

A black and white photograph of a sink drain and a pill on a metal surface. The drain is on the left, and the pill is on the right. The pill is white and oval-shaped. The background is a dark, textured metal surface.

Douglas

Purity and Danger

1

RITUAL UNCLEANNES

Our idea of dirt is compounded of two things, care for hygiene and respect for conventions. The rules of hygiene change, of course, with changes in our state of knowledge. As for the conventional side of dirt-avoidance, these rules can be set aside for the sake of friendship. Hardy's farm labourers commended the shepherd who refused a clean mug for his cider as a 'nice unparticular man':

'A clane cup for the shepherd,' said the maltster commandingly.

'No – not at all,' said Gabriel, in a reproving tone of consideration. 'I never fuss about dirt in its pure state and when I know what sort it is . . . I wouldn't think of giving such trouble to neighbours in washing up when there's so much work to be done in the world already.'

In a more exalted spirit, St. Catherine of Sienna, when she felt revulsion from the wounds she was tending, is said to have

bitterly reproached herself. Sound hygiene was incompatible with charity, so she deliberately drank of a bowl of pus.

Whether they are rigorously observed or violated, there is nothing in our rules of cleanness to suggest any connection between dirt and sacredness. Therefore it is only mystifying to learn that primitives make little difference between sacredness and uncleanness.

For us sacred things and places are to be protected from defilement. Holiness and impurity are at opposite poles. We would as soon confound hunger with fullness or sleeping with waking. Yet it is supposed to be a mark of primitive religion to make no clear distinction between sanctity and uncleanness. If this is true it reveals a great gulf between ourselves and our forefathers, between us and contemporary primitives. Certainly it has been very widely held and is still taught in one cryptic form or another to this day. Take the following remark of Eliade:

The ambivalence of the sacred is not only in the psychological order (in that it attracts or repels), but also in the order of values; the sacred is at once 'sacred' and 'defiled'.

(1958, pp. 14–15)

The statement can be made to sound less paradoxical. It could mean that our idea of sanctity has become very specialised, and that in some primitive cultures the sacred is a very general idea meaning little more than prohibition. In that sense the universe is divided between things and actions which are subject to restriction and others which are not; among the restrictions some are intended to protect divinity from profanation, and others to protect the profane from the dangerous intrusion of divinity. Sacred rules are thus merely rules hedging divinity off, and uncleanness is the two-way danger of contact with divinity. The problem then resolves into a linguistic one, and the paradox

is reduced by changing the vocabulary. This may be true of certain cultures. (See Steiner, p. 33.)

For instance, the Latin word *sacer* itself has this meaning of restriction through pertaining to the gods. And in some cases it may apply to desecration as well as to consecration. Similarly, the Hebrew root of k-d-sh, which is usually translated as Holy, is based on the idea of separation. Aware of the difficulty translating k-d-sh straight into Holy, Ronald Knox's version of the Old Testament uses 'set apart'. Thus the grand lines 'Be ye Holy, Because I am Holy' are rather thinly rendered:

I am the Lord your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt; I am set apart and you must be set apart like me.

(Levit. 11.46)

If only retranslation could put the whole matter right, how simple it would be. But there are many more intractable cases. In Hinduism, for example, the idea that the unclean and the holy could both belong in a single broader linguistic category is ludicrous. But the Hindu ideas of pollution suggest another approach to the question. Holiness and unholiness after all need not always be absolute opposites. They can be relative categories. What is clean in relation to one thing may be unclean in relation to another, and vice versa. The idiom of pollution lends itself to a complex algebra which takes into account the variables in each context. For example, Professor Harper describes how respect can be expressed on these lines among the Havik peoples of the Malnad part of Mysore state:

Behaviour that usually results in pollution is sometimes intentional in order to show deference and respect; by doing that which under other circumstances would be defiling, an individual expresses his inferior position. For example, the theme of the wife's subordination towards the husband finds

ritual expression in her eating from his leaf after he has finished . . .

In an even clearer case a holy woman, *sādhū*, when she visited the village, was required to be treated with immense respect. To show this, the liquid in which her feet had been bathed:

was passed round to those present in a special silver vessel used only for worshipping, and poured into the right hand to be drunk as *tirtha* (sacred liquid), indicating that she was being accorded the status of a god rather than a mortal. . . . The most striking and frequently encountered expression of respect-pollution is in the use of cow-dung as a cleansing agent. A cow is worshipped daily by Havik women and on certain ceremonial occasions by Havik men. . . . Cows are sometimes said to be gods; alternatively to have more than a thousand gods residing in them. Simple types of pollution are removed by water, greater degrees of pollution are removed by cow-dung and water. . . . Cow dung, like the dung of any other animal, is intrinsically impure and can cause defilement – in fact it will defile a god; but it is pure relative to a mortal . . . the cow's most impure part is sufficiently pure relative even to a Brahmin priest to remove the latter's impurities.

