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THE ORIGIN OF MONOTHEISM.

BY A. M. HOCART.

To trace the origin of Monotheism may seem a presumptuous undertaking; but perhaps not so much as may appear at first. Scholars often forget that important results may sometimes be achieved by simple means, and that an encyclopaedia is not necessarily the prelude to far-reaching conclusions. They assume that the preparations must be as great as the subject; yet it requires neither genius nor learning to discover such an important law as that nations rise and fall; only profound and accurate scholarship can discuss such a minor problem as the composition of the *Aeneid*. It may require more abundant or remoter facts to find the Origin of Monotheism, than to trace the phases of a nation's rise and fall, but perhaps we have gathered enough facts of late to make at least a guess at this origin. I will attempt no more than a guess: it is something to have suggested a theory which is simple, which is reasonable, and which does not invoke a single process that cannot be shown actually to occur.

THE EARLIEST KNOWN RELIGION.

We must take our start from the fact that the earliest known religion is a belief in the divinity of kings. I do not say that it is the most primitive; some will tell you that animism is the most primitive, others that magic is. Let them prove it. So far these are mere surmises, unsupported by any evidence which a historian would accept.¹

¹ See "What is primitive?" *Hibbert Journal*, Jan. 1920.

Here we are dealing only with facts, and the facts are that our earliest records show us man worshipping gods and their earthly representatives, namely kings. We have no right, in the present state of our knowledge, to assert that the worship of gods preceded that of kings; we do not know. Perhaps there never were any gods without kings, or kings without gods. When we have discovered the origin of divine kingship we shall know, but at present we only know that when history begins there are kings, the representative of gods.

In Egypt "as far back as we can go," says Mr. G. Foucart,¹ "we find ourselves in the presence of a conception of monarchy based solely upon the assimilation of the king to the gods." The king was the embodiment of "that particular soul that came to transform the young prince into a god on the day of his anointing."

Prof. S. Langdon tells us² that "before 3,000 B.C. ancient Sumerian city-kings claimed to have been begotten by the gods, and born of the goddesses Although the rulers of that period were not deified, and did not receive adoration and sacrifice as gods, nevertheless their inscriptions show that their subjects believed them to be divinely sent redeemers, and the vicars of the gods." Later they are worshipped, but it is most important to note that in Sumer kings were not deified after death, but "worship of dead kings was forbidden unless they had been deified while living. Evidently some kind of consecration of the living mortal alone gave the possession of immortality. Temples were built everywhere to these kings in Sumer" (p. 167).

In Greece it is also the earliest religion we can trace. The Homeric kings are called divine; this is usually taken to be merely an expression of admiration; but the same was once thought of the titles bestowed upon Egyptian

¹ Hastings, *Encyclopædia of Ethics and Religion*, s.v. "Kings."

² *The Museum Journal* (Philadelphia), viii. 1917, p. 166.

kings, and these have now been proved to have a literal meaning. "None of these epithets," says Mr. Foucart of Egyptian kings, "should be regarded (as they too often are) as arising from vanity or grandiloquence, for each corresponds theologically to a very precise definition of a function or force belonging to one or other of the great gods of Egypt." This warning should be remembered in dealing with Greece or any other country. The Homeric king was descended from gods (*diotrephe*s), he was a priest, and a good king "caused the black earth to bring forth wheat and barley, the trees to be loaded with fruit, the flocks to multiply, and the sea to yield fish."¹ All these attributes are very symptomatic of divine kingship.²

It is a pity that our Hebrew chronicles are coloured by late theology; yet we can find in them traces of divine kingship, or shall we say chieftainship? The Judges were certainly vicars of God or gods; they were not hereditary, but heredity is not a necessary, though a usual feature of this institution; it is quite possible that in its earliest form it was not hereditary. The phrase "And the Spirit of the Lord came upon him," which is used of Othniel, Jephthah, and Samson (Judges iii. 10; xi. 29; xiii. 25) ought, I think, to be taken literally. The story of Samson suggests that originally he was thought to have been begotten by the deity, a point left vague by later compilers.

Scholars declare that there is no trace of divine kingship in the Vedic hymns; it does not follow that divine kingship was then unknown. The Vedas are not a treatise on manners and customs, but allusive lyrics, which assume in the hearer a considerable knowledge of the traditions of the wise men, to say nothing of those fundamental institutions which were familiar to the most ignorant. The island of Rotuma, north of Fiji, possesses hymns of a

¹ *Golden Bough*, i. 156; *Odyssey*, xix. 109-114.

