

## THE SPIRIT OF PAGANISM

The antithesis between paganism and Christianity is usually resolved, in current opinion, into the theological antithesis between polytheism and monotheism. But a religious life means more than mere theology, and one has the right to ask oneself what is, in reality, the religious character of paganism.

Between polytheism and monotheism, the *enotheism* of Max Muller (and of F. W. J. Schelling) is not a mean term, and still less a moment of transition from one to the other, for the simple reason that it is situated on a different plane. In the fervour of prayer, under the impulse of devotion, the believer is so absorbed in the thought of the God he is adoring at that very moment—this is described as *enotheism*—that for him, at that moment, it is as if no other god existed. This will not prevent him, at another moment, from consecrating himself with equal fervour to the adoration of another god. The famous Egyptian hymn inspired by the religious ideas of Amenophis IV, and which invokes Aten, the Sun, as “sole God,” is just as far from true monotheism with its absolute negation of every divine being except the One, as are the Vedic hymns in which Indra is celebrated as the god “besides whom there are no others” (Rig-Veda, VI 21.10; cfr. I 81.5; 165.9; IV 30.1; VII 32.23).

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If we then extend the conception of paganism beyond the confines of the Greco-Roman world and its relations with Christianity, we find an Iranian polytheistic paganism which is opposed by the monotheistic religion of Zarathustra, and an Arab polytheistic paganism opposed by the monotheism of Islam. In the religious history of India, however, we see that, although the polytheistic Brahmanism is far more closely identified with paganism than is Buddhism, the latter is nevertheless not a monotheistic religion, and it does not deny the common divinities of the Vedic-brahmanistic tradition.

The historical connection between paganism and its supplanter, Christianity, accordingly transcends the historical connection between polytheism and monotheism. Polytheism is supplanted by monotheism, but paganism can also be supplanted by monotheism in a different and independent sense: once again we are faced with the proof that religion transcends theology.

The construction of a religious history of humanity in accordance with the line of development of the idea of God in the evolutionist thought of the nineteenth century was inadequate, both from the historical and the religious point of view. Polytheism and monotheism are not a succession of moments and necessary steps in a uniform and constant process of the human intellect; they are religious values. Monotheism is not the last term of an intellectual evolution, it is the fruit of a historically qualified religious revolution, which determines a new course for religious history. On its side, polytheism is not a theological error destined to be corrected once and for all by monotheism; it is a religious value which has been overcome, but not nullified, by monotheism, and which continues to live beside, and even in the bosom of, monotheism itself.

It is well known that the gods of Greco-Roman paganism did not entirely disappear with the advent of Christianity. This is not a question of the survival or revival of the pagan deities in figurative art, in poetry, and in general modern culture after the Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> What is of interest here is not constituted by the external values of the Greek and Roman deities, but by the religious values they continued, in one way or another, to represent even in the bosom of Christianity, and which, as a matter of fact, did not so much deny their existence as the quality of their gods. Incompatible as gods with the belief in an only God, they were not so as demons:

1. Cf. J. Seznec, *La survivance des dieux antiques*. Essay on the role of mythological tradition in Humanism and in the Art of the Renaissance (London, 1940), with the remarks of B. Croce, in *La Parola del Passato*, 1946, pp. 273–285. See also M. Simon, *Les Dieux antiques dans la pensée chrétienne* in *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 1954, pp. 97–113.

“omnes dii gentium daemonia.”<sup>2</sup> Jove, Venus, Mercury were for the ancient Christians not so much fantastic and fabulous figures as diabolical beings conquered and dethroned. The same treatment was given to the deities of the other pagan religions which Christianity encountered on its road of expansion in Europe and elsewhere. An ancient Gallic god, *Cernunnos*, the “Horned One,” kept his horns on being transformed into the Devil of the religious Masques and of the sacred iconography of the Middle Ages. An ancient Celtic god with three heads became at first the Devil, but was later used to represent the Christian Trinity. Traces of an analogous process are to be found in Germanic paganism.<sup>3</sup>