(Harper, pp. 181–3)

It is obvious that we are here dealing with symbolic language capable of very fine degrees of differentiation. This use of the relation of purity and impurity is not incompatible with our own language and raises no specially puzzling paradoxes. So far from there being confusion between the idea of holiness and uncleanness, here there is nothing but distinction of the most hair-splitting finesse.

Eliade's statements about the confusion between sacred contagion and uncleanness in primitive religion were evidently not

intended to apply to refined Brahminical concepts. To what were they intended to apply? Apart from the anthropologists, are there any people who really confuse the sacred and the unclean? Where did this notion spring from?

Frazer seems to have thought that confusion between uncleanness and holiness is the distinctive mark of primitive thinking. In a long passage in which he considers the Syrian attitude to pigs, he concludes:

Some said it was because pigs were unclean; others said it was because pigs were sacred. This . . . points to a hazy state of religious thought in which the idea of sanctity and uncleanness are not yet sharply distinguished, both being blent in a sort of vaporous solution to which we give the name taboo.

(*The Spirits of the Corn and Wild*, II, p. 23)

Again he makes the same point in giving the meaning of taboo:

Taboos of holiness agree with taboos of pollution because the savage does not distinguish between holiness and pollution.

(*Taboo and the Perils of the Soul*, p. 224)

Frazer had many good qualities, but originality was never one of them. These quotations directly echo Robertson Smith to whom he dedicated *The Spirits of the Corn and Wild*. Over twenty years earlier, Robertson Smith had used the word taboo for restrictions on 'man's arbitrary use of natural things, enforced by dread of supernatural penalties' (1889, p. 142). These taboos, inspired by fear, precautions against malignant spirits, were common to all primitive peoples and often took the form of rules of uncleanness.

The person under taboo is not regarded as holy, for he is separated from approach to the sanctuary, as well as from contact

with men, but his act or condition is somehow associated with supernatural dangers, arising, according to the common savage explanation, from the presence of formidable spirits which are shunned like an infectious disease. In most savage societies no line seems to be drawn between the two kinds of taboo.

According to this view, the main difference between primitive taboo and primitive rules of holiness is the difference between friendly and unfriendly deities. The separation of sanctuary and consecrated things and persons from profane ones, which is a normal part of religious cults, is basically the same as the separations which are inspired by fear of malevolent spirits. Separation is the essential idea in both contexts, only the motive is different – and not so very different either, since friendly gods are also to be feared on occasion. When Robertson Smith added that: 'to distinguish between the holy and the unclean marks a real advance above savagery', to his readers he was saying nothing challenging or provocative. It was certain that his readers made a big distinction between unclean and sacred, and that they were living at the right end of the evolutionary movement. But he was saying more than this. Primitive rules of uncleanness pay attention to the material circumstances of an act and judge it good or bad accordingly. Thus contact with corpses, blood or spittle may be held to transmit danger. Christian rules of holiness, by contrast, disregard the material circumstances and judge according to the motives and disposition of the agent.

. . . the irrationality of laws of uncleanness from the standpoint of spiritual religion or even of the higher heathenism, is so manifest that they must necessarily be looked upon as having survived from an earlier form of faith and of society.

(*Note C*, p. 430)

In this way a criterion was produced for classing religions as

advanced or as primitive. If primitive, then rules of holiness and rules of uncleanness were undistinguishable; if advanced, then rules of uncleanness disappeared from religion. They were relegated to the kitchen and bathroom and to municipal sanitation, nothing to do with religion. The less uncleanness was concerned with physical conditions and the more it signified a spiritual state of unworthiness, so much more decisively could the religion in question be recognised as advanced.

Robertson Smith was first and foremost a theologian and Old Testament scholar. Since theology is concerned with the relations between man and God, it must always be making assertions about the nature of man. At the time of Robertson Smith, anthropology was very much to the fore in theological discussion. Most thinking men in the second part of the nineteenth century were perforce amateur anthropologists. This comes out very clearly in Margaret Hodgen's *The Doctrine of Survivals*, a necessary guide to the confused nineteenth-century dialogue between anthropology and theology. In that formative period anthropology still had its roots in the pulpit and parish hall, and bishops used its findings for fulminating texts.

Parish ethnologists took sides as pessimists or optimists on the prospects of human progress. Were the savages capable of advancement or not? John Wesley, teaching that mankind in its natural state was fundamentally bad, drew lively pictures of savage customs to illustrate the degeneracy of those who were not saved:

The natural religion of the Creeks, Cherokees, Chickasaws and all other Indians, is to torture all their prisoners from morning to night, till at length they roast them to death. . . . Yea, it is a common thing among them for the son, if he thinks his father lives too long, to knock out his brains.

(*Works*, vol. 5, p. 402)

I need not here outline the long argument between the

progressionists and degenerationists. For several decades the discussion dragged on inconclusively, until Archbishop Whately, in an extreme and popular form, took up the argument for degeneracy to refute the optimism of economists following Adam Smith.

