

Paganism and the Sense of Song

By Victor B. Neuburg

Originally published in the 19 January 1907 issue of *The Agnostic Journal*; London, England, pages 34-36.

PAGANISM is an attitude of mind towards Nature; it corresponds to the emotional plane, which preceded the mental in the history of mind, and hence Paganism is natural to children and savages. And inasmuch as Paganism represents a more purely natural attitude towards Nature than those that are the outcome of later and more extended culture, in it may be found the key to many "mysteries" that elude the scientific specialist and the university professor.

The sense of sound is, I think, the earliest to receive impressions from what is exquisitely called by Emerson the "Over-soul"; music is said to be the youngest of the arts, but music is sound perceived through the medium of the intellect, and it is sound perceived through the medium of the emotional nature with which I am now chiefly concerned.

The cry of the wind skirling and whistling through the trees; the splash and call of flowing water; the yearning and moaning of the sea; the patter of raindrops on sand, fell upon the ear of primitive man, and he heard, without understanding, the myriad voices of the forces of Nature. And his was the wisdom of the child—with a difference; child-likeness was mingled with human experience, and the gods came into being. Primitive man may have been wiser than he knew, for, after all, we have no certain knowledge of the beginning and ending of the scale of life; Pan may manifest where our ears are too dull to catch the notes. To the poet, in many respects a "return" to a primitive "type," the sea actually does speak, and the rain and the wind murmur secrets of the beginning of things.

Primitive man was rather a poet than a scientist; intuitive rather than reflective, and thus the modern creeds, that are lineal descendants of the older ones, contradict purely scientific comparisons. But the perfect creed is a blend of science and poetry. To science is the power of progress, to poetry the power of vision. Either without the other is comparatively valueless. For this reason we, as Freethinkers, attack the popular conceptions as being neither poetic nor scientific, and therefore useless as factors of progress.

The seeming contradiction between science and poetry is due to the materialisation of symbols and mental concepts. Primitive man, to whom the great realities were the stars, and the sun, and the wind, and the sea, was not

a Theologian, but a Seer. The modern creeds are due to a tendency of men to reverence the past, merely because it *is* the past,—possibly a subconscious inherited reminiscence of ancestor-worship. Owing to this strong and unfortunate tendency, that which was originally and rightly intended as a symbol, becomes mistaken for the thing-in-itself, and the symbol thus loses all its significance, and becomes a mere fetish. At the same time, the thing-in-itself (or, rather, the conception of it), degenerates into a mere formula. This is what has happened to the modern religions; to the vast majority of their votaries their original meaning and significance are utterly obscured, and their spirit is dead, or at least so soundly sleeping, that nothing less than the clarion voice of a Master could succeed in recalling them to life. Thus it is that the modern men who go straight to Nature for their impressions are infinitely more religious than the professional Theologians who trade (probably in most cases innocently and ignorantly) on cut-and-dried formulæ and the blood and bones of dead gods.

To modern thought the old, crude, coarsened symbols are unpalatable, and the power of leadership in the only real sense—that of discriminative appreciation, as opposed to that of slavery—is in inverse proportion to "orthodoxy." The men who, directly or indirectly, chiefly influence democracy—with which, till the next great reaction, lies the future—are Spencer, Darwin, Swinburne, Whitman, and their disciples. The chief cry, even in the retrograde and discredited [exoteric] Christian churches, is to-day for *breadth*, and this is an intensely significant fact. The very votaries of one of the stupidest and most impossible superstitions the worlds has ever seen are exclaiming against and explaining away—in itself a liberal education!—the crudities and doctrinal immoralities they were taught in their childhood. The new reformed school of Christian Theology—the Campbell-Lodge one—suffers at present from excessive sentimentality, but even this is infinitely better than the old-fashioned Christian Materialism, and, after all, it is due to reaction. When the balance is struck the New Religionist will find himself not far from the Humanist and the Pagan; and, inasmuch as the reforming religious impulse came to Christianity from without rather than from within, the "New Religionist" will have to walk by far the greater part of the way towards reconciliation.

Real progress consists of schism and reunion. The process is as follows:—A small party of "heretics" perceives a new truth, for which offence it is damned by the orthodox multitude, the extent of the damnation (damnation is, after all, a matter of degree) being coincident with the power and will of the majority. When the heretics have absolutely proved their point, the majority slowly, and at first unwillingly, takes steps towards reconciliation, which idea is welcomed by everyone except the fanatics on both sides. If the heretic smiles sarcastically to himself, it is no-one's business but his own, and he is surely justified. The very stupidest majority can scarcely resist fact when it has been levelled down to its intellect, and it is mere narrowness for the heretic to

grudge the acceptance of *his* knowledge—albeit unwillingly—by his late opponents, on the ground that it *is* his knowledge, and not his opponents'. Let us, therefore, be thankful for small mercies, and if the "New Theology" becomes impregnated by *real* spiritualism and secularism, which are the same thing, it seems to me that we should rather rejoice at the sign of progress, than be furious because our opponents are not "whole-hoggers."

