

A Critique of (Subjective) Religious Explanations of Mythology

The religious explanations of Mythology have taken many forms and these, too, must be examined one by one until "the last, highest and therefore necessarily true explanation" is reached.¹⁶ Schelling begins by considering Mythology as:

A. A Development out of "Primitive Religion?"

The phrase "primitive religion" is not Schelling's. When he uses the word "religion" he means Mythological or Revealed or Philosophical Religion. He does not regard the objects of primitive religious belief as gods in the proper sense, and finds it incredible that Mythology could have developed out of such crude and disparate notions. We must be careful not to misunderstand Schelling here. He readily admits that mankind developed a primitive belief in real beings behind the phenomena of nature, due perhaps "to ignorance of the true causes of natural phenomena, or to the influence of a purely unreflecting animal terror," or to the primitive human tendency to see in every act of nature the manifestation of freedom and will (VI:70). He even agrees that men, having come to fear these superior, capricious powers, must have sought to win their favor by giving evidences of submissiveness (whence the saying, *Primus in orbe Deos fecit timor*). But he refuses to refer to belief in such beings as the first *religion*. Those who speak of a

pre-mythological stage of gross superstition (Hermann) or a primitive state in which brutish man peopled nature with meaningless spirits as brutish as himself (J.H. Voss) are quite in error in supposing such to have been the soil from which *mythological religion* grew. Even David Hume went astray here (VI:70ff). Holding that belief in many gods arose through man's reflections not so much on the life of nature - which would have suggested a single being - as on the ceaseless changes and contradictions within human life itself, Hume went on to claim that the first real polytheism became mythological when important human beings were incorporated into the ranks of those primitive, religiously-venerated beings. Nevertheless, Hume does not claim that those primitive nature spirits are "gods" in the proper sense, and Schelling agrees:

If these invisible beings, which are supposedly connected with the processes of nature, are gods, it would follow that the mountain and water spirits of the Celtic people, the goblins of the Germanic tribes, and the fairies of the peoples of both East and West, must also be gods.

But they have never been so regarded. The Greek imagination also produced Oreads, Dryads and Nymphs which, to be sure, were venerated to some extent as servants of the gods, but were never themselves considered to be deities. The fear experienced in the presence of such beings, even the gifts by which men sought to win their favor and to put them in a kind and friendly mood, does not constitute proof that these beings were worshiped as divine, i.e., that they were regarded as having religious significance. Such attempts to postulate gods without God seem not to have appreciated the true force, the real import of the concept, *for it is not proper* to give to creations of this kind the name of gods. Hume himself agrees with this point when he says: 'Closely considered, this supposed religion is in reality only an *atheism* compounded with superstition. The objects of their adoration have absolutely nothing in common with our idea of divinity.' In another passage he says that if one were to eliminate from the beliefs of ancient Europe *God and the angels* (for the angels, as instruments of the divinity without wills of their own, are not conceivable without the divinity) and retain only the fairies and goblins, there would emerge a belief similar to this so-called polytheism (VI:75f).¹⁷

Contemporary primitives appear to Schelling to give empirical support to his view. Azara, for example, had described South

American savages who believed in the presence of "spectre-like beings" behind the phenomena of nature but who nevertheless had *no* religion. Since Schelling holds that "acts of adoration are visible acts", the question whether or not a tribe possesses a religious cult can be settled by simple observation. And since he believes Azara is a careful, independent and unprejudiced observer, he trusts his report "that there was no act of those savages which indicated religious veneration of any object whatsoever", and accepts his conclusion "that they had no religion" (VI:74f).¹⁸

The rejection of the view that mythology developed naturally out of primitive religion involves both a question of definition and the question of Schelling's presuppositions which must be examined in the sequel. For the present, we simply note that Schelling is now free to approach "the truly religious" explanations of mythology.

Our discussion so far has dealt merely with the question as to which explanations could be called religious and which could not. Sound reason tells us that polytheism cannot be atheism and that *true* polytheism cannot be something from which all trace of theism is absent. Gods, properly speaking, must *somehow* have God as their ground, whether this be through numerous intermediate links or in some other way. One does not alter this fact by deciding that mythology is false religion, for false religion is not therefore irreligion, just as error (or at least what deserves to be called error) is not complete absence of truth but simply truth itself perverted or distorted (VI:76).

