

Corresponding to Stars

Charles Dupuis (1742-1809) claimed that all religions have grown out of astral beliefs. Dupuis was a scholar who became a member of the revolutionary government in France in 1792, and also served briefly in Napoleon's government. However, he soon retired from politics, and devoted the rest of his life to his studies. In 1795 he published a work called *Origine de tous les cultes, ou la religion universelle* in which he presented his theory of the astral origin of all religions, and his view that the place where all organized religion originated was northern Egypt. The work stirred up considerable controversy, and is said to have led to the expedition organized by Napoleon for the exploration of Egypt, an invasion which had many consequences.

Dupuis begins by asserting that in the beginning all religion was pantheistic. There is an anonymous translation of parts of his work with the title *The Origin of All Religious Worship*, made in 1871, in which Dupuis says: "When man began to reason upon the causes of his existence and preservation, also upon those of the multiplied effects, which are born and die around him, where else but in this vast and admirable Whole could he have placed at first that sovereignly powerful cause, which brings forth everything, and in the bosom of which all reenters, in order to issue again by a succession of new generations and under different forms. This power being that of the World itself, it was therefore the World, which was considered as God, or as the supreme and universal cause of all the effects produced by it, of which mankind forms a part. This is that great God, the first or rather the only God, who has manifested himself to man through the veil of the matter which he animates and which forms the immensity of the Deity."

"Although this God was everywhere and was all, which bears a character of grandeur and perpetuity in this eternal World, yet did man prefer to look for him in those elevated regions, where that mighty and radiant luminary seems to travel through space, overflowing the Universe with the waves of its light, and through which the most beautiful as well as the most beneficent action of the Deity is enacted on Earth. It would seem as if the Almighty had established his throne above that splendid azure vault, sown with brilliant lights, that from the summit of the heavens he held the reins of the World, that he directed the movements of its vast body, and contemplated himself in forms as varied as they are admirable, wherein he modifies himself incessantly."

Dupuis quotes Pliny the Elder (*Natural History*, II.1): "The World, says Pliny, or what we otherwise call Heaven, which comprises in its immensity the whole creation, is an eternal, an infinite God, which has never been created, and which shall never come to an end. To look for something else beyond it, is useless labor for man, and out of his reach. Behold that truly sacred Being, eternal and immense, which includes within itself everything; it is All in All, or rather itself is All. It is the work of Nature, and itself is Nature."

"It would be a mistaken idea to believe, that [the Ancients] considered the World merely as a machine, without life and intelligence, moved by a blind and necessary force. As the World seemed animated by a principle of life, which

circulates in all its parts, holding it in eternal activity, it was believed that the Universe lived as man did and the other animals, or rather that these lived only because the Universe, being essentially animated, communicated them for a few instants an infinitesimal portion of its immortal life, which it infused into the coarse and inert matter of sublunary bodies. Was it restored back to itself? Man and beast died and the Universe alone, always alive, circulated around the remains of their bodies by its perpetual motion, and organized new beings. The active Fire or the subtle substance, which animated it, by incorporating itself in its immense mass, was the universal soul. This is the doctrine, which is embodied in the system of the Chinese, on Yang and Yin, one of which is the celestial matter, moveable and luminous, and the other the terrestrial one, inert and gloomy, of which all bodies are composed."

"This is the dogma of Pythagoras," Dupuis continues, "contained in those beautiful verses in the sixth book of the Aeneid, where Anchises reveals to his son the origin of the souls and their fate after death: "You must know, my son, he said, that Heaven and Earth, the Sea, the luminous globe of the Moon and all the Stars, are moved by a principle of eternal life, which perpetuates their existence; that there is a great intelligent Spirit extended in all the parts of the vast body of the Universe, which, while mixing itself in All, is agitating it by an eternal motion. It is this soul, which is the source of life of man, of the beasts, of the birds and all the monsters living within the bosom of the Ocean. The vital force, which animates them, emanates from that eternal Fire, which shines in the Heavens, and which while it is held captive in the raw material of the bodies, is only developed as much, as the various mortal organizations permit it, which subdue its power and activity. At the death of each creature, these germs of a particular life, these portions of an universal breath, return to their principle and to their source of life, which circulates in the starred sphere."

Matching lives of men with lives of stars is nearly universal. In Africa, according to Harold Courlander in his *Yoruba Gods and Heroes* (1973), the following cosmogony is told among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. "In ancient days, at the beginning of time, there was no solid land here where people now dwell. There was only outer space and the sky, and, far below, an endless stretch of water and wild marshes. Supreme in the domain of the sky was the orisha, or god, called Olorun, also known as Olodumare and designated by many praise names. Also living in that place were numerous other orishas, each having attributes of his own, but none of whom had knowledge or powers equal to those of Olorun. Among them was Orunmila, also called Ifa, the eldest son of Olorun. To this orisha Olorun had given the power to read the future, to understand the secret of existence and to divine the processes of fate. There was the orisha Obatala, King of the White Cloth, whom Olorun trusted as though he also were a son. There was the orisha Eshu, whose character was neither good nor bad. He was compounded out of the elements of chance and accident, and his nature was unpredictability. He understood the principles of speech and language, and because of this gift he was Olorun's linguist."

