

The Origins of Pagan Religions

The relation of Christianity to other world religions was an extremely controversial issue in Schelling's day. A corollary issue concerned the ultimate source and historical development of those other religions. It was a general assumption that they could not have derived directly from God. On the other hand, their resemblance in many significant respects to the "one true religion" posed a puzzle with potentially troubling implications. For how could the sublime worship of God appear even remotely similar to the pagan idolatries?

It is worthwhile to consider briefly what some of the alternative positions were. The often heated polemics accompanying the disagreements are especially revealing of the operative pre-understandings as to what would constitute religious truth. There were at least five clearly distinguishable views.

The nonreligious hypothesis. Perhaps the most widely held view denied that the original impulse of pagan myths was of a religious nature at all. In the course of time, it was conceded, the gradual accumulation of popular superstitions might have assumed a religious or quasi-religious character. But in order to determine the root meanings of myths, one would have to penetrate beyond these later interpolations.

What, then were the "root meanings" of myths supposed to be? According to this view, they originated in the observation either of seasonal variations, historical events, geographical features, linguistic peculiarities, or numerous other empirical phenomena. Noticing these things, the early peoples allegedly looked for patterns and principles of order that could help to make the diversity of phenomena more readily comprehensible. Myths, then, originated as primitive "theories" about the natural or social worlds. They were attempts to codify and organize what the senses perceived. The other typical characteristics of myths—including their anthropomorphism, the liberal use of fantasy, symbolism, exaggerations, dreamlike associations, otherworldly speculations, etc.—resulted simply from the undisciplined and immature quality of the mythmakers'

minds. They were not, however, essential or necessary features of myths, and could safely be eliminated from consideration.

The task of the scholar, therefore, was to get to the core of myths by paring away all such peripheral details. In the following chapter, I shall return to some of the proposed interpretations that emerged out of this approach. But for now let us turn to those other thinkers who insisted on seeing myths as fundamentally religious in character.

The corrupted truth hypothesis. A second, very prevalent position maintained that myths represented confused and corrupted relics of the divine revelation bestowed by God on humankind at the beginning of time, a faithful preservation of which was recorded in the Pentateuch. But the pagan remnants, preserved in garbled form by the descendants of Ham (the disrespectful son of Noah whose offspring, as recounted in Genesis 9, were accursed and base), had lost the original monotheistic teaching and fallen prey to false beliefs and idolatry.

The interpretation of myths as deriving from an original monotheism goes back to St. Martin of Braga (c. 560).¹ This theory has the advantage of recognizing the religious significance of myths, but at the cost of radically misconstruing their import. Martin, for example, insisted that the deities of ancient Greece and Rome were actually apostate angels who had fallen from Heaven along with Lucifer and the other demons. In the seventeenth century, John Milton included a dramatic representation of the same theory in his *Paradise Lost*. Among the angels cast with Satan into perdition, according to Milton,

The chief were those who, from the pit of Hell
Roaming to seek their prey on Earth, durst fix
Their seats, long after, next the seat of God,
Their altars by his altar, gods adored
Among the nations round, . . .²

Other variants of the same basic idea can be found in the writings of Gerhard Voß and Hugo Grotius, who derived pagan mythologies from perverse distortions of the primal revelation.³

Schelling was scornful of such theories. He pointed out that they resorted to the notion of "revelation" (*Offenbarung*) in an entirely arbitrary manner. Not only did the word by itself explain nothing, but it also presupposed an original receptivity to divine influences on the part of the ancestors of the human race. The possibility of this receptivity, by Schelling's time presumed lost, was uncritically assumed and surely no less in need of explanation than the revelation itself. Indeed, inasmuch as the

only evidence in support of this original receptivity was the existence of mythology itself, one might with as much justice use mythology to explain the possibility of revelation, as the other way around.⁴

The developed superstition hypothesis. Stimulated by the recent discoveries in Africa and America of tribal societies that were rife with animism and fetishism, some observers proposed that the classical forms of paganism in ancient Greece and Rome might have descended from similarly "primitive" antecedents. Charles de Brosses was among the first to put this view forward in his *Du culte des dieux fetiches* (1760).⁵

Since this interpretation of myths anticipates the general outlook that still prevails today, it may seem especially attractive to us. Yet Schelling voiced a number of reservations. Observing that many "primitive" peoples throughout history have entertained superstitious beliefs concerning the nature and properties of physical objects in their environment, he asked whether such false beliefs also qualify as being "religious." Does the presumption, for example, that dryads or fairies exist really suffice to make one religious, or would this belief not be more aptly classified as a crude misconception about the nature of reality?⁶

These are indeed penetrating questions. If the concept of "religion" entails the notion of an actual encounter with the divine—even if only a misguided or inadequate encounter—then this definition does appear to involve two presuppositions: (a) that there does exist something divine to be encountered; and (b), that this something can be encountered in and through a human, cultural phenomenon. The real issue with which Schelling grappled concerned the question: When does a human belief or activity qualify as genuinely religious? Even if supernatural beings or paranormal powers were real, would belief in them necessarily suffice to constitute a religious faith? If not, then what would? On the other hand, if fetishism, etc., are not religious phenomena, then what are they? Clearly, the answers to these questions depend upon one's prior set of ontological commitments as to the true nature of religion and its objects. Schelling's decision to treat as fundamentally irreligious those theories of pagan religions which attempt to derive them from animism or fetishism must be understood on his own terms.

