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## New Revisions of Comparative Religion

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## New Revisions of Comparative Religion. :

The three stages of down-town metropolitan real estate: the brick store, the steel and concrete sky-scraper, the parking lot, fitly describe the history of the comparative study of religions. The foundation was laid in philology when Max Mueller together with many a less brilliant, but more profound student of language developed the imposing structure of the science of religion on the basis of etymological study. The structure was laid low less than fifty years later, and on its place was erected the colossal pile of the anthropological study of religion, based on the evolutionary theory. The reconstruction of Old Testament history by the higher criticism is but a sector out of this enormous sphere of research. To-day the sky-scraper has been carried away piece-meal and its foundations destroyed by the cultural anthropology. It is time to pause and survey the criticism by which this unexpected change has been brought about.

There is a strange parallel between the earlier views of evolutionistic ethnologists and the fallacy of orthodox geology. The latter assumes that the evolutionary principle is true—that plant and animal life has developed from the single-cell stage to the multi-cellular: from star-fish and trilobite to fish, reptile, bird, mammal, and man. It fixes the age of a stratum of rock through index fossils. Fossil remains of the lower animals indicate ancient rock, whereas remains of four-footed beasts indicate a more recent stratum. The entire system of historical geology is built up upon the assumption that animals and plants on earth gradually developed from simple to more complex forms. When the biologist is asked for his proof of evolution, he directs us to paleontology, to the sequence of life indicated by the fossils, as the only direct proof. In like manner, the ethnologist has assumed the correctness of the theory which pictures man as a descendant from brute ancestors. And since it is impossible to assume, on this premise, that the early forms of religion were the most spiritual and perfect, he has to reject absolutely the story of man's creation and his knowledge of a Supreme Being in the first stage of his history. He has to assume dark gropings and clumsy seeking after the supernatural, the Old Man of the cave-dweller's dreams, identified by the savage with some being outside of him and above him, ghosts of ancestors casting evil spells, demons and sprites inhabiting rocks and trees, until there would be an emergence of one god above the rest and finally the recognition of a World Soul or Superior Architect. According to this scheme the ethnologist arranged the data of his research in the religions of mankind. And it is this evolutionistic framework of comparative religion that has now crashed. Biological evolution has been exposed to the withering fire of such works as *The Dogma of Evolution* by



L. T. More. The evolution of religion has more recently been disavowed by a school of sociologists which is as little under the sway of historic Christian concepts as was Professor More when he exposed the fallacies of the biologists.

Harvey Wickham, in his notable discussion of modern Pseudoscience, *The Misbehaviorist* (1931), finds fault with Lewis Browne's *This Believing World* on account of the "illimitable naiveté" (p. 243) with which he propounds his idea of the origin of religion: "In the beginning was fear, and fear was in the heart of man. . . . And he, poor gibbering half-ape, nursing his wound in some draughty cave, could only tremble. . . . Man had to have faith in himself or die—and he would not die. So he had faith [in himself, you will note] and developed religion" (p. 244). The picture is familiar to the reader. The assumption is that man's culture began in a cave. What is Wickham's attitude? He asks: "Is it necessary to remark that there is no evidence whatever pointing to this as the early state of man? that it is merely an assumption, assumed to help along one particular theory of evolution, and is contradicted by those modern researches tending to show that savages, when actually degraded, are degenerate rather than primitive? Yet Browne illustrates his text with an original pen-and-ink sketch of this missing link. The drawing is extremely good and spirited. One only wishes it were a photograph" (p. 244).

The most notable discussion of present-day scientific philosophy is Bernhard Bavink's *The Natural Sciences* (American translation, The Century Company, 1932). After pronouncing the origin of the ideas of law, morals, and religion as "most difficult to answer," the author summarizes the present-day opinion of the scientific world as follows: "Numerous recent investigators no longer adhere to the series which was once very generally assumed, namely, the order of development: animism, fetishism, totemism, polytheism, henotheism (monolatry), monotheism or pantheism. They regard as more probable in the beginning an indefinite belief in a mysterious power dwelling in all sorts of things, the 'mana,' which is later succeeded by animistic and totemistic ideas, fetishism being a degenerate form which branched off from the line of upward development" (p. 510). This means of course that in the opinion of this acute and exceedingly well-read observer (Bavink's book has been a sensation in our American universities) the huge dissertations on comparative religion based upon the method of Spencer and Frazer have involved a fundamental error—the evolutionary development of religion according to a scheme parallel to the gradual rise of reason assumed by the evolutionary hypothesis.

