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THE RELIGION OF THE VEDA

THE ANCIENT RELIGION OF INDIA

(FROM RIG-VEDA TO UPANISHADS)

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“thou art the That,” of the Chāndogya Upanishad. Lest some one should suspect this to be a mere blundering thought for the nonce, a kind of freak or sport of mental rumination, the same Dirghatamas hymn contains the idea several times more; for instance in stanza 6:

“In ignorance do I ask here them that haply know,
Who did support the six regions of the world?
What was, forsooth, this one unborn thing?”

The tenth book of the Rig-Veda contains the famous creation hymn (10.129). This remarkable production has always interested Sanskritists profoundly; it has also passed over into the general literature of religion and philosophy. That great and sober critic, the late Professor William D. Whitney, remarked anent it in 1882, that the unlimited praises which had been bestowed upon it, as philosophy and as poetry, were well-nigh nauseating.¹ And yet, twelve years later, in 1894, Deussen, who, I am sure, is not trying to contradict Whitney, breaks out into new praise, more ecstatic than ever: “In its noble simplicity, in the loftiness of its philosophic vision it is possibly the most admirable bit of philosophy of olden times.” And again, “No translation can ever do justice to the beauty of the original.”² I think

¹ *Proceedings of the American Oriental Society*, vol. xi., p. cxi.

² *History of Philosophy*, vol. i., part i., pp. 119 and 126.

we may grant that the composition shows a good deal of rawness, unevenness, and inconsistency. Yet it is perhaps easier to undervalue such a performance than to exaggerate its importance. It occurs in one of the earliest literatures of the world; it brushes aside all mythology, and it certainly exhibits philosophic depth and caution when it designates the fundamental cause of the universe not by a name, but as “that” (*tad*), or “the one thing” (*ekam*). But let my hearers judge for themselves:

FIRST STANZA.

“Nor being was there nor non-being; there was no atmosphere and no sky beyond. What covered all, and where, by what protected? Was there a fathomless abyss of the waters?”

The poet describes as deftly as possible a primordial chaos. There was not non-being, for that is unconceivable¹; there was not being in the ordinary experience of the senses. What was there? The poet in the next stanza carries on his negation and then abruptly presses forward to a positive conclusion:

SECOND STANZA.

“Neither death was there nor immortality; there

¹ Cf. Chāndogya Upanishad 6. 2. 2.

was not the shen of night nor light of day. That One breathed, without breath, by inner power ; than it truly nothing whatever else existed besides."

The poet is careful in his thought of what positively was. It is "That One" (*tad ekam*); it exists and breathes, but it breathes in a higher sense, without breath (literally "wind") which is physical and material. It is difficult to imagine a more cautious, or even a more successful attempt to conceive and express a first cause or principle without personality. Yet we must not fail to observe that even so subtle a conception as the neuter "That One" is furnished with the anthropomorphic attribute of breath, because after all, in the long run, it must be decked out in some sort of flesh and blood. The third stanza takes up anew the description of chaos, and follows it up with a second description of the primal force :

THIRD STANZA.

"Darkness there was, hidden by darkness at the beginning ; an unilluminated ocean was this all. The living force which was enveloped in a shell, that one by the might of devotional fervor was born."

Unquestionably we have here the idea, frequently expressed in the Brāhmana tales of the creator Prajāpati.¹ According to this the primal being be-

¹ See below, p. 240.

gins to create through the force of devotion (*tapas*). Here an even more primary condition is assumed : the fundamental force is itself put forth by, or is born from, devotion. This devotional fervor marks either another start at a primeval cause, or, paradoxical as this may seem, is the devotional fervor of the yet uncreated sages. Anyhow these sages appear upon the scene as *dei ex machina* in the next stanza, and then, after this gap has been spanned, the work of creation can really proceed.

FOURTH STANZA.

"Desire arose in the beginning in That ; it was the first seed of mind. The sages by devotion found the root of being in non-being, seeking it in (their) heart."

Desire, Kāma, the equivalent of Greek *Ἔρως* "Love," means here the desire to live ; it is the first possible seed or fruit of the mind, for there is no conceivable action of the mind which is not preceded by life. The second hemistich introduces an even more primordial creative rôle on the part of the sages, whose devotion is the real promotive force in the act of creation. The poet does not tell whence come the sages at this stage of the drama. The production of this creation, which is here defined as "being" coming out of "non-being," contradicts, the first stanza where "non-being" is denied : "How

can 'being' come out of 'non-being?'" asks the Chândogya Upanishad (6. 2. 2). Moreover it ignores the previously postulated "That Only" which by its terms eliminates "non-being." The poet here unquestionably entangles himself in sham-profundity; he had better left out all reference to "non-being"; it is a term handled by the Hindus with a degree of deftness which is in the inverse ratio to their fondness for it.

The hymn continues with a mystical fifth stanza which is obscure, and in any case unimportant. Then it takes a wholly new turn into the direction of philosophic scepticism. This is quite unexpected in the wake of "That Only," in whose mind creative desire had sprung forth: it ought to, aided by its own or the sages' creative fervor, go on to create the world, if it does anything at all:

SIXTH STANZA.

*"Who truly knoweth? Who can here proclaim it?
Whence hither born, whence cometh this creation?
On this side are the gods from its creating,
Who knoweth then from whence it came to being?"*

SEVENTH STANZA.

*"This creation—from whence it came to being,
Whether it made itself, or whether not—
He who is its overseer in highest heaven,
He surely knoweth—or perchance he knoweth not."*

The avowed purpose of all philosophy is to account for the presence of the world and its contents, as something which is not self-evident, and needs to be explained beyond the point of mere individual experience, or analysis through empirical knowledge. The creation hymn performs this act not without some unsteadiness and with petulance due to scepticism. In putting forth a fundamental principle without personality it does not fall far behind the best thought of later times inside or outside of India. It fails where all philosophy fails, in bridging over to this particular idealistic or phenomenal world, even after the fundamental principle has been abstracted, no matter in how rarefied and non-committal a form. We may expect, therefore, other starts towards the same end. The Veda, as I have hinted before, contains an astonishing number of attempts to establish a supreme monotheistic being who is far easier to handle than the monistic "That Only"; a monotheistic god who, when once conceived, conveniently assumes all responsibility. We have seen more than once how supreme divine action makes a show of gradually detaching itself from the persons of the various gods who figure in the earlier myth and cult, and how this action impresses itself upon the mind as really more important than the particular divine agent who was at any given time supposed