² *E.g.* in Fiji and Polynesia. "Chieftainship in the Pacific," *American Anthropologist*.

somewhat similar type. I doubt whether anyone would find in them traces of divine kingship, even with the aid of a prose commentary supplied by the most learned of the natives; yet from other sources I obtained undoubted evidence of divine chiefs. These other sources are lacking for Vedic times. The silence of the Vedas is not, therefore, conclusive. The later evidence is not ambiguous. Indian kings are habitually addressed as *deva*, gods. Mr. Louis H. Gray in Hastings' *Encyclopaedia* does indeed explain this away, contending that this does not imply "any divinity of the king, but merely, that he is as much superior to the lower castes as the gods are superior to mankind." The explanation is forced, and Mr. Gray produces evidence against himself; he quotes Manu, vii. 37, as saying "that when Brahman created the king he took eternal particles of Indra, of the Wind, of Yama, of the Sun, of Fire, of Varuna, of the Moon, and of Kubera," and again Manu, vii. 8, "The king is a great deity in human form." In Epic literature "a king or royal seer is called *nara-deva* (god of men); a priest is called *bhūmi-deva*, 'earth god.' It is only as a god that a king may accept a gift. He is Indra, Varuna, Kubera, and Yama incorporate."¹

The oldest records then show divine kingship full blown, and indeed this religion must have been very ancient to spread over so great a part of the world, from Benin to the South Seas, and beyond them to Peru.

SUCCESSIVE INCARNATIONS.

We have seen that kings were worshipped in their lifetime and after their death. In Egypt "as a divine son of Ra, the dead king became a patron-deity, theologically distinct from the ancestor-god, though one of his manifestations" (Hastings, *Encyclopaedia*). Here lies, I think,

¹ Hopkinson, *Epic Mythology* (*Grundriss der Indo-Arischen philologia*), p. 64.

the germ from which has grown the idea of one universal god. I will first make a supposition.

Suppose the kings of England are incarnations of Odin ; then King Edward VII. would be Odin incarnate, but temples would be dedicated to him under the name of Edward. King George V. would succeed him as Odin on earth, but would also be worshipped under the name of George ; but since King Edward and King George are both Odin, they must both be the same ; they would also be the same persons as the many kings of England that have reigned since the conquest.

Evidence that this has actually happened is scarce, and I cannot as yet find any that is earlier than Indian Mythology. Yet such evidence serves to show that the process I have described is not altogether fanciful, but actually takes place. The Indian god Vishnu has ten incarnations ; each incarnation is worshipped in its own right, so to speak, but it is not forgotten that it is the same as Vishnu. One of the incarnations is Rama, whom legend represents as king on earth, and I think most scholars will agree that this personage is historical ; but it makes little difference whether he is historical or merely a natural phenomenon. To the Indian he is a king, and to the Indian mind it is, therefore, conceivable that a king may be the same as a god. Another of Vishnu's incarnations is Krishna, also a man on earth. Rama is Vishnu, and Krishna is Vishnu ; therefore Rama and Krishna are one. The Indian has drawn this conclusion, for we have a god called Rama-Krishna, just as there is a Krishna-Vishnu.¹

¹ Hopkinson, *Epic Mythology*, p. 3. Here perhaps we have the key to a curious feature of Indian religion. Already in the Vedas gods are frequently coupled and worshipped in pairs, thus Mitra-Varuna, Indra-Brihaspati, Agni-Soma. Possibly gods so coupled are incarnations of the same god, or one is the incarnation of the other. If this explanation is right the number of primary gods in the Indian pantheon must be very small ; most of them are secondary gods, that is incarnations of the primary ones.

Another incarnation of Vishnu is Narasinha, the Man-Lion. Now Narsing was a common name for kings in Southern India, and there also the Man-Lion is a favourite motive in architecture. There were Lion-dynasties in Orissa and in Ceylon; the Ceylon kings were descended from a prince with a lion's hands and feet, the son of a lion and a princess. It is natural then to conclude that Narasinha was a king or dynasty in whom Vishnu was incarnated.

A MODERN INSTANCE.

The process can be observed in India at the present day. At Bodh-Gaya you may see a row of present-day tombs erected over the remains of ascetics. I owe the following details to Mr. Sivadas Bhattacharya. When an ascetic dies "his body is buried in the sitting posture, cross legged, with the hands on his lap, just as a man sits in meditation On the top of the grave a *lingam* of Siva is fixed. The idea is that *Sannyasi* (ascetic) has not died, but has become one with the universal deity Siva (or Parambraham) . . . These *lingams*, especially those on the graves of the *Mahants* (Abbots) and influential men are daily worshipped by the Mahant's man in the same way as the god Siva is worshipped . . . No other sort of offerings are made in the temples except those required for the worship of Siva . . . The *mantras* uttered are the same as those used for Siva worship."

THE GERM OF MONOTHEISM.