'Could this abandoned creature,' he asked, 'entertain any of the elements of nobility? Could the lowest savages and the most highly civilised specimens of the European races be regarded as members of the same species? Was it conceivable as the great economist had asserted, that by the division of labour these shameless people could 'advance step by step in all the arts of civilised life'?'

(1855, pp. 26-7)

The reaction to his pamphlet, as Hodgen describes it, was intense and immediate:

Other degenerationists, such as W. Cooke Taylor, composed volumes to support his position, assembling masses of evidence where the Archbishop had remained content with one illustration. . . . Defenders of the eighteenth century optimism appeared from all points of the compass. Books were reviewed in terms of Whately's contention. And social reformers everywhere, those good souls whose newly acquired compassion for the economically downtrodden had found a comfortable solvent in the notion of inevitable social improvement, viewed with alarm the practical outcome of the opposite view. . . . Even more disconcerted were those scholarly students of man's mind and culture whose personal and professional interests were vested in a methodology based upon the idea of progress.

(pp. 30-1)

One man finally came forward and settled the controversy for

the rest of the century by bringing science to the aid of the progressionists. This was Henry Burnett Tylor (1832–1917). He developed a theory and systematically amassed evidence to prove that civilisation is the result of gradual progress from an original state similar to that of contemporary savagery.

Among the evidence aiding us to trace the course which the civilisation of the world has actually followed is the great class of facts to denote which I have found it convenient to introduce the term 'survivals'. These are processes, customs, opinions and so forth, which have been carried by force of habit into the new society . . . and . . . thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has evolved.

(p. 16)

The serious business of ancient society may be seen to sink into the spirit of later generations and its serious belief to linger on in nursery folk-lore.

(p. 71)

(*Primitive Culture* I, 7th Edn.)

Robertson Smith used the idea of survivals to account for the persistence of irrational rules of uncleanness. Tylor published in 1873, after the publication of *The Origin of Species*, and there is some parallel between his treatment of cultures and Darwin's treatment of organic species. Darwin was interested in the conditions under which a new organism can appear. He was interested in the survival of the fittest and also in rudimentary organs whose persistence gave him the clues for reconstructing the evolutionary scheme. But Tylor was uniquely interested in the lingering survival of the unfit, in almost vanished cultural relics. He was not concerned to catalogue distinct cultural species or to show their adaptation through history. He only sought to show the general continuity of human culture.

Robertson Smith, coming later, inherited the idea that

modern civilised man represents a long process of evolution. He accepted that something of what we still do and believe is fossil: meaningless, petrified appendage to the daily business of living. But Robertson Smith was not interested in dead survivals. Customs which have not fed into the growing points of human history he dubbed irrational and primitive and implied that they were of little interest. For him the important task was to scrape away the clinging rubble and dust of contemporary savage cultures and to reveal the life-bearing channels which prove their evolutionary status by their live functions in modern society. This is precisely what *The Religion of the Semites* attempts to do. Savage superstition is there separated from the beginnings of true religion, and discarded with very little consideration. What Robertson Smith says about superstition and magic is only incidental to his main theme and a by-product of his main work. Thus he reversed the emphasis of Tylor. Whereas Tylor was interested in what quaint relics can tell us of the past, Robertson Smith was interested in the common elements in modern and primitive experience. Tylor founded folk-lore: Robertson Smith founded social anthropology.

Another great stream of ideas impinged even more closely on Robertson Smith's professional interests. This was the crisis of faith which assailed those thinkers who could not reconcile the development of science with traditional Christian revelation. Faith and reason seemed homelessly at odds unless some new formula for religion could be found. A group of philosophers who could no longer accept revealed religion, and who could not either accept or live without some guiding transcendental beliefs, set about providing that formula. Hence began that still-continuing process of whittling away the revealed elements of Christian doctrine, and the elevating in its place of ethical principles as the central core of true religion. In what follows I am quoting Richter's description of how the movement had its home in Oxford. At Balliol, T. H. Green tried to naturalise Hegelian

idealist philosophy as the solution to current problems of faith, morals and politics. Jowett had written to Florence Nightingale:

Something needs to be done for the educated similar to what J. Wesley did for the poor.

This is precisely what T. H. Green set out to achieve: to revive religion in the educated, make it intellectually respectable, create a new moral fervour and so produce a reformed society. His teaching had an enthusiastic reception. Complicated though his philosophic ideas were and tortuous their metaphysical basis, his principles were simple in themselves. They were even expressed in Mrs. Humphrey Ward's best-selling novel, *Robert Elsmere* (1888).

Green's philosophy of history was a theory of moral progress: God is made incarnate from age to age in social life of ever greater ethical perfection. To quote from his lay sermon – man's consciousness of God:

... has in manifold forms been the moralising agent in human society, nay the formative principle of that society itself. The existence of specific duties and the recognition of them, the spirit of self-sacrifice, the moral law and reverence for it in its most abstract and absolute form, all no doubt presuppose society, but society of a kind to render them possible is not the creature of appetite and fear. ... Under this influence wants and desires that have their root in the animal nature become an impulse of improvement which forms, enlarges and recasts societies, always keeping before man in various guises according to the degree of his development an unrealised ideal of a best which is his God, and giving divine authority to the customs or laws by which some likeness of this ideal is wrought into the actuality of life.

