

RELIGIOUS RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT.*

[BY HERBERT SPENCER.]

Unlike the ordinary consciousness, the religious consciousness is concerned with that which lies beyond the sphere of sense. A brute thinks only of things which can be touched, seen, heard, tasted &c.; and the like is true of the untaught child, the deaf-mute, and the lowest savage. But the developing man has thoughts about existences which he regards as usually inaudible, intangible, invisible; and yet which he regards as operative upon him. What suggests this notion of agencies transcending perception? How do these ideas concerning the supernatural evolve out of ideas concerning the natural? The transition cannot be sudden; and an account of the genesis of religion must begin by describing the steps through which the transition takes place.

The ghost-theory exhibits these steps quite clearly. We are shown that the mental differentiation of invisible and intangible beings from visible and tangible beings progresses slowly and unobtrusively. In the fact that the other-self, supposed to wander in dreams, is believed to have actually done and seen whatever was dreamed—in the fact that the other-self when going away at death, but expected presently to return, is conceived as a double equally material with the original; we see that the supernatural agent in its primitive form diverges very little from the natural agent—is simply the original man with some added powers of going about secretly and doing good or evil. And the fact that when the double of the dead man ceases to be dreamed about by those who knew him, his non-appearance in dreams is held to imply that he is finally dead, shows that these earliest supernatural agents have but a temporary existence; the first tendencies to a permanent consciousness of the supernatural, prove abortive.

In many cases no higher degree of differentiation is reached. The ghost-population, recruited by deaths on the one side, but on the other side losing its members as they cease to be recollected and dreamed about, does not increase; and no individuals included in it come to be recognised through successive generations as established supernatural powers. Thus the Unkulunkulu, or old-old one, of the Zulus, the father of the race, is regarded as finally or completely dead; and there is propitiation only of ghosts of more recent date. But where circumstances favor the continuance of sacrifices at graves witnessed by members of each new generation who are told about the dead and transmit the tradition, there eventually arises the conception of a permanently existing ghost or spirit. A more marked contrast in thought between supernatural beings and natural beings is thus established. There simultaneously results a great increase in the number of these supposed supernatural beings, since the aggregate of them is now continually added to; and there is a strengthening tendency to think of them as everywhere around, and as causing all unusual occurrences.

Differences among the ascribed powers of ghosts soon arise. They naturally follow from the observed differences among the powers of the living individuals. Hence it results that while the propitiations of ordinary ghosts are made only by their descendants, it comes occasionally to be thought prudent to propitiate also the ghosts of the more dreaded individuals, even though they have no claims of blood. Quite early there thus begin those grades of supernatural beings which eventually become so strongly marked.

Habitual wars, which more than all other causes initiate these first differentiations, go on to initiate further and more decided ones. For with these compoundings of small social aggregates into greater ones, and re-compounding of these into still greater, which war effects, there, of course, with the multiplying gradations of power among living men, arises the conception of multiplying gradations of power among their ghosts. Thus in course of time are formed the conceptions of the great ghosts or gods, the more numerous secondary ghosts or demi-gods, and so on downwards—a pantheon: there being still, however, no essential distinction of kind; as we see in the calling of ordinary ghosts *manes*-gods by the Romans and *elohim* by the Hebrews. Moreover, repeating as the other life in the other world does, the life in this world, in its needs, occupations, and social organisation, there arises not only a differentiation of grades among supernatural beings in respect of their powers, but also in respect of their characters and kinds of activity. There come to be local gods, and gods reigning over this or that order of phenomena; there come to be good and evil spirits of various qualities, and where there has been by conquest a superposing of societies one upon another, each having its own system of ghost-derived beliefs, there results an involved combination of such beliefs, constituting a mythology.

Of course ghosts primarily being double-like the originals in all things; and gods (when not the living members of a conquering race) being doubles of the more powerful men; it results that they, too, are originally no less human than ordinary ghosts in their physical characters, their passions, and their intelligences. Like the doubles of the ordinary dead, they are supposed to consume the flesh, blood, bread, wine, given to them; at first literally, and later in a more spiritual way by consuming the essences of them. They not only appear as visible and tangible persons, but they enter into conflicts with men, are wounded, suffer pain; the sole distinction being that they have miraculous powers of healing and consequent immortality. Here, indeed, there needs a qualification; for not only do various peoples hold that the gods die a first death (as naturally happens where they are the members of a conquering race, called gods because of their superiority), but, as in the case of Pan, it is supposed, even among the cultured, that there is a second and final death of a god, like that second and final death of a ghost supposed among existing savages. With advancing civilisation the divergence of the supernatural being from the natural being becomes more decided.

