

peaks experience - a transformation
of the soul resulting from
penetration into reality
previously unknown.

* my own definition:
came to mind sometime
between '82 and '84,
while attending the
University of Utah,
probably while meditating
on Adamson's paper.

APE OR ANGEL

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Some years after Darwin had published *The Descent of Man*, Disraeli, referring to some implications of this work and the resultant furor said epigrammatically, "It is a question of ape or angel, and I am on the side of the angels." The latter half of this epigram has now become part of our common speech. To be on the side of the angels has come to be a byword for a man of good will. And, in the popular mind, at least, it came to be assumed that those who postulated a long biological inheritance for mankind, including an animal, and possibly even a vegetable, ancestry, were not on the side of the angels, that however brilliant such men might be, they were nevertheless the moral inferior of the man who stoutly maintained, in the best traditions of rhetorical and muscular Christianity, that man had only an angelic nature, that he was free of the biological taint of animality.

But an inaccuracy of outlook is involved in Disraeli's statement. For it had never occurred to any significant thinker in any of the Western religious traditions to question or doubt man's link to the lower forms of life. It had never been a question of ape or angel, but always a matter of ape and angel. Man's dual nature, the linking in him of the animal and angel, was most clearly seen in the concept of the Great Chain of Being, a concept at one time universally accepted by Christian, Jewish and Islamic humanists.

The Chain of Being was envisioned as a continuous chain in which the links were composed of all existent forms of life beginning with inanimate matter and ranging up through the animal and vegetable kingdoms. Beyond the animal kingdom was the realm of grace inhabited by the nine orders of angels. In between these two realms was man, half animal, half angel. This was at once his tragedy and his triumph.

It was his tragedy because all life in the universe, except man, had a homogeneous nature and instinctively followed the law of its own being. The lower orders knew no moral

struggle, no divided will, no senses of sin or guilt. Walt Whitman wrote,
I think I could turn and live with the animals, they are so placid and self-contained,

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God.¹

But Whitman's romantic primitivism was not typical. The more usual religious attitude is seen in a poem by Henry Vaughan, the seventeenth-century mystic, who, sensing the communion of all living things with the divine order and only himself estranged through doubt, confusion, and self-betrayal, cries out his wish to be a flower, a stone, a tree, a spring, a bird.

Then should I, tied to one sure state,
All day expect my date;
But I am sadly loose and stray
A giddy blast each way.²

As the lower kingdoms were bound in the laws of their own being, so were the angels. Aquinas taught that, when originally created, the angels were free to do good or evil; only one act was required of them in order that they might be tested. This act was a demand for obedience to the will of God. Through pride, Satan and his hosts chose disobedience; as a result, they fell from grace and were forever after incapable of doing good. The good angels, on the other hand, having been obedient, were confirmed in grace and thereafter were incapable of sin.³ Like the lower orders of nature they were removed from the arena of moral struggle. Man only, in all the universe, incorporated into one nature the tragic division of ape and angel. As Sir Thomas Browne put it, "Man [is] that great and true *Amphibium*," and he lives "in divided and distinguished worlds."⁴

¹ Song of Myself, 32nd Canto.

² From the poem, "And Do They Sor?"

³ The *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas, ed., Fathers of the Dominican Province (London, 1912), Part I, Second Number, Q. 62, art. 5, and art. 8.

⁴ *Religio Medici*, Everyman Library (London, 1947), p. 39.

Though the divided nature was man's peculiar tragedy, there was still an element of triumph in it. For man, in common with the angels, possessed the faculty of Reason. This faculty was his dignity and his hope. "The World was made to be inhabited by Beasts," says Sir Thomas Browne, "but studied and contemplated by Man: 'tis the Debt of our Reason we owe unto God, and the homage we pay for not being Beasts."⁵ The Christian-Humanist vision of man's potential, if he lived according to his angelic nature, according to reason, is brilliantly imaged in one of Hamlet's speeches.

What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! (Act II, sc. 2).

If, however, man betrayed himself and lived according to his animal nature, his reason became a perverse thing, serving only to deepen his depravity. In Goethe's *Faust*, Mephistopheles sneers at man and his angelic faculty.

Life somewhat better might content him,

But for the gleam of heavenly light which thou hast lent him:

He calls it Reason — thence his power is increased

To be far beastlier than any beast (Prologue in Heaven).

