# The Evolution of the Idea of God

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# PREFACE

T WO main schools of religious thinking exist in our midst at the present day: the school of humanists and the school of animists. This work is to some extent an attempt to reconcile them. It contains, I believe, the first extended effort that has yet been made to trace the genesis of the belief in a God from its earliest origin in the mind of primitive man up to its fullest development in advanced and etherealised Christian theology. My method is therefore constructive, not destructive. Instead of setting out to argue away or demolish a deep-seated and ancestral element in our complex nature, this book merely posits for itself the psychological question, “By what successive steps did men come to frame for themselves the conception of a deity?”—or, if the reader so prefers it, “How did we arrive at our knowledge of God?” It seeks provisionally to answer these profound and important questions by reference to the earliest beliefs of savages, past or present, and to the testimony of historical documents and ancient monuments. It does not concern itself at all with the validity or invalidity of the ideas in themselves; it does but endeavour to show how inevitable they were, and how man’s relation with the external universe was certain *a priori* to beget them as of necessity.

In so vast a synthesis, it would be absurd to pretend at the present day that one approached one’s subject entirely *de novo* . Every enquirer must needs depend much upon the various researches of his predecessors in various parts of

his field of enquiry. The problem before us divides itself into three main portions: *first* , how did men come to believe in many gods—the origin of polytheism; *second* , how, by elimination of most of these gods, did certain races of men come to believe in one single supreme and omnipotent God—the origin of monotheism; *third* how, having arrived at that concept, did the most advanced races and civilisations come to conceive of that God as Triune, and to identify one of his Persons with a particular divine and human incarnation—the origin of Christianity. In considering each of these three main problems I have been greatly guided and assisted by three previous enquirers or sets of enquirers.

As to the *origin of polytheism* , I have adopted in the main Mr. Herbert Spencer's remarkable ghost theory, though with certain important modifications and additions. In this part of my work I have also been largely aided by materials derived from Mr. Duff Macdonald, the able author of *Africana* , from Mr. Turner, the well-known Samoan missionary, and from several other writers, supplemented as they are by my own researches among the works of explorers and ethnologists in general. On the whole, I have here accepted the theory which traces the origin of the belief in gods to primeval ancestor-worship, or rather corpse-worship, as against the rival theory which traces its origin to a supposed primitive animism.

As to the *rise of monotheism* , I have been influenced in no small degree by Kuenen and the Teutonic school of Old Testament criticism, whose ideas have been supplemented by later concepts derived from Professor Robertson Smith's admirable work, *The Religion of the Semites* . But here, on the whole, the central explanation I have to offer is, I venture to think, new and original: the theory, good or bad, of the circumstances which led to the elevation of the ethnical Hebrew God, Jahweh, above all his rivals, and his final recognition as the only true and living god, is my own

and no one else’s.

As to the *origin of Christianity* , and its relations to the preceding cults of corn and wine gods, I have been guided to a great extent by Mr. J. G. Frazer and Mannhardt, though I do not suppose that either the living or the dead anthropologist would wholly acquiesce in the use I have made of their splendid materials. Mr. Frazer, the author of that learned work, *The Golden Bough* , has profoundly influenced the opinions of all serious workers at anthropology and the science of religion, and I cannot too often acknowledge the deep obligations under which I lie to his profound and able treatises. At the same time, I have so transformed the material derived from him and from Dr. Robertson Smith as to have made it in many ways practically my own; and I have supplemented it by several new examples and ideas, suggested in the course of my own tolerably wide reading.

Throughout the book as a whole, I also owe a considerable debt to Dr. E. B. Tylor, from whom I have borrowed much valuable matter; to Mr. Sidney Hartland’s *Legend of Perseus* ; to Mr. Lawrence Gomme, who has come nearer at times than anyone else to the special views and theories here promulgated; and to Mr. William Simpson of the *Illustrated London News* , an unobtrusive scholar whose excellent monographs on *The Worship of Death* and kindred subjects have never yet received the attention They deserve, at the hands of unprejudiced students of religion. My other obligations, to Dr. Mommsen, to my friends Mr. Edward Clodd, Professor John Rhys, and Professor York Powell, as well as to numerous travellers, missionaries, historians, and classicists, are too frequent to specify.