(Richter, p. 105)

The final trend of Green's philosophy was thus to turn away from revelation and to enshrine morality as the essence of religion. Robertson Smith never turned away from Revelation. To the end of his life he believed in the divine inspiration of the Old Testament. His biography by Black and Chrystal suggests that in spite of this belief he came strangely close to the Oxford Idealists' notion of religion.

Robertson Smith held the Free Church Chair of Hebrew in Aberdeen in 1870. He was in the vanguard of the movement of historical criticism which for some time earlier had been making upheavals in the conscience of Biblical scholars. In 1860 Jowett himself at Balliol had been censured for publishing an article 'On the Interpretation of the Bible', in which he argued that the Old Testament must be interpreted like any other book. Proceedings against Jowett collapsed and he was allowed to remain Regius Professor. But when Robertson Smith wrote the article, 'Bible', in 1875, for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the outcry in the Free Church against his heresy led to his suspension and dismissal. Robertson Smith, like Green, was in close touch with German thought, but whereas Green was not committed to Christian revelation, Robertson Smith never wavered in his faith in the Bible as the record of a specific, supernatural Revelation. Not only was he prepared to treat its books to the same kind of criticism as other books but, after he was dismissed from Aberdeen, he travelled in Syria and brought informed fieldwork to its interpretation. On the basis of his first-hand study of Semitic life and documents he delivered the Burnett lectures. The first series of these was published as *The Religion of the Semites*.

From the way he wrote it is clear that this study was no ivory-tower escape from the real problems of humanity of his day. It was important to understand the religious beliefs of obscure Arab tribes because these shed light on the nature of man and on the nature of religious experience. Two important themes emerged from his lectures. One is that exotic

mythological happenings and cosmological theories had little to do with religion. Here he is implicitly contradicting Tylor's theory that primitive religion arose from speculative thought. Robertson Smith suggested that those who were lying awake at night trying to reconcile the details of the Creation in Genesis with the Darwinian theory of evolution could relax. Mythology is so much extra embroidery on more solid beliefs. True religion, even from the earliest times, is firmly rooted in the ethical values of community life. Even the most misguided primitive neighbours of Israel, bedevilled by demons and myths, still showed some signs of true religion.

The second theme was that Israel's religious life was fundamentally more ethical than that of any of the surrounding peoples. Let us take this second point quickly first. The last three Burnett lectures, given in Aberdeen in 1891, were not published and little now survives of them. The lectures dealt with apparent Semitic parallels with the cosmogony of Genesis. The alleged parallel with the Chaldean cosmogony was held by Robertson Smith to have been much exaggerated, and the Babylonian myths were classed by him as more like the myths of savage nations than those of Israel. The Phoenician legend, again, superficially resembles the Genesis story, but the similarities serve to bring out the deep differences of spirit and meaning:

Phoenician legends . . . were bound up with a thoroughly heathen view of God, man and the world. Destitute as these legends were of ethical motives, no believer in them could rise to any spiritual conception of Deity nor any lofty conception of man's chief end . . . The burden of explaining this contrast (with Hebrew ideas of deity) does not lie with me. It falls on those who are compelled by a false philosophy of Revelation to see in the Old Testament nothing more than the highest point of the general tendencies of Semitic religions. This is not the view that study commends to me. It is a view that is not

commended, but condemned by the many parallelisms in detail between Hebrew and heathen story and ritual, for all these material points of resemblance only make the contrast in spirit the more remarkable. . . .

(Black & Chrystal, p. 536)

So much for the overwhelming inferiority of the religion of Israel's neighbours, and heathen Semites. As for the basis of heathen Semitic religions, it has two characteristics: an abounding demonology, rousing fear in men's hearts, and a comforting, stable relation with the community god. The demons are the primitive element rejected by Israel; the stable, moral relation with God is true religion.

However true it is that savage man feels himself to be environed by innumerable dangers which he does not understand and so personifies as invisible or mysterious enemies of more than human power, it is not true that the attempt to appease these powers is the foundation of religion. From the earliest times religion, as distinct from magic and sorcery, addressed itself to kindred and friends who may indeed be angry with their people for a time, but are always placable except to the enemies of their people or to renegade members of the community. . . . It is only in times of social dissolution . . . that magical superstition based on mere terror or rites designed to placate alien gods invade the sphere of tribal or national religion. In better times the religion of the tribe or state has nothing in common with the private and foreign superstitions or magical rites that savage terror may dictate to the individual. Religion is not an arbitrary relation of the individual man to a supernatural power; it is a relation of all the members of a community to the power that has the good of the community at heart.