There is nothing to check the gradual de-materialization of the ghost and of the god; and this de-materialization is insensibly furthered in the effort to reach consistent ideas of supernatural action: the god ceases to be tangible, and later he ceases to be visible or audible. Along with differentiation of physical attributes from those of humanity, there goes on more slowly the differentiation of mental attributes. The god of the savage, represented as having intelligence scarcely if at all greater than that of the living man, is deluded with ease. Even the gods of the semi-civilised are deceived, make mistakes, repent of their plans; and only in course of time does there arise the conception of unlimited vision and universal knowledge. The emotional nature simultaneously undergoes a parallel transformation. The grosser passions, originally conspicuous and carefully ministered to by devotees, gradually fade, leaving the passions less related to corporeal satisfactions; and eventually these, too, become partially de-humanized.

These ascribed characters of deities are continually adapted and re-adapted to the needs of the social state. During the militant phase of activity, the chief god is conceived as holding in subordination the greatest crime, as implacable in anger, as merciless in punishment; and any alleged attributes of a milder kind occupy but small space in the social consciousness. But where militancy declines and the harsh despotic form of government appropriate to it is gradually qualified by the form appropriate to industrialism, the foreground of the religious consciousness is increasingly filled with those ascribed traits of the divine nature which are congruous with the ethics of peace: divine love, divine forgiveness, divine mercy, are now the characteristics enlarged upon.

To perceive clearly the effects of mental progress and changing social life, thus stated in the abstract, we must glance at them in the concrete. If, without foregone conclusions, we contemplate the traditions, records, and monuments of the Egyptians, we see that out of their primitive ideas of gods, brute or human, there were evolved spiritualised ideas of gods, and finally of a god; until the priesthoods of later times, repudiating the earlier ideas, described them as corruptions: being swayed by the universal tendency to regard the first state as the highest—a tendency traceable down to the theories of existing theologians and mythologists. Again, if putting aside speculations, and not asking what historical value the "Hail" may have, we take it simply as indicating the early Greek notion of Zeus, and compare this with the notion contained in the Platonic dialogues, we see that Greek civilisation had greatly modified (in the better minds, at least) the purely anthropomorphic conception of him: the lower human attributes being dropped and the higher ones transfigured. Similarly, if we contrast the Hebrew God described in primitive traditions, manlike in appearance, appetites, and emotions, with the Hebrew God as characterised by the prophets, there is shown a widening range of power along with a nature increasingly remote from that of man. And on passing to the conceptions of him which are now entertained, we are made aware of an extreme transfiguration. By a convenient obliviousness a deity who in early times is represented as hardening men's hearts so that they may commit punishable acts, and as employing a lying spirit to deceive them, comes to be mostly thought of as an embodiment of virtues transcending the highest we can imagine.

Thus, recognising the fact that in the primitive human mind there exists neither religious idea nor religious sentiment, we find that in the course of social evolution and the evolution of intelligence accompanying it, there are generated both the ideas and sentiments which we distinguish as religious; and that through a process of causation clearly traceable, they traverse those stages which have brought them, among civilised races, to their present forms.

And now what may we infer will be the evolution of religious ideas and sentiments throughout the future? On the one hand, it is irrational to suppose that the changes which have brought the religious consciousness to its present form will suddenly cease. On the other hand, it is irrational to suppose that the religious consciousness, naturally generated as we have seen, will disappear and leave an unfilled gap. Manifestly it must undergo further changes; and however much changed it must continue to exist. What then are transformations to be expected? If we reduce the process above delineated to its lowest terms, we shall see our way to an answer.

As pointed out in "First Principles," section 96, Evolution is throughout its course habitually modified by that Dissolution which eventually undoes it: the changes which become manifest being usually but the differential results of opposing tendencies towards integration and disintegration. Rightly to understand the genesis and decay of religious systems, and the probable future of those now existing, we must take this truth into account. During these earlier changes by which there is created a hierarchy of gods, demi-gods, manes-gods, and spirits of various kinds and ranks, Evolution goes on with but little qualification. The consolidated mythology produced, while growing in the mass of supernatural beings composing it, assumes increased definiteness in the arrangement of its parts and the attributes of its members. But the antagonist Dissolution eventually gains predominance. The spreading recognition of natural causation conflicts with this mythological evolution, and insensibly weakens those of its beliefs which are most at variance with advancing knowledge. Demons and the secondary divinities presiding over divisions of Nature, become less thought of as the phenomena ascribed to them are more commonly observed to follow a constant order; and hence these minor components of the mythology slowly dissolve away. At the same time, with growing supremacy of the great god heading hierarchy, there goes increasing ascription to him of actions which were before distributed among numerous supernatural beings; there is integration of power. While in proportion as there arises the consequent conception of an omnipotent and omnipresent deity, there is a gradual fading of his alleged human attributes; dissolution begins to affect the supreme personality in respect of ascribed form and nature.

Already, as we have seen, this process in the more advanced societies, and especially among their higher members, gone to the

* This article will eventually form the closing chapter of "Etiological Institutions," Part VI. of "The Principles of Sociology." The statements concerning matters of fact in the last part of it are based on the contents of preceding chapters. Evidence for nearly all of them, however, may also be found in Part I. of "The Principles of Sociology," already published.