

THE ORIGINS OF RELIGION

Rafael Karsten

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RAFAEL KARSTEN

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THE
ORIGINS OF
RELIGION

BY
RAFAEL KARSTEN



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PREFACE

THIS work on the early history of religion, although comparatively limited as to size, is the result of studies carried on for many years, founded partly on literary sources, partly on my own field research. The views therein expressed have consequently not been written down hastily, but after mature consideration of the many and difficult problems presented by primitive religion. In spite of my criticism of certain ethnological schools and theories of the subject, I have tried to do them justice by citing their evidence as fully as space permitted. I therefore venture to hope that my work, apart from the interest it may awaken in scientists in this field, may also claim a *raison d'être* as a handbook for beginners.

HELSINGFORS, *March*, 1935.

R. K.



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INTRODUCTION

THE modern science of Comparative Religion has, from the start, paid particular attention to the problem of the origin of the belief in a supernatural world and the religion of so-called "primitive" peoples. So many works, in fact, have been written on the "origin of religion" or "primitive religion" that one who ventures to add to their number needs to state specially his reason for such an undertaking. For my part I should say that being new, the science of comparative religion is naturally making rapid progress, and fresh facts likely to throw light on religious phenomena at the lower stages of culture are constantly being presented. It is natural, therefore, that our views on the subject should change in proportion as our insight into its essential elements grows, many older theories proving untenable and new hypotheses forcing themselves upon us.

In this book, of course, many facts familiar through earlier works on the subject are adduced, but in addition much new material is presented which may give it some value independent of the theories set forth. Most of this new material is collected from two very different areas. One is South America, where I travelled for six years studying the religious beliefs and customs of several Indian tribes representing different stages of culture. The other is the Finno-Ugrian area, where Finnish and Russian ethnologists have been at work in the last decades and in former times, bringing to light a body of facts which form a valuable addition to our knowledge about religious life at an early stage of evolution. These new facts, however, are known only imperfectly to international science, being written to a great extent in languages not generally understood in Europe. In view of these new facts, and specially of those collected by myself among the South American Indians or from little-known books on them, I have, in many cases, reached conclusions on controversial questions which differ considerably

from those of other scientists. At the same time, I am quite aware of the difficulty of general conclusions of any real validity in regard to so vast and complicated a subject as primitive religion.

A few words may be said as to the sources from which our knowledge of religion at an early stage of development is derived, and the method I have applied to my own study of the subject. The sources are varied, and opinion differs as to the value to be attributed to them. When the Science of Religion arose in the middle of last century, philology was one of its most important assistant sciences. The epoch-making discoveries within the culture history of many peoples of archaic culture in the beginning and middle of the last century naturally influenced the study of primitive and non-Christian religions. Indiology and the study of the Avesta, Assyriology, and Egyptology became fashionable sciences and gave rise, at first to comparative philology, and soon after, owing to the contents of the sacred books, to the comparative science of religion.

It was easy to find that the various religions, however much they differed from each other in particulars, had essential elements in common and consequently could be compared. We no longer hope to be able to trace in any of these sacred books—in the Veda for instance, as did Max Müller—the beginnings of religion. “Primitive” traits, if any, appear only as survivals from still earlier times in the history of the peoples that created them. There can, however, be no difference of opinion about the highly valuable material they afford for the study of religious phenomena at earlier stages of religious evolution. The records of certain classical writers like Herodotos, Strabo, Pausanias, Varro, Cæsar, Tacitus, Plutarchos, and others, relating to the religious ideas and practices of the ancient oriental peoples, the Greeks, Romans, Teutons, Celts, etc., have a similar value, and more attention is now paid to them than formerly.

The most important material, however, which modern Comparative Religion has at its disposal and makes use of when trying to solve its problems is derived from a wholly different source, that of ethnology. The results achieved in this field during the last decades, or rather since the middle and end of the last century, are well known and account for the unusual

activity evident at present among students of the science of religion. The material which ethnology has brought to light concerning the religious ideas and superstitions, and the rites and ceremonies of so-called primitive peoples in different parts of the world, is so vast that it is almost impossible for one person to master it completely. There is much controversy, however, as to the valuation of this material and the interpretation of the ethnological facts. Above all, to what extent can they throw light on the problem of the origin of religion? This is an important methodological question with which I shall presently deal in stating my own position.

The comparative method which the Science of Religion applies to religious phenomena implies that between these phenomena there are not only dissimilarities but also essential similarities, thus enabling them to be compared. The phenomena are classified into groups according to their characteristics. From these, certain general laws are deduced with supposed validity for religion at large.

A method of this kind, of course, is founded on the assumption that peoples now existing in various parts of the world are, in spite of racial differences, and different geographical and social milieus, identical in regard to their psychical character. Owing to the uniformity of the human intellect, the religious thoughts of primitive peoples will necessarily tend in the same direction, independently of possible culture-contact. The history of religion shows numerous instances of such "elemental ideas", or *Elementargedanken*, to use a term introduced by the German ethnologist A. Bastian. To these belong, undoubtedly, the whole primitive "philosophy" called *animism* and the system of primitive ideas constituted by so-called *magic*.