(*The Religion of the Semites*, p. 55)

It is clear that in the 1890s this authoritative pronouncement on the relation of morals to primitive religion would be warmly welcomed. It would bring together in happy combination the new ethical idealism of Oxford and ancient revelation. It is plain that Robertson Smith himself had fallen entirely for the ethical view of religion. The compatibility of his views with those advanced in Oxford is nicely confirmed in the fact that when he was first dismissed from the Chair of Hebrew in Aberdeen, Balliol offered him a post.

He was confident that the pre-eminence of the Old Testament would stand above the challenge, however close the scientific scrutiny. For he could show with unrivalled erudition that all primitive religions express social forms and values. And since the moral loftiness of Israel's religious concepts was above dispute, and since these had given way in the course of history to the ideals of Christianity and these in turn had moved from Catholic to Protestant forms, the evolutionary movement was clear. Science was thus not opposed but deftly harnessed to the Christian's task.

From this point onwards the anthropologists have been saddled with an intractable problem. For magic is defined for them in residual, evolutionary terms. In the first place it is ritual which is not part of the cult of the community's god. In the second place it is ritual which is expected to have automatic effect. In a sense, magic was to the Hebrews what Catholicism was to the Protestants, mumbo-jumbo, meaningless ritual, irrationally held to be sufficient in itself to produce results without an interior experience of God.

Robertson Smith in his inaugural lecture contrasts the intelligent, Calvinist approach with the magical treatment of the Scriptures practised by the Roman Catholics who loaded the Book with superstitious accretions. In the same inaugural lecture he drives home the point. 'The Catholic Church', he argued:

... had almost from the first deserted the Apostolic tradition and set up a conception of Christianity as a mere series of formulae containing abstract and immutable principles, intellectual assent to which was sufficient to mould the lives of men who had no experience of a personal relation with Christ. . . .

Holy Scripture is not, as the Catholics tend to claim, 'a divine phenomenon magically endowed in every letter with saving treasures of faith and knowledge'.

(Black & Chrystal, pp. 126-7)

His biographers suggest that the association of magic with Catholicism was a canny move to shame his die-hard Protestant opponents into more courageous intellectual dealings with the Bible. Whatever the Scot's motives, the historical fact remains that comparative religion has inherited an ancient sectarian quarrel about the value of formal ritual. And now the time has come to show how an emotional and prejudiced approach to ritual has led anthropology down one of its barrenest perspectives — a narrow preoccupation with belief in the efficacy of rites. This I shall develop in Chapter 4. While Robertson Smith was perfectly right to recognise in the history of Christianity an ever-present tendency to slip into purely formal and instrumental use of ritual, his evolutionary assumptions misled him twice. Magical practice, in this sense of automatically effective ritual, is not a sign of primitiveness, as the contrast he himself drew between the religion of the Apostles and that of late Catholicism should have suggested. Nor is a high ethical content the prerogative of evolved religions, as I hope to show in later chapters.

The influence which Robertson Smith exerted divides into two streams according to the uses to which Durkheim and Frazer put his work. Durkheim took up his central thesis and set comparative religion in fruitful lines. Frazer took up his incidental minor thesis, and sent comparative religion into a blind alley.

Durkheim's debt to Robertson Smith is acknowledged in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (p. 61). His whole book develops the germinal idea that primitive gods are part and parcel of the community, their form expressing accurately the details of its structure, their powers punishing and rewarding on its behalf. In primitive life:

Religion was made up of a series of acts and observances, the correct performance of which was necessary or desirable to secure the favour of the gods or to avert their anger, and in their observances every member of society had a share marked out for him either in virtue of being born within the family and community or in virtue of the station within the family and community that he had come to hold . . . Religion did not exist for the saving of souls but for the preservation and welfare of society . . . A man was born into a fixed relation with certain gods as purely as he was born into a relation with his fellow men; and his religion, that is the part of conduct which was determined by his relation to the gods, was simply one side of the general scheme of conduct prescribed for him by his position as a member of society . . . Ancient religion is but part of the general social order which embraces gods and men alike.

Thus wrote Robertson Smith (pp. 29–33). But for differences of style and the use of the past tense, it could have been written by Durkheim.

I find it very helpful to understand Durkheim as engaged initially in an argument with the English, as Talcott Parsons has suggested (1960). He was concerned with a particular problem about social integration posed for him by the shortcomings of English political philosophy, particularly represented by Herbert Spencer. He could not subscribe to the utilitarian theory that the psychology of the individual would account for the development of society. Durkheim wanted to show that something else

was necessary, a common commitment to a common set of values, a collective conscience, if the nature of society was to be correctly understood. At the same time another Frenchman, Gustav le Bon (1841–1931) was engaged also in the same task of correcting the prevailing Benthamite tradition. He proceeded by developing a theory of crowd psychology which Durkheim also seems to have freely drawn upon. Compare Durkheim's account of the emotional force of totemic ceremonies (p. 241) with le Bon's account of the suggestible, emotionally savage or heroic 'crowd mind'. But a better instrument to Durkheim's purpose of convicting the English of error, was the work of another Englishman.

