

THE UNITY OF NATURE.

BY THE DUKE OF ARGYLL.

IX.

THE ORIGIN OF RELIGION CONSIDERED IN THE LIGHT OF THE UNITY OF NATURE.

(Continued.)

The considerations set forth in the previous chapter indicate the fallacies which lie in our way when we endeavor to collect from the worship of savage nations any secure conclusions as to the origin of Religion. Upon these fallacies, and upon no more safe foundation, Comte built up his famous generalization of the four necessary stages in the history of Religion. First came Fetishism, then Polytheism, and then Monotheism, and last and latest, the heir of all ages, Comtism itself, or the Religion of Humanity, which is to be the worship of the future.

Professor Max Müller has done admirable service in the analysis and in the exposure which he has given us of the origin and use of the word "Fetishism," and of the theory which represents it as a necessary stage in the development of Religion.¹ It turns out that the word itself and the fundamental idea it embodies, is a word and an idea derived from one of those popular superstitions which are so common in connection with Latin Christianity. The Portuguese sailors who first explored the West Coast of Africa were themselves accustomed to attach superstitious value to beads, or crosses, or images, or charms and amulets of their own. These were called "fetiços." They saw the negroes attaching some similar value to various objects of a similar kind, and these Portuguese sailors therefore described the negro worship as the worship of "fetiços." President de Brosses, a French philosopher of the Voltairean epoch in literature, then extended the term Fetish so as to include not only artificial articles, but also such great natural features as trees, mountains, rivers and animals. In this way he was enabled to classify together under one indiscriminate appellation many different kinds of worship and many different stages in the history of religious development or decay. This is an excellent example of the crude theories and false generalizations which have been prevalent on the subject of the origin of Religion. First, there is the assumption that whatever is lowest in savagery must have been primeval—an assumption which, as we have seen, is in all cases improbable, and in many cases must necessarily be false. Next there is great carelessness in ascertaining what is really true even of existing savages in respect to their religious beliefs. It has now been clearly ascertained, that those very African negroes whose superstitious worship of material articles supposed to have some mysterious powers or virtues, is most degraded, do nevertheless retain behind and above this worship certain beliefs as to the nature of the Godhead, which are almost as far above their own abject superstitions as the theology of a Fénelon is above the superstitions of an ignorant Roman Catholic peasant. It is found that some African tribes have retained their belief in one Supreme Being, the Creator of the world, and the circumstance that nevertheless no worship may be addressed to Him has received from Professor Max Müller an explanation which is ample. "It may arise from an excess of reverence quite as much as from negligence. Thus the Odjis or Cohantis call the Supreme Being by the same name as the sky; but they mean by it a Personal God, who, as they say, created all things and is the Giver of all good things. But though He is omnipresent and omniscient, knowing even the thoughts of men, and pitying them in their distress, the government

of the world is, as they believe, deputed by Him to inferior spirits, and among these, again, it is the malevolent spirits only who require worship and sacrifice from man."² And this is by no means a solitary case. There are many others in which the investigations of missionaries respecting the religious conceptions of savage nations have revealed the fact that they have a much higher theology than is indicated in their worship.

The truth is, that nowhere is the evidence of development in a wrong direction so strong as in the many customs of savage and barbarous nations which are more or less directly connected with Religion. The idea has long been abandoned that the savage lives in a condition of freedom as compared with the complicated obligations imposed by civilization. Savages, on the contrary, are under the tyranny of innumerable customs which render their whole life a slavery from the cradle to the grave. And what is most remarkable is the irrational character of most of these customs, and the difficulty of even imagining how they can have become established. They bear all the marks of an origin far distant in time—of a connection with doctrines which have been forgotten, and of conceptions which have run, as it were, to seed. They bear, in short, all the marks of long attrition, like the remnants of a bed of rock which has been broken up at a distant epoch of geological time, and has left no other record of itself than a few worn and incoherent fragments in some far-off conglomerate. Just as these fragments are now held together by common materials which are universally distributed, such as sand or lime, so the worn and broken fragments of old religions are held together, in the shape of barbarous customs, by those common instincts and aspirations of the human mind which follow it in all its stages, whether of growth or of decay.