All of this, then, is setting the record straight. Man was always known to be an animal in part of his nature until the Victorian era when legs became limbs, pants became casings, sweat became perspiration and sex was spelled s-x. One wonders if the modern protests against any assertion of man's animality did not owe its birth to some clandestine meeting between Adelaide Proctor and Horatio Alger, Jr. In any case, Darwin certainly did not originate the notion of man's animal nature. The old religious concept stated that in an act of special creation God endowed man with an animal nature; Darwin's theory said that through an evolutionary creation man had inherited an animal nature. That was the difference between the two ideas.

Any art, any philosophy and, above all, any religion which does not consider and deeply consider the dark, animal side of man's nature will inevitably run into sentimentalism, into opti-

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

mistic naive, a pleasant characteristic no doubt, but a rather costly one. In any spiritual crisis, it is the first piece of intellectual lumber to be thrown out; its presence is always an indication of spiritual immaturity, an open invitation to spiritual disaster.

But the real question tonight is not "Watchman, tell us of the ape." The point, everywhere except in the popular mind, has long been conceded. The fight is over. Some shadow boxers are still working out in the shadows, but they are like the two Japanese soldiers on a Pacific island who still refuse to surrender, ludicrous, pathetic, heroic, but certainly, in no sense, significant. The real question, I think, is "Watchman, tell us of the angel." And many of those who ask have sensitive nostrils easily offended by tautologies, analytic propositions and any form of unverifiable data such as poetry or religion. "Tell us of the angel," they say, meanwhile muttering to themselves, "and it better be good," meaning "it better not be poetry." By "angel," of course, I mean the spiritual aspect of man's nature, the nature to which religion addresses itself.

Theories of religion are so diverse and so multitudinous that the barest narration of the more prominent ones could occupy more time than I am allowed. And not many of the theories are altogether foolish. As a matter of fact, the data are so vast and various that, if one selects his materials, he can make a pretty good case for many widely differing ideas. So, simply as an expedient, I am going to present two different ways of looking at religion. The first way results in theories which consider religion to be a manifestation of a primitive mentality which men will, or at least should, outgrow. This was the implicit theory of most of the philosophers of the Enlightenment. To illustrate such a theory, Edward Gibbon wrote his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in which he attempted to demonstrate to his own age the indissoluble link between barbarism and religion. In its crudest form this theory conceived of religion as a conspiracy, a conscious conspiracy for power entered into between venal priests and corrupt magistrates.⁶

⁶ See Sir Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1949), I, 163.

This crude idea, of course, is not far removed from the Marxist theory in which religion was considered as a tool by which the proletariat were exploited. Cheaper and more effective than alcohol or dope, it reconciled the masses to their chains. "The idea of God," wrote Marx, "is the keystone of a perverted civilization."⁷

The anthropologist, Sir J. G. Frazer, believed that man's knowledge passed through three stages: magic, religion and science. His belief that religion was always and essentially a manifestation of a retarded mentality accounts for the tone of amused contempt that permeates such a work as his *Folklore in the Old Testament*. Frazer's delineation of the stages of man's thought is, of course, similar to that of the positivist, Auguste Comte, who believed that the three stages of man's development were characterized by religion, metaphysics and science.

Freud's theory, which has had a very considerable vogue, is pretty well indicated by the title of his major work on religion, *The Future of an Illusion*. Commenting on the religion of the ordinary man, Freud once said,

The whole thing is so patently infantile, so incongruous with reality, that to one whose attitude to humanity is friendly it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life. It is even more humiliating to discover what a large number of those alive to-day, who must see that this religion is not tenable, yet try to defend it inch by inch, as if with a series of pitiable rear-guard actions.⁸

All these theories, then, in common deny that there can be any kind of religion except primitive religion. Although art or science may move from primitive to sophisticated levels, according to the culture in which they develop, religion, like magic, is simply a false way of knowing, an erroneous method of knowledge, a fantasy unconsciously constructed to escape the harshness of a real world. As there can be no evolution of magic, no real development of an essentially false system, so there can be no evolution of religion, which is also simply a

⁷ Quoted by E. A. Burtt, *Man Seeks the Divine* (New York, 1957), p. 6.
⁸ *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere, International Psycho-Analytical Library, No. 17 (London, 1930), pp. 23-4.

false system. All of the inventors of these theories would say a fervent Amen to Whitman's cry: "Hurrah for positive science! Long live exact demonstration!"