These "truly religious" explanations of mythology have to deal with the difficult question of "how God could have been the original ground of polytheism" (VI:77). Here again various possibilities are examined one by one. Can mythology be considered as:

B. A Creation of Man's Religious Instinct?

One could posit in man a religious instinct and hold that just as every instinct seeks the object which corresponds to it, so this religious instinct, groping and grasping for its object, produced true polytheism. Driven on by his mysterious presentiment of an unknown God, man searched for the deity in the elements and in the stars, then in inorganic forms, and later in organic beings, representing him first in animal form and finally endowing him with human attributes. Theories which regard the mythological gods as deified natural

essences belong here, says Schelling, because such theories presuppose a primary intuition of God (VI:77f).¹⁹

This explanation would acquire a more philosophical character, however, if nature were left entirely out of the picture and the idea of God regarded as a completely inward creation independent of the external world. The *Notitia Dei insita* is an ancient theory which can only mean that a consciousness of God existed in man *in potentia*. It could be held that, by virtue of a necessary law, this potential consciousness passed over into actuality and rose to the level of a real consciousness of God.

One would have to suppose that the instinct we mentioned possesses an immanent law (the same law as that which determines the successive phases of nature) by virtue of which man goes through the whole of nature finding God yet losing him again at every stage, until he arrives at the true God, the one who transcends all moments or phases and who stands therefore even above Nature which, in relation to him, becomes a mere moment in the past. Since God is the *goal* (the *terminus ad quem*) of this ascending movement, the belief in God exists at every stage, and the final content of the polytheism which is born in and through this process is truly God himself (VI:78f).

Schelling concedes that the assumption of a religious instinct is not yet comprehensible, but he regards the theory that springs from it as "the prototype" of the explanation he is seeking. It is free of all external and arbitrary assumptions and is the first explanation to derive mythology from a purely inward and necessary movement. "If this instinct is powerful enough to keep mankind moving toward the true God, it must be something real, an actual power (*Potenz*)." What Schelling is trying to understand is the actual formation of mythology not merely its theoretical possibility, and "the hypothesis of a religious instinct ... could be the first step toward the insight that mythology is not to be explained in terms of a purely theoretic (ideal) relation between consciousness and any object whatsoever" (VI:79).

C. The Disintegration of an Original Rational Theism?

The possibility that mythology represents the distortion or decomposition of some prior religious doctrine is much more difficult to establish than the view that it sprang from an innate idea of God.

Schelling reproduces Hume's argument *against* it. He recalls that for Hume the truly religious meaning of mythology is *not* its original meaning. Hence Hume had supported his view by attacking (i) the idea of a religious instinct (which he rejects chiefly because he believes no two people agree on matters of religion), (ii) the doctrine of innate ideas (which he dismisses as *passé*), and (iii) the suggestion that there was a prior religious doctrine (VI:80).

Such a pre-mythological religious doctrine, Hume argues, could only have been a "scientifically-founded one, a theism established by logical reasoning (*theisme raisonné*)." But this would presuppose a trained and soundly equipped reason on the part of man, which is inconceivable in that primitive, pre-mythological period. Can we really believe that those ignorant masses conceived the deity theistically rather than in crude anthropomorphic terms? [Theism, for Hume, means belief in a most perfect being, an intelligent world-creator, etc.] "We might as easily suppose that there were palaces before there were huts, or that geometry preceded agriculture" (Hume in VI:81). But if we suppose, for the sake of argument, that such a rationally-adduced antecedent theism did exist, it is clear that men would never have abandoned this belief in order to plunge into idolatry. Schelling follows Hume's reasoning:

Speculative insights, arrived at through reasoning, are quite different from distortion-prone historical facts. In the case of opinions grounded on reasoned argument, there are two possibilities: either the proofs are clear and intelligible enough to convince everyone, in which case they would be sufficient to maintain the opinion in all its pristine purity no matter how widespread it became; or else the proofs are abstruse, transcending the powers of comprehension of ordinary men, so that the doctrines supported by such proofs are known to only a few individuals and sink into oblivion as soon as these men cease to concern themselves with them. In either case, the hypothesis of an antecedent theism - one which deteriorated into polytheism - appears impossible, for arguments of the first kind (the popular proofs) would have prevented such a theism from becoming corrupted, while the difficult and abstract arguments would have removed it from the consciousness of the great multitude who are alone responsible for the distortion of principles and opinions (VI:82).²⁰

What sometimes looks like Theism in ancient times, is explained by Hume as mere appearance: one of the idolatrous nations raises to the highest rank *one* of the supposedly invisible beings, exaggerating his attributes until he is conceived as supreme, infinite and without equal. But Schelling agrees with Hume in regarding such a Theism as really Atheism (VI:82f).

