

COSMIC LAW IN ANCIENT THOUGHT¹

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WHEN some fifty years ago the late Sir Edward Tylor published his epoch-making book entitled *Primitive Culture* the study of the history of religious belief was still in its infancy. The author defines culture in his opening sentence. It is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." The work, therefore, was not intended to be a work on religion. But the conditions of the problem set were too strong for the author. Every one of the subjects included in his definition was, in fact, in the earliest period of which we have any evidence, so inextricably interwoven with religion, that his work becomes practically a work on religion; and more than half of it is devoted to an exposition of the theory of Animism.

This, as is well known, is merely another name for the soul-theory. But it was a great advance to replace the ambiguous expression "soul" by a new scientific word which could be used in a definite sense, and from which an adjectival form—Animistic—could be easily formed. It is only too possible for us, who no longer use the word "soul" exclusively in its original meaning, to misunderstand the ancient view, and to put back into it such modern conceptions as emotion, vitality, personality, and many others. The oldest form of the hypothesis was frankly concrete and materialistic. It was the presence within the body of a double—shadowy no

¹ Read before the British Academy, November 7, 1917, and reproduced by kind permission of the Council.

doubt, and subtle, and impalpable—but still a physical double of the physical body. And at the death of the body this double—this homunculus or mannikin or howsoever otherwise it can be called—continued to live, and to carry on an existence of its own.

We do not know how the theory arose. Speculation has suggested that it may have arisen from dreams. That is not impossible. There is evidence to show that some of our own children, and some modern savages, look upon dreams as realities—that is to say, that what they experience in dreams seems to them as real as what they experience in the waking state. So it may have happened that, long, long ago, a man, after a hard-fought victory, and a rude feast—perhaps on the body of his foe—had a sort of nightmare dream; he fought the fight over again in the familiar glades, and awoke in terror at an impending blow, only to find that all was over, and he was safe at home. Then it may have seemed clear enough to him that his foe had been alive again; that there was a something, he knew not what, but just the very image of his foe, which had survived his death, and carried on an existence of its own. He did not perhaps reason much about it, and certainly would not have stayed to consider whether this horrible double was eternal or not. But he was much too frightened to forget it. And the dread reality—as he thought it—will have afforded to him a perfectly clear explanation of many other mysterious things. When he awoke in the morning, after hunting all night in his dreams, and learnt from his companions that his body had been there all the time, it was of course his “soul” that had been away. This is all plausible enough. But all that we *know* is that this soul-theory, with its numerous applications, appears in full vigour in all our earliest documents.

These applications differ of course at different times and places. Among the most important are the following. Death and trance and deep, dreamless, sleep were “explained” by the permanent or temporary absence of the “soul.” If, and when, the “soul” returned, motion began again, and life. Animals had therefore souls within them. And even things

had souls if they were uncanny, or seemed to have life and motion. Thus the awe-inspiring phenomena of nature were instinctively regarded as the result of spirit action. Rivers, plants, and stars, the earth and air and heavens, became full of souls, of gods, each of them in fashion as a man, and with the passions of a man. The matter was perfectly clear and simple. To doubt it were perverse, or wicked.

Now on this one or two observations are necessary. In the first place, there is no evidence that this was consciously held to be a theory, or an hypothesis. It was regarded simply as a fact, a fact of universal application, that whatever had life and motion had also within it a detachable "soul" in shape like a man. We may quite rightly call this an hypothesis, and object that it is wanting in points essential to a sound scientific hypothesis. But these early Animists themselves regarded it apparently as a general law of nature—that is as what, I venture to submit, we might call an instance of cosmic law.¹

Secondly, the meaning of the word "soul," as used in this hypothesis of Animism, is quite different from the meaning attached now in Europe to the word. Both in France and Germany the corresponding words *Âme* and *Seele* mean very nearly what we express by "mind." In English the word "soul" is used in varying and contradictory senses. We can speak of a man as having a "soul for music"; and by that we mean, I suppose, not that any mannikin within him has a good ear, but merely that his emotional feelings respond easily to the sounds produced in music. There is an excellent book on the Burmese by Mr. Fielding Hall entitled *The Soul of a People*. It describes the beliefs and customs of that nation. In Mr. Syme's work on *The Soul* the author in his Introduction quotes William James as saying that "the term soul is a mere figure of speech and the thing itself a pure fiction." After that the word does not occur again through

¹ The only detailed description of the soul as yet found in ancient literatures is the one collected from passages in the Upanishads (say seventh century B.C.) by the present writer—"Theory of the Soul in the Upanishads," *J.R.A.S.*, 1899.

