham, another of the sons of Noah and forefather of the black race. Here too we find a complete system of religious tenets. The supreme deity among them was called Ammon, or the Absolute Spirit, corresponding to the Zeus of the Greek, the Deus of the Roman, the Ormazda of the Persian, and the Jehovah of the Jews. They also professed belief in the Trinity, and many times they represented the deity in three persons. Their idea of the inferior gods and of idolatry was formed from the idea of the various attributes of the true God. They also believed in the creation and in the immortality of the soul.

Among the Greeks and the Romans the idea of one Supreme Being is more concise and developed. Although the Romans had their innumerable inferior deities, their religion is in striking contrast to that of the Greeks in that it is less picturesque and more somber. Among them there is a great insistence upon ritual. The gods are believed to exist male and female, Jupiter and Juno, Janus and Jana. Jupiter was the supreme deity and was honored by all the Latin races as the god of the shining heavens. In their religious rites sacrifice played an important rôle; they offered not only blood but also fruit and vegetables. Among the Greeks the supreme deity was called Zeus, with many subordinate gods and goddesses. The Greeks lacked in many respects a deep moral sense and their religion was poetic and mythological.

Abstracting from the supernatural character of the Jewish religion, not for the purpose of lessening credence in the supernatural, but simply for the purpose of showing that this religion rises from its intrinsic worth above the others, assuming Moses as an historical character, just as we admit the historicity of Buddha, Mahomet, or the teachers of the other great religions, we find that Moses ever taught the idea of a personal God, Jehovah. In his system of morals, intrinsically superior to those of all other teachers of ancient religions, there is a complete moral and ceremonial code. Sacrifice is ever insisted upon, and among all the religious systems that of the Jewish people

is exceptional for the fact that it was never idolatrous in worship as a system.

With these few considerations furnished from a brief survey of the most important systems of religious belief, we must either admit that everything, even religious thought, is a matter of chance, or else that there is an all-provident God who has never from the fall of Adam entirely abandoned His handiwork but has given to His creatures some primitive revelation on the most important religious truths, and that in the course of ages, as men drifted away from the fountain source of all truth and righteousness, so also did their ideas of God and of the supernatural become more and more obscure. As St. Paul tells us, "God delivered them up to the lusts of the flesh."³

Man, it is true, could by the natural light of reason be guided along the path of natural virtue and goodness and arrive at a knowledge of the existence of God, the Creator and First Cause of all things, the Ruler and Guide of all things to their ultimate end. This cannot be denied. But it does not become the wisdom and justice of God to allow man, made after the likeness of God, to wander along without light toward his end. Although man has sight, with the aid of a telescope he is enabled clearly to perceive those things which he would otherwise be unable to see. So also in the intellectual order, besides reason man has had the telescope of revelation to enable him to see what he ordinarily could not see, or at least to see better and more clearly what he could see but dimly.

Revelation, then, is the communication of some truth by God to a rational creature through means that are beyond the ordinary course of nature.⁴ It is beyond our present scope to treat of the nature and possibility of revelation. We simply are trying to show that the fact of a primitive revelation is more conformable to reason in explaining the universality of religious belief in God.

The Scriptures, viewed merely as an historical document, will at least indicate the fact of such a revelation. We have no better or more accurate account of the rise of nations and races than that found in the Book of Genesis, where we find an historical narration of the generations of the sons of Noah, Sem, Cham, and Japeth.⁵ From this threefold source, like a vast fountain, can the entire anthropogony be traced. Sem had sons and daughters, and these are the forefathers of the Semitic races, Chinese, Japanese, Hindoos, and the Mongolian

³ Romans, i, 24 and 29.

⁴ *Catholic Encyclopedia*, "Revelation," XIII, 1.

⁵ Genesis, Chap. x.

race. Cham or Ham is the forefather of the black race, while Japeth is the father of the white race, Romans, Greeks, Slavs, Saxons, Angles.

One fact outstanding from the study of the religious systems of these various descendants of Noah is that the foundation of religion is substantially the same. Going down the scale from the highest ancient civilizations, like those of the Egyptians, Chaldean, Assyrian, Phoenician, Indian, Cimmerian, Chinese, Mexican, and Peruvian antiquities, to the lowest social forms, we find religions, the more elementary the less complicated. How shall we explain this fundamental universality, permanence, and identity of religions? There have been many attempts to eliminate from the explanation of this mystery the supernatural. Among the various explanations we will name those of the Materialists, the Spiritualists, the Evolutionists, and finally that given by Catholic students. The explanation comes to one of the following answers: either religious concepts have been revealed by a supernatural intervention; or they are the product of the human spirit, which as it is always and everywhere the same, has everywhere formed the same religious conceptions; or the natural and supernatural cooperate so that far from excluding each other they wonderfully unite in a necessary accord. The human spirit acts according to its natural faculties, and Divine Providence enlightens, fortifies, sustains and directs this spirit, directly or indirectly, throughout the ages, despite all the sources of trouble, error, and perversion that surround it.

The materialistic school, not wishing to admit the supernatural, necessarily places its explanation in the second hypothesis, but rather than explain, it confuses and complicates matters. If such were admitted, then it would follow that there was a time when there must have been no religious conceptions, no moral code. Not that such is contrary to the nature of man, but in view of the necessary deductions drawn from the present state of religion in the savage tribes of Africa, especially the Bantu races, this supposition is contrary to the traditions of all races. Furthermore, it presupposes that men, separated by long distances and utterly unknown to each other, have agreed upon certain constituent elements of religious belief. If this agreement is by chance, then, as Father Le Roy, the eminent scholar and missionary, whose authority in such matters is backed by long years of experience in the mission field of South Africa, says, chance should be called by a different name.⁶

⁶ A. Le Roy, *Religion of the Primitives* (Translation by Rev. Newton Thompson, New York, 1922), p. 317.

Again, the Traditionalists and Fideists, restricting the power of human reason, place the explanation solely upon the revealed word of God. This system has been condemned by the Church as contrary to the nature of man who is an intellectual creature.

Finally we come to the theory of human reason coöperating with and aided by supernatural revelation, not in the sense that God made one revelation to our first parents and then went back to heaven and left man entirely to himself to rely upon his memory and to transmit this tradition to his children, but, as St. Paul says, "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, last of all, in these days hath spoken to us by His Son."⁷ The revelation has been made, not only to the direct ancestors of the Hebrew people, but to all the children of Adam and Eve who had a soul to save, so that all the necessary means of salvation were available to Jew and Gentile, Greek and Roman alike.

This explanation seems conformable to the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas: "As regards the substance of the articles of faith, they have received no increase as time went on, since whatever those who lived later believed was contained, albeit implicitly in the faith of those who preceded them."⁸

Thus to conclude we will quote from the work of Father Le Roy: "The human species migrated from the original spot where it first appeared, at a period which science is powerless to determine in a precise manner. It had in its possession a fund of religious and moral truths, with the elements of a worship, the whole rooted in the very nature of man, and there conserved along with the family, developing with society. Each race according to its particular mentalities, its intellectual tendency, and the special condition of its life, gradually established those superficially varied but fundamentally identical forms that we call religions. Everywhere and from the beginning, there were attached to these religions, myths, superstitions, and magics which vitiated and disfigured them and turned them from their object."⁹

⁷ Hebrews, i, 1.

⁸ *Summa Theologica* (English Translation), IIa IIae, q. 1, a. 7.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 319.