The dogma of original ancestral ghost-worship was the contribution of Herbert Spencer to the discussion of the origin of religion.



This theory was presented by him in the first volume of *Principles of Sociology*, which appeared in instalments from 1874 to 1877. He assumes of course the origin of man from brute beginnings. The first conception of a supernatural being was that of a ghost. With propitiation of the ghost comes ancestor-worship, and from ancestors are derived the gods. Reading his famous work one is impressed by the fact that he stakes all upon the thesis that also the religion of Semitic and Aryan peoples originated from ancestor-worship, demonstrating to his own satisfaction that his evolutionary scheme holds here as elsewhere and that alleged moral practises are really ancestor-worship. Dr. Clifford Kirkpatrick of the University of Pennsylvania has subjected Spencer's theory to a searching criticism. He quotes Spencer's work (p. 429): "Evidence was given that by the highest races as by the lowest, ancestor-worship, similarly practised, similarly originated deities; and we saw that it even now survives among the highest races, though overshadowed by a more developed worship. Concluding, then, that from worship of the dead every other kind of worship has arisen, we proceeded to examine those worships which do not externally resemble it, to see whether they have traceable kinships." Regarding this conclusion Kirkpatrick says that "it may be suspected he entertained it prior to his examination of the facts" (*Religion in Human Affairs*, p. 36).

What has been said by certain critics of Spencer's principles of sociology ever since they first appeared has gradually become the opinion of scientists everywhere. In the first place, his method was purely deductive. "Facts are marshaled only to support a preconceived hypothesis. His unfortunate and loose use of the comparative method, *i. e.*, his taking facts out of their cultural setting for comparison, invalidates much of his work. His conclusions are so dogmatically stated that the demonstration of a single exception to his plan is bound to be fatal, and many such exceptions to his rigid, evolutionary scheme have been found" (Kirkpatrick, *op. cit.*, p. 41). But the reversal of scientific opinion touches not only the specific theory of Spencer. It has not only set aside the theory of E. B. Tylor (*Primitive Culture*), who was not quite so dogmatic an evolutionist as Spencer, yet derived all spiritual beings from the ghost-soul observed in dreams and visions. It has been recognized that the entire method of taking the concept of evolution from the field of biology and applying it in the field of human society or culture is an uncritical procedure.

After the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859 book after book appeared tracing the evolution of this or that social institution through definite stages. And so the evolution of religion has been arranged in definite stages, "which may be useful in making a text-book on sociology clear to the student, but do not necessarily



teach him the truth" (Kirkpatrick, *op. cit.*, p. 142). In order to understand the adjustments which science has made in treating this problem in anthropology, we must briefly call to mind the classifications of religion on the evolutionary basis which have been propounded. A familiar classification is that which traces the development of religion according to the following scheme:—

1. Primitive nature religions;
2. Animism and fetishism;
3. Polytheism represented by the mythologies of the ancient world, China, the Mediterranean empires, and the ancient Germans and Celts;
4. Polytheism united with a code of morality, like Brahmanism and Buddhism;
5. Monotheistic religions — Judaism, Christianity, Islam.

As regards this system, it is quite feasible to accept it as a taxonomic scheme. Even as we are able to accept the "periods" of geology as a systematic grouping or series, even when we decline to regard them as ages and eras, and as indicating a sequence of time. But the geologist does not simply say, In this order we classify the strata in order to have a scheme for systematic treatment; no, he says, in this order the strata of the earth were laid down. Just so anthropology has accepted for more than half a century a classification something like that given above as a definite sequence of stages through which the religions of the world have passed or are passing or will pass. Now, the remarkable phenomenon observable to-day is what might be called a revolt against the evolutionary scheme of religion. Especially our American anthropologists have in recent years announced a sharply critical attitude over against a presentation of this kind. The complaint is loud and insistent that in assuming that religion passes through specific stages there is a gross fallacy, a begging of the question, which assumes a sequence of stages instead of deriving inductively the change from form to form by recording the observation of such occurrence in each tribe of people.

