

CARP

The hook traces a hieroglyph in the carp's throat
 A gasping pyramid of shuddering scales
 The ancients revered what they dared not partake of
 The white flesh of fish has a woman's ease
 Thus is game.

The market smell is laced with civil innards
 The carp sees the butcherwoman with no teeth
 Pity his eyes.

Where is the messiah of ocean aspiration?
 On a platter, loveless.

THE PANGS OF CLEANSING

INTRODUCTION

The battle between religious traditionalism and modern secularism has been bitterly fought in Jewish life for the past two centuries. One of the most remarkable positions to be taken in that struggle is presented in the writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), who was chief rabbi of Palestine under the British Mandate. While holding steadfastly to the truth of traditional Judaism in the very strictest way, he is nevertheless able to ascribe an important measure of truth and even a providential role to atheism. He thus takes issue implicitly with the widespread assumption of theists and atheists alike, that the two positions must in every important respect be mutually antagonistic and antithetical.

This surprising conclusion is based on Kook's unique religious outlook, which he presents in the first part of the present essay. Kook's conception of God is of the En Sof, the Infinite of Kabbalistic thought. As such, God is incommensurable with any of our ideas of him, or of what we conceive to be his attributes—"the good, the merciful, the just, the heroic, the beautiful . . ." But God is not any less real for not being conceptualizable; on the contrary, only when stripped of all misleading images and misrepresentations does God become the most real power in man's experience. When man feels his insignificance before God, "this natural diminishing engenders greatness and dignity, distilling in the soul endless delight in its very being, and in its ever widening role, reaching out to the infinite beyond."

But this cannot happen when religion is in a state of decline and mistakes the outward representation for the inner essence. Religion presents a finite simulacrum and calls it God; at this point, according to Kook, certain perceptive people realize that the finite cannot be God, so they reject religion's claim and are left with no God. These atheists have grasped an essential part of the truth, and it is necessary to appreciate this partial truth in order to recover the greater

truth that in the realm beyond all false gods is the true God.

It is tempting to see this argument as analogous to the mystical solution of the problem of evil, i.e., that since all things participate in God, they are all good, and evil is only a diminution or lack in the fullness of being of a particular thing. This is only a part of the answer. Kook regarded atheism as not simply evil, but more crucially as a necessary phase in achieving the good, and therefore in some way good in itself. It is helpful to remind ourselves that the particular atheists with whom Kook came in contact were the chalutzim, socialist Zionists who reclaimed the land from desert and swamp and established the Jewish settlements which were the material basis of the State of Israel. Kook saw them as rebuilding the Temple, and loved them as part of the holy people Israel. In giving a positive interpretation of their very atheism, Kook was attempting to make possible the reconciliation of religious and secular factions within the people Israel as a prelude to the greater reconciliation of Israel with God.

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The Pangs of Cleansing

All the ideological controversies among people and all the inner conflicts which every individual suffers in his world outlook are caused by the confusion in the conception of God. This is an endlessly profound realm and all thoughts, whether practical or theoretical, are centered in it.

One must always cleanse one's thoughts about God to make sure they are free of the dross of deceptive fantasies, of groundless fear, of evil inclinations, of wants and deficiencies. Faith in God enhances human happiness only to the extent that the greatness of God is probed and studied by the elite elements of the human race, who are equal to it. Then is the soul illumined by the divine light, through cleaving in love and full understanding to Him who is the life of all life. All feelings, all ideas and all actions, thus become refined. The attachment to God in feeling will have its effect in directing life on an upright path to the extent that this basic principle is operative in the soul, in a state of purity.