the whole work, which is on psychology. M. Henri Bergson delivered in 1911 a course of four Lectures at University College on "The Nature of the Soul." They deal exclusively with the mind. In the authorized translation of the Bible the word "soul" occurs 449 times. Fifty-five times it means person (including the body). "We were in the ship 276 souls," etc.¹ Eighty-five times only is it used in the Animistic sense. In 306 passages it means various sorts of emotional or intellectual states of mind. This numbered analysis of meanings is of course good evidence only for English beliefs, and English use of words, in the seventeenth century; but it is sufficient to show that the vagueness now attaching both to the belief and to the word had already, three centuries ago, more than begun. It had left far behind the original idea of a detachable unity manifested (and this should never be forgotten) rather by motion and life than by emotion and will.

If one glances over the tables of contents to the best and latest treatises on the early religious beliefs of the four or five countries where early records have been found—such as de Groot on China, Hopkins on India, Jastrow on Mesopotamia, or Breasted on Egypt—one sees that they are mainly, if not quite exclusively, concerned with Animistic ideas or with the applications of such ideas. In the course of my ten years' lectures on Comparative Religion I came across quite a number of early religious beliefs and practices which by no stretch of ingenuity could be brought under Animism. They were not explained in the books (and could not be explained) by the theory of a detachable soul. I found myself forced to the conclusion that we must seek for at least one additional hypothesis, as far-reaching as Animism, and altogether different from it, before we could explain all the facts. I say "at least one," for it seemed at first that more than one would be required. But though the number of non-Animistic beliefs was very great, it was found possible to arrange them in more

¹ The well-known wireless message S.O.S. is thus explained, in popular usage, as meaning "Save our souls." What it really meant to telegraphists when it was first used, may have been different.

or less overlapping groups; and behind all the groups can be discerned, I venture to think, one single underlying principle. That principle is the belief in a certain rule, order, law. We must invent a name for it—a name that does not imply or suggest a lawgiver, and that does not suffer from the disadvantage of being still in common use, and liable therefore to have vague and modern connotations wrapt up in it. Such a word is Normalism, with its convenient adjective Normalistic. To it we can attach a specific, scientifically exact meaning.

What that meaning should be will be best explained by a few simple examples. The first is one from the lower culture—from what is sometimes, most unfortunately, called “primitive” culture. Professor de Groot in his *Religion of the Chinese*¹ tells us that he saw a boy with a hare-lip, and that this was explained to him (de Groot) by the father, who said that the mother of the boy had, during her pregnancy, accidentally made a cut in an old coat of the father’s she was mending. Professor de Groot brings this belief under demonology. But is this really correct? There is not a word in the story, as he tells it, about any demon. Surely the only conclusion we are justified in drawing is that the Chinese father believed that given x , y would follow, and it would follow of itself. What is this but recognition of a law, a rule? We may not agree with it. The rule may seem to us foolishness. But we must add in simple justice to the Chinese father that similar ideas about experiences of a pregnant mother affecting the child are quite solemnly discussed in Europe at the present day. And the validity of the rule is not here in question. The point is, Are we to group a belief under Animism when no *anima* enters into it, when the event in question takes place without the intervention of any soul or god?²

The argument would be much the same in the very numerous examples of similar beliefs. But it is when we turn to the higher culture that we begin to see the importance of this

¹ New York, 1910, p. 12.

² Professor de Groot’s views on the whole subject of Animism are given at length in vol. iv. of his larger work, *Religious Systems of China*.

trend of thought. The oldest documents, for instance in China, are, like those almost everywhere else, anthologies based on still earlier books or sayings now lost. There are traditions, more or less untrustworthy, as to the names of some of the authors of passages inserted in those anthologies. But for the most part the names and dates can no longer be traced. Confucius himself is the editor of the oldest of the anthologies, and we have others, recording his own sayings, edited by his disciples. No European Chinese scholar has yet drawn up, so far as I know, any detailed and critical account of the various beliefs held before the time of Confucius. But even a scholar ignorant of Chinese can already make, from the translations, the beginnings of such an attempt. It is at last clear that beside the polytheism (not unlike that which we find elsewhere in the sixth century B.C. and earlier) there is also, and in many respects transcending it in importance, the recognition of a cosmic order. It is on that rather than on Animism that Confucius himself bases his teaching. But he does not deny the soul-theory, and makes references, though only occasional ones, to gods. His elder rival, Lao Tsü, goes much farther. In the work attributed to him, the *Tao Te Ching*, he quite ignores the soul-theory; and his deep and pregnant sayings are concerned exclusively with the Tao, or cosmic order. It is upon that that his ethics, religion, and philosophy are built up. And as this point of view is regarded by both teachers as one taken as a matter of course by all, and is expressed by them in the same technical phraseology, it is clear that it had been widely held long before their time—that is to say, long before the time when our existing documents were put into their present shape. And it continued in vogue long afterwards. Ten centuries later Chwang Tsü still supports this view with emphasis and without a trace of Animism. And through all the centuries of Chinese literature the doctrine of the Tao, and all that it implies, has been held in high honour and esteem. Chinese poetry and drama are full of allusions to it, and to its implications.