On the other hand, it is a fact that ideas, customs, and institutions can be transmitted from one people to another through historical contact. Many myths, it has been shown, were diffused from one land to another, thus explaining the fact that they exist in much the same form among peoples who geographically, and even racially, were widely separated. We are confronted here with one of the leading controversial questions in social anthropology to-day, and in regard to which the methods of different ethnological schools are at great variance: natural evolution or cultural diffusion?

The evolutionary school, founded by Darwin himself and in anthropology proper by such men as Herbert Spencer, Lewis Morgan, Letourneau, E. B. Tylor, Lord Avebury, and others, has, without denying the possibility of culture-contact, started from the assumption that uniformity in customs and beliefs among different savage peoples must be explained chiefly by the uniformity of the less developed human mind itself. It regards the high culture, characteristic of the civilized peoples of our day, as the result of a slow progressive evolution through different stages of savagery and barbarism.

An entirely different view is taken by a school of ethnologists, represented in England notably by W. H. R. Rivers, and in the German scientific world by Frobenius, Graebner, and Father W. Schmidt and his pupils. They lay special stress on cultural diffusion, even going so far as to regard the analysis of cultural relations as the first and true task of ethnology. [1] The advocates of this school are generally little inclined to admit the possibility of an independent origin for customs and ideas. In conformity with this view, they are averse on principle to all "psychological" explanations of religious and social phenomena.

The evolutionary school, which, to quote E. B. Tylor, treats "the history of mankind as part of the history of nature", and applies to the study of man the same method as is used in natural science, at present has its most decided opponent in the Catholic school of ethnologists represented by Father Schmidt and his adherents. Father Schmidt is also the most fervid advocate of the theory of "culture centre" (*Kultur-kreislehre*) as set forth by the Culture History school. This theory is open to so many objections that there is no need to deal with it at length.

It is interesting to note, however, that, in spite of the indefatigable energy with which Father Schmidt, both in his special review *Anthropos* and in his works, combats the theory of cultural evolution (*der Evolutionismus*), there is more agreement between the two schools than one might at first think. The latter speaks of low and more advanced "stages" of evolution, the culture-history school of different *Kulturstufen* which have followed each other historically and are still represented in the "culture centres" distinguishable among the different races of mankind. It may be that even the evolutionary

theory is too schematic and not wholly in touch with reality in outlining the regular and straightforward development of culture through different stages; but, in its mania for systematizing and its arbitrary historical reconstructions, the culture-history school of ethnology certainly outdoes all others.

It is not enough that in such widely separated parts of the world as Oceania and South America much about the same different "*Stufen*" of culture are distinguished; every "stage" in one part of the world has its almost exact equivalent in a similar stage in another. Thus the "Urkultur" or Tasmanian culture in Oceania answers exactly to the primitive culture which in South America, according to Father Schmidt, is represented chiefly by such peoples as the Fuegians, the Botocudos, and certain Chaco tribes, and in Africa in the pygmies of equatorial Africa, the Bushmen, and so on. Moreover, each of these particular types of culture is characterized by a certain social status and by certain peculiarities, exactly indicated, within the sphere of material and intellectual culture. Now in the first place it may be greatly doubted whether we are entitled to speak of any "Urkultur" at all in regard to the savages of to-day; but this is a question to which I shall return in the next chapter.

I want particularly in the present connection to draw attention to the arbitrary way in which the said school of ethnologists distinguishes different strata of culture and classifies savage tribes, widely separated from one another in time and space, as belonging to one and the same "culture centre". In South America, for instance, neither the Fuegians nor the Chaco tribes are more "primitive" than most other South American tribes. On the contrary, the Fuegians, who, as is well known, have been under European and Christian influence for many decades, must be classified decidedly among the higher of those South American tribes still supposed to be living in a natural state. The beehive-shaped huts, for instance, which are used both in the Chaco and in Tierra del Fuego, need not necessarily be taken as exponents of their generally low level of culture. In the Chaco, at any rate, they must be explained wholly by natural conditions. It is simply the form of hut which can be most easily constructed of the material these tribes have at their disposal. [2]

One of the most obvious mistakes of the so-called culture-

history school of ethnology, particularly as represented by Father Schmidt, is its failure to realize the highly differentiating influence exerted by racial peculiarities and purely natural conditions, such as climate, on the customs and institutions of uncivilized peoples. Another fundamental mistake is the tendency to connect arbitrarily widely different culture elements which have nothing essential in common and the co-existence of which among one and the same people is evidently merely accidental. One may well question, for example, what such culture traits as conical-shaped huts, dug-outs, spear-throwers, bark girdles, penis-envelopes, platform-burial, paternal system of descent, totemism, and sun-mythology, which according to Father Schmidt form the chief characteristics of the "totemic culture" in the whole world, have fundamentally in common that justify our grouping them together in this way. [3]

The lower races can certainly be compared, in a general way, in regard to ideas and customs, but we cannot, even in the same part of the world, graduate them so as to form a definite scale of cultures. All attempts, therefore, to classify them according to abstract schemes such as that hinted at above are doomed to failure. Owing to geographical conditions or other causes, a tribe may stand very low in its material culture, such as the Fuegians and the Australian aborigines. Intellectually and in regard to social development they may, on the other hand, occupy a comparatively high stage of culture like the same "primitive" natives. Under such circumstances their cultural classification must needs be extremely difficult.