The rapidity of the processes of degradation in Religion, and the extent to which they may go, depends on a great variety of conditions. It has gone very far indeed, and has led to the evolution of customs and beliefs of the most destructive kind among races which, so far as we know, have never been exposed to external conditions necessarily degrading. The innate character of this tendency to corruption, arising out of causes inherent in the nature of Man, becomes indeed all the more striking when we find that some of the most terrible practices connected with religious superstition, are practices which have become established among tribes which are by no means in the lowest physical condition, and which inhabit countries highly blest by Nature. Perhaps there is no example of this phenomenon more remarkable than the "customs" of Dahomey, a country naturally rich in products, and affording every facility for the pursuits of a settled and civilized life. Yet here we have those terrible beliefs which demand the constant, the almost daily sacrifice of human life, with no other aim or purpose than to satisfy some imaginary Being with the sight of clotted gore, and with the smell of putrefying human flesh. This is only an extreme and a peculiarly terrible example of a general law, the operation of which is more or less clearly seen in every one of the religions of the heathen world, whether of the past or of the present time. In the very earliest ages in which we become acquainted with the customs of their worship, we find these in many respects strange and unaccountable, except on the supposition that even then they had come from far, and had been subject to endless deviations and corruptions through ages of a long descent.

Of no Religion is this more true than of that which was associated with the oldest civilization known to us—the civilization of Egypt. So strange is the combination here of simple and grand conceptions with grotesque symbols and with degrading objects of immediate wor-

¹ Hibbert Lectures, 1878.² Hibbert Lectures, pp. 107, 108.

ship, that it has been the inexhaustible theme of curious explanations. Why a Snake or why a Dung-beetle should have been taken to represent the Divine Being, and why in the holiest recess of some glorious temple we find enshrined as the object of adoration the image or the coffin of some beast, or bird, or reptile, is a question on which much learned ingenuity has been spent. It has been suggested, for example, that a conquering race, bringing with it a higher and a purer faith, suffered itself to adopt or to embody in its system the lower symbolism of a local worship. But this explanation only removes the difficulty—if it be one—a step further back. Why did such sufferance arise? why was such an adoption possible? It was possible simply because there is an universal tendency in the human mind to developments in the wrong direction, and especially in its spiritual conceptions to become more and more gross and carnal.

Nor is it difficult to follow some, at least, of the steps of consequence—that is to say, the associations of thought—by which worship may become degraded when once any serious error has been admitted. Animal worship, for example, may possibly have begun with very high and very profound conceptions. We are accustomed to regard it as a very grotesque and degraded worship, and so no doubt it was in its results. But if we once allow ourselves to identify the Divine Power in Nature with any of its operations, if we seek for the visible presence of the Creator in any one of His creations, I do not know that we could choose any in which that presence seems so immanent as in the wonderful instincts of the lower animals. In a previous chapter we have seen what knowledge and what foreknowledge there is involved in some of these. We have seen how it often seems like direct inspiration that creatures without the gift of reason should be able to do more than the highest human reason could enable us to do—how wonderful it is, for example, that their prevision and provision for the nurture and development of their young should cover the whole cycle of operations in the second work of creation which is involved in the metamorphoses of insects—all this, when we come to think of it, may well seem like the direct working of the Godhead. We have seen in a former chapter that men of the highest genius in philosophical speculation, like Descartes, and men of the highest skill in the popular exposition of scientific ideas, like Professor Huxley, have been led by these marvels of instinct to represent the lower animals as automata or machines. The whole force and meaning of this analogy lies in the conception that the work done by animals is like the work done by the mechanical contrivances of men. We look always upon such work as done not by the machine but by the contriving mind which is outside the machine, and from whom its adjustments are derived. Fundamentally, however little it may be confessed or acknowledged, this is the same conception which, in a less scientific age, would take another form. What is seen in the action of an automaton is not the mechanism but the result. That result is the work of mind, which seems as if it were indwelling in the machine. In like manner, what is seen in animals is the wonderful things they do; and what is not seen, and is indeed wholly incomprehensible, is the machinery by which they are made to do it. Moreover, it is a machinery having this essential distinction from all human machines, that it is endowed with life, which in itself also is the greatest mystery of all. It is, therefore, no superficial observation of animals, but, on the contrary, a deep pondering on the wonders of their economy, which may have first suggested them to religious men as at once the type and the abode of that Agency which is supreme in Nature. I do not affirm as an historical fact that this was really the origin of animal worship, because that origin is not historically known, and, like the origin of Religion itself, it must be more or less a matter of speculation. Some animals may have become objects of worship from having origin-

