

BACKGROUND TO THE SPIRIT

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.

THE fundamental reality of all early religions is that of union, union with the family, with the tribe, with the rest of creation, with God. There is a general consensus of opinion on this point among anthropologists and other students of the prehistoric and the primitive. Thus, "The savage seldom or never thinks of the individual as having a distinct personality; all tends to be merged in collective or corporate personality, or is dissolved in fortuitous relationships between men, animals, plants and cosmic and other inanimate objects and forces."¹ But it would be a mistake to regard this as purely collective, for within the whole cosmic order the primitive man regarded each individual thing as a person, whether in fact it was animate or inanimate: "The ancients . . . saw man always as part of society, and society as imbedded in nature and dependent upon cosmic forces. For them nature and man did not stand in opposition and did not, therefore, have to be apprehended by different modes of cognition. . . . Natural phenomena were regularly conceived in terms of cosmic events." The fundamental difference between the attitudes of modern and ancient man as regards the surrounding world is this: for modern, scientific man the phenomenal world is primarily an 'it'; for ancient—and also for primitive—man it is a 'thou'. Primitive man does not impart human characteristics to the inanimate world. He 'simply does not know an inanimate world. For this reason he does not 'Personify' inanimate phenomena, nor does he fill an empty world with the ghosts of the dead, as "animism" would have us believe'.²

There was thus a great community of life, every kind of being playing its part in this common life from the gods or hidden powers, down to the sticks and stones. Men and gods formed a group, but this did not exclude the rest of the universe. There was in this way some perception of a hierarchy of persons, within this

¹ *From the Stone Age to Christianity*. By W. F. Albright. (Baltimore, 1940), pp. 124ff.

² 'Myth and Reality'. By H. & M. A. Frankfort, in *Before Philosophy*, by various authors (Pelican). pp. 12, 14.

vast community. At the apex of this hierarchy was some sort of Supreme Being. This being did not always exercise any very specific function in the religion of the people nor receive any unique worship but it appears that it was only the increasing number and importance of the lesser gods that tended to obscure the central and unique being—a fact that offers a strange parallel with the Platonic and gnostic hierarchies, in which the intermediary powers so often occupied the attention of the worshippers.³ The sense of the community of all creatures is inextricably linked with the sense of the dependence on all higher powers, whether they be regarded as many (and by implication, intermediary) or as the One.

In all this the primitive peoples showed themselves faithful to the natural law of their being and consequently fulfilled in its essence the law of religion which acknowledges this dependence and solidarity. St Thomas says that by the virtue of religion man shows reverence to God 'according to his nature (*ratio*), in so far as he is the first principle of creation and the government of things' (II-IIae, 81, 3). And in this he reveals the double relationship—each man related to God, 'each man related to all creation, the universe which is one because wholly and as a whole dependent upon the Creator and destined through his government to the one end'. There is a sense, therefore, in which every created being, however dumb, shows its reverence to the Creator by its dependence and its acceptance of his dispositions. It seems then that the nature of things demands this community of creatures, a religious community held in one by its religion. This was the primitive spirit in religion and one that gave great importance to family and tribe and other natural associations among these creatures.

The Jewish religion, fostered and protected by the Creator in the centre of his creation and as the central thread throughout time, will be of this same natural texture, though purified, strengthened and perfected by supernatural grace and revelation. The most powerful of all this purification was of course the preservation of the transcendence and uniqueness of the Supreme Being, of Jahwe the God of the tribe and the God of the universe. This excluded a great deal of complicated hierarchy in the community of beings and placed all reality and all holiness in the One

3 Cf. *Traité d'Histoire des religions*. By Mircea Eliade (Paris, 1949). p. 34.

Being. Jahwe was, of course, associated with all natural phenomena. He showed his power in the storm; thunder was his voice and lightning was called Jahwe's 'fire' or his 'arrow' (Ps. 18, 15, etc.). When he gave the law to Moses he announced his presence 'by thunder, lightning and a thick smoke' (Exod. 19, 16). The Eternal one descended on to the mountain in the midst of the fire. The earth trembles at his footfall, the heavens are disturbed, and the clouds pour forth their rain. (Judges 5, 4.) (cf. Eliade, p. 90.) Psalm 103 overflows with the acknowledgment of God's activity in every aspect of nature.

O Lord, how manifold are thy works: in wisdom hast thou made them all, the earth is full of thy riches; so is this great and wide sea wherein are things creeping innumerable. . . . The glory of the Lord shall endure for ever: the Lord shall rejoice in his works. He looketh on the earth and it trembleth: he toucheth the hills and they smoke. (vv. 24, 25, 31, 32.)