Durkheim adopted in its entirety Robertson Smith's definition of primitive religion as the established church which expresses community values. He also followed Robertson Smith unquestioningly in his attitude to rites which were not part of the cult of the community gods. He followed him in dubbing these 'magic' and defined magic and magicians as beliefs, practices and persons not operating within the communion of the church and often hostile to it. Following Robertson Smith and perhaps following Frazer, the early volumes of whose *Golden Bough* were already published when *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* came out in 1912, he allowed that magic rites were a form of primitive hygiene:

The things which the magician recommends to be kept separate are those which, by reason of their characteristic properties, cannot be brought together and confused without danger . . . useful maxims, the first forms of hygienic and medical interdictions.

(p. 338)

Thus the distinction between contagion and true religion was confirmed. Rules of uncleanness lay outside the main stream

of his interests. He paid them no more attention than did Robertson Smith.

But any arbitrary limitation of his subject draws a scholar into difficulty. When Durkheim set aside one class of separations as primitive hygiene and another class as primitive religion he undermined his own definition of religion. His opening chapters summarise and reject unsatisfactory definitions of religion. Attempts to define religion by notions of mystery and awe he dismisses, and likewise Tylor's definition of religion as belief in spiritual beings. He proceeds to adopt two criteria which he assumes will be found to coincide; the first, we have seen, is the communal organisation of men for the community cult, and the second is the separation of sacred from profane. The sacred is the object of community worship. It can be recognised by rules expressing its essentially contagious character.

In insisting on a complete break between the sphere of the sacred and the sphere of the profane, between secular and religious behaviour, Durkheim is not following in Robertson Smith's footsteps. For the latter took the opposite view and insisted (p. 29 seq.) that there is 'no separation between the spheres of religion and ordinary life'. A total opposition between sacred and profane seems to have been a necessary step in Durkheim's theory of social integration. It expressed the opposition between the individual and society. The social conscience was projected beyond and above the individual member of society onto something quite other, external and compellingly powerful. So we find Durkheim insisting that rules of separation are the distinguishing marks of the sacred, the polar opposite of the profane. He then is led by his argument into asking why the sacred should be contagious. This he answers by reference to the fictive, abstract nature of religious entities. They are merely ideas awakened by the experience of society, merely collective ideas projected outwards, mere expressions of morality. So they have no fixed material point of reference. Even the graven images of

gods are only material emblems of immaterial forces generated by the social process. Therefore they are ultimately rootless, fluid, liable to become unfocussed and to flow into other experiences. It is their nature always to be in danger of losing their distinctive and necessary character. The sacred needs to be continually hedged in with prohibitions. The sacred must always be treated as contagious because relations with it are bound to be expressed by rituals of separation and demarcation and by beliefs in the danger of crossing forbidden boundaries.

There is one little difficulty about this approach. If the sacred is characterised by its contagiousness, how does it differ from non-sacred magic, also characterised by contagiousness? What is the status of the other kind of contagiousness which is not generated from the social process? Why are magical beliefs called primitive hygiene and not primitive religion? These problems did not interest Durkheim. He followed Robertson Smith in cutting off magic from morals and religion and so helped to bequeath to us a tangle of ideas about magic. Ever since, scholars have scratched their heads for a satisfactory definition of magic beliefs and then puzzled over the mentality of people who can subscribe to them.

It is easy now to see that Durkheim advocated an altogether too unitary view of the social community. We should start by recognising communal life for a much more complex experience than he allowed. Then we find that Durkheim's idea of ritual as symbolic of social processes, can be extended to include both types of belief in contagion, religious and magical. If he could have foreseen an analysis of ritual in which none of the rules which he called hygienic are without their load of social symbolism, he would presumably have been happy to discard the category of magic. To this theme I shall return. But we cannot develop it without first rubbing the slate clean of another set of preconceptions which derive also from Robertson Smith.

Frazer was not interested in the sociological implications of

Robertson Smith's work. He seems indeed not to have been very interested in its main theme at all. Instead he fastened on the magical residue which was thrown off incidentally, as it were, from the definition of true religion. He showed that there were certain regularities to be found in magical beliefs and that these could be classified. On inspection, magic turned out to be much more than mere rules of avoiding obscure infection. Some magic acts were intended to procure benefits and others to avert harm. So the field of behaviour which Robertson Smith labelled superstition held more than rules of uncleanness. But contagion seemed to be one of its governing principles. The other principle was belief in the transfer of properties by sympathy or likeness. According to the so-called laws of magic, the magician can change events either by mimetic action or by allowing contagious forces to work. When he had finished investigating magic Frazer had done no more than to name the conditions under which one thing may symbolise another. If he had not been convinced that savages think on entirely different lines from ourselves, he might have been content to treat magic as symbolic action, neither more nor less. He might then have joined hands with Durkheim and the French school of sociology and the dialogue across the channel would have been more fruitful for English nineteenth-century thought. Instead he crudely tidied up the evolutionary assumptions implicit in Robertson Smith and assigned to human culture three stages of development.