When the culture-history school regards the ethnological analysis of culture phenomena as the chief task of the history of civilization and denies the possibility or importance of a psychological explanation, this is another of the school's equally obvious exaggerations. W. H. R. Rivers, the radical representative of this tendency of thought in England, pointed out that savage peoples in general are not able to assign the reason for practising a certain custom and that, as a rule, an ethnologist will inquire in vain about the motives for their actions. [4] This assertion does not hold true of all savage peoples, particularly not, I believe, of those peoples who have preserved their own native culture, while remaining comparatively

free from external influence. Thus, in South America, I was struck by the accuracy with which many independent tribes were able to account for the ideas underlying their religious and magical practices. During my investigations I also came to realize the importance of obtaining the explanation from the Indians themselves. Otherwise many of their customs would have remained either unintelligible or open to misunderstanding. Who, for instance, could understand the peculiar rules of *fasting* observed by the Jibaro Indians, and of which some instances will be given below, unless the curious line of thought upon which they are founded were indicated exactly by themselves?

The existence of elemental ideas, i.e. ideas which are due to the uniformity of the mental constitution of men, is an indisputable fact. From this it follows that there are many culture-phenomena which, although appearing in the same form among different peoples, may still have an independent origin and development. On the other hand, it is an equally indisputable fact that the various human races have borrowed from each other many of their beliefs, customs, arts, and crafts. The sociologist and historian of religion should therefore always be on his guard against hasty conclusions in one direction or another. If we may say, therefore, that the chief task of sociology and the science of religion is the same as that of every science, namely, to explain the facts with which it is concerned, we may add that inquiry into the possible wanderings of culture-phenomena is another task which ought never to be left entirely out of sight. Here we have two scientific methods which supplement each other but which cannot replace each other. I completely agree with Dr. Westermarck when he points out that "even when the historical connection between customs found among different peoples has been well established, the real origin of the custom has not been explained thereby. It is not a sufficient explanation of a custom to say that it has been derived from ancestors or borrowed from neighbours; this only raises the question of how it originated among those who first practised it; for a custom must have a beginning." [5]

For my part, I should add that the ease with which culture-phenomena are transmitted from one people to another may vary greatly. Myths and legends, for instance, evidently have

more tendency to "wander" and are more easily borrowed than fundamental religious ideas and complicated rites. This is due to the conservative character of religion in general and particularly of religious cult. The consequence is that, within this department of custom and thought, peoples are less liable to external influence than in many others. Besides which, peoples cannot "borrow" elements of a cult from each other unless they are psychologically qualified for such borrowings.

The comparative method in the study of religion should be applied with due caution. Two religious phenomena which are outwardly similar may, in spite of this similarity, be quite different in nature and due to different causes. Induction in regard to a certain idea or a certain custom ought to be as complete as possible. Above all, great caution is necessary when we come to draw general conclusions about peoples who belong to entirely different races, or to widely separated geographical milieus, or who represent quite different stages of culture. The authorities and sources from which our material is derived ought to be carefully scrutinized. In all these respects serious faults have been committed in comparative sociology and the science of religion. This is the chief reason why the results have so often proved doubtful and been so short-lived. It is astonishing, for instance, to find what little pains theoretical scholars have taken in this field to establish the reliability of the statements upon which they founded their theories, these often touching religious problems of fundamental importance. Popular books published by passing travellers and collectors of ethnographic curiosities, who have stayed among a tribe for a few days or weeks, seem to be considered equally reliable as ethnological sources as monographs written by trained ethnologists or missionaries who have lived among a people for years, perhaps for decades.

It is this uncritical use of literary sources with their resultant generalizations which is responsible for the unsatisfactory character of most of the older comparative works on the religion, customs, and institutions of the lower peoples. In this particular respect a new treatment of sociology and the science of religion is necessary. Even when he deals with the lower religions, the historian of religion should adopt just as critical an attitude towards the documents he uses as the profane historian.