Looking at the subject broadly, I would presume to say once more that my general conclusions may be regarded as representing to some extent a reconciliation between the conflicting schools of humanists and animists, headed respectively by Mr. Spencer and Mr. Frazer, though with a

leaning rather to the former than the latter.
At the same time it would be a great mistake to look upon my book as in any sense a mere eirenicon or compromise. On the contrary, it is in every part a new and personal work, containing, whatever its value, a fresh and original synthesis of the subject. I would venture to point out as especially novel the two following points: the complete demarcation of religion from mythology, as practice from mere explanatory gloss or guesswork; and the important share assigned in the genesis of most existing religious systems to the deliberate manufacture of gods by killing. This doctrine of the manufactured god, to which nearly half my book is devoted, seems to me to be a notion of cardinal value. Among other new ideas of secondary rank, I would be bold enough to enumerate the following: the establishment of three successive stages in the conception of the Life of the Dead, which might be summed up as Corpse-worship, Ghost-worship, and Shade-worship, and which answer to the three stages of preservation or mummification, burial, and cremation; the recognition of the high place to be assigned to the safe-keeping of the oracular head in the growth of idol-worship; the importance attached to the sacred stone, the sacred stake, and the sacred tree, and the provisional proof of their close connection with the graves of the dead; the entirely new conception of the development of monotheism among the Jews from the exclusive cult of the jealous god; the hypothesis of the origin of cultivation from tumulus-offerings, and its connection with the growth of gods of cultivation; the wide expansion given to the ancient notion of the divine-human victim; the recognition of the world-wide prevalence of the five-day festival of the corn or wine god, and of the close similarity which marks its rites throughout all the continents, including America; the suggested evolution of the god-eating sacraments of lower religions from the cannibal practice of honorifically eating

one’s dead relations; * and the evidence of the wide survival of primitive corpse-worship down to our own times in civilised Europe. I could largely increase this rapid list of what I believe to be the new contributions here made to the philosophy of religious evolution; but I purposely refrain. I think it will be allowed that if even a few of these ideas turn out on examination to be both new and true, my book will have succeeded in justifying its existence.

* While this work was passing through the press a similar theory has been propounded by Mr. Flinders Petrie in an article on “Eaten with Honour,” in which he reviews briefly the evidence for the custom in Egypt and elsewhere.

I put forth this work with the utmost diffidence. The harvest is vast and the labourers are few. I have been engaged upon collecting and comparing materials for more than twenty years. I have been engaged in writing my book for more than ten. As I explain in the last chapter, the present first sketch of the conclusions at which I have at last arrived is little more than provisional. I desire in my present essay merely to lay down the lines of the general theory which after so many years of study I incline to accept. If my attempt succeeds in attracting public attention, I hope to follow it up by several other volumes in which the main opinions or suggestions here set forth may be reinforced and expanded by copious collections of evidence and illustrations. If it fails to arouse public attention, however, I must perforce be satisfied with this very inadequate preliminary statement. I should also like to add here, what I point out at greater length in the body of the work, that I do not hold dogmatically to all or to a single one of the ideas I have now expressed. They are merely conceptions forced upon my mind by the present state of the evidence; and I recognise the fact that in so

vast and varied a province, where almost encyclopaedic knowledge would be necessary in order to enable one to reach a decided conclusion, every single one or all together of these conceptions are liable to be upset by further research. I merely say, “This is how the matter figures itself to me at present, on the strength of the facts now and here known to us.”

A few chapters of the book were separately published in various reviews at the time they were first written. They were composed, however, from the outset, as parts of this book, which does not therefore consist of disconnected essays thrown into line in an artificial unity. Each occupies the precise place in the argument for which it was first intended. The chapters in question are those on “Religion and Mythology,” and “The Life of the Dead,” contributed under the titles of “Practical Religion” and “Immortality and Resurrection” to the *Fortnightly Re-view* ; that on “Sacred Stones,” contributed under the same name to the same periodical; and that on “The Gods of Egypt,” which originally appeared in the *Universal Review* . I have to thank the proprietors and editors of those magazines for permission to print them in their proper place here. They have all been altered and brought up as far as I could bring them to the existing state of our knowledge with regard to the subjects of which they treat.

