

ATONEMENT IN NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS.

By GEORGE S. GOODSPEED,
The University of Chicago.

I. THE ATONEMENT OF FEAR.

1. In writing of atonement in non-Christian religions one may be permitted to use the word in the most general sense implied by its etymology—the making of man “at one” with the supreme power or powers by which he believes his life to be directed, the bringing of the two into harmony. If it be regarded as synonymous with “reconciliation,” the latter should be recognized as not necessarily involving “estrangement” as its precedent. Only thus is it possible to lay bare those fundamental notions on which were built the ideas of atonement understood “in its technical signification to denote the satisfaction of divine justice for the sin of man.”¹

I.

2. The various attitudes exhibited by man toward the higher powers throughout human religious history can be traced back to a few simple relations based upon elemental feelings. One of these primal feelings, as important and as persistent as any other, is that of fear. The external world revealed itself to the primitive man in many wild and terrible aspects—in the storm of wind, rain, and lightning, in the attack of savage beasts, in the overwhelming grandeur of lofty mountains, in the fierce glare of the sun, as well as in phenomena which, being incomprehensible to him, were therefore mysterious and tended to produce awe if not terror, such as the movements of the heavenly bodies, the rustling of the wind through the forest, the immensity of the seas, or the ebb and flow of

¹ SHEDD, *History of Christian Doctrine*, Vol. II, p. 204; see also *Century Dictionary*, s. v. “Atonement.”

their waters. Similar feelings were aroused by the phenomena of sleep and death—the dreams in which one saw distant scenes, the visions of friends far separated, some even already dead, the sudden cessation of activity observable in the case of the death of companions, the changes coming over the body after dissolution, and the problems of the soul separated from the body.² In time, no doubt, many of these things lost their mystery or awfulness and became matters of course. But this was not true of all these experiences, and the process of escaping from fear had left human nature susceptible to its influence and easily on occasion subject to its recurring domination.

3. It was impossible that fear should not connect itself very early with religion. The phenomena of the external world and the experiences connected with sleep and death, already mentioned, take a large place among the elements of primitive religious belief and practice. The theories of the origin of religion connect themselves with these, whether (1) that which makes religion take its rise from man's contemplation of, or relation to, nature in its various manifestations,³ or (2) that which associates its appearance with the attitude toward the dead⁴ taken by primitive man. Whatever may be the verdict of science in the future on these theories, the fact must remain true that in these relations to the world around him, even in the association of religion with them, man could not escape being moved by

² For the attitude of the savage toward the souls of the dead see TYLOR, *Primitive Culture*, third edition, Vol. II, pp. 111 f.; and on the presence of fear in primitive life see WOOD, *Survivals in Christianity*, p. 148; SCOTT, *Sacrifice, Its Prophecy and Fulfilment*, pp. 63 f. For a somewhat differing judgment illustrating the view of anthropological experts I am permitted to quote from a private letter of Professor Frederick Starr, to whom the writer of this article is indebted for a careful criticism of its positions: "Personally I cannot believe that primitive man was so terrorized as is often assumed. The storm was always dreaded, and at times animals were dangerous. But animals generally, the lofty mountains, the glare of the sun, movements of the heavenly bodies, immensity of the seas, ebb and flow of their waters, were little calculated to instil terror or awe. The feeling of awe connected with these is certainly characteristic of man far from primitive. It seems to me that these were 'matters of course' before they were mysteries."

³ This was the point of view of the late Professor F. Max Müller.

⁴ This is the theory of Herbert Spencer and many others.

fear.⁵ This is not to assert that fear was the primal emotion. *Primus in orbe deos fecit timor*, a thesis which has had many advocates, is just now rejected scornfully by the prevailing school of investigators,⁶ and perhaps with reason. They distinguish between magic and religion, and assign to the former the monopoly of this sentiment.⁷ Without entering upon a discussion of this point, waiving it as unessential in our investigation, we may safely maintain the position that, even if secondary and not fundamental, fear has played a real part in the religious life of mankind from the beginning until now.