The progressive revelation hypothesis. With the Enlightenment came a number of new theories seeking to mediate between the presumptive truth of Christianity and the alien contents of paganism. Since the Renaissance, it had become increasingly agreed upon that even these religions possessed much wisdom and spiritual insight. Further complicat-

ing matters was the discovery of evidently “mythical” elements within the Bible itself.⁷ This discovery threatened to undermine the comfortable distinction between “natural” and “revealed” religions. If pagan religions were as capable of containing spiritual truths as the Christian faith was of containing myths—if there were demonstrable historical and cultural connections between them—then how was one to maintain the conviction that the latter was indubitably superior to the former?

In 1780 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing published *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, a daring and remarkable proposal for the reconciliation of Christian with pre-Christian religions.⁸ In essence, his idea was to interpret God as standing in the role of a religious educator (*Erzieher*) vis-à-vis the human race. Because early humanity lacked the requisite maturity and moral sophistication to comprehend a fully developed monotheism, God revealed his nature and principles in a step-wise fashion: Divinely inspired prophets began with the notion of a stern national deity, then progressively imparted the loftier values of forgiveness, love, the brotherhood of all peoples, the immortality of the soul, as well as the singularity and universality of God. Lessing affirmed, moreover, that all religious truths originally communicated by God via special acts of revelation would ultimately be recognized as truths of reason, accessible to the unaided power of rational reflection.⁹ In this way, Lessing sought to establish a continuous line of development running through all the world religions and, at the same time, to bridge the gap between “revealed” and “natural” theology.

Schelling greatly esteemed Lessing’s work, acknowledging that this “wonderful man” had had a considerable influence on his thought.¹⁰ His primary criticism was that the *Erziehung* essay remained a preliminary sketch, leaving unsolved major difficulties concerning the nature of religious truth and the content of mythology.¹¹ In particular, Schelling objected to Lessing’s typically rationalistic assumption that the essence of religion consists in a doctrine, be it moral or theoretical. But, as Schelling was at pains to demonstrate, the religion of our prehistoric ancestors was not of a doctrinal nature at all; whereas that of more developed cultures always consists of an inseparable synthesis between doctrine and actuality (*Eigentlichkeit*).¹² What sort of “actuality” was Schelling thinking of here? This is a question to which we shall frequently have occasion to return, because it goes to the very heart of Schelling’s entire philosophical program.

The primordial revelation hypothesis. A final development of great importance for Schelling’s thought regarding the origins and nature of

pagan religions was the translation, at the close of the eighteenth century, of Vedic texts from India. These ancient scriptures had mythical elements often strikingly reminiscent of the Greco-Roman as well as Hebrew traditions. At the same time, they also contained passages of deep mystical speculations, tending toward either a monistic or, alternatively, a monotheistic worldview. Because the sudden appearance of these texts was so important for setting the basic tone of the discussion and establishing the problematic that Schelling and his contemporaries faced, it is worth mentioning their early publication history.

As early as 1784, William Jones, founder and first president of the Asian Society of Calcutta, had published some of the Vedic myths and pointed to their affinities with familiar Western motifs.¹³ Jones also translated the *Īśa Upanishad*, which features meditations on the nondual "Atman" believed to pervade all finite beings.¹⁴ Then, at the turn of the century, Anquetil-Duperron released a stilted Latin translation, which in turn was based on a Persian translation, of the original Sanskrit versions of principal Upanishads.¹⁵ (It was this edition, incidentally, that was to have such a decisive impact on the thought of Arthur Schopenhauer.) In 1808, Friedrich Schlegel issued a ground-breaking philological and philosophical study, including translations of excerpts from the *Ramayana* and *Bhagavad Gita*, both strongly monotheistic in flavor.¹⁶ One year later, M. E. de Polier brought out a work entitled *Mythologie des Indous*, based on Sanskrit texts obtained by her uncle, A. de Polier, during his tour of duty in India. This book, which called attention to similarities between the Hindu and biblical traditions, exercised a great influence on many scholars in the early part of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Still further translations from the Upanishads were provided by the Indian scholar Rammohun Roy¹⁸ and by the famed British philologist, Henry Thomas Colebrooke.¹⁹

