

The Great Religions and the Environment

Man is a mortal animal but at the same time endowed with the capacity of reason. Man is part of 'nature'; he emerges from it and within it, and at the last, after no long lapse of time, his body returns to the dust. In the state of nature his life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. But by his capacity for reason he has powers of elevating himself to control his environment in some degree. The degree is modest, of course. Language about moving mountains by faith and casting them into the sea was a well understood convention of language for describing the achievement of the apparently impossible before Jesus spoke in such terms. We know that man can affect his environment adversely by over-exploitation, and there is a powerful moral ingredient to the science of ecology. Our contemporaries have a sense of moral outrage if a habitat for beautiful wild life is destroyed to make a dam for the generation of electric power. On the other hand, the history of humanity is one of continuous struggle to master the natural environment, to harness its force to serve his interest, whether private or collective. Man cannot beat nature but he can join it, co-operate with it, compel the environment to leave him room to develop, to survive, to generate a surplus to give greater security for his society. Yet man does not live by bread alone.

Accordingly the religious estimate of human nature generally tends to occupy middle ground between those, on the one hand, who understand man from his roots in and affinities with nature and especially with the irrational animal order, and those, on the other hand, who in a tradition loosely labelled 'idealist' see man's rational power as that which marks him out as distinctive in the world. The 'naturalist' interpretation of human nature tends to prefer deterministic explanations of behaviour and to reduce to the minimum, perhaps to zero, the area in which man can be seen as genuinely free and responsible. The 'idealist' can speak as if embarrassed by man's animal nature, sometimes as if his needs for food or sex and his mortality after a short, short life, are an unintended accident; but in all forms this tradition stresses man's transcendence over the order of nature, his capacity to comprehend the universal both in the empirical world and in the concepts with which he classifies things, and

the power to discern beauty, to acknowledge the right and the good, and to aspire to a truth beyond and above particular contingent truths. In Platonic idealism the root of evil in man is located in his physical nature, or in a deliberate preference on the part of the soul for the lower delights of bodily appetite. The natural order is in this view often seen as a chaotic jungle into which reason alone can bring light and harmony and direction. In contrast to this, the naturalistic estimate of man tends to see the solution of man's troubles in a return to nature's balance and harmony (a classic statement is the *Georgics* of Vergil). Here the chaos needing to be given order is located not in man's affinity to the serene environment but in the specifically and distinctively human powers of the mind. Neither the physical environment nor the human body are here understood as exercising a downward pull on the higher aspirations of man. The animal constituent of human nature is seen by naturalism as the best ordered part, undisturbed by pride and envy. Man's best route to happiness is on this view the practice of psychological adjustment to the deflating truth that his sense of 'freedom' and self-determination is largely illusory, perhaps entirely so.

Full-blooded determinism requires such infinite care in statement to begin to make it sound plausible that in this discussion it can perhaps be simply left on one side. It is a doctrine that can never succeed in persuading any large group of people other than philosophers, and only then when they are being highly philosophical, which is generally not all the time. But that is not to say that man's area of freedom is not constantly restricted within narrow frontiers by the environment and (perhaps in particular) by the social habits of mind shared in the community to which any individual belongs. Religion is closely bound up with the values of the social group, the family, the tribe or race, sometimes with such elusive entities as 'the West' or 'the Arab world', fairly obviously so in the case of communities like the Jews where the bond between religion and race is commonly felt to have force, even for those who do nothing to practise their faith or that of their ancestors. The physical environment no doubt plays a part in shaping the forms and some part of the character of a society. The ever present sea continually

provokes Greeks or British folk to leave their native soil and to travel abroad. German and Turkish are languages spoken by few who have gone far from their original habitat, and such peoples seem more at home on land. But it would be far from easy to give much plausibility to the contention that the German genius for music, theology, and military organisation has sprung out of their central geographical position in Europe. It is not easy to believe that the vast movements of the human spirit in the West which we label Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, and Romanticism (all movements which had a direct and intimate link with powerful forces latent within the Christian tradition), arose by physical causation from the geographical setting of the European environment.

So when Renan delivers the grand pronouncement that 'the desert is monotheist', I am inclined to suspect that this tells us more about Renan's love for over-simplifications than it tells us about either monotheism or even the desert. At least it does not appear that the desert began by being monotheist, even though the awesome clarity of the Milky Way fills frail humanity with a sense of wonder as also of the order of the universe, and is not in the desert obscured to the eye as it is in the city with its bright lights. Most of our evidence for religion in the ancient Near East speaks of a broadly shared pattern of nature-cults in which the seasonal death and revival of the vegetation becomes expressed in myth through the story of a god who is killed. In many forms of the ancient myth the killer is either a boar or an enemy whose symbol is a boar. The corpse is deposited in a river or the divine figure is drowned in a tragic accident. Through his death the vitality of nature is lost. But (in several forms of the myth) his loss is mourned by a goddess who goes out to recover his body. The finding of the corpse is a liberating act for the vegetation; the god returns to life once more.

Modern scholars have normally taken it for granted that the unending recurrence of the seasons would have given ancient men and women complete confidence that the cycle would come round again. The philosopher Aristotle thought so, but adds that not all Greeks felt as confident as he. The entire prosperity of a society without reserves depended on a good harvest. One bad year was awkward, a succession of bad years brought calamity. Each year the menacing desert, burning under the summer heat, reduced human and plant vitality to a minimum. Yet, as if miraculously, the seed buried in the soil at seed-time sprang to new life at the harvest. To primitive man that could not be taken for granted. The spirit-powers must be kept propitious. An annual ritual must be performed; perhaps (if the moon had something to do with the weather) monthly ceremonies. Ancient texts tell us of magical rites being used to ensure that the phases of the moon proceeded as usual, and the sorcerers can have had no occasion to complain of failure.