4. So far as the higher powers produce terror or awe in their worshipers, there arises naturally a desire to propitiate them. "Man's first feeling toward the gods was that of fear. They ruled over all things, life and death were in their hands, and therefore it seemed needful to offer them something to win their favor." These words of Clodd,⁸ if the mooted question suggested by the word "first" be dismissed, fairly express the fact, which appears in all religions and is a germ of atonement ideas and practices. To approach these dreaded powers with a gift to appease their wrath, to do them homage, to gain their favor, to render them complacent—this act of worship is the commonest in all ancient religions.⁹ It may not be the earliest religious ceremonial—of that something may be said later—it is certainly the most prominent in the rituals of which we have anything like satisfactory knowledge.

5. The forms taken by the propitiatory or atoning gift are bewildering in their variety. They may be regarded, however, as ranging themselves under two heads according as the giver

⁵ See, e. g., for the gods of thunder in savage religions, BRINTON, *Religions of Primitive Peoples*, p. 81 and note. Cf. also the judicious statement of D'ALVIELLA, *Origin and Growth of the Conception of God*, Hibbert Lectures, 1891, pp. 68 f.

⁶ So W. R. SMITH, *Religion of the Semites*, second edition, pp. 54 f.; BRINTON, *Rel. Prim. Pop.*, p. 45; JEVONS, *Introduction to the History of Religion*, Index, s. v. "Fear." Cf. the sane and comprehensive discussion of TIELE, *Elements of the Science of Religion*, Vol. II, pp. 135, 144 ff.

⁷ Not all scholars who deny the primacy of fear in the beginnings of religion hold that magic and religion are fundamentally distinct.

⁸ E. CLODD, *The Childhood of Religion*, p. 91.

⁹ See ALEXANDER, *System of Biblical Theology*, Vol. I, pp. 463-5, 471.

is moved by the consideration either (1) of what the god may be supposed to want, or (2) of what he himself as worshiper and suppliant ought to give. In the one case he may be said objectively to take into consideration the higher powers only, their attributes, character, requirements; in the other he looks primarily within himself, contemplates his own character, and acts upon his sense of obligation. While it is not always easy to separate these two motives—the distinction is largely one of emphasis—it is possible roughly to arrange the great mass of gifts under the one or the other of them.

II.

6. In the first instance, the worshiper sought most commonly to give the gods what they liked to eat. This appears evident when the materials of sacrifice all the world over are analyzed. What Professor W. Robertson Smith says of Semitic sacrifices is true of many others: [They] “are drawn from edible substances, and indeed from such substances as form the ordinary staple of human food.”¹⁰ He adds: “All sacrifices . . . were taken by the ancients as being literally the food of the gods.”¹¹ These gifts might therefore be either vegetable or animal, grain or flesh. The latter were most common, because flesh, regarded as the most desirable human food, would naturally be most agreeable to the higher powers. Indeed, Professor Simon goes so far as to derive the custom of animal sacrifice from this root when he says: “The primary occasion of animal sacrifices, and others rooted in them, was probably the desire to gratify the gods with the best that man himself enjoys.”¹² Where other foods are more highly relished, these are with the like motive given to the deity.¹³ A natural variation of this conception, and possibly derived from it, was the view that the gods needed this food and that the worshiper was providing for their wants in his offering. The striking example of this given in the

¹⁰ *Rel. of the Sem.*, p. 218.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

¹² *The Redemption of Man*, p. 162.

¹³ *Primitive Culture*, II, p. 377; D'ALVIELLA, *Conception of God*, pp. 85 f.