D. A Development out of an Original Revelation?

If the doctrine which supposedly preceded mythology was too rich and systematic to have been *invented* by man, perhaps it was *given* to him, i.e., divinely *revealed*, so that mythology could be understood as deriving somehow or other from revelation (VI:83ff). Now, "the very actus of revelation is a real process", and the advantage of this explanation is that it entails "a real relation of God to the human consciousness", enabling us, for the first time, to account for the irresistible power of mythological religion. Consider, for example, the indisputable authority with which unnatural deeds and sacrifices were commanded - like the burning alive of the best loved children in honor of some God or other! Cosmogonic philosophers could never have bestowed such authority on the gods. "Only a supernatural fact, which left a confused and lasting impression, could have imposed silence on the natural sentiment which resists such unnatural demands" (VI:84). In revelation we are dealing not with a general God but a specific God, not with theism but with monotheism, not with religion in general but with the true religion.

Such a theory, says Schelling - the theory that a revelation or a revealed monotheism preceded polytheism - enjoyed undisturbed favor from the beginning of the Christian era right down to the appearance of David Hume. "It was considered impossible that polytheism could have arisen other than through the corruption of a pure religion; and inseparable from this hypothesis, so to speak, was the notion that this pure religion originated in a divine revelation" (VI:85).

But how can we understand this revealed monotheism? It cannot signify merely the Unicity of God, for how could polytheism be derived from the pure negation of any others outside the One? "What possibility of multiplicity remains once abstract Oneness is postulated?" Perhaps, then, this Unity which disintegrated into

polytheism represented the sum of all relations of God to nature and the world, as Lessing seems to have assumed when he wrote in his *Education of the Human Race* (Sections 6 and 7):

Let us suppose that the first man to come into the world was endowed immediately with the concept of a single God. Even so, such a concept (one which was communicated to him, not acquired or earned by him) could not possibly have existed for long in its purity. For human reason, left to its own resources, would no sooner have begun to reflect upon it, than it would have dissolved the incommensurable One into diverse commensurate parts, and attributed to each of these parts a particular characteristic. In this natural way, polytheism and idolatry would have come into existence (VI:85).

Here, observes Schelling, the statement that a non-acquired notion, as such, is subject to corruption, is true; but the further claim, that mythology arose only when reason went to work on the revealed concept of a single God, attributes a *rational* not a *religious* origin to polytheism.

Perhaps the theory that mythology derived from revelation can be understood in other ways. For example, it may be possible to hold, with Cudworth, that God "turns a different face toward each aspect of the world" without himself thereby becoming manifold; that such aspects were given names (as happens in the Old Testament, for example); that these names were later regarded as distinct deities; and that when men began to worship these deities, polytheism was born (VI:86f). Or perhaps we could regard the divine *history*, given through revelation, as the substance of a later polytheism, although no one has *actually claimed* that the moments of this history suffered mythological distortion. Still, some have seized upon the human side of the history of revelation and resorted to Euhemeristic interpretations of the Mosaic writings. "The Greek *Cronos*," for example, "who had committed an outrage against his father Ouranos, was supposed to be the Biblical Shem deified by the pagans - for Shem had been guilty of an outrage against *his* father, Noah." Such euhemeristic use of the Old Testament to account for pagan mythology was initiated chiefly by Gerhard Voss and carried to its most absurd consequences by Daniel Huet (VI:87f).²¹ Such interpretations, however, are *sententiae dudum explosae*, says Schelling, and should not be dragged out again. The nineteenth century brought new possibilities:

Until the end of the eighteenth century all attempts to connect mythology and revelation were kept within such limits as these. In the nineteenth century, however, thanks to the considerable enrichment of our knowledge of the various mythologies, particularly the religious systems of the Orient, it became possible to hold a freer opinion, one more independent of the written documents of revelation (VI:89).