In dealing with so large a variety of materials, drawn from all times and places, races and languages, it would be well-nigh impossible to avoid errors. Such as my own care could discover I have of course corrected: for the rest, I must ask on this ground the indulgence of those who may happen to note them.

I have endeavoured to write without favour or prejudice, animated by a single desire to discover the truth. Whether I have succeeded in that attempt or not, I trust my book may be received in the same spirit in which it has been written, —a spirit of earnest anxiety to learn all that can be learnt

by enquiry and investigation of man’s connection with his God, in the past and the present. In this hope I commit it to the kindly consideration of that small section of the reading public which takes a living interest in religious questions.

# CHAPTER I.—CHRISTIANITY AS A RELIGIOUS STANDARD.

I propose in this work to trace out in rough outline the evolution of the idea of God from its earliest and crudest beginnings in the savage mind of primitive man to that highly evolved and abstract form which it finally assumes in contemporary philosophical and theological thinking.

In the eyes of the modern evolutionary enquirer the interest of the origin and history of this widespread idea is mainly psychological. We have before us a vast and pervasive group of human opinions, true or false, which have exercised and still exercise an immense influence upon the development of mankind and of civilisation: the question arises, Why did human beings ever come to hold these opinions at all, and how did they arrive at them? What was there in the conditions of early man which led him to frame to himself such abstract notions of one or more great supernatural agents, of whose objective existence he had certainly in nature no clear or obvious evidence? Regarding the problem in this light, as essentially a problem of the processes of the human mind, I set aside from the outset, as foreign to my purpose, any kind of enquiry into the objective validity of any one among the religious beliefs thus set

before us as subject-matter. The question whether there may be a God or gods, and, if so, what may be his or their substance and attributes, do not here concern us. All we have to do in our present capacity is to ask ourselves

strictly, What first suggested to the mind of man the notion of deity in the abstract at all? And how, from the early multiplicity of deities which we find to have prevailed in all primitive times among all human races, did the conception of a single great and unlimited deity first take its rise? In other words, why did men ever believe there were gods at all, and why from many gods did they arrive at one? Why from polytheism have the most advanced nations proceeded to monotheism?

To put the question in this form is to leave entirely out of consideration the objective reality or otherwise of the idea itself. To analyse the origin of a concept is not to attack the validity of the belief it encloses. The idea of gravitation, for example, arose by slow degrees in human minds, and reached at last its final expression in Newton's law. But to trace the steps by which that idea was gradually reached is not in any way to disprove or to discredit it. The Christian believer may similarly hold that men arrived by natural stages at the knowledge of the one true God; he is not bound to reject the final conception as false merely because of the steps by which it was slowly evolved. A creative God, it is true, might prefer to make a sudden revelation of himself to some chosen body of men; but an evolutionary God, we may well believe, might prefer in his inscrutable wisdom to reveal his own existence and qualities to his creatures by means of the same slow and tentative intellectual gropings as those by which he revealed to them the physical truths of nature. I wish my enquiry, therefore, to be regarded, not as destructive, but as reconstructive. It only attempts to recover and follow out the various planes in the evolution of the idea of God, rather than to cast doubt upon the truth of the evolved concept.

In

investigating any abstruse and difficult subject, it is often best to proceed from the known to the unknown, even although the unknown itself may happen to come first in

the order of nature and of logical development. For this reason, it may be advisable to begin here with a brief preliminary examination of Christianity, which is not only the most familiar of all religions to us Christian nations, but also the best known in its origins: and then to show how far we may safely use it as a Standard of Reference in explaining the less obvious and certain features of earlier or collateral cults.