Assyrian epic¹⁴ is familiar. When the sacrifice was offered by Tsitnapishtim, who had escaped the deluge, "the gods inhaled the sweet odor, *the gods gathered like flies about the sacrificer.*" F. A. Wolf dogmatically declared the origin of sacrifice to lie in the fact that the gods were hungry and wanted to eat.¹⁵

7. But the powers on high not only like something to eat, they are pleased with the recognition of their power which the gift demonstrates. Hence the element of paying tribute, of doing homage to the god, with the propitiatory motive is illustrated in many offerings.¹⁶ God is the chief, the king, to be feared and to be approached by the subject with a present "to smooth his face." Thus first-fruits of the ground were claimed by agricultural deities as a tribute due them.¹⁷ Tylor would make this notion in its simplest form the origin of sacrifice. "The suppliant who bows before his chief, laying a gift at his feet, and making his humble petition, displays the anthropomorphic model and origin at once of sacrifice and prayer."¹⁸

III.

8. The desire to please the god, while it falls, on the one hand, as we have seen, to the low plane of regarding him as hungry and thirsty, may rise in the scale to an intensity which returns upon the worshiper in an overwhelming sense of his own obligation to discover a satisfactory means of propitiation. Herewith the second motive of the atoning gift is uncovered. The problem in this instance is not primarily, What does God want? but, What shall I do to make atonement between us? Many forms of sacrifice rise out of the attempt to reply to this question. One answer to it was made throughout the whole ancient world, viz., *Give your best.*¹⁹

¹⁴ JASTROW, *Religion of Babylonia and Assyria*, p. 503.

¹⁵ Quoted in KLEINERT's article in *Studien und Kritiken*, 1874, p. 453.

¹⁶ Kleinert, in the article just referred to (pp. 453-9), makes homage the fundamental idea in the gift of food to the deity, in contradistinction to the notion that the food is primarily given because the god likes to eat it.

¹⁷ *Rel. of the Sem.*, pp. 240 f.

¹⁸ *Prim. Culture*, II, p. 375; this is also Kleinert's view, *Stud. u. Krit.*, p. 459.

¹⁹ See TIELE, *Elements of the Science of Religion*, Vol. I, p. 103, 176-8.

9. This answer leads directly to that most tremendous and awful phenomenon of religion, human sacrifice. Our purpose is not to discuss the very complex problems of its origin and primary meaning, but only to call attention to the character and significance of the atoning element in it. Archbishop Magee has collected in his *Dissertations on Atonement*²⁰ an array of facts showing beyond a doubt that human sacrifices in antiquity were widely regarded as the most potent means of propitiating an offended deity. The Phœnicians and Carthaginians gave up their children because these were their dearest treasures, and hence the devoting of them was most likely to secure divine favor.²¹ Similar explanations of the same rite by Greek and Roman writers make it clear that such was the notion held in classical antiquity. "An exceptional emergency demanded a human victim," because such a one was the best mankind could offer. "The ancient Germans laid it down," says Brinton,²² "that in time of famine beasts should first be slain and offered to the gods. Did these bring no relief, then men must be slaughtered; and if still there was no aid from on high, then the chieftain of the tribe himself must mount the altar; for the nobler and dearer the victim, the more pleased were the gods!" And accordingly we are told that when in Carthage slave boys were substituted for the children of the nobles in the offerings to the gods, the deities were angry and brought greater woe upon the state.

10. The transfer of emphasis from what God wants to what man owes to God, which had its part in the fostering of human sacrifice as the fulfilment of the supremest obligation, was connected in most cases with exceptional experiences of misfortune, indeed was occasioned by these. In ordinary times it was

²⁰ *Discourses and Dissertations on the Scriptural Doctrines of Atonement and Sacrifice*, a book of the eighteenth-century style, full of solid learning. Appendix V (pp. 96-139 of the London edition of 1832) of the first volume is a very full collection of materials from classical literature and elsewhere illustrating human sacrifice.

²¹ Besides MAGEE, *l. c.*, see DÖLLINGER in *The Gentile and the Jew*, Vol. 1, pp. 426, 488.