I deny the basis of the theories outlined above, holding that religion is subject to the same evolutionary process as man's mind. For my discussion I take as a point of departure, Chandi's definition of religion. "By religion," he said, "I mean . . . that which brings a man to face creative reality."⁹

Can we find some kind of common center for all religious experience, something that will cover the facts of both primitive and mature religion? I think we can in the idea of the Sacred Encounter, a term which I borrow, although I am going to adapt its meaning somewhat, from W. H. Auden's inaugural address when he assumed the chair of Professor of Poetry at Oxford. I define the Sacred Encounter as an occurrence in which an object, event or idea ceases to function in its ordinary relationship and takes on a highly symbolic content. This transfer of meaning from literal to symbolic is accompanied by the profound emotion of awe, certainly a universal aspect in all religious experience. Finally, in its most intense form, the experience is capable of working a profound transforming meaning from literal to symbolic, an accompanying intense emotion of awe and, in some instances at least, a resulting transformation of personality make up the Sacred Encounter and this encounter, I believe, lies at the basis of all religious experience, both primitive and sophisticated.

An illustration of the nature of the Sacred Encounter in a primitive setting is cited by Ernst Cassirer in his work *Language and Myth*.

After the inhabitants of the town of Dzaque in Peki had settled that place, a certain farmer at work in his fields went to look for water. In a trough-shaped hollow he drove his machete into the damp soil. Suddenly a gory looking stream welled up before him, of which he drank and which he found refreshing. He told his family about it and persuaded them to come with him and worship that red fluid.¹⁰

⁹ Quoted by Burtt, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹⁰ Trans. Susanne K. Langer, Dover Publications, 1946, p. 22.

This primitive family had always been familiar with the phenomenon of water coming from the ground. But this spring they worshipped. Why? Because in the intensity of awe that, for obvious reasons, surrounded the event, this spring ceased to function in its normal, literal relationship to the man and took on a highly symbolic meaning. It became a divine moment or event. It became what Cassirer has called "a momentary deity." Water, of course, seems always to take on such a sacred identity for desert people as the imagery of the Old Testament clearly indicates.

To use another example, one might illustrate the Sacred Encounter in a primitive setting by referring to the totem feast. As is well known, the totem feast was a ritualistic occasion on which the members of the tribe partook of the flesh of a particularly sacred animal, an animal that usually was taboo to them. The meal was eaten in an atmosphere of profound awe and in the belief that the vitality and life of this animal would be imparted to the members of the tribe. What made this such a significant occasion? The act of eating, for primitives, is as continuous as any occurrence in nature. The answer is, of course, that the meal is a symbolic one in which eating has ceased to function in its normal literal relationship. Modern Christian communion, it may be noted in passing, in which the worshipper believes that he partakes of the actual substance, or a representation of the substance, of the flesh of his god is accompanied by the same intense awe and occasionally, we may believe, by at least partial transformation in personality.

For an event nearer home, let us take the well-known story of the Mormon crickets and the seagulls. Surely the birds, on many previous occasions, must have acted in much the same way they did on this one, but this time the need was intense and, on the appearance of the gulls, the intellectual spark leaped the gap from the literal to the symbolic. The birds became agents of deliverance and deliverance, I suspect, is the most powerful of all religious themes. An acquaintance of mine in the East once told me of the first time she learned of the Mormons and the seagulls. A group were having a private

beach party, during which a guest, like the unfortunate Ancient Mariner, perversely shot at one of the sea-birds. A former Utahn who was present vehemently protested this desecration and then told, with great emotion, the story of the gulls and the crickets. "We were all very surprised and a little shamed," she said, "although to tell the truth if those birds serve any god, it must be the god of garbage." To her the birds were only gulls.

Auden, in speaking of the Sacred Encounter, says:

A sacred being cannot be anticipated; it must be encountered. On encounter the imagination has no option but to respond. All imaginations do not recognize the same sacred beings or events, but every imagination responds to those it recognizes in the same way.

That response, he says, "is a passion of awe."¹¹

It might be well to illustrate the Sacred Encounter on the level of which Auden is speaking, that is, the level of high poetry. William Blake is a case in point.

"What," it will be questioned, "When the Sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?" O, no, no, I see an innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty."¹²

Blake, in other words, sees not the sun, but rather a vision of the creative energies of the universe.