Professor Kirkpatrick represents the most extreme form of negative criticism of Christianity and the Bible. He has nothing but scorn for Fundamentalism and regards the gospels as containing "a vast amount of material added to enhance the apparent supernatural power of Jesus" (*op. cit.*, p. 444). But his contempt for traditional Christianity is not a whit more outspoken than his disavowal of the evolution of religion. He points out the obstacles to this point of view that have developed in the field of anthropology and history. There has been a diffusion of religious thought rather than a straight-line development of religion through successive stages. In the official



history of particular groups it is found that one religion borrows from another. Some stages are skipped entirely, as when animistic tribes are converted to Christianity. Animism, totemism, ancestor-worship, polytheism, henotheism, and monotheism still serve as terms for the classification of the major types of religion; to the modern student they no longer represent the stages through which religions must pass in accordance with the law of evolution. "The religion of to-day is the product of a thousand different streams of cultural development in constant interaction rather than of any inner principle of growth. . . . It has been argued that most of the evolutionary schemes are based on pure assumption, and it is also true that many are contrary to the historical facts in their assumed sequence. . . . There is good reason to believe that some peoples of low material culture approach as closely to monotheism as does historic Christianity" (Kirkpatrick, *op. cit.*, p. 145).

One of the earliest students of anthropology to break the spell which had held ethnologists in thrall since the publication of Tylor's *Primitive Culture* was Andrew Lang. His *Making of Religion* appeared some forty years ago, impressed many with the charm of its liquid style, but found only uncomprehending eyes so far as the mass of anthropologists was concerned. To-day, Lang experiences a revival of no mean proportion in the discussion of this topic. It was he who first directed the attention of students to the "high gods," the "creator gods," worshiped among peoples of low culture—the Australians, the Zulus, and others. "Over and over again Lang pointed out that there is no necessity that gods be developed from ghosts and that it is very difficult, if such development be assumed, to explain the highly moral qualities of a Supreme Being. How, he asks, could a righteous God have developed out of the ghost of a dirty and maleficent medicine man?" (p. 152). Not only that, but Lang refuses to credit the existence of high gods among savages to a process of borrowing from others. He assumed a very ancient belief in supreme beings which has degenerated under the influence of mythology and later animistic conceptions. Moreover, Lang comes close to the position in the first chapter in Romans when he speculates on the origin of idolatry. "It would be easy for a ghost cult to crowd out the God cult, for the ghosts in a way are more serviceable, less impartial, more subject to bribes, more approachable, and more likely to be served by cunning priests" (Kirkpatrick, *op. cit.*, p. 153).

It was P. Radlin who in his *Monotheism among Primitive Peoples* revived Lang's theory of an original monotheism. And others have gone so far as claiming for humanity a general stage of ancient culture "having as one characteristic the belief in a high god, dwelling in the sky, eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, moral, asexual,



worshiped not in temples, but by spontaneous, unstereotyped prayer" (*op. cit.*, p. 154).