We cannot meet this objection by saying, as does one modern sociologist, that "it is often simply impossible for the most carefully scrutinizing critic to decide whether a certain statement is accurate or not, and it may even be difficult to form a just idea of the general trustworthiness of an ethnographical author." [6] This may be so in some cases, just as there may be different opinions as to the trustworthiness of an historic document, but in the majority of cases it does not hold true. If we really had no means of distinguishing between falsehood and truth in regard to ethnological sources, we should have to admit that the results arrived at in comparative anthropological works are more or less illusory. We can usually discover, at any rate, how long the author in question stayed among the people he describes, whether he learnt the language or not, whether he acquired his information through interpreters or founded his statements on personal observation, whether he was particularly trained for studies of this kind or not, and so forth. It is not difficult, even after a superficial glance at the literature used in many comparative works on the customs of the lower races, to establish that at least fifty per cent of the authors quoted were not qualified to give trustworthy information about the peoples with whom they dealt, and that, from a scientific point of view, their works are consequently valueless.

A wholesome reaction, therefore, is at present noticeable against the sociological method in so far as it aims at an indiscriminate and too general a comparative study of the lower races in the entire world. The opinion is gaining more and more ground that the study of religious and social phenomena should be limited at first to definite groups of related tribes or definite culture areas, in regard to which the ethnologist is able to proceed with greater care and thoroughness, and particularly to apply more criticism to the sources used. Not until a great number of careful and detailed monographs on definite classes of social and religious phenomena from different parts of the world lie before us should we proceed to write general comparative works. [7]

As far as religion is concerned, we are at present, it seems to me, in a better position when aiming at a synthesis than when dealing with purely sociological phenomena. Excellent monographs on the religious ideas and customs of the lower races in different parts of the world already exist. These, in addition to

monographs on the religions of archaic peoples, may make it possible for us to state the general traits of religious evolution at the earlier stages of culture. Be this as it may, attempts of this kind are not without interest and importance, since they give us a survey of the many difficult problems put before us by the comparative science of religion and of the tentative efforts to solve them.

PRIMITIVE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

CHAPTER I

THEORIES OF THE ORIGIN OF RELIGION

THE word "primitive", so frequently used by the modern sciences of religion and sociology, can be taken in two different senses. Partly it can be taken to signify what, in a strictly chronological sense, is original and primary; partly, in a more general sense, it may be taken to signify what, as regards its *structure*, is primordial and imperfect. In the first case, the problem of primitive religion is the same as the problem of the *origin* of religion: in the latter, we are concerned only with that form of religion which is the lowest known to us historically, above all the one represented by the lowest uncivilized peoples existing at present. It will soon be seen that, in this book, in this latter sense particularly, I use the word "primitive". It may be that the rudimentary religious thought found among many backward peoples of to-day comes relatively near that stage of religion attained by our human ancestors, but nothing entitles us to assert that there still exist primitive tribes which have remained intellectually at this primary stage of culture. Practically, however, it is difficult to keep the two senses wholly apart, and the problem of the origin of religion is of such great historical interest that we need to pay some attention to the theories set forth at different epochs on the subject.

Science will never be able to trace, with absolute certainty, the first beginnings of human culture, still less the first beginning of the belief in a supernatural world, characteristic, as far as we know, of all human races which exist or have ever existed. In dealing with this problem we merely use hypotheses of greater or less probability. We cannot follow the history of religion down to its origin. We do not know when the being which first deserved the name of *man* appeared on the earth. About his intellectual, as well as his physical condition, we can form an opinion only by way of deductions or conclusions *ex analogia*.

The extreme difficulty or even insolubility of the problem, however, has not always been realized by the representatives of the science of religion. We need not speak of that epoch, not so far removed, when the Old Testament was regarded as an infallible authority on the early history of man, with the result that the first form of religion was supposed to have been a clear, although simple, belief in one single god, a belief which later degenerated into polytheism and demonism. This theory is still of interest inasmuch as, in a modified form, it has frequently been renewed by scholars apparently founding it on a more scientific basis.

At the end of the last century, several prominent historians of religion believed that, in the religious history of the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, and Indians they had found traces of a "primary monotheism", which later had more or less disappeared. Max Müller rejected the theory of an original monotheism in the Veda religion, but his own theory on "henotheism" reflects the same romantic spirit conspicuous in many of his contemporaries.

Like monotheism, henotheism is only conceivable if we assume in primeval times a comparatively high standard of culture prevailed among mankind, and that this later fell into decay, producing fetishism, demonism, and other lower forms of religion and superstition. According to this view, the state of savagery and barbarism in which many uncultured peoples live at present is not a primary but a secondary phenomenon, the result of a degeneration of culture. This is the old theory of degeneration as contrasted with the modern theory of progress supported by the scientists of the evolutionary school.

The same general view of the development of human culture at the lower stages, namely, that on essential points there has been a movement backward and not forward in civilization, from higher forms to lower, underlies certain other theories which assume a relatively high standard of religious thought in primeval times. Such was the case, for instance, with the theory which Robertson Smith set forth at the end of last century in his well-known work on the religion of the Semites, and, according to which, totemism was the original form of religion. Totemism, it should be understood, as conceived by Robertson Smith, was, in fact, a low form of monotheism, a monotheism which had not been limited to the Semitic peoples but had marked a

universal religious stage. In conformity with his theory, this orientalist and the school he founded contended that degeneration on the whole had been more characteristic of human cultural development than progression. This view, for instance, is strongly set forth by E. B. Jevons in his *Introduction to the History of Religion*.