Transcendent he remains, yet in the centre of all creation and direction he is concerned principally with man, or rather with a particular family of men, Israel, but every other being lies also under his care—he takes away their breath or gives it to them. 'Thou shalt send forth thy spirit and the face of the earth shall be renewed.' Jahwe was of course preserved from the immersion in worldly affairs, unlike the Hittite Teshub, the weather-god who carried lightning in his hand and waged war upon the Dragon but who was sometimes missing from the earth so that all fertility and life disappeared. (cf. *The Hittites*, by O. R. Gurney. Pelican. pp. 134 sq., 181 sq.). Jahwe was the God of Nature, but he was no nature-god.

It is interesting to note one of the human means that preserved the idea of Jahwe from losing its transcendence and becoming too mixed up with the vagaries of nature. The settled agriculturists naturally discerned the hidden powers at work in the regular movement of sowing and growing crops and especially in the mysteries of fertility. All that power was manifest out on the plains, in the valleys and in the descent of the rain from the hills. Hence the nature and fertility gods had to be approached as rather distant and terrifying powers to whom man had to pay his dues of corn, wine, oil, the tithe of all that he received from the good will of the god of Nature. Jahwe quite evidently held something of this position in the minds of the Israelites themselves, who received

their wheat and barley as well as their sheep and goats from the Lord. But for the nomad the deities had a much more intimate part to play in the family and tribe. The god was also a parent-god, a member of the family circle. The Hebrews being nomads were thus able to preserve their concept of Jahwe from too great an immersion in nature, so that the human rather than the 'nature' element predominated. 'He was a God of humanity rather than of nature: a God who could be thought of as like man who had been made in his image. His worship too was part of daily life but affected man's social relationships rather than his dealings with nature' (Scholfield, *Religious Background of the Bible*, 1944, p. 114).

In this way the true and full idea of the Godhead was preserved as a Person, acting by means of intellect and will and not merely as a natural force or himself subject to natural forces. At the same time the people were related to him as a Father, so that they retained their family, communal sense. Jahwe was the Supreme Person, to whom all the other persons of the universe were related, and in particular the persons of the Hebrew family. For them God was the next-of-kin, father, or even brother in a certain sense (Abijah or Ahijah), and their bond with him was a physical bond of similar nature with the family bond. St Luke's genealogy traces the family of Joseph right back to Adam and to God. Adam was of God and all these others were of Adam and so also of God. The Lord loved his people, protected them and fought for them, except when their transgression led him to be angry. He was in his supremacy of personality the Judge of all who gave and administered the Law and he was the guardian of the morals of his people.

The Hebrew relation to the intellectual will of Jahwe is extremely instructive from the point of view of our present subject. They had little conception of a permanent order of things existing as a clear pattern in the mind of God. In the external world of nature the wind blew where it listed and there was a certain air of the unexpected and the disorderly in the fires and storms. The plan of the universe did not appear to them as a great, rational machine in which everything played an inevitable and orderly part. God was unaccountable and therefore his people had to keep in the closest, constant touch with him in order to follow his personal direction. Persons rather than principles play the operative part in human life so that the Law is adhered to with such unflinching

tenacity, not because it represents the natural order of things—as in fact the Ten Commandments are according to the law of nature—but rather because it is the decreed will of Jahwe, made clear to his people. All things are in his care and nothing can be severed from him and continue to exist. The law of all things was therefore a bond between them and the Creator. This was not the intellectual order of the abstract ideas of things which fascinated the Greeks so intensely but which could remain so cold and remote from the life and reality of the world. Later, of course, the Jews turned from the Lord of the Law so that the remaining elements of the nature religion became transformed into a book religion. This written Torah did in fact preserve the unity of the Jews throughout the Diaspora, holding all the scattered Jews to one physical centre, the Temple. But it lacked the living cohesive effect of the dependence upon God's voice, the law being made manifest in every tempest, in the birth of a child or barrenness of a wife. The Book was not a system of abstract theories to delight the Greek speculative tendency, but it did become a deadening system of dictates and commands that gradually lost living contact with the Supreme Father.

Yet in this respect from the Law of the Father we can see the objective nature of the Jewish solidarity. It was the family code and the Father was the head of the family to whom he had given this testament in order that the tradition might preserve them always under the paternal roof. The primitive tribe of the Gilbert Isles in the Pacific have a saying still that sums up this bond of law and tradition under God. 'Each Karaki (history) has its own body from the generations of old. These are the words of our grandfathers' fathers, and then we pass them on to our children's children.' (*A Pattern of Islands*, by Arthur Grimble, p. 43.) For these islanders Paradise was the preserve of Nakaa the Judge, keeper of the gate of death, the Law-giver; but for the Hebrews Jahwe was constantly watching them and in their midst: 'But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded', says Solomon. 'Yet . . . hearken unto the prayer which thy servant prayeth before thee today; that thine eyes may be open towards this house night and day, even toward the place of which thou hast said My name shall be there . . .' (3 Kings 8, 27-29). The Law came always in the name

of Jahwe and as it were from the very look of his face.

