

CHAPTER III

MORALITY AND THE RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD

1. The line of thought we have been pursuing up to this point is abstract in character; for these "stages" do not exist in the detached way in which they have been described; further, this line of reasoning is abstract in that it isolates man and severs him from a reality which exists independently of all civilization, culture and all that posits itself: the reality of religion (1). Not only are civilization and culture historically often decisively dependent on religious ideas and emotions, but, above all, as a fact of history, morality—coupled with the closely related phenomenon of law, and the custom which unites both—never appears apart from religion. From the empirical and historical point of view religion is the source of all "good breeding" and of all morality (2). The consciousness of "right and wrong," of that which is permitted and that which is not permitted, commanded and forbidden, is very closely connected with the consciousness of "the Holy" (3).

The common element both in morality and in religion is this; the caprice of the human being swayed by his desires and by his passions is checked by the erection of a barrier, surrounded by the numinous awe of "the Holy." In all religions, in the "most primitive" as well as in the "higher" religions, there exists this "Law," which proceeds from a divine will, these "prohibitions" which protect some object or some sphere of life from human aggression, these frontiers which man is forbidden to cross, and which subjectively, from feelings of religious awe, man does not dare to cross. *Nefas!* "Thou shalt not!"

The content of these "prohibited" actions may not be "ethical" according to our present way of thinking—"you may not kill a particular animal—you may not enter a certain place"; still, the fact remains that only through such prohibitions does man learn that his positive desires must be controlled by duty, and his negative reactions by the knowledge of prohibitions. However the relation between religion and ethics may be defined, this, in any case, is common to both: that this limitation of human self-will takes place, not through the arbitrary imposition of man, but through the mysterious

THE DIVINE IMPERATIVE

self-authentication of an invisible court, proceeding "from that which is hidden," which man obeys from a sense of reverent awe. Although it is clear that the rationalistic theory which derives belief in the gods from fear is false—"timor primus in orbe fecit deos"—and also that no real religion has ever existed apart from a sacred "awe" (reverence: *Ehr-furcht*) which is absolutely different from "fear," it is also evident that this sense of reverent awe is a matter of fundamental importance for the moral consciousness.

2. But just as it would be wrong to explain religion in a rationalistic way from the moral consciousness, it would also be wrong to take the opposite course. It is possible to maintain that the conception of an autonomous, purely immanent morality only appears on the very verge of historical reality, within the restricted area of a rationalistically emancipated culture; but, on the other hand, it is also certain that the moral consciousness provides documentary evidence for its independent existence apart from the religious consciousness; or perhaps it would be more correct to say, it acquires it. For in the beginnings of human historical life which we can still observe or infer with comparative certainty, not only are religion and morality indissolubly united, but so also are religion and law, culture, social order, and art. But where this (relatively) primitive state of affairs has been left behind, we see that the relation between religion and morality is not that of one-sided dependence, but rather of mutual influence. This mutual influence is, however, so complicated and so varied that it is impossible to disentangle the threads which compose it; this intricate web of mutual influences varies with the type of religion concerned as well as with the general intellectual level of a people.

The relation between the various conceptions of the Good Life—the right way of ordering all the circumstances of life—and religious conceptions, varies greatly (4). In a Pantheon we may see, for instance, a god who is regarded as the author and preserver of morality as a whole, or, on the other hand, we may see a number of gods, each one of whom governs a particular sphere of life. The independence of morality is also expressed in the fact that the gods themselves are regarded as subject to the moral law, that to some extent they disobey it, and are indeed extremely immoral in their behaviour, and thus that they can only expect to receive their just punishment from some impersonal world-law which is not

further defined or known. Almost everywhere the sanctity of the oath, the law of hospitality, and the right of sanctuary, are conceived as directly connected with the will of the gods; other spheres of morality, however, are either very loosely connected with the divine, or they have no connexion with it at all. At one point we may detect an increasing influence of morality upon religious ideas; at another point we perceive how morality itself acquires greater depth through the influence of religious ideas and feelings; or again, we may see how the two drift apart, and religion and morality are severed from each other. The most amazing phenomenon of all is the fact that certain gods who are represented as the guardians of a particular province of morality, offend most crudely against this law themselves, and give man an extremely bad example (5).