Christianity, then, viewed as a religious standard, has this clear and undeniable advantage over almost every other known form of faith—that it quite frankly and confessedly sets out in its development with the worship of a particular Deified Man.

This point in its history cannot, I think, be overrated in importance, because in that single indubitable central fact it gives us the key to much that is cardinal in all other religions; every one of which, as I hope hereafter to show, equally springs, directly or indirectly, from the worship of a single Deified Man, or of many Deified Men, more or less etherealised.

Whatever else may be said about the origin of Christianity, it is at least fairly agreed on either side, both by friends and foes, that this great religion took its rise around the personality of a certain particular Galilean teacher, by name Jesus, concerning whom, if we know anything at all with any approach to certainty, we know at least that he was a man of the people, hung on a cross in Jerusalem under the procuratorship of Caius Pontius Pilatus. That kernel of fact—a man, and his death—Jesus Christ and him crucified—is the one almost undoubted historical nucleus round which all the rest of a vast European and Asiatic system of thought and belief has slowly crystallised.

Let us figure clearly to ourselves the full import of these truths.

A Deified Man is the central figure in the faith of Christendom.

From the very beginning, however, a legend, true or false (but whose truth or falsity has no relation whatever to our present subject), gathered about the personality of this particular Galilean peasant reformer. Reverenced at first by a small body of disciples of his own race and caste, he grew gradually in their minds into a divine personage, of whom strange stories were told, and a strange history believed by a group of ever-increasing adherents in all parts of the Græco-Roman Mediterranean civilisation. The earliest of these stories, in all probability—certainly the one to which most importance was attached by the pioneers of the faith—clustered about his death and its immediate sequence. Jesus, we are told, was crucified, dead, and buried. But at the end of three days, if we may credit the early documents of our Christian faith, his body was no longer to be found in the sepulchre where it had been laid by friendly hands: and the report spread abroad that he had risen again from the dead, and lived once more a somewhat phantasmal life among the living in his province. Supernatural messengers announced his resurrection to the women who had loved him: he was seen in the flesh from time to time for very short periods by one or other among the faithful who still revered his memory. At last, after many such appearances, more or less fully described in the crude existing narratives, he was suddenly carried up to the sky before the eyes of his followers, where, as one of the versions authoritatively remarks, he was “received into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God”—that is to say, of Jahweh, the ethnical deity of the Hebrew people.

Such in its kernel was the original Christian doctrine as handed down to us amid a mist of miracle, in four or five documents of doubtful age and uncertain authenticity. Even this central idea does not fully appear in the Pauline epistles, believed to be the oldest in date of all our Christian

writings: it first takes full shape in the somewhat later Gospels and Acts of the Apostles. In the simplest and perhaps the earliest of these definite accounts we are merely told the story of the death and resurrection, the latter fact being vouched for on the dubious testimony of “a young man clothed in a long white garment,” supplemented (apparently at a later period) by subsequent “appearances” to various believers. With the controversies which have raged about these different stories, however, the broad anthropological enquiry into the evolution of God has no concern. It is enough for us here to admit, what the evidence probably warrants us in concluding, that a real historical man of the name of Jesus did once exist in Lower Syria, and that his disciples at a period very shortly after his execution believed him to have actually risen from the dead, and in due time to have ascended into heaven.

At a very early date, too, it was further asserted that Jesus was in some unnatural or supernatural sense “the son of God”—that is to say, once more, the son of Jahweh, the local and national deity of the Jewish people. In other words, his worship was affiliated upon the earlier historical worship of the people in whose midst he lived, and from whom his first disciples were exclusively gathered. It was not, as we shall more fully see hereafter, a revolutionary or purely destructive system. It based itself upon the common conceptions of the Semitic community. The handful of Jews and Galileans who accepted Jesus as a divine figure did not think it necessary, in adopting him as a god, to get rid of their own preconceived religious opinions. They believed rather in his prior existence, as a part of Jahweh, and in his incarnation in a human body for the purpose of redemption. And when his cult spread around into neighboring countries (chiefly, it would seem, through the instrumentality of one Paul of Tarsus, who had never seen him, or had beheld him only in what is vaguely called “a vision”) the cult