Whole-hogging is essentially an amusement for the very strong and the very bigoted. True wisdom, it seems to the present writer, consists in eclecticism, and not in surrender of the intellect to a "party," and an appeal to a "leader" in every difficulty. That is the way Churches are formed, and churches of all kinds are essentially for the use of those who depute others to do their thinking for them.

Self-unfoldment is eventually the only thing worth striving after. This sounds selfish; but in reality it is nothing of the kind; for those who are best able to influence and assist others are obviously they who are in some way or other are superior to those they would assist. On the other hand, to some types self-unfoldment comes by helping others. But every thinking man must discover the particular brand of egoism or altruism best suited to his own particular soul. All this has been superbly expressed in a sonnet by Laurence Binyon:—

THE CLUE

Life from sunned peak, witched wood, and flowery dell
A hundred ways to eager spirit woos,
To roam, to dream, to conquer, to rebel;
Yet in its ear, ever a voice cries, Choose!

So many ways, yet only one shall find;
So many joys, yet only one shall bless;
So many creeds, yet for each pilgrim mind
One road to the divine forgetfulness.

Tongues talk of truth, but truth is only there
Where the heart runs to be outpoured utterly,
A stream whose motion is its home,—to dare
Follow one faith and in that faith be free.

O Love, since I have found one truth so true,
I would lose all, to lose my loss in you.

Laurence Binyon finds his particular clue in Love; whether Love is the clue for everyone, I cannot say. From the point of view of the initiate, "God" may

be "love"; to those who, like the present writer, are not initiates, and whom honesty compels to be Agnostic, love is but a manifestation of Pan, through perhaps it may be said to be the fairest of his manifestations.

Pan is even now being re-born—a birth whereof the intellectually observant may quite easily assure themselves—and, as is ever the case with the birth of gods, a new faculty is coincidentally evolving amongst men; this new faculty is known by the name of "Cosmic Consciousness," and consists of harmony between Nature and the Soul. At present the Cosmic experience is comparatively rare, and where it exists it is usually outside the control of him who experiences it. Pan is ever born, for Nature is ever manifesting in fresh forms.

Entrance into Nirvana or complete Cosmic Consciousness, is obtained only after repeated manifestations upon the physical plane. Cosmic Consciousness is unexplainable in words; but to those who have experienced it, it is so real that ever afterwards ordinary life and thought take on a more or less unreal appearance. To the orthodox Secularist, all this will be the greatest heresy; but, none the less, the present writer must, in honesty, say that almost the only times he has really lived have been when this new Consciousness has manifested itself. Cosmic Consciousness, by the way, is no more connected with the clairvoyance and clairaudience of the Spiritualists than with physical sight and hearing.

Sings Ethel Wheeler (in "The Year's Horoscope"):—

I cross the rim of sense, and reach the deep,—
The vast devoid of sight or sound of strife,—
Vitality unnourished by the breath:
The silence of a sleep more still than sleep,—
The passion of a life more quick than life:
Not sleep, not life,—but death, and after-death.

If any proof be needed to show that Cosmic Consciousness is in no wise connected with orthodox "religion," it may be found in the fact that this newly-evolving, but by no means new, "sense" was strongly developed in Richard Jefferies, an Atheist, a record of whose experiences may be found in "The Story of My Heart." The writings of "Michael Wood" and Arthur Machen are exceedingly illuminating if they be intelligently read, because they contain many luminous hints on matters connected with Cosmic Consciousness and the origin of religion. I should, perhaps, add that "Michael Wood" writes from the Theosophical, and Arthur Machen from (I believe) the Catholic, standpoint.

This Cosmic Consciousness it was that in earlier days evolved the gods, who, as Blake says, reside in the human breast. Occultly, man corresponds to

the universe in the relationship of microcosm to macrocosm; the development of "the god within," or the gradual unfolding of the sheaths of the Self is taught esoterically in all religions as the *summon bonum*, and I think that Cosmic Consciousness is the "outward and visible sign" of this process of unfoldment. To the unthinking, heaven and hell, "God" and the Devil, Christ and the Holy Ghost, are actual physical realities; to those who possess insight, these "things" are symbols for various experiences of the Soul as it is drawn alternately towards and away from the underlying Reality whence it sprang.