3. In spite of the great variety this picture contains it is possible to formulate the following "law." The more closely morality is connected with religion the more the content of morality is mingled with the ritual-irrational element, the more, for instance, does the conception of moral purity tend to merge into that of the magically sacred. Judged from the moral standpoint, this means that the more deeply the sense of the Holy penetrates a people, the more morality is burdened with a priestcraft which has no ethical influence or significance. Or, to put it the other way round: the more that morality severs its connexion with this system of taboos the more it becomes "humane" and rational, the more also it becomes secular and tends to approach the borderline of mere utilitarianism or of mere *bourgeois* decency. Thus morality seems to possess its deepest meaning in the religious sphere, and its greatest clarity in the rational consciousness, and both stand in a relation of unavoidable tension to each other. The rational purification of morality always seems to be connected with a loss of moral sentiment and of reverence for the law as such (6).

The reason for this is manifest; for where morality drifts away from its moorings and loses touch with religion, it comes inevitably into closer contact with the spirit of culture (civilization); increasingly, therefore, its very basis becomes secular, and in the process it loses its independence, so far as the purpose of civilization and the value of culture are concerned.

But where religion itself becomes "spiritualized," that is,

THE DIVINE IMPERATIVE

where it disengages itself from its numinous, irrational, ritual element, this takes place in one of two directions: either in the direction of mystical speculative pantheism, or in the moralistic, deistic and rationalistic direction. In the latter case the religious sense is almost equated with the sense of culture; religion becomes an arid commonplace affair, the idea of God tends to be equated with the idea of an immanent moral law of nature or the world law, and the religious man tends more or less to be identified either with the "honest citizen," or with the "intellectual," to whom culture is everything. Here morality and religion can merge into each other, without fearing any irrational taint through the magical element. For religion itself has lost all sense of awe and has almost entirely lost its independence, so far as the world and culture are concerned. In the "ethical religion" of the spirit of the Enlightenment ethics and religion have become fused into a unity (7).

Where *mysticism* is concerned it is a different matter. Here the religious element maintains its full independence, its "Other-worldliness" over against all culture and secular existence. But this kind of religion, to the extent in which it becomes mystical, becomes ascetic, that is, remote from the world, indifferent to the life of the world, and thus remote from humanity and indifferent to humanity. Therefore the more fully mysticism develops along its own lines the more it absorbs all morality into religious asceticism; and isolates the human individual both from his environment and from his fellow-men.

4. Confronted by these facts it is impossible to answer the question concerning the presence of a "universal moral sense," a *consensus gentium moralis*, a "unity of the moral consciousness" with a plain "yes" or with a plain "no" (8). An affirmative answer can be given so far as the fact of the "sense of ought" is concerned, for the difference between good and evil, right and wrong, is present wherever there are human beings. Further, we must also grant to those who defend the view of the *consensus* that among all peoples and at all times it can be proved that there does exist and has existed a certain agreement in reference to the content of the idea of good and evil, right and wrong. But we must also immediately add, this agreement is very limited in character. A negative answer must be given in view of the fact that there is scarcely one moral commandment which is everywhere accepted as final,

that, on the contrary, the moral codes of the various peoples and civilizations completely contradict one another, not merely in points of detail but in principle. Could it indeed be otherwise, when we know how the various religious conceptions conflict with one another? Could we possibly conceive that the ethic of Buddhism or of Brahmanism, with its world-denying tendency, should *not* be wholly different from the system of morality which has grown up in China, with its emphasis upon ancestor-worship? How can the morality of the mystic who renounces the life of the world be the same as that of the Parsee or the Muslim who seeks to conquer the world? How can the morality of the deeply serious religion of Egypt be the same as that of Greece with its delight in culture?

To try to discover an "original moral common sense" behind these influences of the various religions is simply a wild-goose chase. It is as futile as it would be to try to discover the common element in religion, the religion of reason, behind all the individual faiths. The "religion of reason" of the Enlightenment, or the "essence of religion" of speculative Idealism and Liberal theology, is essentially a particular phenomenon, standing alongside of the various historical religions; in the same way, the "autonomous morality" of the enlightened reason of a person to whom this abstraction has become a principle of life, is essentially a particular phenomenon, taking its place alongside of morality, and is closely connected with religion, that is, with a living religion. Neither the rational "religion of reason" nor rational morality are either religion or morality "in itself" or "in its purity." The impossibility of this conception will come out still more clearly in the following chapters.