²² *Rel. Prim. Peop.*, p. 188; see also Kleinert in the article referred to (pp. 430-38), who gives instances of the atoning element in the human sacrifice, although he uses the word "atonement" in a narrower sense than is here employed.

enough to keep "at one" with deity by satisfying his desires. Suffering was the sign that something was wrong; it was instantly given religious significance; it denoted the displeasure of the powers above with the sufferer, and called upon him to examine himself and take measures to restore the broken harmony. The doctrine that suffering was the sign of and punishment for "sin" was a commonplace of ancient religion.²³

II. But a striking turn was given to this doctrine when that which was the penalty came also to be regarded as the means of atonement. Deity is appeased by the endurance or exhibition of suffering on the part of the worshiper or a substitute for him. How this point of view was arrived at—whether by arguing that what God inflicted upon man he was pleased with; or by concluding that to give oneself to suffer under divine punishment was to give one's best—may not be clear. But the position once taken that suffering not merely implies divine displeasure, but also possesses propitiatory power, a great body of atoning praxis sprang up under its influence. We are introduced by it to that broad field of the manifestations of pain in religious ritual. Grant atoning efficacy to pain, and it is but a step to regard self-inflicted suffering as parallel in its reconciling force to that divinely inflicted. The habit of the Friendly Islanders, "when afflicted with any dangerous disorder, to cut off their little finger as an offering to the deity,"²⁴ the gashes made upon their bodies by the priests of Baal when summoning their god to Mt. Carmel, and all the other self-mutilations and lacerations in the service of religion, examples of which are furnished in all parts of the world—testify to this strange and remarkable belief. Similarly, the subjection of victims to torture before

²³ The classical illustration of this doctrine in ancient religious literature is found in the Babylonian Penitential Psalms; see JASTROW, *Rel. Bab. and Assyr.*, chap. xviii. Of course, in using the word "sin" of ancient religions one does not refer to the "primitive" religions in which moral distinctions were undeveloped. "The 'primitive' man rarely considered that he was *morally* culpable in the long list of things which brought divine displeasure upon him. He might know the deity would be displeased; but he rarely saw any real wickedness in the deed itself." (Private communication from Professor Starr.)

²⁴ Referred to in MAGEE, *Dissertations*, I, p. 117.

offering them to the deity, "common" says Brinton,²⁵ "in American religions, formed part of the religious value of the ceremony" for this reason. One root of ascetic practices is found here. "The wrath of the gods is appeased, and they are made more disposed to listen to prayer when man fasts."²⁶ We shall discuss elsewhere the intimate relation of substitutionary practices to this atonement by suffering.²⁷

12. Another aspect of the same principle is observable in the efficacy attributed to practices in which the worshiper deprived himself of something on behalf of the god.²⁸ The atoning power is in the ratio of the degree of deprivation. Acceptable offerings must be the offerer's own property and the best of it. The loss of it is thereby felt,²⁹ and there is a distinct religious value in this feeling. "Hence, too . . . the prodigality in sacrifice which startles us at times: the hecatombs of victims, the rivers of oil, the cattle from a thousand hills,"³⁰ and the holocaust in which the victim was conveyed entirely to the deity; yes, the human sacrifice, if of a child or one beloved, appears with added propitiatory significance in the light of its involving the worshiper in grief and loss.³¹ The most extreme case of this sort would be the giving of the offerer's own life to the god; and this, too, is not without its examples. Self-immolation, to be sure, is usually found as a substitutionary practice, and as such will receive treatment later.

IV.

13. As one looks back over the several forms of religious practice which have been described, it is evident that the element

²⁵ *Rel. Prim. Peop.*, pp. 188 f.

²⁶ BARING-GOULD, *Origin and Development of Religious Belief*, Vol. I, p. 347. The wider significance of suffering as atonement is suggested on pp. 387 ff.

²⁷ Cf. the modern significance of the word "sacrifice," and BRINTON, *The Religious Sentiment*, p. 218.