Magic was the first stage, religion the second, science the third. His argument proceeds by a kind of Hegelian dialectic since magic, classed as primitive science, was defeated by its own inadequacy and supplemented by religion in the form of a priestly and political fraud. From the thesis of magic emerged the antithesis, religion, and the synthesis, modern effective science, replaced both magic and religion. This fashionable presentation was supported by no evidence whatever. Frazer's evolutionary scheme was only based on some unquestioning

assumptions taken over from the common talk of his day. One was the assumption that ethical refinement is a mark of advanced civilisation. Another, the assumption that magic has nothing to do with morals or religion. On this basis he constructed the image of our early ancestors, their thinking dominated by magic. For them the universe was moved by impersonal, mechanistic principles. Fumbling for the right formula for controlling it, they stumbled on some sound principles, but just as often their confused state of mind led them to think that words and signs could be used as instruments. Magic resulted from early man's inability to distinguish between his own subjective associations and external objective reality. Its origin was based on a mistake. No doubt about it, the savage was a credulous fool.

Thus the ceremonies which in many lands have been performed to hasten the departure of winter or stay the flight of summer are in a sense an attempt to create the world afresh, to 'remould it nearer to the heart's desire'. But if we would set ourselves at the point of view of the old sages who devised means so feeble to accomplish a purpose so immeasurably vast, we must divest ourselves of our modern conceptions of the immensity of the Universe and of the pettiness and insignificance of man's place in it . . . To the savage the mountains that bound the visible horizon, or the sea that stretches away to meet it, is the world's end. Beyond these narrow limits his feet have never strayed . . . of the future he hardly thinks, and of the past he only knows what has been handed down by word of mouth from his savage forefathers. To suppose that a world thus circumscribed in space and time was created by the efforts or the fiat of a being like himself imposes no great strain on his credulity; and he may without much difficulty imagine that he himself can annually repeat the work of creation by his charms and incantations.

(The Spirits of the Corn and Wild, II, p. 109)

It is hard to forgive Frazer for his complacency and undisguised contempt of primitive society. The last chapter of *Taboo and the Perils of the Soul* is entitled, 'Our Debt to the Savage'. Possibly it was inserted in response to correspondents who pressed him to recognise the wisdom and philosophic depth of primitive cultures they knew. Frazer gives interesting extracts from these letters in footnotes, but he cannot adjust his own preconceived judgements to take them into account. The chapter purports to contain a tribute to savage philosophy, but since Frazer could offer no reason for respecting ideas which he had massively demonstrated to be childish, irrational and superstitious, the tribute is mere lip service. For pompous patronage this is hard to beat:

When all is said and done, our resemblances to the savage are still far more numerous than our differences . . . after all, what we call truth is only the hypothesis which is found to work best. Therefore in reviewing the opinions and practices of ruder ages and races we shall do well to look with leniency upon their errors as inevitable slips made in the search for truth. . . .

Frazer had his critics and they gained some attention at the time. But in England Frazer undoubtedly triumphed. For is not the *Golden Bough* abridged edition still bringing in an income? Is not a Frazer Memorial Lecture regularly delivered? Partly it was the very simplicity of his views, partly the tireless energy which brought out volume after volume, but above all the gold and purple style of writing, which gave such wide circulation to his work. In almost any study of ancient civilisations you will be sure to find continual references to primitiveness and to its criterion, magical non-ethical superstition.

Take Cassirer, for example, writing about Zoroastrianism, and recognise these themes from the *Golden Bough*:

Even nature assumes a new shape, for it is seen exclusively in the mirror of ethical life. Nature . . . is conceived as the sphere of law and lawfulness. In Zoroastrian religion nature is described by the concept of *Asha*. *Asha* is the wisdom of nature that reflects the wisdom of its creator, of Ahura Mazda, the 'wise Lord'. This universal, eternal, inviolable order governs the world and determines all single events: the path of the sun, the moon, the stars, the growth of plants and animals, the way of winds and clouds. All this is maintained and preserved, not by mere physical forces but by the force of the Good . . . the ethical meaning has replaced and superseded the magical meaning.

(1944, p. 100)

Or, to take a more recent source on the same subject, we find Professor Zaehner noting sadly that the least defective Zoroastrian texts are only concerned with rules of purity and therefore of no interest:

. . . only in the *Vidēvdāt* with its dreary prescriptions concerning ritual purity and its listing of impossible punishments for ludicrous crimes do the translators show a tolerable grasp of the text.

(pp. 25-6)

This is certainly how Robertson Smith would consider such rules, but over 100 years later can we be sure that this is all there is to be said about them?