Early in this century the old theory of primary monotheism and the degeneration theory upon which it is based were revived by Andrew Lang. It is chiefly due to his influence that it has advocates among ethnologists even to-day. Andrew Lang apparently gave it a firmer foundation by supporting it with ethnological arguments. His theory of a monotheism among the lower races of mankind which is a survival from primitive times has, in its turn, been revived by the Catholic ethnologist Father Schmidt. In a special chapter I propose to deal with the Supreme Beings of primitive peoples and examine the main arguments adduced in support of the theory about a primary monotheism by Father Schmidt and his pupils.

No theory of human culture, however much it may emphasize the progress made by man in his long history from primitive times to our days, can deny that this history also gives evidence of cases of degeneration. Just as the degradation theory recognizes progression, so of course the progression theory recognizes degeneration as a powerful influence affecting the course of culture. Realizing the truth that human culture has known both advance and retreat, we also acknowledge the necessity of using the word "evolution" with due caution. And, with equally great caution, we ought to use the word "primitive" when applied to low savage races of our own days.

Obviously, the word has been much misused, especially by anthropologists of the evolutionary school. No savage tribe exists whose mental and cultural state would answer even approximately to that of "primeval" man. Even the rudest savage tribes of to-day have a long history behind them. It is impossible to assume that during the hundreds of thousands of years of their existence they have remained entirely unaltered. The very art of making fire which has been known to all historic peoples, but which must have been unknown to our first human ancestors, has pushed the former far in advance of the latter. If romantic thinkers such as Rousseau and his modern epigones, among them in a certain sense Andrew Lang, have unduly

idealized savage man and uncultured human society, on the other hand there has frequently appeared, especially among evolutionists, a contrary tendency, namely, to exaggerate unduly his primitive nature. In this respect it is characteristic that Darwin himself regarded the Fuegians, whom he met during his voyage round the world, as a people standing so extremely low in culture that ever since they have been classified among the most backward known primitive races. I have already pointed out that this opinion must be considered erroneous. I may add that, whereas their language, for instance, was regarded by Darwin as half animal-like and not even as articulate, the English missionary Thomas Bridges, a few decades later, noted down in this same language a vocabulary of no less than 32,000 words.

However, we have also seen that the error of taking low savage tribes of to-day as representing "primeval" man in their general state of culture has by no means been limited to extreme "evolutionists". A school, diametrically opposed to that of Darwin, the German culture-history school of ethnology, adheres dogmatically to the same view, referring the Fuegians, together with certain other low races, to an imaginary *Urkultur*. Other anthropologists, although they have not accepted the theory of culture centres, have nevertheless shown a marked tendency to exaggerate the primitiveness of certain modern savages, presumably occupying the lowest stages of cultural development, such as the Australian aborigines, and have built upon this supposed fact general theories about the beginnings of culture among mankind at large.

On this point it is sufficient to bring to mind that it is on Australian evidence chiefly that Sir James Frazer founded his well-known theory according to which, in the evolution of human thought, the stage of religion was preceded by an earlier stage of magic. [1] Similarly, the Melanesians have been regarded as so extremely primitive a race that a whole school of anthropologists likewise do not shrink from bold generalizations, have seen in their idea of *mana* a notion still earlier in the history of religious thought than animism itself.

By emphasizing the fact that there are no longer any "primitive" races of men nor any "Urkultur" in the strict sense of the word, we do not, on the other hand, imply that we must give up the method hitherto followed by modern anthropology, in so far as it uses ethnology as its chief assistant science. The

modern savage does not reflect the mental and cultural state of early man to the extent dogmatically assumed; but, on the other hand, he must by no means be looked upon as a degenerate descendant of ancestors standing comparatively high in culture.

E. B. Tylor, always cautious in his judgments, has expressed the view which may still, I think, on the whole be upheld. "By comparing the various stages of civilization among races known to history, with the aid of archaeological inference from the remains of prehistoric tribes, it seems possible," he says, "to judge in a rough way of an early general condition of man, which from our point of view is to be regarded as a primitive condition, whatever yet earlier state may in reality have lain behind it. This hypothetical primitive condition corresponds in a considerable degree to that of modern savage tribes, who, in spite of their difference and distance, have in common certain elements of civilization, which seem remains of an early state of the human race at large. If this hypothesis be true, then, notwithstanding the continual interruptions due to degeneration, the main tendency of culture from primeval up to modern times has been from savagery towards civilization." [2]

The relative stagnancy, which is always characteristic of the culture of savage peoples and forms a contrast to the activity and development appearing in all departments of the social life of civilized peoples, entitles us to assume that the former, in spite of all possible cases of degeneration, are nearer the origins of cultural evolution than the latter. This assumption, as pointed out even by Tylor, is confirmed by all our knowledge of the early history of mankind.