ally been the subjects of sacrifice. The victim may have been so associated with the god to whom it was devoted as to become his accepted symbol. The Ox and the Bull may well have been consecrated through this process of substitution. But no such explanation can be given in respect to many animals which have been worshipped as divine. Perhaps no further explanation need be sought than that which would be equally required to account for the choice of particular plants, or particular birds and fishes, as the badges of particular tribes and families of men. Such badges were almost universal in early times, and many of them are still perpetuated in armorial bearings. The selection of particular animals in connection with worship would be determined in different localities by a great variety of conditions. Circumstances purely accidental might determine it. The occurrence, for example, in some particular region of any animal with habits which are at once curious and conspicuous, would sufficiently account for the choice of it as the symbol of whatever idea these habits might most readily suggest or symbolize. It is remarkable, accordingly, that in some cases, at least, we can see the probable causes which have led to the choice of certain creatures. The Egyptian beetle, the *Scarabæus*, for example, represents one of those forms of insect life in which the marvels of instinct are at once very conspicuous and very curious. The characteristic habit of the *Scarabæus* beetle is one which involves all that mystery of prevision for the development of the species which is common among insects, coupled with a patient and laborious perseverance in the work required, which does not seem directly associated with any mere appetite or with any immediate source of pleasure. The instinct by which this beetle chooses the material which is the proper nidus for its egg, the skill with which it works that material into a form suitable for the purpose, and the industry with which it then rolls it along the ground till a suitable position is attained—all these are a striking combination of the wonders of animal instinct, and conspicuous indication of the Spirit of wisdom and of knowledge which may well be conceived to be present in their work.

But although it is in this way easy to imagine how some forms of animal-worship may have had their origin in the first perception of what is really wonderful, and in the first admiration of what is really admirable, it is also very easy to see how, when once established, it would tend to rapid degradation. Wonder and reverence are not the only emotions which impel to worship. Fear, and even horror, especially when accompanied with any mystery in the objects of alarm, are emotions suggesting, perhaps, more than any, that low kind of worship which consists essentially in the idea of deprecation. Some hideous and destructive animals, such as the crocodile, may have become sacred objects neither on account of anything admirable in their instincts, nor on account of their destructiveness; but, on the contrary, because of being identified with an agency which is beneficent. To those who live in Egypt the Nile is the perennial source of every blessing necessary to life. An animal so characteristic of that great river may well have been chosen simply as the symbol of all that it was, and of all that it gave to men. There is no mystery, therefore, in the crocodile being held sacred in the worship of the God of Inundation. But there are other animals which have been widely invested with a sacred character, in respect to which no such explanation can be given. The worship of serpents has been attributed to conceptions of a very abstract character—with the circle, for example, into which they coil themselves, considered as an emblem of Eternity. But this is a conception far too transcendental and far-fetched to account either for the origin of this worship or for its wide extension in the world. Serpents are not the only natural objects which present circular forms. Nor is this attitude of their repose,

curious and remarkable though it be, the most striking peculiarity they present. They have been chosen, beyond any reasonable doubt, because of the horror and terror they inspire. For this, above all other creatures, they are prominent in Nature. For their deceptive coloring, for their insidious approach, for their deadly virus, they have been taken as the type of spiritual poison in the Jewish narrative of the Fall. The power of inflicting almost immediate death, which is possessed by the most venomous snakes, and that not by violence but by the infliction of a wound which in itself may be hardly visible, is a power which is indeed full of mystery even to the most cultivated scientific mind, and may well have inspired among men in early ages a desire to pacify the powers of evil. The moment this becomes the great aim and end of worship, a principle is established which is fertile in the development of every foul imagination. Whenever it is the absorbing motive and desire of men to do that which may most gratify or pacify malice, then it ceases to be at all wonderful that men should be driven by their religion to sacrifice the most horrid, and to practice the most unnatural.