E. A Disintegrated Monotheism (Creuzer)?

The "freer opinion" Schelling mentions was based on the fact that the nineteenth century established agreements between Egyptian, Hindu and Greek mythologies, so that slowly there came into view "an *ensemble* of representations common to the different mythologies and expressive of their unity." But how were these resemblances to be explained? Where was the unitive ground of all the theodicies? Not in the consciousness of a single people, declares Schelling, "for each people becomes conscious of itself as a separate people only when it turns aside from this unity"; and not in the consciousness of a single people regarded as the source and common ancestor of all others (as Bailly erroneously suggested) (VI:89).²² But this leaves open the possibility of an "original whole", a primeval system, inspired or communicated by an original revelation (*Uroffenbarung*) to the *whole human race*. Such a system could be reconstructed by taking the "Mosaic doctrine" (VI:90)²³ and supplementing it with a knowledge of all the world's mythologies.

William Jones, founder and first President of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta, is regarded by Schelling as the first to have come to such conclusions - conclusions based on the agreements between Oriental, Greek and Hebrew religion (VI:90f). But Friedrich Creuzer, whose *Symbolik und Mythologie der Alten Völker* (1810-1824) demonstrated most clearly that the theory of an original religious meaning of mythology is not in conflict with historical evidence, did most to revive this idea of an *original whole*.

[Creuzer conceived] a system of human science of immemorial antiquity which deteriorated little by little, or perhaps suffered some sudden destruction and covered the earth with its ruins. Since the fragments are distributed among all people, the whole is not to be found among any one people and is to be reconstituted only by consulting all the peoples of earth ...²⁴

Since, however, it is *not revelation itself*, but only that which revelation deposits in consciousness, which is subject to alteration, a mediating theory was needed, but one in which God was represented not only in a theistic fashion, i.e., not merely *as God* in his separation from the world, but also as a *Unity* embracing Nature and the World. This unity could be conceived ... pantheistically; or it could be understood after the fashion of those ancient oriental emanation-theories according to which a divinity free of all multiplicity descends in a plurality of finite forms which are only so many manifestations or, to use a recently favored word, incarnations of its infinite essence. Either way, the theory would not postulate an abstract monotheism, absolutely exclusive of multiplicity, but a *real monotheism* positing multiplicity within itself (VI:91f).

The resemblances between the mythologies thus receives its simplest explanation, says Schelling, in this theory of an original monotheism which later disintegrated into polytheism. Mythology is a *disintegrated monotheism*, and so far this is "the highest explanation" to which the ascending, step-by-step inquiry has led. Schelling defers his critique of this hypothesis and here acknowledges only its merit (VI:93).²⁵

No one will deny that this point of view has more grandeur than previous conceptions, if only because its starting point is not the indeterminate multiplicity of objects brought forth by chance from nature, but the center of a unity which dominates the multiplicity. Mythology is not governed by partial beings of a highly adventitious and ambiguous nature, but by the idea of the *necessary and universal being* before whom alone the human spirit bows down. It is this which exalts mythology to the status of a true system of elements which belong to one another; a system which, even in the time of separation, stamps its distinctive character on each individual representation. Hence, its end result cannot be a merely indeterminate multiplicity, but must be polytheism, i.e., a multiplicity of *gods* (VI:93).

But serious difficulties arise. How is this "monotheistic hypothesis" to be understood. If, as Schelling has established, the various mythologies (and therefore polytheism in general) arise only in and with the birth of peoples, then this supposed monotheism must belong to the period prior to the formation of peoples. If so, then the

causal-relationship between the separation of the peoples and the emerging polytheism is conceivable in two ways: either (with Creuzer) mankind separated into peoples, thus causing the break up of the original monotheism and a resultant polytheism, or polytheism emerged first, thus causing the separation into peoples (VI:94). The logic of Schelling's inquiry will thus force him to look more deeply into three issues: i) the origin of "people-hood" (*Völkerthum*), ii) the nature of polytheism, and iii) the true understanding of this alleged primitive monotheism.