It is no answer to our argument that the organized ecclesiastical hierarchy of Taoists afterwards gave expression to their

views in Animistic language, and adopted Animistic beliefs and practices. All over the world the same thing has happened, and is happening now. The two principles of Animism and Normalism are always, and must be, in opposition. In ancient times it was a friendly opposition. We find no evidence of that bitterness on both sides, and contempt, that so often distinguish the modern conflict of religion and science. They had no such words as these two, so vague and uncertain. How can the game be fairly played when the dice are loaded, or when the very counters used have different values to the two contending parties? But the conflict was there, and influenced the language then as it does to-day—and this may show us the importance, not only of the use of colourless phrases (Animism and Normalism raise no emotions), but of realizing the existence of these two views of life, and taking note of their action and interaction.

In order to do so it is quite immaterial whether either of these two explanations—Animism and Normalism—is, from our point of view, right or wrong. Both of them seem to be both right and wrong. But that does not matter here. Our question is purely historical.

When the modern European Animist inveighs against “nature red in tooth and claw” he takes up a position exactly contrary to the doctrine of the Tao. To the Taoist the cruelty of men or animals is really against “nature.” The Tao, the course of nature, is regular, beneficent without thought of beneficence, patient, modest, not violent in action, always trustworthy, generous without stint, with no hope or desire of reward, seeking no glory, undefiled by any impurity, never at war, restful, quiet, at peace. To that should man habituate himself, like that should his conduct be, with that should he hope and strive to live in harmony. Whether so striking and noble a conception as this be really truer to the facts than the opposite theory more popular in the West is of no importance to our present argument. Different minds may fairly think differently as to that. But the whole theory of the Tao is clearly not Animistic; and it suggests an aspect of nature not emphasized by theologians in Europe.

Where precisely, and when, the modern European Animist acquired his certainty, in direct contradiction to the ancient tradition held throughout the world, that animals have no "souls," it might be interesting to inquire. The Chinese have not advanced so far beyond the older faith; and on the other hand they have never dared to personify the Tao.

There is yet another Normalistic theory which has been adopted in China by all the schools of thought. It is cosmological in origin. The primeval chaos is supposed to have been broken up by the antagonism of two principles, namely, expansion and contraction. They were called Yang and Yin. Poetical feeling interpreted the former, Yang, in terms of warmth, strength, life, light, and beauty; while it assigned cold, weakness, darkness, death, and deformity to Yin, the latter. These forces, acting regularly, and without the intervention of any soul or god, are held to explain the fact of the presence or absence in any individual of the qualities just mentioned. It is a very ancient doctrine, older than the period of Lao and Confucius; but the history of its earliest form and gradual extension has not yet been considered critically. Neither of these interacting forces has ever been personified. The Yang is held to be the male force in all creatures, and the Yin to be the female. As this application of the theory gives all the bad things to women it may be conjectured that it was either added to the oldest form by men, or if the application formed part of the theory from the beginning, then that the theory itself was first started when the power and influence of men had become predominant. Similar theories of the evolution of things from chaos by the interaction of two contending opposites were put forward, as is well known, by early Greek philosophers, perhaps most thoroughly and picturesquely by Empedocles in the fifth century B.C.¹ The theory is still in everyday use in China.

¹ This is only one of many instances of Normalistic views held by Greek thinkers before the time of Plato. It is much to be desired that someone more qualified than the present writer should collect the evidence. It seems to me better to confine myself in this article, already too long, to matters on which I am more competent to judge.

In India our earliest records, the thousand and more Vedic hymns, seem at first sight to be altogether Animistic. They consist almost exclusively in appeals to various gods. The European books on Indian religions are concerned, when treating of the Vedic period, with descriptions of these gods, based on the epithets applied to them, the acts attributed to them, and so on. But these poems make no pretension to being a complete statement of the beliefs held by the tribes whose priests made use of the poems. Other poems, not included in our present collection, were doubtless extant in the community at the time when the collection was made. Other beliefs, not mentioned in the poems, were widely influential among the people. What we have is not complete even as a summary of the theosophy, or the ritual, or the mythology of the priests; and it refers only incidentally to other beliefs unconnected with gods, of great importance as a factor in religion and daily life.