On this point prehistoric archaeology supports ethnology in a most valuable way. By no means has archaeology brought to light any evidence which would show that, in earliest times, a comparatively high human culture prevailed. On the contrary, it has revealed a culture standing far below even that possessed by the rudest savage people of our own days. If this is so, we may expect to find, among many modern savages of low culture, features which give us some guidance in trying to discover the laws at work in the first formation of man's belief in supernatural powers.

The information archaeology is able to supply as to the religious state of prehistoric man is certainly very scanty. Almost our only sources are the grave-finds. Many of the weapons,

implements, ornaments, remains of food, etc., which have been found in prehistoric graves, however, seem to show irrefutably that the primitive men who buried their dead in this way believed in the existence of a *soul* which survives the death of the body. Because of this, we may infer that even palaeolithic man in Europe, the contemporary of the mammoth and the cave-bear, was in possession of a sort of religion or belief in spirits.

Evidence to the same effect are those curious wall-paintings encountered in ancient caves in western Europe. Paintings and engravings of mammoth, bison, bear, elk, and other animals, done with wonderful skill by these prehistoric men on the walls of their primitive dwellings, cannot be explained merely as an expression of their aesthetic sense, but must have been connected in some mysterious way with their belief in spirits or souls. Now, if we compare the religious ideas to which the archaeological finds refer with the facts brought to light by modern ethnology about the ideas of uncultured peoples of to-day, we cannot fail to note a remarkable agreement. On these grounds we may also be able to form an opinion about the nature of primitive religious thought in general.

An oft-noted characteristic of the religious ideas and the rites based on them is the conservatism with which they are observed even after the disappearance or change of the cultural milieu to which they originally belonged.

This fact explains why, even among peoples of high civilization, we find numerous traces of ideas and customs which, properly speaking, form elements of primitive culture. History shows that general cultural degeneration was frequently followed by religious degeneration, this marked by a sudden revival of more primitive forms of belief and cult.

It is natural to explain such phenomena as due to a kind of religious atavism or as survivals from stages of culture already passed by the people in question. In the religion of the ancient Greeks, Romans, and other peoples of archaic culture we encounter, for instance, even at the time when their culture was at its highest, numerous traces of such primitive forms of cult as ancestor-worship, the worship of chthonic (earth) deities and of animals, traces of fetishism, etc. These must doubtless be explained as survivals. The popular religion and folklore of most civilized peoples in Europe show similar instances of

survivals, many ancient rites and superstitious practices being kept up and observed, among the lower classes of the population at least, long after their original meaning has been forgotten.

Phenomena of this kind enable us to understand how easily different forms of religion, both higher and lower, blend or combine, and how difficult it is to fix definite limits between them. In fact, religious evolution has hardly any "stages" of religion which can be distinguished clearly one from another. Thus there never has existed a "pure" monotheistic religion. Still more impossible is it to draw a sharp line of demarcation between animism and polytheism. Lower forms of religious belief and cult, animism, fetishism, demonism, witchcraft, may exist, and in most cases do exist, among peoples who, in other respects, have attained a relative montheism in the development of their religious thought.

These religious survivals are of great importance to the student of religion. They complete, in a valuable way, the material supplied by ethnology. But folklore material, when it is used to elucidate questions concerning primitive religion, ought to be treated with still greater caution than that offered by ethnology. Savage peoples who have remained free from external influence generally know the ideas underlying their customs and rites; they are elements of living faith, and can therefore be more easily explained and classified. On the other hand, this is seldom the case with the category of stereotyped habits and usages called survivals. A characteristic of these, as already indicated, is that the very folk who observe them do not know why they do so, or else attach to them a meaning which has nothing to do with the original one. How far such survivals truly reflect "primitive" ideas is consequently a delicate question to solve, and experience shows that they have frequently been strangely misinterpreted.

Among writers of the evolutionary school who have tried to explain the origin of religion there are two who ought to be mentioned above all others: Herbert Spencer and E. B. Tylor. Spencer was one of the first anthropologists to see in the culture of the present-day savage an approximate correspondence to the state of culture represented by early or prehistoric man, and who founded his theory about the beginnings of religion upon facts revealed by modern ethnology.