In Old Testament studies the assumption is rife that primitive peoples use rituals magically, that is in a mechanical, instrumental way. 'In early Israel the distinction between what we call intentional and unintentional sin, as far as God is concerned, scarcely exists' (Osterley & Box). 'For the Hebrews of the fifth century B.C.', writes Professor James, 'expiation was merely a

mechanical process consisting of wiping away material uncleanness' (1938). The history of the Israelites is sometimes presented as a struggle between the prophets who demanded interior union with God and the people, continually liable to slide back into primitive magicality, to which they are particularly prone when in contact with other more primitive cultures. The paradox is that magicality seems finally to prevail with the compilation of the Priestly Code. If belief in the sufficient efficacy of the rite is to be called magic in its late as well as in its earliest manifestations, the usefulness of magic as a measure of primitiveness would be lost. One would expect the very word to be expunged from Old Testament studies. But it lingers on, with *Tabu* and *mana*, to emphasise the distinctiveness of the Israelite religious experience by contrast with Semitic heathenism. Eichrodt is particularly free with these terms (pp. 438, 453).

Mention has already been made of the magical effect ascribed to Babylonian rites and formulas of expiation, and this becomes especially clear when it is remembered that the confession of sin actually forms part of the ritual of exorcism and has *ex opere operato* efficiency.

(p. 166)

He goes on to cite Psalms 40, 7, and 69, 31, as 'opposing the tendency of the sacrificial system to make forgiveness of sins a mechanical process'. Again, on p. 119, he assumes that primitive religious concepts are 'materialistic'. Much of this otherwise impressive book rests on the assumption that ritual which works *ex opere operato* is primitive, prior in time compared with ritual which is symbolic of internal states of mind. But occasionally the unattested *a priori* nature of this assumption seems to make the author uneasy:

The commonest of all expressions for making atonement, *kipper*, also points in this direction if the original meaning of the term may be defined as 'to wipe away' on the basis of the Babylonian and Assyrian parallels. Here the fundamental concept of sin is of a material impurity, and the blood, as a holy substance endowed with miraculous power, is expected to remove the stain of sin quite automatically.

Then comes an illumination which would cause much rewriting if taken seriously:

Since, however, the derivation based on the Arabic, giving the meaning 'to cover' seems equally possible, it may well be that the idea is that of covering up one's guilt from the eyes of the offended party by means of reparation, which would by contrast emphasise the personal character of the act of atonement.

(p. 162)

So Eichrodt half relents towards the Babylonians – perhaps they too knew something of true interior religion; perhaps the Israelite religious experience did not stick out in the surrounding pagan magic with such unique distinctiveness.

We find some of the same assumptions governing the interpretation of Greek literature. Professor Finley, in discussing the social life and beliefs of Homer's world, applies an ethical test for distinguishing earlier from later elements of belief (pp. 147, 151, 157).

Again, a learned French classicist, Moulinier, makes a comprehensive study of ideas of purity and impurity in Greek thought. Free of the bias of Robertson Smith, his approach seems excellently empirical by current anthropological standards. Greek thought seems to have been relatively free of ritual pollution in the period which Homer describes (if there was such a historical period), while clusters of pollution concepts

emerge later and are expressed by the classical dramatists. The anthropologist, weak in classical scholarship, looks round for specialist guidance on how much reliance can be placed in this author, for his material is challenging and, to the layman, convincing. Alas – the book is roundly condemned in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* by an English reviewer who finds it wanting in nineteenth-century anthropology:

... the author needlessly handicapped himself. He appears to know nothing of the great mass of comparative material which is available to anyone studying purity, pollution and purification ... a very modest amount of anthropological knowledge would tell him that so old a notion as that of pollution of shed blood belongs to a time when the community was the whole world ... on p. 277 he uses the word 'tabu' but only to show that he has no clear idea of what it means.

(Rose, 1954)

Whereas a reviewer unburdened by dubious anthropological knowledge recommends Moulinier's work without reserve (Whatmough).

These scattered quotations collected very much at random could easily be multiplied. They show how widespread Frazer's influence has been. Within anthropology too, his work has gone very deep. It seems that once Frazer had said that the interesting question in comparative religion hinged on false beliefs in magical efficacy, British anthropologists' heads remained dutifully bowed over this perplexing question, even though they had long rejected the evolutionary hypotheses which for Frazer made it interesting. So we read through virtuoso displays of learning on the relation between magic and science whose theoretical importance remains obscure.

All in all, Frazer's influence has been a baneful one. He took from Robertson Smith that scholar's most peripheral teaching,

and perpetuated an ill-considered division between religion and magic. He disseminated a false assumption about the primitive view of the universe worked by mechanical symbols, and another false assumption that ethics are strange to primitive religion. Before we can approach the subject of ritual defilement these assumptions need to be corrected. The more intractable puzzles in comparative religion arise because human experience has been thus wrongly divided. In this book we try to reunite some of the separated segments.

In the first place we shall not expect to understand religion if we confine ourselves to considering belief in spiritual beings, however the formula may be refined. There may be contexts of enquiry in which we should want to line up all extant beliefs in other beings, zombies, ancestors, demons, fairies – the lot. But, following Robertson Smith, we should not suppose that in cataloguing the full spiritual population of the universe we have necessarily caught the essentials of religion. Rather than stopping to chop definitions, we should try to compare peoples' views about man's destiny and place in the universe. In the second place we shall not expect to understand other people's ideas of contagion, sacred or secular, until we have confronted our own.