The same degradation from the divine plane can also be verified outside Christianity. This is the case with the gods of Iranian paganism in regard to the religion of Zarathustra. In the language of the *Avesta*, the word *daiva* means “demon”: but originally it had quite a different meaning, precisely that which the same word *deva* has in the Vedas (and that the word *deus* has in Latin), that is to say, “god.” This inversion of meaning is due to the advent of Zoroastrian monotheism, in which there was evidently no place for the *daevas* of the traditional religion side by side with the one God, Ahura Mazda, and therefore the ancient “gods” were renounced as such, and degraded to the condition of demons in the train of Ahriman, the Arch-Demon, the Anti-God, the principle of evil. When, later, some of them, such as the (Indo-)Iranian (Mitra-)Mithra, were later readmitted to Zoroastrianism, they were no longer considered or venerated as gods (*baga*), but simply as *yazata*, or “adorable,” in subordination to the one god Ahura Mazda.<sup>4</sup>

In any case, even in Buddhism the ancient pagan gods of the Brahmanic Vedism were retained, as we have pointed out, but they suffered a *de-minutio*, abandoning their transcendent position to be placed in the perpetual cycle of coming into being—as superior forms of existence, certainly—but subject to the universal law of pain, with no possibility of evasion other than that offered in the doctrine of the Buddha (“the monk superior to the gods”).

2. Augustin., *Enarrat. in Psalm. CXV (XCVI)*, 4–5: Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. XXXVII, p. 1231.

3. See my article: “The Pagan Origins of the Three-Headed Representation of the Christian Trinity,” in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 1946, pp. 135–151.

4. In the trilingual inscription of Xerxes the term *daiva* is rendered in the Accadian text by *limnu (ilāni)*, that is “the wicked (gods).” According to E. Herzfeld, “Xerxes’ Verbot des Daiva-Cultes,” in *Archeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, VIII (Berlin, 1937), 73 ff., the allusion is to the gods of the Iranian peoples of polytheistic religion not adhering to the monotheistic Zoroastrianism.

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With the transformation of the ancient gods into demons, in the context of Christianity, there is however an implicit religious estimation of paganism which, though later obscured in theological and lay thought, has never altogether disappeared and has been revived in our own day. We find it clearly formulated by a great Christian thinker, Gerardus van der Leeuw, as "The Reality of Heathendom," in *The Student World*, 1934, 292 ff. (here translated from the French version, published at the same time as the English version, in *Le Monde non-chrétien*).

In eloquent phrases, dictated by the strength of his feelings, van der Leeuw protests against the widespread opinion that the twilight and passing of paganism were facts of a purely intellectualistic order, "the victory of emancipated intelligence over error and stupidity." He decisively rejects the idea that the ancient gods were simply inventions and nothing more: "Neither the Israelites nor the Christians of Antiquity fell into this error. . . ." Paganism is not dead: "among the many things still living . . . in our epoch . . . we must count paganism." The pagan deities are still alive in their essential realities, even if their names evoke only shades. "To-day . . . it appears that we are surrounded by real powers, we affront them at every step, the power of blood and the power of death, the power of sex and the power of hunger, the power of the spoken word and the power of history, the power of the strong man and the power of power. . . . That the land which gave us birth is a power, Klages has declared to us in terms of a personal sensualism. . . . That death is a power, Freud has told us in a striking manner. . . ." It is not necessary that these powers should still be named Mars, Venus and Mercury. It is not necessary to go seeking for them, like the German neo-paganism, in the religious past of the Teutonic race. "The new paganism has still much to learn. But it exists, and its Gods exist. They have never died."

Paganism, then, is no passing moment in religious history, overcome once and for all in the West by the Christian religion. It is an immanent religious value, in perpetual antithesis to Christianity. What is its value? A negative one, in the opinion of van der Leeuw. "We shall not deny (we moderns, as did the ancient Christians) the existence of the pagan gods, on the contrary, we have to deal with them every day; but we know the commandment: Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them." The "real powers" of blood, of sex, of death, are no longer called by their ancient names, but they are always those same powers which, worshipped by the pagans, were an abomination to the Christians. In the same way

as the ancient gods, whose names were Mars, Venus and Mercury were demons, so to-day, the "real powers" of pervading paganism are demoniacal, dethroned by the true God, but always living and always insurgent in man, who, being a Christian, must not deny their existence, but must abjure and combat them in the daily and everlasting contest which is true Christian life.