This custom, I would suggest, is the germ of monotheism. This is how it may have first dawned on man that many gods were the manifestations of one. Monotheism is usually taken for granted and no explanation is ever offered for its first appearance; it is supposed to be a natural growth, sufficiently explained by that magic word evolution; yet, when we come to consider it, there is no

obvious reason why there should be one god rather than many; once man has come to believe in gods, why should he ever cut down their number to one? In some ways it is easier to believe in many than in one, it spares us endless theological problems, and it makes religion more personal. Such an intelligent people as the Greeks seem to have been well content to have many gods.

The theory I have outlined at all events explains how the oneness of God first occurred to men. It is based on a custom which can be traced as far back as early Egypt and Sumer, the custom of worshipping kings in their own name.

MONOTHEISM BY CONQUEST.

The idea once vaguely conceived was doubtless confirmed and expanded by other causes, conquest being one of them.

Let us return to our supposition that the kings of England are incarnations of Odin. They conquer India, and assume the title of Emperor of India, but in taking the title he is taking far more than the mere name; he is assuming the divine attributes that go with the name. He becomes, let us suppose, Indra. King George then is Odin, he is also Indra; therefore, Odin and Indra are the same.

Prof. Sethe and Dr. A. M. Blackman both recognise that conquest may have helped to fuse gods together, though they conceive the process somewhat differently from what I have outlined. "Owing to the political predominance gained by Buto over Heliopolis in the predynastic age, Horus, originally the god of Buto, came to be identified with the Sun-god, the local god " of Heliopolis. Since the king was regarded as the embodiment of Horus, he was also regarded as the embodiment of the Sun-god."¹ The idea seems to be that the gods were first identified with one another; the king being the

¹ Blackman, "Sacramental ideas and usages in Ancient Egypt" (*Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology*, March 1918, p. 60).

incarnation of one, naturally became also the incarnation of the other. It is by no means clear, however, why the political predominance of one city over another should cause their gods to become one. May I suggest another explanation? It may be contrary to the evidence at the disposal of scholars, but then my suggestion will perhaps have brought forth this evidence, and thus definitely settled in what way conquest leads to fusion of gods. In the meantime this fusion may be accounted for mechanically thus: The Horus-King of Buto defeats the Sun-King of Heliopolis, and takes away his dignities; but those dignities are merely the outward sign of his divinity. He takes over the attributes of the Sun-god because he has become the representative of the Sun-god. Henceforth he is Horus, and he is the Sun; therefore the Sun and Horus are one.

I am emboldened to make this suggestion, ignorant as I am of the facts, by my knowledge of Fijian usage. Divine Chieftainship, somewhat obscured, has extended to Fiji, and therefore Fijian history may be consulted with advantage. We there find that titles are not made or assumed at will. With us any man who can unify Italy can proclaim himself King of Italy; the Yugo-Slavs may any day set up a King of Yugo-Slavia; but Fijian titles are in the gift of certain families, who alone can perform the rite of installation. Thus the people of Levuka bestow the title "Lord of Levuka" upon a chief who is not one of their own people, but one of the tribe of Mban which coming down from the hills first subdued them, and finally expelled them; they still go one hundred and fifty miles by sea to instal every new chief of Mban. That chief also receives the title of "Root of War," or possibly "God of War," from his own tribe.¹ He therefore combines two divine person-

¹ *Vunivalu*, *vu* means root, but it also means god. This translation would enable us to explain the title *Vunindovu* given to the teacher of dances and secret ceremonies: he is the god of the bamboo; we know that these teachers are actually possessed by spirits.

alities in himself, not because the two gods have become identified with one another, but because his own people have raised him to one god-head, and the people of Levuka to another. It is unfortunate, however, that in Fiji the theory of divine kingship has so decayed that it has to be reconstituted largely by inference. We cannot, therefore, follow these complications in their consequences. Indeed, South Sea Islanders, and probably savages generally, are unsatisfactory witnesses in this respect, for not having a class devoted to intellectual pursuits they never develop extensive systems of thought as the Europeans have done or the Asiatics; they supply us with hints, but seldom give us the theory. In Europe and Asia too, political unity has been carried out with a thoroughness unknown to savages; petty states have been absorbed into mighty kingdoms, and it is easy to see how, under those conditions, the idea of one supreme god, of whom all others are but aspects, must have been strongly promoted by the existence of one supreme king uniting in himself the divine attributes of all the petty kings he has displaced.

Conquest also acts indirectly in that it removes the king and rulers further from the people, and weakens the personal tie; it accustoms people to give allegiance to principles rather than to men; it turns their devotion to abstractions rather than to concrete things. The clansman fights for his chief, but the modern British fight for freedom or the Empire. In the formula "for King and Country," the king is a mere survival, the country is the reality.