Fecundity is indispensable for survival in the desert, and the year's festivals celebrate the joyful fact that the community is still present and flourishing under a friendly hand. In primi-

tive religion, at least as we are able to understand it from the ancient near eastern texts, the gods of the tribe are not hostile and arbitrary spirits, but intimate and friendly kindred with a special relationship to their worshippers. The roots of near eastern cults do not lie in the need to seek to appease implacable and inexplicable powers. Resort to magic and sorcery is regarded by all ancient men, throughout the Mediterranean world, as dangerous and anti-social, and above all a hazard to the establishment of the authorised, divinely sanctioned government. Even in the period of the later Roman Empire we have evidence of the link between sorcery and high treason, culminating in the ferocious treason trials at Scythopolis in the fourth century at which persons of high social distinction in the Empire were tortured and executed on their admission of being implicated in resort to magic. By contrast with the powers that the magicians sought to control and coerce by their spells, the gods of the tribe are almost always supportive, and among them one may hold a supremacy corresponding to that of the father within his family or a king among his tribe. So the god who occupies this special position is 'king' and 'lord'—Adon, Baal, Moloch or Melek. And he will have special care for the poor, since such a care is also the proper role of the tribal king, protecting the weak against the oppression of great and wealthy aristocratic families. The stronger the power of the tribal king and the greater the concern he shows for the weak and the poor, the greater the ease with which, in the celestial sphere, the role of the supreme divine power will be understood in terms of ethical monotheism. Conversely, the intimate link between the monarchy and the sanctions given by religion will tend to enhance the sacrosanctity of the king where he is thought to be the earthly instrument of a heavenly monarch.

In the Christianised Roman Empire of the fourth century of our era there is a classic illustration of this thesis in the panegyric on the Life of Constantine by Eusebius of Caesarea, for whom Christian monotheism offers a framework for a political theory underpinning Constantine as sole monarch of all territory ruled by Rome. The text is one that Christians have seldom found it possible to read without some sensation of alarm, and in *The City of God* Augustine adopted the view that governmental authority in the Roman Emperor has divine authority behind it without linking this theme to a sanctity derived from monotheistic belief. In refusing to make any such link Augustine picks up a thread which is central to the great monotheistic religions emerging from the Near East in close proximity to the Jordan valley.

This theme or thread is that monotheism, implicitly or explicitly, contains a critique of all forms of nature religion and likewise of all notions that the function of religion is to support the coherence, survival, and particularity of the tribe or race. Man is not an insect whose destiny is genetically determined, but a free agent, within a framework that imposes obvious limits, and exercises this freedom in forms that are given by culture rather than by genetic load. Cultural

traditions shape the life of societies and individuals, but even when they impose moral prescriptions they do not have a coercive force. The moral prescriptions are normally linked very closely with religious belief and especially religious practice. (We expect a Moslem young man faithful in his daily prayers to be protected from the temptations to become a playboy, and our expectation is seldom falsified.)

The moral conscience is formed in society—for moral issues of right and wrong concern relations with fellow-men. Society trains the individual to think some commands unconditional requirements, some prohibitions equally absolute. But the nurtured individual then grows up to pass judgment on his or her own actions, and can then go on to pass moral judgments on the too readily accepted conventions of society which come to seem convention or compromise.

So the paradox of the idea of conscience: on the one hand the term describes the innermost citadel of the personality where only the individual can judge, and on the other hand the community has a far-reaching influence on the forming of moral judgments. In an individual case, the sensitivity of the moral conscience appears intimately linked to the warmth and love received in childhood from parents or teachers or other guardians. Those who receive little affection in childhood seem to have little feeling of guilt from antisocial actions, and punishment tends to do most good to those who least need it, most harm to those who most deserve it—in many cases strengthening their sense of rebellion against society as their enemy, and failing to instil an inner judgment

of self-imposed censure. Yet the conscience, formed in society, comes to protest against society.

There is some profound link between the independence of the conscience over against social convention and the critical stance inherent in the three great monotheistic religions over against the naturalistic conception of man and his society. For the naturalistic interpretation tends to identify the right and the good wholly with the material prosperity and well-being of the closed tribal society. Monotheism comes to relativise the particular group: a theme already articulated in the New Testament when the apostle Paul takes monotheism as necessarily demanding a universalist understanding of religion in contrast to the closed society of Judaism. (Romans 3, 28–30.) Monotheism, therefore, encourages internationalism, and an awareness of the need to listen to others whose society and religious experience are different from one's own. This toleration, however, tends to go hand in hand with fierce intolerance towards nature cults. Monotheism cannot be regarded as an easygoing form of religion for which virtually anything is acceptable and where there is nothing, whether of myth or cultic act or moral stance, which one can in conscience feel bound to censure. Of all forms of religion it is that with the most awkward consequences and the maximum inconveniences, whether for the community or for the individual. It is not in its essence that form of religion that human beings would be likely to create by projecting their own hopes and fears on to the cosmos. We shall not think it a defiance of reason that monotheism has been esteemed as a belief known because the one and only God disclosed himself.