This conclusion might be justified as rendered necessary by a critical consideration of the simple known facts as to the composition of the anthology we call the Rig-Veda. It is confirmed by the discovery in later Vedic books (especially in the manuals of domestic rites) of customs and beliefs, that must evidently go back to the Rig-Veda period (though not referred to in that collection), and even of one or two such cases that certainly go back to an earlier period still. We have time here for only one or two sample instances, and even they can only be treated in the merest outline:

Take the case of *Rta* (pronounced *Rita*). The meaning of the word would seem to have passed through some such evolution as "motion, rhythmic motion, order, cosmic order, moral order, the right." In those slowly moving ages a long period must be postulated for the growth and consolidation of such ideas. The word is found, incidentally mentioned, at the end of its career, in the Avesta and the Veda. It must have been in full use before the Persian Aryans had separated from the Indian Aryans. The idea may therefore with reasonable probability be traced back to the third millennium before Christ. The use of the word died out in India before the

time of the rise of Buddhism. Of the pre-Buddhistic Upaniṣads it occurs only in one—the Taittirīya. In the peroration to that work Ṛta is placed above, before the gods. The word occurs, it is true, in three or four isolated passages of post-Buddhistic works, but these are archaisms. It has not been traced in either the Buddhist or the Jain canonical literature.

The process of the gradual decline in the use of an abstract word is precisely analogous to the process of the gradual decay and death of a god.¹ The word covers not one idea only, but a number of connotations. The implications involved in it are constantly, though imperceptibly, changing. Sooner or later one or other phase of it overmasters the others, and some new word or words, emphasizing some one or other of the various connotations of the older word, come gradually into use as more adequate or more clear. When that process is complete the older word is dead. But it lives again in the newer word or words that have taken its place, and would never have been born or thought of unless the older word had previously lived. It was so with Rta—a broader and deeper conception than the Greek Moira, and more akin to the Chinese Tao. Like these, Rta was never personified and it lives again in the clearer and more definite (though still very imperfect) phrases of the Buddhist Suttantas.

The case of Rta is by no means unique. I have elsewhere discussed at some length another case, that of *tapas* or self-mortification, austerity.² It was held in India from Vedic times onwards that *tapas* (originally "burning glow," but afterwards used of fasting and other forms of self-mortification) worked out its effects by itself, without the intervention of any deity. This is only the more remarkable since it is almost certain that in India, as elsewhere, the ecstatic state of mind which rendered such austerity possible was originally often regarded as due to the inspiration of a spirit. But it is, so far as I know, never mentioned that the supernormal effects of the austerity were due to the spirit from whom the inspiration came. The effects were due to the austerity itself. Very

¹ See *Buddhist India*, p. 234.

² *Dialogues of the Buddha*, i., 203-14.

often indeed there was no question of any deity's help in the determination to carry out the self-torture—just as in the case of the *puṣārīs* at the *ghats* in modern India.

Even the very sacrifice itself—made to gods, supposed to give sustenance and strength to gods, accompanied by hymns and invocations addressed to gods—was not entirely free from such Normalistic ideas. The hymns themselves already contain phrases which suggest that their authors began to see a certain mystic power over the gods in a properly conducted sacrifice. And we know that afterwards, in the *Brāhmaṇas*, this conception was carried to great lengths. So also we have evidence of a mystic power, independent of the gods, in the words, the verses, that accompany the sacrifice. It is no contradiction of this that we find this mystic power itself afterwards deified and becoming, indeed, in the course of centuries of speculation, the highest of the gods. And it is significant, in this connection, that the string of *Bṛhaspati's* bow is, in the *Veda*, precisely *Ṛta*.

Many also of the minor books of the Brahmins reveal beliefs, dealing with domestic and social habits of action or refraining from action, because of some connection supposed to exist between a deed and its result. Some of these are stupid enough. If a man have erred, the wearing of a dark garment may improve his character. Many of them may be classed under one or other of the various meanings given by anthropologists to the ambiguous and confusing word "magic": the "magic" of names, or numbers, or propinquity, or likeness, or association, or sympathy, and so on. Many will also be found in the long list of practices from which it is said in the *Silas* (one of the very earliest of our Buddhist documents, earlier than the *Piṭakas* though incorporated in them) that the *Samana Gotama* refrains.¹

In the teaching of the Buddhist *Dhamma*—a word which itself is often best rendered by *Norm*—the Normalistic idea was the heart and essence of the Buddhist reformation in religion and religious philosophy. Its central tenets, such as the law of *Karma*, the law of causation, the code of the "noble

¹ *Dialogues of the Buddha*, i. 16-39.

eightfold path," and its doctrines of the immensity of the universe, of the infinite past inherited by each individual, and of the infinite effect on the future of his acts, are all so drawn up as to exclude any reference to gods or souls. For a thousand years the dominant faith of India rested on this basis; and though Animism ultimately, after centuries of discussion, recovered its popularity, it remained profoundly influenced by the long struggle.