But if we wish to see an illustration and an example of the power of all conceptions of a religious nature in the rapid evolution of unexpected consequences, we have such an example in the case of one man who has lived in our own time, and who still lives in the school which he has founded. I refer to Auguste Comte. It is well known that he denied the existence, or at least denied that we can have any knowledge of the existence, of such a Being as other men mean by God. Mr. John Stuart Mill has insisted with much earnestness and with much force that, in spite of this denial, Auguste Comte had a religion. He says it was a religion without a God. But the truth is, that it was a religion having both a creed and an ideal object of worship. That ideal object of worship was an abstract conception of the mind so definitely invested with personality that Comte himself gave to it the title of The Great Being (*Grand Etre*). The abstract conception thus personified was the abstract conception of Humanity—Man considered in his past, his present, and his future. Clearly this is an intellectual Fetish. It is not the worship of a Being known or believed to have any real existence; it is the worship of an idea shaped and molded by the mind, and then artificially clothed with the attributes of personality. It is the worship of an article manufactured by the imagination, just as Fetishism, in its strictest meaning is the worship of an article manufactured by the hand. Nor is it difficult to assign to it a place in the classification of religions in which a loose signification has been assigned to the term Fetishism. The worship of Humanity is merely one form of animal-worship. Indeed, Comte himself specially included the whole animal creation. It is the worship of the creature Man as the consummation of all other creatures, with all the marvels and all the unexhausted possibilities of his moral and intellectual nature. The worship of this creature may certainly be in the nature of a religion, as much higher than other forms of animal worship as Man is higher than a beetle, or an ibis, or a crocodile, or a serpent. But so also, on the other hand, it may be a religion as much lower than the worship of other animals, in proportion as man can be wicked and vicious in a sense in which the beasts cannot. Obviously, therefore, such a worship would be liable to special causes of degradation. We have seen it to be one of the great peculiarities of Man, as distinguished from the lower animals, that whilst they always obey and fulfill the highest law of their being, there is no similar perfect obedience in the case of Man. On the contrary, he often uses his special powers with such perverted ingenuity that they reduce him to a condition more miserable and more degraded than the condition of any beast. It follows that the worship of Humanity must, as a religion, be liable to corresponding degra-