Paganism is, accordingly, for van der Leeuw, a religious value, but negative. It is natural to ask: is there not in this religious conception of paganism a residue of theological thought? Is there really nothing in paganism that has a positive religious value? "We have above all to learn that the essential characteristic of Christianity is not a conception, true or false, of the divinity, but simply and solely obedience to the God of our life." But even paganism was a form of religious life; and which God, then, in paganism, was "the God of our life"?

Zeus, Ares, Hermes, Aphrodite could be nothing other than demons to the Christians. From the theological point of view, they soon became, for the Greeks themselves, figures that were worse than absurd. But from a religious point of view they had a positive value, above all in the form of civic deities. Their cult gave a religious expression to the life of the *polis*, with its hopes and fears, its triumphs and its defeats. The chief difference between paganism and Christianity lies not so much in the different way of conceiving "the God of our life," as in the different orientation of religious life. Christianity has its eyes fixed on the other world; life on this earth has no value, or has only the secondary and passing values of preparation and trial; it does not merit being lived, but rather being lost, so that the other life, which is eternal, may be gained. A religion of salvation, Christianity desires to save each individual man for the next world. Our world is subordinated to that higher world, the State is subordinated to the Church, the *res publica* to the *civitas Dei*.

In paganism, on the contrary, religious life is concerned chiefly with this world.<sup>5</sup> Pagan religion is principally cult, adoration in act, service rendered to the gods to receive from them in return the protection of the community. The salvation of the community, State, and nation, prevails above the salvation of individuals, and to them the individual must sacri-

5. With the exception of religions with secret mysterious rites of which I have recently written in: *Les Mystères grecs et les Religions mystériques de l'Antiquité*, in *Cahiers d'Histoire mondiale*, 1954.

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fice his own salvation. Thus even paganism is, in its own way, a religion of salvation and of sacrifice, although the object of value is of this world. Its emphasis on this world, which is the essential character of the pagan religion as compared with the other-worldliness of Christianity, is also its positive value, real and innate.

Paganism is not wholly demoniac. It is still alive in our day, not only in its negative "powers," but also in its real values. The religious life of the *polis*, the *res publica*, the State, did not stop with the advent of Christianity, but continued, assuming Christian forms when Christianity became the state religion. There was no place in Christian monotheism for the civic deities. But in the cult of the patron saints of the city, the country, the nation, monotheism continued to express in popular forms the religious life of these orders. The saints were once again "the successors of the gods." The religious history of the Middle Ages and of the modern age, on the political plane, with its centuries of struggle between Papacy and Empire, between State and Church, is for the most part, and under the common Christian regime, the history of the interferences and compromises between the religion of this world, with its pagan origins, and the religion of the other world announced by the Gospels. Laicism deluded itself by supposing it could win on the political plane by abdication in favour of the Church on the religious plane; but the French Revolution venerated France in the cult of the Goddess Reason.

In the East, paganism, as the religious expression of the State's national and political life, has lived and continues to live in our day, side by side with the more recently introduced supra-national religions of individual salvation. In Asia, Buddhism, like Christianity a religion of supra-national tendency, did not destroy, as Christianity had done in the West, the national religions of "pagan" type encountered in its path.<sup>6</sup> In China, the very ancient religious structure of the feudal and imperial state has lasted, in its Confucian systematization, up to our own times (at least until the advent of communism). In Japan, the traditional religion, Shintoism, with its pagan religious ideal of unconditional sacrifice for the native land and absolute devotion to the Sovereign, is still alive in the popular conscience, even after the defeat of the "Divine Sovereign" and the foreign occupation of the "Sacred Land." It is true that, towards the end of the last centu-

6. See the article "East and West" in my *Essays on the History of Religions* (Leiden, Brill, 1954).

ry, Shintoism was defined by the Japanese Government as a “non-religion.” This, however, merely served to exalt its religious value in the popular conscience, by preserving for it that obligatory character which it would have lost, had it remained on an equal footing with the other religions, which were declared optional in virtue of the equality of all cults proclaimed by the Japanese Constitution of 1889 following the example of the lay states of the West.<sup>7</sup>

7. R. Pettazzoni, *La Mitologia Giapponese*, Introduction (Bologna, 1929).