The essence of religion consists of realizing the perfection of God, the Infinite. All our conceptions of Him are insignificant in relation to what He is. What the soul in its authenticity aspires for is beyond what we call the good, the merciful, the just, the heroic, the beautiful, the meaning of life or of the glory of life, or religious faith

or the divine. All the divine names, whether in Hebrew or in any other language, give us only a tiny and dull spark of the hidden light, to which the soul aspires when it utters the word, "God." Every definition of God brings about heresy, every definition is spiritual idolatry. Even attributing to God intellect and will, even the term divine, the term God, suffer from the limitations of definition. Except for the keen awareness that all these characterizations are but sparkling flashes of what cannot be defined—they, too, would engender heresy. Among people who have lost this basic awareness these terms have indeed engendered gross heresy. If we become alienated from this basic perception, our faith will be impoverished and become valueless.

It will take on vitality only as it focuses on the realm of values generally, beyond any particular values, and thus it will assure stability to all values. All beliefs beyond this perception of the greatness of God, the Infinite, are only explanatory aids to introduce us to the essence of religious faith itself; some are called "the limbs of the King," and some, "the garments of the King." One who is disdainful of the garments of the King is also guilty of irreverence. One must, however, draw a distinction between the essence of faith, and the explanatory aids, as well as the different levels among the explanatory aids themselves.

The confusion of thought born of deficiencies in study and knowledge leads a person to focus his thought on the nature of the being. The more he will immerse himself in the folly of this insolent and absurd preoccupation, the more he will think that he is thereby drawing closer to the exalted knowledge of God, to which he had heard that the world's leading spirits have always aspired. When this habit pattern is established over many generations various false notions are engendered, which lead to many tragic consequences. They beget a state of confusion which undermines the individual's material and spiritual vitality. The greatest impediment to the human spirit, on reaching maturity, results from the fact that the conception of God is crystallized among people in a particular form, going back to childish habit and imagination. This is an aspect of the offense of making a graven image or a likeness of God, against which we must always beware, particularly in an epoch of greater intellectual enlightenment.

All the troubles of the world, especially the spiritual, such as grief, impatience, disillusionment, despair, the truly basic troubles of man—they all come about only because of the failure to view clearly the majesty of God. It is natural for a particular creature to feel insignificant before the whole, especially before the source of all existence in which one senses infinite transcendence of the whole. There is no anguish or depression in such lowliness, but pleasure and pride, a sense of inner power adorned by every kind of beauty. When this perception of God's majesty develops in the soul, in all its dimensions, it reconciles life to its natural subjugation. It fills life with peace to the extent that the individual recognizes the greatness of the whole and the majesty of its source. As the soul diminishes itself before its Creator, the phenomena of existence ascend in power and beauty and become permeated with the touch of universality. This natural diminishing engenders greatness and dignity, distilling in the soul endless delight in its very being, and in its ever widening role, reaching out to the infinite beyond. But when is it natural? It is when the greatness of the divine is well perceived in the soul, in a pure conception, above considerations of the nature of divine *essence*, but oriented toward the vision of the goodness of life. Then does the claim for self-diminishing emanate from every aspect of the soul, its universal as well as its particular dimension.

The general failure of the spiritual disciplines to focus on studies pertaining to God has dimmed the conception of God; there is no rational service of God sustained by refined feelings. The outward fear, the natural faith, and the feeling of lowliness, remain in many hearts as an inheritance from earlier epochs when the divine perception and feeling were prevalent in an enlightened state in full force, when, because of its greatness, it naturally evoked humility from people. Since the thoughts concerning God, in their basic elements, are unclear, God's being, as conceived by the multitude and even by individuals who should be their leaders, is that of a ruthless power from whom there is no escape and to whom one must necessarily be subservient.