Like Tylor, Spencer starts from animism. In animism he sees the fundamental stratum from which religion in every form has been evolved, but the word is used by him in a more limited sense than by Tylor. It is to him identical with the deification of the spirits or souls of the dead. According to Spencer, religion has developed out of the primitive worship of departed souls; in particular, the worship of departed ancestors which, as a matter of fact, constitutes an important form of religion among peoples of low culture. From this primitive form of religion some other religious cult is derived, which, in relation to ancestor-worship, is consequently a secondary phenomenon. The worship of inanimate nature, for instance, has, according to Spencer, arisen by spirits of the dead having been thought in one way or another to have taken up their abode in the objects of nature and to be active in natural phenomena. [3]

This is the old theory of the origin of religion set forth as early as the third century before the Christian era by the Greek philosopher Euhemeros, and frequently revived in the history of the modern science of religion. A similar view of the early evolution of religion was taken by the French historian Fustel de Coulange with special reference to the peoples of antiquity, by Lippert with reference to Aryan peoples, and by Grant Allen as a general theory of the origin of religion.

It is this old theory that Spencer revived, trying to support it by facts gathered from modern ethnology. He tries to show how the belief in a human soul originated, a soul which survives the decay of the body and which, owing to its supposed power to benefit or harm the survivors, becomes the object of a real cult. With the help of numerous instances, Spencer shows how widely spread is this kind of worship in the lower cultures. But whereas this fact is now generally known, it is, of course, much more difficult to show how other forms of religious cult were developed out of the "only true form of religion, ancestor worship".

The facts, for example, which Spencer adduces to explain the origin of animal, plant, and nature worship, which according to him are merely aberrant forms of the worship paid to ancestral ghosts, are not very convincing. Savage children, for instance, misunderstood the tales of their parents about the stars, originally supposed to be the camp-fires of such and such a departed person, and thus originated the identification of deceased ances-

tors with heavenly bodies. Animal-worship also, according to Spencer, arose through some peoples having mistaken certain forms of animal life, such as snakes, lizards, and insects, which often come into the habitations of men, for the souls of their departed relatives, who are supposed occasionally to revisit their old abode. Creatures found in the caves used for burials were likewise taken for the new shapes assumed by the dead. The habit of naming individuals after animals and plants was also largely a cause of their being confused, and so forth. [4]

But although confusions such as these may have played a certain part in the history of religion, they obviously do not offer that satisfactory explanation of the important and widespread forms of primitive religion expected of them. Moreover, Spencer overlooks the tendency of the primitive mind to personify inanimate objects of nature independent of the conception of the human soul.

Spencer's theory, reached by a deductive rather than by an inductive method of research, has therefore often been contradicted. What is unsatisfactory in it, however, it seems to me, is rather the argument than the general view he expresses as to the development of early religion. Since the days of Spencer, modern ethnology has brought to light numerous facts which directly confirm his hypothesis as to the intimate connection between the worship of the dead and the worship of animals, plants, and inanimate objects of nature. Everything, for instance, favours the hypothesis that the religion of the Finno-Ugrian peoples, as existing among the Russian and Asiatic tribes up to our own day, has been developed out of a primitive worship of the dead. The same may be said, I believe, of the religion of the Bantu tribes of Africa and of that of the South American Indians. Even the highly developed state religion of the Incas was at bottom nothing but an ancestor worship in a wonderful system.

The assertion that all spirits and gods in the lower and higher religions are by nature nothing more than deified human souls or spirits of *dead* men, however, cannot be proved as a general theory. On this point Spencer was somewhat prejudiced and dogmatic. On the whole, the relation of the worship of souls to the worship of other animistic beings cannot be unravelled by the general reasoning and doubtful hypotheses of such as Spencer offers, but only by a careful inductive research into the

ideas actually held by different lower peoples. This is a question with which I shall deal again later.

The theory of animism as the original form of religion was set forth by E. B. Tylor in his well-known work *Primitive Culture* of 1871. However much opinions about primitive religion may have varied, the general view, of which Tylor has laid the foundation, has, on the whole, retained its validity. "Animism", as sketched by Tylor, is a fact, however differently we may explain the details of this "primitive philosophy" and whatever place we may assign to it in the evolution of religion. Tylor has established the existence of animism among all low human races and, in a modified form, even among civilized peoples, and in his famous minimum definition of religion he falls back on this essential source of the belief in the supernatural. By religion, Tylor simply means the belief in spiritual beings. Further, according to Tylor, the theory of animism divides into two great dogmas, forming parts of one consistent doctrine: first, concerning the souls of individual creatures, capable of continued existence after the death or destruction of the body; second, concerning other spirits, extending to the rank of powerful deities.

"Spiritual beings are held to affect or control the events of the material world, and man's life here and hereafter; and it being considered that they hold intercourse with men, and receive pleasure or displeasure from human actions, the belief in their existence leads naturally sooner or later to active reverence and propitiation. Thus animism, in its full development, includes the belief in controlling deities and subordinate spirits, in souls, and in a future state, these doctrines practically resulting in some kind of active worship." [5]

Tylor's theory of animism has, as we know, been of epoch-making importance. Its stimulating influence on the modern science of religion can be denied by nobody. The research work on the cult of the dead and the "animism" of the lower races has given rise to a whole literature. Other important aspects of primitive religion may thereby have been overlooked or neglected. At any rate, the theory which sees the origin of religion in the belief in spiritual beings was the object of much criticism in the last decades.