Theories of religious progression fundamentally erred by not distinguishing between the different levels of culture found in the uncivilized world, the great difference in the cultural pattern and background and even of cultural advance and attainment. In characterizing the older ethnologists, Prof. Albert Muntzsch (St. Louis University) says in his *Cultural Anthropology*: "Facts have been picked from here, there, and everywhere over the habitable globe and lumped together without rime or reason. . . . The lessons these criticisms suggest have been an integral and highly important factor in bringing about the cautious and rigidly objective attitude that at present characterizes the great bulk of cultural anthropologists. . . . Adventurous dogmatism has given place to an almost timid agnosticism" (p. 283). No longer will an ethnologist to-day follow the method of Spencer, who had a large number of assistants scour the literature of travel and anthropology for data of pagan practise and belief and then would classify these in his *Principles of Sociology* according to the viewpoints of evolutionary progress. Fraser's enormous collection *The Golden Bough*, in 12 volumes, and his *Folk-lore in the Old Testament* are almost worthless except as collections of source material, due to the same inherent error. Heavy execution has been wrought against these artificial constructs by the Kulturkreis-philosophers of Germany and Austria, among whom F. Graebner and B. Ankermann of the Berlin Ethnological Museum and W. Schmidt of Vienna are the chief representatives. The nucleus of the Kulturkreistheorie is that culture radiated in successive waves from definite centers, which probably all lie in Asia. These sequences of cultures are called "culture-cycles" or "culture-complexes," which here and there still remain intact, but which more often have been overlaid by subsequent waves and become confused with them. "The elements of each stream of culture must be determined and traced back to their point of departure. Each one of these streams of culture once formed a complete whole; each had its own forms of religion or mythology, of social organization" (Muntzsch, *op. cit.*, p. 13). The special claim made for this method is that the inclusion of various cultural elements in compact groups or cycles is not based upon a *a priori* "evolutionary" schemes, but upon careful examination of the data of culture. Other American writers, too, have found the principle of culture diffusion much more scientific than the old evolutionary viewpoint. J. H. Landman has contributed an essay to the *Michigan Law Review* in which he finds that also the development of human laws is the result of environment and of cultural diffusion rather than of growth from within. In fact, there has been no such thing as an "evolution of morality"; man has always acknowledged



the moral law, even as some form of religious belief is now recognized among all peoples. Muntsch declares that the belief in a Supreme Being—who may be a strictly theistic creator, a moral lawgiver, or a remote shadowy deity—is found among three-fourths of the world's "primitives" (*op. cit.*, p. 268).

As in biology, so in anthropology science has unlearned a great deal of what formerly passed as knowledge. Cultural facts are a bewildering tangle. So little has at the present time been explored that the principal workers in this field expect "many decades" to pass before definite theories can be formulated (Muntsch, *op. cit.*, p. 279). It is even being asserted now that "there is no anthropological evidence that in any sense militates against belief in primitive revelation" (*op. cit.*, p. 288).

We have no space to outline the contributions of the American school of historical ethnology represented by Franz Boas, R. H. Lowie, and many students of American Indian belief and ceremonial, except to say that this school investigates each primitive culture in its own restricted aspect of time and location and in its relation to surrounding cultures. Not from a dominating theory of evolutionary progress, but from working over the ethnographical collections of large museums the culture-area concept and its method was born. The change from the old to the new is lucidly set forth by Alexander Goldenweiser in a chapter contributed to *History and Prospects of the Social Sciences* (Knopf, 1925). A division of this chapter is entitled "The Downfall of Evolutionism." The author complains that the older school was satisfied with low standards of scholarship in authenticating the facts of pagan religions—depending in part on stray travelers, prejudiced historians, and government agents. He asks: "What good was there in such raw material? What was worse, the facts were secured by a sort of literary kidnaping. They were torn forcibly from their historic homes to figure in evolutionary dissertations as cultural waifs, deprived of their local associations and chronological antecedents. When thus severed from the soil of historic reality, facts could be made to speak any tongue, to serve any dogma. . . . Was not uniformity of cultural change one of the evolutionary tenets, the justice of which was first to be demonstrated by the comparative procedure? Thus, instead of providing proof of evolution the evolutionist was merely chasing his own tail" (*The Social Sciences*, p. 222). As opposed to this rigid scheme, "it was shown that both evidence and probability were against the assumption of a single unilinear development in social organization, religion, art, material culture. . . . Evidence was produced to show that the belief in a Superior Being was perhaps older than was once supposed. . . . Stages became so confused as to resemble a network rather than a ladder, and the prehistory of culture once more appeared as a set



of problems, many of them barely broached" (*op. cit.*, p. 222 f.). To add a final parallel with organic evolution, which now is faced with a gigantic problem in the face of emergences or mutations, — sudden appearances of new forms rather than gradual transformation, — also the comparative study of religions now recognizes "that relatively sudden change is at least as characteristic of the developmental process as is gradual transformation" (*op. cit.*, p. 228).

As in the study of plant and animal forms, so in the research devoted to comparative religion the evolutionary basis has been shattered, and the present task is concerned with patient registration and classification of facts, with a minimum of generalization and theory.

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