This paternal code was not couched in abstract terms of justice and right, but in dictates about the concrete way of life. To a large extent this people of Jahwe were to be kept as part of his household by observing the elaborate religious ritual of first-fruits and sacrifices and libations. But the dictates applied equally to the following of righteousness among the people themselves. Indeed it has been suggested that the prophets distinguished between the external ritual and the interior spirit in relation to the dual aspect of the deity. External ritual was mainly concerned with nature, the seasons and man's dependence upon crops and floods; and in all this the religious ceremonies were concerned with the God of Nature, somewhat remote and forbidding. At the same time the ritual could easily become as 'mechanical' and unthinking as the movement of the sun and the advent of the season. But the interior spirit led immediately to God as Parent-God. Devotion of the heart, loving kindness, justice and all that spoke of righteousness was proper to this nomadic tribe who depended also upon Jahwe from day to day in their social relationships. (cf. Scholfield, *op. cit.*, p. 114.) This distinction was still a distinction with a definitely corporate life of man with God and in the universe of God. It had not the self-analysing element of the interior life of the soul that was to come later from the Greek influence. But this double aspect of God made it possible to preserve the bond of the Law without falling into legalism. The history of the Jews showed that it was not easy and that the message of the prophets was heeded only by the few, the remnant. Yet there was definitely an interior corporate life that had the Fatherhood of God as its immediate and constant inspiration.

The religion of the Jews, then, is quite evidently built up on the framework of community, community of all creatures with God. The smallest common unit wherein life was generated and continued was the 'father's household'. They did not conceive of the individual as an isolated unit, for his life was given him in the family and the tribe and he helped to continue that life so long as he remained within the family and tribe. The bond was always a physical relationship. Adam looks upon Eve as 'bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh' (Gen. 2, 23). The whole tribe had the same flesh and bones and blood. 'Our blood has been spilt', they said when

one of their number was killed; and this blood is the life of the family and race. (Deut. 12, 23.)

But the Hebrews appear to have a far deeper insight into what is meant by community and unity precisely because of this capacity for distinction. The common life with God was common to many individuals; and they had a very clear conception of their individuality. The Jewish race was not just a sheer collectivity and its association with Jahwe was no pantheistic identification. Jahwe was utterly transcendent, the tribe was set about by all the other tribes of mankind and each individual was liable to be left utterly alone. A peculiar feature of the Old Testament is the loneliness of individuals and of the tribe. Abraham is a lonely leader when he takes his family out of the land of Haran: 'The Lord said to Abram, Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and from thy father's house.' (Gen. 12, 1.) In his subsequent nomadic wanderings he is detached increasingly from all ties save for his immediate family relationship, until eventually he has to be entirely isolated even from these ties by the command to sacrifice his only son. Moses, too, becomes a very distinct unit as, having left Egypt with his people, his people also disassociate themselves from him in their idolatry. David again and especially Jeremias are types of the lonely man who can turn only to God, who himself may turn away and leave the individual in terrifying loneliness. Saul says to the spirit of Samuel: 'I am sore distressed . . . and God is departed from me, and answereth me no more, neither by prophets, nor by dreams.' (1 Kings 28.)

Similarly the whole 'chosen' people, by the very fact of their sense of election and mission, are always conscious of their separation from the other tribes of the world; and at times too they become like Saul separated from God: 'I have seen this people and behold it is a stiff-necked people, now therefore let me alone that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them.' (Exodus 32, 9-10.) These people were separated from all other men by external sacramental rites closely associated with generation—the receiving and carrying on of their common life. The passage in the Old Testament concerning the sons of Jacob and Hamor and Shachem is of great interest in this respect. Although the sons of Jacob were in fact deceiving the sons of Hamor, they show that the only possibility of union with their race was through these external rites so that they might become

of the same tribe: 'If ye will be as we be, that every male of you be circumcised, then will we give our daughters unto you and we will take your daughters to us, and we will dwell with you, and we will become one people.' (Gen. 34, 15.) Otherwise the descendants of Abraham remain cut off from the rest of mankind and even from the universe.