This underlying Reality can neither be destroyed nor explained; let not those who attack misunderstood and perhaps unnecessary symbols fall into the delusion that they are destroying the real Religion; let not those who "explain" religion imagine that they can enlighten the unawakened without symbolism. For Religion is an affair neither of the intellect nor of the emotions, but of the individual Soul, and the paths to the "divine forgetfulness" are infinite in number, and not to be formulated in creeds.

Letters to the Editor

The Dying Creed

J. A. Reid

SIR,—Mr. Victor B. Neuburg, in his interesting article, "Paganism and the Sense of Song" in last weeks' *A.J.*, remarks: "Whole-hogging is essentially an amusement for the very strong and the very bigoted." Has not the time arrived when those who profess to be Agnostics should finally burn their boats and discard the idea of God and immortality? We are just now hearing a good deal of the "New Theology" which candidly critics justly say is not theology or new. It seems to be a formula invented by some preachers who have not the courage to accept facts, but who are finding that Freethought criticism is effectively doing its work.

I suppose the best part of a million of money will be spent on the new Liverpool Cathedral without a word of protest from those who are supposed to guide the destinies of this nation. What sort of religion is to be propagated there when it is built? The Christian religion has been riddled with criticism, and yet the priests try to go on just the same.

there is a significant article in the January issue of the *Edinburgh Review*, entitled "The Age of Reason." John Morley's contributions to Freethought literature are belatedly reviewed. Of course, some effort is made to reconcile Freethought and clericalism, but the seriousness of the issue is not ignored. The pious *Daily Mail*, which at least knows the commercial value of Christianity, talks of the incalculable benefits the Christian religion has conferred on the human race. What are they?

Think of the bloodshed and the millions of money expended to propagate these legends. Is it not time to cry "halt"? Cannot the effort and money be spent more judiciously by serving humanity than by worshipping a mythical God? Who would care to live for billions of years? We can cultivate all the virtues without surrendering our reason.—Yours truly,

A Reply

V.B. Neuburg

SIR,—I crave some space in which to reply to the remarks made by my friend, Mr. J. A. Reid, in the *A.J.* for January 26th.

Mr. Reid asks if the time has not "arrived when those who profess to be Agnostics should finally burn their boats and discard the idea of God and immortality?"

The best way will be for me to endeavour to make my position to Mr. Reid. Let me say that I do not "discard the idea of God and immortality" because I am an Agnostic; but I am an Agnostic because I hold certain views upon these questions. In other words, I do not try to shape my views into accordance with a system of thought; but I am compelled to subscribe to a certain system because it happens to be in consonance with my views. This seems to me to be a more philosophical attitude than that advocated by Mr. Reid. I dislike dogmatic credos (and non-credos) because I think that they are bars to brotherhood.

My friend's idea that all Agnostics should adopt certain hard-and-fast attitudes towards "God" and "immortality" savours—to my nostrils, at least—too much of the religious system that I suppose most readers of the *A.J.* have outgrown.

I want to say a few words in regard to the ideas of God and Immortality.

As to "God," I am quite Agnostic; indeed, I call myself an Atheist, which I claim to be, in the real connotation of that term: I am, so far as I know,

without a personal God. An *impersonal* God is inconceivable to me; but I do not—because I cannot—deny the possibility of His or Its existence. On that particular point I am Agnostic.

As regards "Immortality," I am Agnostic; but I am pretty well convinced that the *Ego* persists, for a time at least, after the death of the physical body. It would take up too much space to go into the matter at all fully here; and I am loath to raise in the *A.J.* a controversy that bids fair to become perennial. For those who want to investigate there are nearly always the means at hand, and I do not pose as a teacher.

And surely the attitude of Agnosticism towards "Immortality" is a non-committal one, rather than one of absolute denial? Is not this latter attitude rather dogmatic for an Agnostic—a non knower?

I am glad Mr. Reid found my article interesting.—Yours truly,

Agnosticism and Atheism

J. A. Reid

SIR,—I would like to thank Mr. Neuburg for his letter in which he further explains his views respecting Agnosticism and Atheism. He says he is pretty well convinced that the *ego* persists, for a time at least, after the death of the physical body. Probably my views on the question of "God" and immortality are now fairly familiar to your readers. I am afraid I cannot share Mr. Neuburg's views respecting a future existence. As to the Christian God idea, it is unthinkable to me now. If such a monster did exist I would not worship him. Who believes in the doctrine of eternal punishment now? And what becomes of the Christian plan of salvation? Here we are doubtless on common ground.

If the *Ego* of man persists after death, which I do not believe, a similar condition of things would occur in regard to the lower animals, seeing their common origin. I do not think consciousness can exist apart from the brain. The doctrine of annihilation is not exactly consoling, but the brain reels at the Christian idea of immortality. I believe in natural causation. I think we might eliminate the word "God." It is a meaningless expression.—Yours truly,