This criticism came partly from those scientists, quite numerous in our day, who, starting from the conception of *mana*,

contended that the animistic stage in the evolution of religion was preceded by a still more primitive "pre-animistic" stage, characterized by a belief in impersonal magical powers. The adherents of this theory show, in general, a marked tendency to underrate the importance of animism as a primitive form of religion, and think they can trace everywhere the ideas of an impersonal magical power. On the other hand, Tylor has been strongly contradicted by the adherents of the theory of primary monotheism, which in animism also sees a secondary phenomenon only.

In the chapters that follow, in which animism and kindred ideas are treated, I shall state in which sense Tylor's theory, in my opinion, may still be maintained. We shall see that the belief in spirits, thus in a certain sense "animism", must still be regarded as the very essence of primitive religion. If, by religion in general, we understand the belief in supernatural powers on which man feels himself to be dependent and which in one way or another he tries to influence in his favour, we may establish the fact, moreover, that there is no people in our day, however low in the scale of human development, which is wholly devoid of religion. When certain anthropologists, Lord Avebury for instance, made statements to the contrary, this was due only to their having used the word "religion" in too narrow a sense. In the subsequent chapters we shall examine more closely the ideas of the Supernatural which occur among the lower races of mankind.

CHAPTER II

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PRIMITIVE MAN: "PRE-ANIMISTIC" THEORY

THE psychology of primitive peoples has often been dealt with both by the general psychologist and the anthropologist. The difficulty of arriving at reliable results on this question arises from the fact, already pointed out, that there no longer exist any truly "primitive" peoples. When we use this word, we mean in general a number of peoples of low culture, living, as we say, in a state of nature but showing great differences in their material culture and social organization, their beliefs, customs, and institutions as well as their general mental characteristics.

The "primitive mentality" about which Lévy-Bruhl, for instance, has written so much in recent years and which is characterized by him as being essentially "prelogical" in opposition to the logical mind of civilized peoples [1] is in fact nothing but a philosophical abstraction without counterpart in reality. Nothing entitles us to assume, for instance, that the Australians, the Polynesians, the arctic peoples of northern Asia and America, the Bantu tribes of Africa, and the Indians of North and South America have all those characteristics ascribed to a primitive mind, or that their thinking is essentially different from our own logical thinking. My experiences from South America, at any rate, are contrary to Lévy-Bruhl's theory, and ethnologists at work in other parts of the world seem to have arrived at similar results.

Lévy-Bruhl points out that when he ascribes a prelogical mentality to primitive peoples he only means that they are not like civilized men, anxious above all, in their own thinking, to keep away from contradictions. To illustrate how natural such contradictions are to a primitive mind he mentions the Bororó of central Brazil, who, according to Karl von den Steinen, identify themselves with macaws. The red macaws are Bororó and, vice versa, the Bororó assert that they are macaws. According to Lévy-Bruhl this does not imply that, in their own

belief, the Bororó will be changed after death into macaws; they firmly believe that, in spite of their human form, they actually are macaws at the same time, "just as if a larva asserted that it is a butterfly". [2] Now, if we look into von den Steinen's book for his statement about the ideas of the Bororó, we find something very different. Like other South American Indians, the Bororó believe in the transmigration of the soul. "Soul" in the Bororó language is *bupé*—which fact should interest Lévy-Bruhl who *denies* the existence of a primitive conception of the soul. During sleep the soul flies away from the body in the shape of a bird and sees and hears many things. After death a Bororó man or woman is changed into a red macaw, that is, into a bird, like the soul in the dream. After death the medicine-men are also changed into other animals, for instance into fishes. According to the belief of the Bororó, departed men of other tribes would be changed into other kinds of animals; the negroes for instance into black vultures. K. von den Steinen himself, said the Indians, would, at some time, be changed into a white heron, etc. [3]

Is there anything contradictory or "prelogical", to use the words of Lévy-Bruhl, in these ideas? I certainly do not think so. The idea that, after the death of the body, the human soul may take up its abode in other bodies, even in those of animals, is quite logical and as a matter of fact is found not only among uncivilized peoples but also in the higher religions. It is held, in fact, by thousands of civilized peoples to this very day. In the lower cultures, as we shall see later, totemism, among other things, is intimately connected with this idea. But the way in which Lévy-Bruhl in the said passage uses von den Steinen's report on the Bororó is very characteristic of his whole method. He does not quote the statements of ethnologists as they stand and allow them to speak for themselves, but alters them with a view to bringing them into conformity with his own theories and adduces them to support these same theories. It is easy to see that, with such a method, we can prove almost any theory. The same argument exactly meets us in Lévy-Bruhl's recent theory that peoples of low culture have no idea of a soul.

Although the thinking of so-called primitive peoples is at bottom just as logical as that of civilized peoples, there are still certain peculiarities which seem to be characteristic of an undeveloped intellect in general and which we must take into