The symbol of the desert in this respect is of the greatest importance. They were surrounded by the settled tribes of agriculturists who seemed to them to have fallen into a bondage, slaves to the changing seasons and to the mother-earth. Indeed their God was the Father, while the farmers had to remain dependent upon the Mother. M. and H. A. Frankfort have written on this point: 'The settled peasant's reverence for impersonal authority and the bondage, the constraint which the organised state imposes, mean an intolerable lack of freedom for the tribesman. The farmer's everlasting preoccupation with phenomena of growth and his total dependence on these phenomena appear to the nomad a form of slavery. Moreover to him the desert is clean. . . . On the other hand nomadic freedom can be bought only at a price; for whoever rejects the complexities and mutual dependencies of agricultural society not only gains freedom but also loses the bond with the phenomenal world; in fact he gained his freedom at the cost of significant form. For, wherever we find reverence for the phenomena of life and growth, we find preoccupation with the immanence of the divine and with the *form* of its manifestation. But in the stark solitude of the desert, where nothing changes, nothing moves (except man at his own free will), where features in the landscape are only pointers, landmarks, without significance in themselves—there we may expect the image of God to transcend concrete phenomena altogether. Man confronting God will not contemplate him, but will hear his voice and command.' (*Before Philosophy*, p. 247.) The desert provided the positive purification which made it possible for the people to realize at once their separateness and their need for God, and not only for God but eventually also for the rest of mankind and for the whole universe. But in the light of the desert this dependence on and solidarity with all others becomes a positive giving and sharing of the gifts of life: 'And he (the Lord) said: It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to

the Gentiles that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth . . . and I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritage. . . . Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains; for the Lord hath comforted his people and will have mercy upon his afflicted.' (Isaias 49; 68, 13.) The desert leads to a new and far deeper union of the people with the parent-God who is the Lord of Creation, gathering all things under the cloak of his Omnipotence.

The isolation also has its effect upon the individual, so that his desert necessarily throws him back upon himself and his own power. The Old Testament teems with reference to what is translated in Latin as *Anima*, in English as Soul. The word is *Nephesh*, which does not mean the individual, spiritual, intellectual substance that we understand by soul as distinct from the body. *Nephesh* is distinguished from body or flesh (*basar*) but not as a 'spiritual' being; it stands for the individual life, the inner part of man whence spring his initiative and his energy. Originally it seems to have meant *breath*, which is so intimately connected with life so that when a man breathes his last, he breathes out his soul. But it is identified always with the life rather than with the manifestations of life. *Nephesh resides in the blood*, and the blood is so intimately connected with life that the soul is sometimes regarded as the blood itself: 'But flesh with the life (*nephesh*) thereof which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat' (Gen. 9, 4) 'For the life (*nephesh*) of the flesh is in the blood and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls (*nephesh*, i.e. for yourselves): for it is the blood that maketh atonement by reason of the life (*nephesh*)' (Lev. 17, 4.)

In this connection with blood the soul is evidently part of the sacrificial system in which the tribe is linked with the God of Creation or nature. The blood sacrifices that play such a large part in the Old Testament worship and prepare the way for the One Sacrifice, are in this way connected with returning souls to the Maker and Keeper of souls. This gift of life or return of the soul to God was the way of reconciliation, the way of overcoming the separation of the community of all the people from the transcendent Jahwe. The injunction that 'No soul shall eat blood' which follows the explanation of the blood making the atonement in Leviticus 17, 11 (*ut supra*) seems to imply that the indi-

vidual soul (*nephesh*) of the Israelite must not be mingled with any other soul; the principle of the desert must be applied to each individual in what is most intimate to him as a single person. The union with Jahwe, broken by sin, is restored by returning life to the source of life, not by trying to derive or replenish one's life from the rest of his creation.

The soul, which 'though material, is a very fine and subtle substance' (*Immortality and the Unseen World*, by Oesterly, p. 15), is separable from the body, both temporarily by the 'desert' of sleep and permanently by the desert of death: and in each case this ultimate analysis and distinction leads to another union or *koinônia*. Jahwe keeps the souls in a kind of bag, according to Abigail's conception: 'And though man be risen up to pursue thee and to seek thy soul', she says to David, 'yet the soul of my Lord shall be bound in the bag of life in the care and custody of the Lord thy God; and the souls of thine enemies them shall he sling out, as from the hollow of a sling.' (1 Kings 25, 29, according to the translation recommended by Driver, cf. Oesterly, op. and loc. cit.) Ezechiel attacks the Hebrew women for hunting souls with special charms. 'Will ye hunt the souls of my people and save souls alive for yourselves. . . ? Wherefore thus sayeth the Lord God: Behold I am against your pillows, wherewith ye there hunt the souls to make them fly and I will tear them from your arms, and I will let the souls go . . .' (Ezechiel 3, 17 sq.). In this Hebrew conception of the soul is to be found a connection with the primitive interpretation of dreams; for the soul in sleep was able to slip away and associate itself with other souls of other ages. The Gilbertese believed that they could sometimes return to paradise in their dreams (cf. Grimble, op. and loc. cit.) and evidently the Hebrew *Nephesh* could become mixed up with other evil or good souls or spirits (*ruach* or 'spirit' is practically synonymous with *nephesh* as applied to living creatures).