Or there is Kandinsky, whose work, *Concerning the spiritual in Art*, was the first testament of the abstractionist movement in painting, a movement which is, I believe, in its essence, one of the most profoundly spiritual events ever to occur in Western art. In a discussion of the color blue, he tells us that it is a color which gives depth, that it is, really, a call to the infinite, a desire for purity and transcendence. "When [blue] sinks to black," he tells us, "it echoes a grief that is hardly human."¹³ Such grief has meaning only when the gap from literal to symbolic has been crossed. One can only guess at the intense awe and pain felt by the artist as he sees not a literal event, blue fading to black, but rather a symbolic presentation

¹¹ *Atlantic Monthly*, Jan. 1957, p. 51.

¹² From "A Vision of Last Judgment."

¹³ (New York, 1947), p. 58.

of nothingness and non-being overcoming and encompassing man and man's aspirations. He sees, as Milton had, man's intellectual being

swallow'd up and lost

In the wide womb of uncreated night,

Devoid of sense and motion (Par. Lost, II, 149-51).

This symbolic vision does not, as some think, result from esthetic trifling with reality, but rather it results from one of the most vital and inescapable functions of the human psyche. In a moment so intense that man must objectify that intensity, a symbol is forged out of the deepest psychic recesses.

Now it may be said that I have located the religious universal in feeling. This is partly, but not entirely, so. Feeling alone does not make the Sacred Encounter. Feeling must be objectified in symbol and the symbol-making process is an integral function of man's mind. And mind functions in the process in another way, too. For if the Sacred Encounter is of sufficient power to transform the personality, it acts like the motion of a vortex which ultimately draws the whole pool, in some fashion, into its motion. So the Sacred Encounter is likely to attract to itself all the significant beliefs and activities of the culture. All prophets reflect their cultures, obviously. Thus, I cannot agree with Matthew Arnold that religion is morality touched with emotion. It may just as well be immorality touched with emotion. The Sacred Encounter may hallow the most barbaric form of human sacrifice or the most transcendent form of self-sacrifice. For God can speak to a culture only through the culture; he can speak to a man only through the man himself. Although I believe that some form of creative reality is present in the Sacred Encounter, still man does the objectifying; the voice is human; the symbols originate in the world of sense. Therefore one must reject the Augustinian dualism of the City of God and the City of the World. The heavenly city can only reflect the earthly; a gross and sensate culture or a refined and spiritual one will each find different patterns of symbol to reflect the content of the Sacred Encounter.

At the risk of laboring what may be obvious, let me develop this point. All objectifications of the Sacred Encounter

himself a religionist, in which "the orthodox religious complex is, in its multifarious ramifications, the most active and pervasive menace to civilization which confronts mankind today, compared with which war and poverty are unimportant details."¹³

Nothing is more highly seductive to man than the irrational; and the objectifying of the Sacred Encounter in symbolic constructs is likely to be taken as a system of literal or historical truth. Where this is so, men are likely to be involved in continual delusion or deceit and much of the history of religion in the West can be classified under one of those two heads.

But there is another lust almost as dangerous, perhaps not quite. That is the lust to limit reality, to believe that the quantitative aspects of the universe, the surface and appearance of things, constitute the only reality, that any Sacred Encounter, whether that of a Polynesian primitive or of an Albert Schweitzer, is merely illusory, hallucinatory, or wishful thinking induced by fear. I believe, quite to the contrary, that failure to participate in or to understand the creative mystery in which objects suddenly become transformed into symbol, failure to experience that awesome moment when a known object recedes into the mysterious unknown, is clothed there with transcendent meaning and returns filled with new life and energy, indicates insensitivity, perhaps in extreme cases even a coarseness of psychic awareness. D. H. Lawrence once complained of these limiters of reality.

They call all experience of the senses mystic, when the experience is considered.

So an apple becomes mystic when I taste in it the summer and the snows, the wild welter of earth and the insistence of the sun.

All of which things I can surely taste in a good apple.

Though some apples taste preponderantly of water, wet and sour like lagoon-water, that has been too much sunned.

If I say, I taste these things in an apple, I am called mystic, which means a liar.