ation. The philosopher, or the teacher, or the prophet who may first personify this abstract conception, and enshrine it as an object of worship, may have before him nothing but the highest aspects of human nature, and its highest aspirations. Mill has seen and has well expressed the limitations under which alone such a worship could have any good effect. "That the ennobling power of this grand conception may have its full efficacy, he should, with Comte, regard the *Grand Etre*, Humanity or Mankind, as composed in the past solely of those who, in every age and variety of position, have played their part worthily in life. It is only as thus restricted that the aggregate of our species becomes an object worthy our veneration."³ This, no doubt, was Comte's own idea. But how are his disciples and followers to be kept up to the same high standard of conception? Comte seems to have been personally a very high-minded and a very pure-minded man. His morality was austere, almost ascetic, and his spirit of devotion found delight in the spirit of the Christian Mystics. Yet even in his hands the development of his conceptions led him to results eminently irrational, although it cannot be said that they were ever degrading or impure. But we have only to consider how comparatively rare are the examples of the highest human excellence, and how common and prevailing are the vices and weakness of Humanity, to see how terrible would be the possibilities and the probabilities of corruption in a religion which had Man for the highest object of its worship. Nor is this all that is to be said on the inevitable tendency to degradation which must attend any worship of Humanity. Not only are the highest forms of human virtue rare, but even when they do occur, they are very apt to be rejected and despised of men. Power and strength, however vicious in its exercise, almost always receives the homage of the world. The human idols, therefore, who would be chosen as symbols in the worship of humanity, would often be those who set the very worst examples to their kind. Perhaps no better illustration of this could be found than the history of Napoleon Buonaparte. I think it is impossible to follow that history, as it is now known, without coming to the conclusion that in every sense of the word he was a bad man—unscrupulous, false, and mean. But his intellect was powerful, whilst his force and energy of character were tremendous. These qualities alone, exhibited in almost unexampled military success, were sufficient to make him the idol of many minds. And as mere success secured for him this place, so nothing but failure deprived him of it. Not a few of the chosen heroes of Humanity have been chosen for reasons but little better. Comte himself, seeing this danger, and with an exalted estimate and ideal of the character of womanhood, had laid it down that it would be best to select some woman as the symbol, if not the object, of private adoration in the worship of Humanity. The French Revolutionists selected a woman, too, and we know the kind of woman that they chose. It may be wise, perhaps, to set aside this famous episode in a fit of national insanity as nothing more than a profane joke; but the developments of anthropomorphism in the mythology of the Pagan world are a sufficient indication of the kind of worship which the worship of Humanity would certainly tend to be.

The result, then, of this analysis of that in which all Religion essentially consists, and of the objects which it selects, or imagines, or creates for worship, is to show that in Religion, above all other things, the processes of evolution are especially liable to work in the direction of degradation. That analysis shows how it is that in the domain of religious conceptions, even more than in any domain of thought, the work of development must be rapid, because, in the absence of revelation or the teachings of Authority, fancy and imagination have no guide and are under no restraint.

³ Mill's "Comte and Positivism," p. 136.

When, now, we pass from the phenomena which Religion presents in the present day to what we know of its phenomena in the earliest historic times, the conclusions we have reached receive abundant confirmation. Of the Origin of Religion, indeed, as we have already seen, history can tell us nothing, because, unless the Mosaic narrative be accepted, there is no history of the origin of Man. But the origin of particular systems of Religion does come within the domain of history, and the testimony it affords is always to the same effect. In regard to them we have the most positive evidence that they have been uniformly subject to degradation. All the great religions of the world which can be traced to the teaching or influence of individual men have steadily declined from the teaching of their founders. In India it has been one great business of Christian missionaries and of Christian governors, in their endeavors to put an end to cruel and barbarous customs, to prove to the corrupt disciples of an ancient creed that its first prophets or teachers had never held the doctrines from which such customs arise, or that these customs are a gross misconception and abuse of the doctrine which had been really taught. Whether we study what is now held by the disciples of Buddha, of Confucius, or of Zoroaster, it is the same result. Wherever we can arrive at the original teaching of the known founders of religious systems, we find that teaching uniformly higher, more spiritual than the teaching now. The same law has effected Christianity, with this difference only, that alone of all the historical religions of the world it has hitherto shown an unmistakable power of perennial revival and reform. But we know that the processes of corruption had begun their work even in the lifetime of the Apostles; and every church in Christendom will equally admit the general fact, although each of them will give a different illustration of it. Mohammedanism, which is the last and latest of the great historical religions of the world, shows a still more remarkable phenomena. The corruption in this case began not only in the lifetime but in the life of the prophet and founder of that religion. Mahomet was himself his own most corrupt disciple. In the earliest days of his mission he was best as a man and greatest as a teacher. His life was purer and his doctrine more spiritual when his voice was a solitary voice crying in the wilderness, than when it was joined in chorus by the voice of many millions. In his case the progress of development in a wrong direction was singularly distinct and very rapid. Nor is the cause obscure. The spirit of Mahomet may well have been in close communion with the Spirit of all truth, when, like St. Paul at Athens, his heart was stirred within him as he saw his Arabian countrymen wholly given to idolatry. Such deep impressions on some everlasting truth—such overpowering convictions—are in the nature of inspiration. The intimations it gives and the impulses it communicates are true in thought and righteous in motive, in exact proportion as the reflecting surfaces of the human mind are accurately set to the lights which stream from Nature. This is the adjustment which gives all their truthfulness to the intimations of the senses; which gives all its wisdom and foresight to the wonderful work of instinct; which gives all their validity to the processes of reason, which is the real source of all the achievements of genius; and which, on the highest level of all, has made some men the inspired mouthpiece of the oracles of God. But it is the tenderest of all adjustments—the most delicate, the most easily disturbed. When this adjustment is, as it were, mechanical, as it is in the lower animals, then we have the limited, but, within its own sphere, the perfect wisdom of the beasts. But when this adjustment is liable to distortion by the action of a Will which is to some extent self-determined and is also to a large extent degraded, then the real inspiration is not from without, but from within—then the reflecting surfaces of mind are so longer set true to the light of Nature; and then “if the light within us be darkness,