At death, however, this light aerial substance leaves its communion, its common life with men on earth, and takes up a new sort of common life. A man 'sleeps with his fathers or is gathered to his people', descends into a great hollow place or city 'under the waters' (cf. Job 26, 6). This is Sheol or city of death. 'This idea of Sheol being a city would have arisen very naturally since it was in the cities that people were gathered together; and that Sheol was conceived of as a place in which crowds assembled, comes out

clearly in Job 30, 32: "For I know that thou wilt bring me to death, to the house of assembly of all living." (Oesterly, op. cit., p. 88.) This new community of living souls remained in the generally accepted terminology utterly cut off from the old earthly community, except of course that every one eventually joins them there. Occasionally the *nephesh* is allowed back from Sheol apparently, as when Samuel is recalled by the witch he says to Saul: 'Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up?' (I Kings 28). The departed (*nephaim*) form a community of their own, whether they were able on occasion to assist the people living on earth, as in the pre-exilic and primitive conception, or whether they were cut off in a land of silence and inactivity as in the post-exilic 'official' view of Sheol. (cf. Oesterly, op. cit., p. 70.) It was the desert of the Exile which finally sealed off the land of the departed, for the departed would not, indeed could not, leave their own land. They retained their ties with the physical place despite the *nomadic spirit that inspired their life on earth*. It was evidently left for the Christ to come and form the true and complete community of living and dead in the kingdom of Jahwe, his Father. It was not until he descended into hell to the gates of the city of the departed and burst open Sheol so that all the community of souls could mingle with the spirits of God as well as with mankind that the final solidarity of all living creatures was re-established.

This distinction of things by means of the 'desert' of purification in all its forms reveals the nature of the Hebrew approach to the fulness of life in Jahwe. It was not an intellectual approach. The Jews did not consider the essence of man to be a spiritual substance which had somehow become mixed with the material and had to be liberated from this mixture. Purification did not separate non-body from body, but refined the material element until it was liberated from false ties, from the wrong sort of community, from contamination that was contracted by mixture with other peoples who were not in communion with Jahwe. They were not anxious to reach out to the simple intellectual meaning of things and to leave the material symbols behind. God spoke to them in signs and they knew him *in* these manifestations. All these signs and symbols that he used were associated with him and therefore to retain association with them was the way to live the upright life of righteousness. The righteous Hezekiah found Jahwe in all the

material things and happenings of his reign: 'And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his fathers did. . . . He trusted in the Lord God of Israel. . . . He clave to the Lord and departed not from following him, but kept his commandments, which the Lord commanded Moses. And the Lord was with him and he prospered whithersoever he went forth' (4 Kings. 18, 2).



ST VINCENT FERRER IN SPANISH AND EUROPEAN HISTORY

RAMON MARTIN HERRERO

SPANISH Catholics—that is to say, Spain—are commemorating this year the fifth centenary of St Vincent Ferrer's canonization. Thus, 1954, the Jubilee Year of St James the Apostle, has found a worthy successor, for, amongst the thousands of names forming Spain's imposing contribution to hagiology, hardly one has a greater significance for the student of history, as well as for the layman, than that of this Valencian saint. It would be pointless and extravagant to try to evaluate what each of the great saints has given to the chronicle of human happenings, since their deeds and words are outside the scope of earthly speculation. Yet it is plain that St Theresa's reform of the Carmelite Order, St Ignatius's foundation of the Society of Jesus, with its all-powerful effect on the ebb and flow of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, or the flight into the world of mystical lyrics of St John of the Cross, have not had upon literature, society or the politics of their epoch such an immediate impact, so clearly perceptible even to the ordinary reader's eye, as had St Vincent's personality and action upon the turmoil of religious and political strife of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Their influence lies deeper and goes further, but not being recorded as historic fact in every handbook, is not so apparent and indisputable for all to feel and see as that of the Levantine¹ thaumaturgist, who united the

¹ In Spain the natives of Catalonia and especially those of Valencia and Murcia are collectively known as 'levantinos'.