²⁸ See BRINTON, *The Religious Sentiment*, pp. 221 f.

²⁹ See SIMON, *Red. of Man*, pp. 159-67.

³⁰ TRENCH, *Christ the Desire of All Nations* (Hulsean Lectures), American edition, p. 185.

³¹ See some remarks in *Rel. of the Sem.*, p. 394, which illustrate this point, while taking another view of the holocaust and human sacrifice.

of atoning significance in them varies in depth and power. It is feeble and superficial in those cases where the offerer acts, as it were, only with his eye on the god, giving him the tribute or the homage due him as a powerful lord, or supplying him with his favorite food to keep him in good humor. The reconciliation in such circumstances is merely formal and outward.³² It may degenerate into a relation in which the deity becomes dependent on the offerer for the food and drink required to save him from perishing. In this way the priest in India came to be the superior of the divinity he served. But this was an extreme situation. In general, the atonement wrought by the gift was adequate for the ordinary demands of early religion. It provided for a harmonious adjustment of heavenly and earthly affairs. While it was not ethically inspiring, it could not be said to be demoralizing. Man and god got on well together in a definite arrangement of mutual obligation and privilege. The fundamental weakness of it all was that it was dominated by ideas of property.³³ The tendency was to conceive of the reconciliation as formal and to be estimated in material terms. This element hindered all spiritual expansion. It minimized fear before the deity's sudden wrath, and secured peace at the expense of fervor and inspiration. The panic terror of primitive ages was preferable to this lifeless calm without fruitful germ of moral or religious growth.

14. Happily it was always possible to shake the religious comfort of this easy atonement by recurring spasms of that earlier fear. Human and divine relations, even when what might be called this contract theory of religion just mentioned was prevalent, were not so well established as not to give sufficient occasion for unrest. The blessed ministry of uncertainty kept men alive to the need of a better and more thorough understanding with the powers above and about them, and thus, as we have seen, drove them from time to time to regard atonement more in the light of their own obligation than in that of the divine pleasure. The value and reach of this latter form of reconciliation was far beyond what the other could attain. It

³² D'ALVIELLA, *Conception of God*, pp. 84 f.

³³ *Rel. of the Sem.*, pp. 395 f.

aroused reflection, demanded submission, and required self-surrender. It implied a much closer relation to the deity, a demand on him presented in the form of a confession of weakness and dependence. Suffering, the weapon of punishment, wrested from the hand of an offended god and made the instrument of reconciliation—what a step forward in religious life from that stage in which satisfied optimism rests upon a bargain made with a good-natured god!

15. This higher type of the atonement of fear had, however, in common with the lower form, a fundamental defect. It could not shake itself clear from its claim upon God. Its property, not indeed milk or flesh which the deity loved, but worthier gifts of its best, the hecatombs, the sons and daughters, the offering of one's own life—these were *its to give*, and like the others constituted a demand upon the powers above. Where a right was thus asserted in the face of heaven, the true humility which is basal to any adequate atonement between God and man could not be found.

16. The attempt has been made in this paper to discuss a series of religious practices, chiefly of the ancient world, which, having an atoning function, seemed distinctly to relate themselves to the sentiment of fear before the higher powers, the term "fear" being employed in a wide, and possibly a loose, sense.³⁴ We have endeavored also to sound the comparative depth of that atoning element in the various forms of its manifestation. The next paper will take up an entirely different principle of atonement, and not only will view some of the practices already discussed in the light of it, but will find further illustrations of the principle in a series of facts which have often escaped the attention of students of religious institutions, or have received from them a very different interpretation.

[*To be continued.*]

³⁴ It must be repeated that the writer has steadfastly avoided asserting the relative priority or preëminence of fear in early religions as compared with other emotions. He has merely preferred to treat, in this first paper, a body of observances which in ancient religions themselves were kept up out of fear of the gods, or may legitimately be associated with that feeling.