how great is that darkness!” Hence it is that one single mistake or misconception as to the nature and work of inspiration is, and must be a mistake of tremendous consequence. And this was Mahomet’s mistake. He thought that the source of his inspiration was direct, immediate, and personal. He thought that even the very words in which his own impulses were embodied were dictated by the Angel Gabriel. He thought that the Supreme Authority which spoke through him when he proclaimed that “the Lord God Almighty was one God, the Merciful, the Compassionate,” was the same which also spoke to him when he proclaimed that it was lawful for him to take his neighbor’s wife. From such an abounding well-spring of delusion the most bitter waters were sure to come. How different this idea of the methods in which the Divine Spirit operates upon the minds of men from the idea held on the same subject by that great Apostle of our Lord whose work it was to spread among the Gentile world those religious conceptions which had so long been the special heritage of one peculiar people! How cautious St. Paul is when expressing an opinion not directly sanctioned by an authority higher than his own! “I think also that I have the Spirit of God.” The injunction, “Try the spirits whether they be of God,” is one which never seems to have occurred to Mahomet. The consequences were what might have been expected. The utterances of his inspiration when he was hiding in the caves of Mecca were better, purer, higher than those which he continued to pour forth when, after his flight to Medina, he became a great conqueror and a great ruler. From the very first indeed he breathed the spirit of personal anger and malediction on all who disbelieved his message. This root of bitterness was present from the beginning. But its developments were indeed prodigious. It was the animating spirit of precepts without number which, in the minds and in the hands of his ruthless followers, have inflicted untold miseries for twelve hundred years on some of the fairest regions of the globe.

Passing now from the evidence of the law of corruption and decline which is afforded by this last and latest of the great historical religions of the world, we find the same evidence in those of a much older date. In the first place, all the founders of those religions were themselves nothing but reformers. In the second place the reforms they instituted have themselves all more or less again yielded to new developments of decay. The great prophets of the world have been men of inspiration or of genius who were revolted by the corruptions of some pre-existing system, and who desired to restore some older and purer faith. The form which their reformation took was generally determined, as all strong revolts are sure to be, by violent reaction against some prominent conception or some system of practice which seemed, as it were, an embodiment of its corruption. In this way only can we account for the peculiar direction taken by the teaching of that one great historical Religion which is said to have more disciples than any other in the world. Buddhism was in its origin a reform of Brahminism. In that system the beliefs of a much older and simpler age had become hid under the rubbish-heaps of a most corrupt development. Nowhere perhaps in the world had the work of evolution been richer in the growth of briars and thorns. It had forged the iron bonds of caste, one of the very worst inventions of an evil imagination; and it had degraded worship into a complicated system of sacrifice and of ceremonial observances. There seems to be no doubt that the teaching of the reformer Sakya Muni (Buddha) was a revolt and a reform. It was a reassertion of the paramount value of a life of righteousness. But the intellectual conceptions which are associated with this great ethical and spiritual reform had within themselves the germs of another cycle of decay.

(To be continued.)