A brilliant protest against the limiters of reality is found in E. M. Forster's short story, *The Celestial Omnibus*. In this

¹³ Quoted by Burtt, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

can be shown to be intimate reflections of the culture. Nothing is easier than to demonstrate this to anyone provided that you use some faith other than his own as illustration. Let us, being Christians or Jews use the Koran as an example. If I tell you that I have a book which deals in some detail with the themes and people of the Old and New Testaments, if I tell you further that it is concerned with the problems of polytheism, polygamy and slavery, that it is dominated by images of gardens, wells, flocks and desert, that it mentions camels, dates, figs, you have already begun to form an idea of when and where the Koran was produced. And these, of course, are the sketchiest kind of details compared with what could be provided. With a little study, I repeat, anyone can place the book in time and geographical setting. For the Moslem, of course, the book remains a document that was pre-existent in heaven from all eternity which Mohammed, God's messenger, merely copied down. But give it to an Eskimo and see what he makes of an eternal book, one written in heaven and therefore presumably all-inclusive, that knows nothing of ice, walrus, blubber, seals or furs; that images paradise as a garden filled with flowers, and that images water, the one thing he could use less of, as the most precious of all substances.

Here is where the rational mind must enter into the pattern of religious experience. The Sacred Encounter itself is perhaps not wholly available to the workings of the rational mind. But the objectification of the encounter in the language and concepts of the culture is available and the rational mind should be given complete freedom in dealing with it. The great danger of all religion is what Martin Buber has called "the lust to overrun reality."¹⁴ The rational faculties must be allowed freely to judge and evaluate the content which accrues to the Sacred Encounter. Until the present, in the West, religion has refused to allow such an evaluation of itself. This refusal has been deadly, for it has resulted in the construction of competing systems, filled with irrationalities, and therefore inevitably in most serious conflict with one another. It has brought us to a situation described by Harry Elmer Barnes,

¹⁴ *Hasidism*, Philosophical Library (New York, c. 1948), p. 39.

story, a young boy who has not yet discovered that reality must be limited to the perceptions of the grossest, tells his father that while reading mystical authors such as Sir Thomas Browne, Shelley or Dante, he rode on a carriage over a rainbow bridge, that he heard three maidens singing in a pool of water and these maidens called out to him, "Truth in the depth, truth in the height." His father, apparently an earnest positivist, whipped the boy for lying and made him memorize poetry as a punishment, Keats to be exact. Later the boy has to recite the poem in front of company. He begins:

"Standing aloof in giant ignorance."¹⁶

His father roars with laughter. "One for you, my son!" he says, "Standing aloof in giant ignorance! I never knew these poets talked sense. Just describes you."

The boy continues.

"Standing aloof in giant ignorance, of thee I dream and of the Cyclades, as one who sits ashore and longs perchance to visit —"

"Quite right," says one of the guests. "To visit what?"

"To visit dolphin coral in deep seas," said the boy and burst into tears. Asked why he is crying, the boy says, "Because — because all these words that only rhymed before, now that I've come back they're me."

That I suppose is my point tonight. That the object transmuted into symbol is as much a psychic reality as the object before it is transformed into symbol, that it has a certain kind of verifiable reality to those who enter into the symbols of the Encounter as the boy in the story entered into the experience of the poet.

I believe that the Sacred Encounter is a vitalizing, hallowing event, imparting polarization and potency to the values of a culture, that at its greatest it works transformation in the personality as in the encounters of Buddha, John Bunyan or Plotinus. Without this living, transforming experience, religion is likely to become brittle, to engage in an unsatisfying activism, to become preoccupied with dogma and decorum. But then a Ghandi, a Jesus, a Buddha or a Schweitzer comes

among us and suddenly, quite to our own surprise, we say "Immanuel," which being translated means, "God with us."

I return to my original contrast of ape and angel. I find in the doctrine of original sin a clear symbolic expression of man's biological inheritance of animality. But in man's ability to transform the world of animal reality, to construct symbols of inner events, symbols which carry vitality and meaning and a transforming power, it is here that I find his angelic nature, a nature which can face, and ultimately can embody, a progressively revealed reality.

I conclude with a passage from William Blake, a man who had a lust to overrun reality, in which he speaks of another genius, Sir Isaac Newton, who had a lust to limit reality.

Now I a four-fold vision see,
And a fourfold vision is given to me;
Tis fourfold in my supreme delight
And threefold in soft Beulah's night
And twofold Always. May God us keep
From single vision and Newton's sleep!¹⁷

¹⁶ *Last Poems* (New York, 1933), "Mystic."

¹⁷ Blake, ed., Alfred Kazin, *Viking Portable Library* (New York, 1946), pp. 209-10.