MONOTHEISTIC ENTHUSIASM.

We have seen how the germ of monotheism lies in the doctrine of divine kingship, and how conquest helps it to develop. In the end it comes to pass that everybody is everybody else, personalities and attributes are multiplied beyond reason, for king after king is added to the list. There is a limit to man's memory and to their powers of

attention. A multitude of facts is a burden to the mind, and a multitude of interests is a worry. When these grow too numerous men seek to reduce them, and if they delay too long, they do so violently and with enthusiasm, sweeping away suddenly the prolonged tyranny of accumulated tradition. Such a movement was the French Revolution, which made a fetish of simplicity and system, because both had been unduly neglected in the past. It is difficult to serve more than a limited number of gods, it is especially difficult when the attributes of those gods are hopelessly mixed, when every god is the same as every other. It is only necessary to read a treatise on the religion of the Vedas to realize how dull and annoying a religion may become when the personalities of the various gods cease to be clearly distinguished. Some minds are content with confusion, but others rebel against it and embrace with enthusiasm any movement that would sweep it away.

It is difficult, however, to understand the tremendous success of monotheism if we look upon it merely as an abstract doctrine ; as such it might stir up strife among philosophers, and those who quarrel about mere ideas ; but the mass of mankind has too much sense for that, and they would not take all the trouble they have taken to assert that there is only one God, and no more, if behind that dogma there was not a tendency, a new spirit, which was worth fighting for. Men at first sight do look hopelessly foolish killing and getting killed for the sake of pure abstractions ; but when we look at it closely we find that they are not so much foolish as unable to express themselves, and therefore unable to do justice to their cause. They feel a great deal which they cannot put into a few clear words, yet they require a few clear words as a war cry to rally their forces ; so we hear a great deal in history about the shibboleths of dogma and ritual that distinguish parties, and very little about the aspirations that impel them. But we must judge the past by the present. If we

look at the sects of our own time we find that the distinction between them is deeper than points of dogma or ritual. You can almost tell what sect a man belongs to by his general outlook on life, his politics, his tastes, his speech, and even his morality. But a man can scarcely support one fellow man, and fight another in the name of social standing, or manners, or artistic tendencies, so he takes points of dogma, as concrete symbols of elusive traditions and feelings. If we judge past ages by our own we may feel sure that even the quarrel over *homoiousios* and *homoousios* involved much more than an iota.¹

We might be quite sure then that the struggle between monotheism and polytheism was more than a philosophic disputation, even if our evidence did not furnish abundant hints to the contrary. It is significant that the monotheistic party in Israel was the party of union, while the polytheistic party was for secession. "Jeroboam said in his heart, Now shall the kingdom return to the house of David: if this people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then shall the heart of the people turn again unto their lord, even unto Rehoboam, King of Judah" (I. Kings xii. 26). The polytheists were for self-determination, the Monotheists for union. The attributes of Buddha are closely copied from those of a universal monarch; in fact tradition declares that he had the option between becoming a supreme Buddha and a universal emperor, but he preferred to be a spiritual Lord of the world. The expansion of his creed was favoured by the greatest empire of ancient India. The Christian Church has a similar conception of its founder:

"And Kings sat still with awful eye,
As if they surely knew their sovereign lord was nigh."

He was born at the very time when the most powerful empire of the ancient world had been consolidated, and

¹ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, ii., p. 352 (Bury).

that empire spread the new creed. In the break up of the Middle Ages the Church still kept alive the ideal of a Universal Empire. It is significant that the teaching of Mohammed resulted in the foundation of a great empire. The idea of a Universal King and that of a Universal God go hand in hand. This is a survival of very early days. Kings at first were gods ; the two terms were interchangeable ; they are no longer so now, but the ancient bond still persists.

Religion and politics are inseparable ; it is vain to try and divorce them ; originally one, they have parted, but not completely ; their common origin still operates on men's minds. Monarchists must necessarily uphold the Church, and ardent believers in one God will help to build up large nations. The belief in a Supreme God or in a Single God is no mere philosophical speculation ; it is a great practical idea. But like many other conceptions, it took some discovering. Men did not search for it at first, any more than they searched for the art of writing, they were led to it by accident almost ; it was a long time before they realised where they were being led to ; some have never yet realised. The doctrine of gods and their incarnations produced a group of gods who were each but aspects of the same god ; thence they came to the belief that all gods were in reality but manifestations of one. Some never got any further, but the bolder nations took the step of simplifying the Universe by sweeping away the multitude of gods that had become useless by their very numbers. Monotheism then became a definite article of faith to be fought for, and to establish in all the world.

A. M. HOCART.