We are now coming to the end of our task. Those parts of the world where Normalism reached its highest flights have been considered at some length. Nearer home, both in Mesopotamia and on the shores and islands of the Eastern Mediterranean—from Greece round to Egypt—the traces of Normalistic beliefs are, at present, more slight, and of minor importance from the historian's point of view. In Mesopotamia we have very old records reaching back to the fifth millennium B.C. But the oldest are fragments; and coming mainly from the temples, deal naturally with the gods. The great reformation of Zoroaster, originating earlier than the reformations in China and India, remained, for the most part, in the Animistic stage; and though the other side is by no means altogether absent it is chiefly found in conjunction with the later and more ritualistic part of the doctrine. In Egypt also we have very old records, found almost exclusively in tombs, and dealing therefore with the Animistic circle of beliefs. We hear much of the wisdom of the Egyptians. But little of it has come down to us, and the only movement that can be called a reformation was Animistic, and of very brief duration. In early Greek speculation, as has already been mentioned, the Normalistic trend of thought is unmistakable. But it is too late to-night to enter on any of these points. I hope to be permitted on some future occasion to deal with some of them in the necessary detail. At present we must content ourselves with submitting to you some conclusions which would seem to follow from what it has been possible to lay before you.

1. That not only in the lower cultures, but also in the higher grades of religious aspiration and practice, the historian must recognize and take account of quite a number of beliefs, recorded

by the believers themselves in early documents, which are not Animistic—that is to say, are independent of gods and souls.

2. That the current definitions of religion must be modified accordingly. I have a number of such definitions; and they make an amazing record. It is a question of method. The method usually followed is to make such a definition as shall express what the writer holds to be true religion, and to shut out what he deems false religion. It is evident that in following this method definitions of religion will be precisely, neither more nor less, as numerous, as contradictory, and as accurate, as are the writer's own beliefs. To give an example, Professor Max Müller mentions "the broad foundations on which all religions are built up—the belief in a divine power, the acknowledgment of sin, the habit of prayer, the desire to offer sacrifice, and the hope of a future life."¹ But he himself does not use the word in that sense. He would call each of the faiths we have discussed to-night a religion. And yet no one of them has any one of his five essential ingredients. Now religions are constantly changing. Wherever the word is used it is, as a matter of fact, of popular usage, applied to each new variation; and any definition, to be philologically and historically accurate, must be so worded as to include all those variations. By the other method the definition of the word becomes at variance with the use to which it is really and habitually put, and as it is a popular, not a scientific term, this is a pity.

3. We find in the oldest documents evidence of the existence, at the same place and time, of both Animism and Normalism. There is no evidence, known to me, that either of them was anywhere anterior to the other.

4. All through the history no one calls himself either Animist or Normalist. Both terms are invented to assist modern historical research by differentiating between two ancient trends of thought. They are not intended to give the names by which the ancient (or for that matter the modern) leaders of religious thought would themselves describe their beliefs.

5. Lastly, misunderstanding may be avoided if it is clearly

¹ *Lectures on the Science of Religion* (1873), p. 287.

stated that this paper does not propose to deal in any way with primitive beliefs. The word primitive is ambiguous; it may mean "unsophisticated," and in that sense may rightly be applied to some of the religious beliefs of modern savages. Or it may mean "earliest" in point of time; and that is, no doubt, the more usual impression that is connoted by the word. Now it by no means follows either that what is old in religion is necessarily unsophisticated, or that the religions of modern savages give a correct picture of the oldest beliefs. We do not know what the earliest, the most primitive, religion was. And it is quite unlikely that we ever shall know. It is not probable that modern savage beliefs, which have passed through millenniums of constant change, have preserved for us unaltered any fragment of primitive faith. But what we can do is to utilize the results of the good work that has been done in recent years on the investigation of modern savage beliefs to throw light on our ancient records, and by the help of these records to study, step by step, the changes and developments of belief during those ages for which we have reliable evidence. Thus we may build up, very slowly perhaps but surely, a knowledge of the main issues in our historical inquiry. It is only as a suggestion on one of those main issues that this paper is submitted to you to-day.