"Down below, it was the female deity Olokun who ruled over the vast expanses of water and wild marshes, a grey region with no living things in it. The two worlds were separate, and the orishas of the sky took no notice of what went on below, except for Obatala, King of the White Cloth. In order to overcome the

monotony of what lay below, he went to Orunmila to ask how land could be introduced below. By casting palm nuts in his divining tray, Orunmila determined that Obatala should make a golden chain with which to descend to the water with sand, to make land with. This Obatala did. He planted a palm nut, and there was vegetation in the land, but no people, so Obatala decided to make people out of clay. After making a number, he got thirsty and began to drink palm wine. He drank so much that he got drunk, and some of the people he made after that were misshapen. A city called Ife was founded. Olokun, the orisha of the sea, angry that water had been covered with land, flooded it, and many people were drowned. After a while, Orunmila, the deity of divination, whose name means "The Sky Knows Who Will Prosper", came down from the sky and turned back the sea."

Orunmila also taught certain orishas who had come to live below on the land, and certain men, the arts of controlling unseen forces, and others the art of divining the future, knowledge of how to find out the wishes and intentions of the Sky God. Earthly order, the understanding of relationships between people and the physical world, and between people and the orishas began to take shape.

Peter Lum in *The Stars in our Heaven, Myths and Fables* (1948) relates that in the myths of Britain, the constellation of the Great Bear (Ursa Major, the Big Dipper) is interwoven with the story of King Arthur and the Round Table. His name was alleged to have come from the words "Arth" and "Uthyr", meaning "bear" and "wonderful". Some of his followers are said to have claimed that he was an incarnation of the spirit of the Great Bear. The Round Table may have referred to the circle made by the swinging of the Great Bear's tail each night when it swept the northern sky. "Fiona Macleod tells an old story," Lum says, "of how Arthur once fell asleep on the seashore, long before he had any thought of being king, and in his sleep a spirit came to him and guided him far up to the north where the stars of the Great Bear were bright. There he found the knights of heaven seated at a great circular table, resplendent as the shining stars, and they spoke to him and gave him wise counsel. They told him that his name should be Arthur, that he would be king, and that he must pattern his life and the rule of his kingdom on that of the kingdom of heaven."

Gene Weltfish in *The Lost Universe: Pawnee Life and Culture* (1965) tells how some Native Americans who lived along the Missouri River saw the connection of the heavens with the affairs of men: "The Pawnees had many tasks to accomplish in the early spring before the time of planting. Some of them were practical and some ceremonial, but to the Pawnees who believed that nothing on earth could move without the heavens, no practical task could be undertaken unless the appropriate ceremony had preceded it. The round of spring renewal ceremonies was heralded by the appearance of two small twinkling stars known as the Swimming Ducks in the northeastern horizon near the Milky Way. They notified the animals that they must awaken from their winter sleep, break through the ice, and come out into the world again.

Ray Williamson in *Living the Sky, The Cosmos of the American Indian* (1984) relates that according to Pawnee stories, they received some of their ritual direction from the stars. They claimed that at one time they organized their villages according to patterns of the stars, and each village possessed a sacred bundle given to it by one of the stars. When the different villages assembled for a

communal ceremony, they arranged themselves in a way which reflected the celestial positions of the stars. There were 18 Skidi Pawnee villages, each associated with a different star.

The Oglala Dakota, a branch of the Sioux Indians, were among those who defeated Custer at the battle of Little Bighorn in 1876. Their chief god was Wakan Tanka, who is sixteen individuals in one, each of four categories containing four individuals (cf. geomancy). As great spirit, he is sky. James Walker, as quoted by Paul Radin in his *Primitive Man as Philosopher* (1927), says of this religion: "The sky is an immaterial god whose substance is never visible. His titles given by the people are *taku-skan-skan* and *nagi tanka* or the great spirit, and those given by the priests are *skan* and *to*, blue. The concept expressed by the term *taka-skan-skan* is that which gives motion to anything that moves. That expressed by the shamans by the word *skan* is a vague concept of force or energy and by the word *to* is the immaterial blue of the sky, which symbolizes the presence of the great spirit. His domain is all above the world, beginning at the ground. He is the source of all power and motion and is the patron of directions and trails and of encampment. He imparts to each of mankind at birth a spirit, a ghost, and a *sicun* [an invisible god] and at the death of each of mankind he hears the testimony of the ghost and adjudges the spirit. His word is unalterable except by himself. He alone can undo that which is done. His people are the stars and the feminine is his daughter."