The tendency of unrefined people to see the divine essence as embodied in the words and in the letters alone is a source of embarrassment to humanity, and atheism arises as a pained outcry to liberate man from this narrow pit, to raise him from the darkness of

focusing on letters and expressions, to the light of thought and feeling, finally to place his primary focus on the realm of morals. Atheism has a temporary legitimacy, for it is needed to purge away the aberrations which attached themselves to religious faith, because of a deficiency in perception and in the divine service. This is its sole function in existence—to remove the *particular* images from the speculations concerning Him who is the essence of all life and the source of all thought. When this condition persists for a period of several generations, atheism necessarily presents itself as a specific cultural expression, to uproot the remembrance of God and all institutions of divine service. But to what uprooting did divine providence intend? To uproot the cross which separates man from the truly divine light, and in the ruins wrought by atheism will the higher knowledge of God erect her Temple. To cleanse the air of the arrogant and evil aberration of focusing thought on the nature of the divine *essence*—a preoccupation that leads to idolatry—a thorough going atheism arises, in itself no better than the former but opposed to it in absolute terms. Out of the clash of these two opposites will mankind be aided greatly to reach an enlightened knowledge of God, which will bring near its temporary and eternal happiness. In place of the presumptuous and vain preoccupation with the nature of the divine *essence*, the human heart will be oriented to concern itself with pure morality, and the heroism for higher things, which emanate as flashes from the divine light and are at all times connected with its source, showing man the way of life and placing him in the light of God. The mighty wind will come from the four corners and raise in its surge, against their will, the anguished victims of the conception of God contrived by the sick imagination. "And you will know that I am the Lord when I have opened your graves." "And I will bring you up from your graves, O my people, and bring you to the land of Israel" (Ezekiel 37:13, 12). The violence of atheism will cleanse away the cross which accumulated in the lower levels of religious faith, and thereby will the heavens be cleared and the shining light of the higher faith will become visible, which is the song of the world and the truth of the world.

Whoever recognizes the essence of atheism from this perspective embraces the positive element in it and traces it back to its origin in holiness. He glimpses the splendor in the monstrous phenomenon.

When one discovers the stern protest embodied in rebellion and

atheism, which seeks to repudiate the good of our ancestral inheritance in pursuit of some new vision, which is in truth a general aspect of the yearning for the return to God stirring the heart, one finds the element of good inherent in it. It is the kernel of repentance which seeks to redress everything lowly and defective, and as a result of it one also comes to redress the defect which is represented in its destructiveness. Then there will be a general return to God, and redemption will come to the world. The perfection of the world which will be effected by the influence of the Jewish people is found in the ideal of penitence, of the return to God. As long as a person orders his life on the basis of fixed pattern he will not be able to escape his intellectual, moral and practical deficiencies, and how will he be able to mend himself? We must therefore not permit habit to be the primary factor in our social or personal life. The individual person as well as society at large must always seek to correct itself and to mend its spiritual and practical defects. All reformations of life and all revolutionary proposals which aim to change the order of things so as to improve it are all paths of repentance. Repentance must always be at the summit of all efforts to improve the world.

From time to time there is exposed the admixture of the pure belief in one God with the obfuscation of ascribing corporeality to Him, and whenever an aspect of anthropomorphism falls away—it appears as though religion itself has fallen. Soon, however, it turns out that religion has not fallen, but has become clarified. The recent turn of the human spirit toward a pure faith has effected the fall of the last vestige of anthropomorphism, which consists of ascribing to God the attribute of general existence. It is an anthropomorphism because however we define "existence" it is immeasurably remote from the divine. A denial of this has the sound of atheism. It is, however, the highest expression of religion when it becomes well clarified, and the human spirit grows accustomed to conceive of religion in terms of actions and influences, which have effected the emergence of nature and the phenomena of the Torah and of morals. Religion must be centered in the recognition that *the divine is the activating influence on existence and is, therefore, obviously above existence*. What looks like atheism, cleansed of its defilement, thus returns to the highest realms of pure religion. But this denial of

"existence" (in God), which is a return to the vision of God as the source of all existence and to the most ultimate essence of the majesty of all existence, requires the most scrupulous understanding. Each day it must be traced back to its authentic purity.