The sudden infusion of all these religious documents from the East, happening as it did during the height of the Romantic period, brought about a virtual revolution in the attitudes and theories of numerous thinkers. According to Schelling, William Jones was the first to elaborate the idea that all the ancient mythologies, including the Hebraic, were merely fragments of an originally far more inspiring and complete religious system: the primordial revelation (*Uroffenbarung*) of God. The primary content of this religion was supposed to consist in the affirmation of the Supreme Being's absolute unity and in the repudiation of any doctrines or tendencies that conceivably could lead to polytheism. Jones's theory bore obvious affinities to the corrupted truth hypothesis described earlier on pages 18–19, but with the essential difference, according to Schelling, that even the books of Moses were treated as neither more nor less privileged

than were other sacred scriptures as witnesses to a lost golden age.²⁰ The human beings of those times, ancestors of all the diverse peoples and nations that came after (following the "Fall" from Paradise), were originally divided by neither linguistic nor cultural differences. In his enthusiasm for the Indian religions, Jones was inclined to locate the ancestral home of all humanity somewhere between the Ganges and Indus rivers.

Closely analogous ideas were held by Friedrich Creuzer, whose massive study, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen* (1st ed., 1810–12), was to exercise a profound influence on Schelling, as well as on Hegel.²¹ Indeed, no writer would be cited with anywhere near the same frequency in Schelling's lectures on the *Philosophie der Mythologie*, and it is clear that Creuzer provided the major foundation of empirical data on which Schelling later drew to support his own theories.²² Creuzer's basic thesis about the origins of Greek mythology was that their deities and sacred myths had been transmitted from the Orient to the (proto-Greek) Pelasgians via missionizing priests from Egypt and the Orient. All of this supposedly happened in prehistoric times. In order to make their esoteric doctrines assimilable by the primitive Pelasgians, moreover, the priests from the East had veiled their doctrines in a rich but obscure symbolism.²³ Myths were told in order to represent on an esoteric level the symbols' deeper meanings.

Creuzer theorized that the original revelation of God must have presented him in his sublime unity. However, our prehistoric ancestors had understood this doctrine in a vaguely pantheistic manner, identifying God as the organic unity pervading the cosmos as a whole. Although very near to the truth, thought Creuzer, this doctrine was subject to a progressive erosion and loss of meaning, as the subordinate aspects and powers of God's order gradually came to be seen as separate deities in their own right. In this way, the primordial monotheism was lost, the popular myths diverged increasingly from their original symbolic meanings, polytheism was born, and in the process diluted traces of the ancient wisdom spread in numerous versions across the face of the earth. Hence, although no single historical culture possessed the whole truth of God, and although the different cultures' myths had all but lost their once-profound purport, scholarship could retrieve the meanings of the symbolism now lost in these myths and thereby reconstruct the originally revealed monotheistic faith.²⁴ Other notable figures who espoused similar or indirectly supportive positions were Henry Thomas Colebrooke²⁵ and especially Johann Joseph von Görres.²⁶

Collectively, all of these theories contributed to a rising interest in, and enthusiasm for, ancient Eastern religions. The notion that these religions

pointed back to the original revelation of God, as transmitted to the ancestors of the human race, had gained much currency in Schelling's time and decisively shaped the intellectual environment in which his study of mythology developed.²⁷ Nevertheless, the other, rival ideas about the origins of pagan religions remained popular among nineteenth-century scholars. Particularly strong contenders were theories that attempted to derive the pagan religions from nonreligious sources, such as fear of the unknown, confused attempts at explaining natural phenomena, or hero-worship. These will be explored in the next chapter. Schelling considered them all to be important alternatives and he devoted much effort to resolving the controversies of his day.²⁸

Moreover, he saw and drew attention to an underlying issue that most of his contemporaries either ignored or took for granted. Each of the presented options presupposed a Christocentric set of assumptions concerning the essential nature of religions in general—that is, concerning what the other faiths could teach and by what methods they typically inspired belief. Thus, for example, it was the unquestioned assumption of Christianity's preeminence as alone being true that led to easy speculations about paganism as deriving from brute ignorance and superstition or, worse, from the corrupting influence of the devil and his cohorts. Similarly, the speculations about a primordial monotheism or pantheism were rooted in seemingly axiomatic ideas about both the essence of religion and the nature of early humanity. But how, Schelling asked, could any of these theories be upheld except on the prior basis of a definitive understanding of religious meaning as such?

Schelling early recognized that questions concerning the origins and nature of pagan religions and their relations to Christianity could not be resolved satisfactorily through mere reliance on scriptural or institutional authorities. For, as the rationalists had long been at pains to point out, the possible validity even of suprarational authorities could only be established and upheld, if at all, by appeals to the bar of reason. This entailed that a sound theory of knowledge was necessary. Furthermore, inseparable from epistemology and equally necessary was a fundamental ontology. Schelling was fully cognizant of this. For only in terms of an established conception of being as such was it feasible to think of erecting any theory purporting to deal with that special kind of being (or privileged way of apprehending being) which would belong to the objects of religion. In order to deal with mythology in a systematic manner, therefore, it was incumbent on thinkers first of all to work out and defend a comprehensive philosophical basis.