Plato speaks in many places of the workings of the stars. In the *Republic*, there is the myth of Er in the 10th book of Plato's meditation on the nature of justice. Er, the son of Armenius, is killed in battle, but comes to life again just before he is to be burnt on a funeral pyre. He describes what he has seen in the other world. This includes a vision of the structure of the universe, described this way by Francis Cornford in his translation of the *Republic* (1941): "What the souls actually see in their vision is not the universe itself, but a model, a primitive orrery in a form roughly resembling a spindle, with its shaft round which at the lower end is fastened a solid hemispherical whorl. In the orrery the shaft represents the axis of the universe and the whorl consists of 8 hollow concentric hemispheres, fitted into one another 'like a nest of bowls,' and capable of moving separately. It is as if the upper halves of 8 concentric spheres had been cut away so that the internal 'works' might be seen. The rims of the bowls appear as forming a continuous flat surface; they represent the equator of the sphere of fixed stars and, inside that, the orbits of the 7 planets. The souls see the Spindle resting on the knees of Necessity. The whole mechanism is turned by the Fates, Clotho (the Spinner), Lachesis (She who allots), and Atropos (the Inflexible). Sirens sing eight notes on consonant intervals forming the structure of a scale (*harmonia*) which represents the Pythagorean "music of the spheres".

In the myth, after the souls have completed their journey to the Spindle resting on the knees of Necessity (probably the Milky Way) Lachesis, daughter of Necessity, distributor of human fates, says: "Souls of a day, here shall begin a new round of earthly life, to end in death. No guardian spirit will cast lots for you, but you shall choose your own destiny." (Cornford's translation). The dead souls are shown a large number of sample lives to choose from. The man who had drawn the first lot chose, in thoughtless greed, to be reborn as a tyrant. He did not see the many evils this life contained, and that he was fated to devour his own children.

Plato attributes his choice to innocence and ignorance: "He was once of those," Plato says, "who had come down from heaven, having spent his former life in a well-ordered commonwealth and become virtuous from habit without pursuing wisdom. It might indeed be said that not the least part of those who were caught in this way were of the company which had come from heaven, because they were not disciplined by suffering; whereas most of those who had come up out of earth, having suffered themselves and seen others suffer, were not hasty in making their choice." (Cornford's translation).

Cornford draws attention to Plato's intention that such stories be taken as myth. By this means Plato synthesizes older speculative interpretations in the manner of Pythagoreans with newer ideas of rational philosophy.

Plato's visions exerted great cultural force near the close of the 16th century, just before the advent of new cosmologies based on the works of such people as Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and Descartes, unified by Newton in his *system of the world*. At Florence, in 1589, an elaborate theatrical production known as the *intermezzi* was presented at the Medici court in honor of the marriage of the Grand Duke of Tuscany. Here is the opening scene, as described by Roy Strong in *Arts and Festivals, Renaissance Festivals 1450-1650* (1973): "On May 2nd 1589 the front curtain on the Teatro Mediceo parted to reveal a Doric temple and above it a cloud, surrounded by rays of light, which slowly descended to the ground. On this rode the Doric Harmony, singing of her descent to mortals. The initial statement of the Doric Harmony was carried to fruition in the first intermezzo which took the form of a representation of the Harmony of the Spheres according to Plato's cosmology, and in particular as described in the tenth book of Plato's *Republic*. The *prospettiva* [a view of the city of Pisa in perspective] was suddenly covered with star-spangled clouds. Eight Platonic sirens plus two more of the ninth and tenth sphere sat on clouds telling how they had forsaken the heavens to sing the praises of the bride. On a central cloud sat Necessity on a throne with a diamond spindle of the cosmos between her knees. She was attended by the three Parcae or Fates and they in turn were flanked by clouds bearing the seven planets and Astraea, whose advent on earth signaled the return of the Golden Age Above were twelve heroes and heroines, each pair embodying virtues attributed to the onlooking couple [the Duke and his bride]. Both the sirens and the planets joined in a dialogue describing the joy of the cosmos at so auspicious an alliance and as the clouds arose from the lower part of the stage sunlight streamed in, while above night approached. A concluding madrigal expressed hopes of 'glorious heroes' as a result of the match. As the cloud vision faded the stage was filled with sunlight, revealing the *prospettiva* of the city of Pisa "

Strong says that the Renaissance court festival "unlike its medieval forebearers, stemmed from a philosophy which believed that truth could be apprehended in images. Our guide to it is a vast tract of literature, books of emblems and *imprese* and mythological manuals. These compilations were an extension and elaboration, under the impact of Florentine Neoplatonism, of the inherited tradition of hidden meanings. Although these texts were known to the middle ages, they were studied with renewed fervour during the renaissance, when scholars examined them to recover a lost history or secret wisdom, pre-dating the Christian revelation that was passed down through Moses and the Egyptian priests by way of Hermes Trismegistus to the Greeks. The acceptance of a pagan

theology that descended from Zoroaster through Hermes Trismegistus to Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato enabled Renaissance man to assimilate the whole heritage of classical mythology and history.”

Goethe (1749-1832) wrote in his poem "Urworte, Orphisch" (1817, my translation):

*The way the sun stood at the planets' greeting,
The way it stood the day the world endowed you,
You were from that time on developed
According to the law by which you entered.
Thus must you be, and you can't escape,
The sybils and the seers have said it;
No time nor force can disassemble
Imprinted form that grows itself in living . . .
What's loved is kept away from hearts that want it,
Will and whim are shaped to a Must unyielding.
We only seem free, and after many years,
We're more bound than when we started.*