Religion is corrupted through the decline of the higher Torah, which leads to the recognition of the greatness of God, the higher perfection that is infinite and beyond assessment; it does not yield the noble fruit it ought to yield, it does not raise the souls from their lowly state, and its abuses increase. It is true the Jewish religion is rooted in the Infinite, which transcends every particular content of religion. For this reason the Jewish religion may indeed be considered as the ideal of religion, the religion of the future, the "I shall be what I shall be" (Ex. 3:14), what is immeasurably higher than the content of religion in the present. But the ideal essence descends many levels to become the Jewish religion as a corporate religious entity rather than the ideal essence of religion. The aberration of atheism arises against religion as an established institution, but atheism does not affect the ideal essence of religion, which is beyond atheism as it is beyond institutional religion. Atheism is without a true ideal; as the Zohar put it (Mishpatim 103a), "The alien deity is sterile, it bears no fruit." Despair and chaos contribute nothing, and therefore there is no place for an ideal contrary to the religious ideal. Though there is a conception (in the Kabbalah) of the negative forces engendering a kind of counterfeit religion paralleling institutional religion, the ideal essence of religion, which corresponds to what the Talmud calls the "fiftieth level of understanding" that was not revealed to Moses (Rosh Hashanah 21b), is not found in the realm of negation.² The influence of this "fiftieth level of understanding," the ideal essence of religion, infuses life to all other levels and subdues the negative aspect of atheism, which is devoid of an idea, before the holiness of religion which remains attached to an eternal ideal. "With You is the source of life" (Psalms 36:14).

On seeing such convulsions people believe that religion is dying, that the world is being overturned. In truth, however, the shadows are stirring, they are in flight in order to make room for the light. If religious faith is to be revitalized, a great effort is needed to deepen the knowledge of God, to follow the most subtle paths of mystical

thinking through which one rises above every kind of limitation in God. As it is a case of folly and weakness to ignore "revealed" knowledge, the beauty and might exemplified in empirical existence, so is it foolish to detach our minds from the inclination to pursue the promptings hidden in the depths of the soul, without which one cannot discern anything sublime that transcends our dull senses, which have been dulled by much defilement and affliction. It is only thus that the soul can be filled with knowledge and sensibility, and it is only through such subtlety of thought that the world will be filled with the light and the dew of revival, that the dormant will be awakened and the dead return to life. The best among the *zaddikim*, the sages most informed in the knowledge of God, must bestir themselves greatly to stimulate the interest in studying the greatness of God through all methods, the rational and the ethical. Then will religion regain its strength, it will rise out of its darkness toward a great light, and it will become the life-giving force to the highest and the most sensitive of souls, even as it is in its authentic nature. Thus will it necessarily regain its respect among all sections of humanity. For the Jews this is the anchor of the nation's rescue in this epoch—to restore to it the preciousness of religious faith in its purity, which is the entire basis of her existence.

But it is precisely when the lights are in convulsion, and the vessels which have housed them seem about to break, there is need to proclaim that indeed the letters, the words, the actions are not the essence of the light, but they are vessels, the organs of a living body, which bears within itself a soul. But alas for anyone who denies them even the role of vessels! Whoever denies the holiness of the letters, the words, the actions, and the forms within their own domain, will render himself speechless, without utterance, without any inner conceptual image, and altogether without the power to act, flooded by various forces which will disturb him altogether, body and soul.

Raise up religion, bring forth thought, acclaim life lived according to the conceptual forms and the practical actions in which the imagination has robbed the higher light, a divine service adapted to the reality of life, expressed in a divine service of life, of the Torah and the commandments.

NOTES

1. These metaphors coined in the Kabbalah are meant to suggest that the

various religious truths as taught by tradition do not really express God as He is in Himself, because they reach us through human mediators. In the Zohar Jethro 85a and Behar 110a these two are identified respectively with a higher and lower level of prophecy or with the written and oral Torah. The "limbs of the King" allude of course to the higher level, and "the garments of the King" to the lower.

2. Various cults have appeared in ancient and modern times paralleling organized religion in form and standard, which have in fact served as vehicles of the demonic forces. Nazism, for instance, developed a ritual, and a mythology but centering in the values of race and nation. Only the factor of ultimate value differentiates these counterfeit "religions" from the genuine religion.