of Jahweh went hand in hand with it, so that a sort of modified mystic monotheism, based on Judaism, became the early creed of the new cosmopolitan Christian church.
Other legends, of a sort familiar in the lives of the founders of creeds and churches elsewhere, grew up about the life of the Christian leader; or at any rate, incidents of a typical kind were narrated by his disciples as part of his history. That a god or a godlike person should be born of a woman by the ordinary physiological processes of humanity seems derogatory to his dignity—perhaps fatal to his godhead: * therefore it was asserted—we know not whether truly or otherwise—that the founder of Christianity, by some mysterious afflatus, was born of a virgin. Though described at times as the son of one Joseph, a carpenter, of Nazareth, and of Mary, his betrothed wife, he was also regarded in an alternative way as the son of the Hebrew god Jahweh, just as Alexander, though known to be the son of Philip, was also considered to be the offspring of Amon-Ra or Zeus Ammon. We are told, in order to lessen this discrepancy (on the slender authority of a dream of Joseph's), how Jesus was miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit of Jahweh in Mary's womb. He was further provided with a royal pedigree from the house of David, a real or mythical early Hebrew king; and prophecies from the Hebrew sacred books were found to be fulfilled in his most childish adventures. In one of the existing biographies, commonly ascribed to Luke, the companion of Paul, but supposed to bear traces of much later authorship, many such marvellous stories are recounted of his infantile adventures: and in all our documents, miracles attest his supernatural powers, while appeal is constantly made to the fulfilment of supposed predictions (all of old Hebrew origin) as a test and credential of the reality of his divine mission.
* On this subject, see Mr. Sidney Hartland's Legend of Perseus, vol. i.

We shall see hereafter that these two points—the gradual growth of a myth or legend, and affiliation upon earlier local religious ideas—are common features in the evolution of gods in general, and of the God of monotheism in particular. In almost every case where we can definitely track him to his rise, the deity thus begins with a Deified Man, elevated by his worshippers to divine rank, and provided with a history of miraculous incident, often connected with the personality of preexistent deities.

In the earlier stages, it seems pretty clear that the relations of nascent Christianity to Judaism were vague and undefined: the Christians regarded themselves as a mere sect of the Jews, who paid special reverence to a particular dead teacher, now raised to heaven by a special apotheosis of a kind with which everyone was then familiar. But as the Christian church spread to other lands, by the great seaports, it became on the one hand more distinct and exclusive, while on the other hand it became more definitely dogmatic and theological. It was in Egypt, it would seem, that the Christian Pantheon (if I may be allowed the expression in the case of a religion nominally monotheistic) first took its definite Trinitarian shape. Under the influence of the old Egyptian love for Triads or Trinities of gods, a sort of mystical triune deity was at last erected out of the Hebrew Jahweh and the man Jesus, with the aid of the Holy Spirit or Wisdom of Jahweh, which had come to be regarded by early Christian minds (under the influence of direct divine inspiration or otherwise) as a separate and coordinate person of this composite godhead. How far the familiar Egyptian Trinity of Osiris, Isis, and Horus may have influenced the conception of the Christian Trinity, thus finally made up of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, we shall discuss at a later stage of our enquiry; for the present, it

may suffice to point out that the Græco-Egyptian Athanasius was the great upholder of the definite dogma of the Trinity against opposing (heretical) Christian thinkers; and
that the hymn or so-called creed known by his name (though not in all probability of his own composition) bears the impress of the mystical Egyptian spirit, tempered by the Alexandrian Greek delight in definiteness and minuteness of philosophical distinction.
In this respect, too, we shall observe in the sequel that the history of Christianity, the most known among the religions, was exactly parallel to that of earlier and obscurer creeds. At first, the relations of the gods to one another are vague and undetermined; their pedigree is often confused and even contradictory; and the pantheon lacks anything like due hierarchical system or subordination of persons. But as time goes on, and questions of theology or mythology are debated among the priests and other interested parties, details of this sort get settled in the form of rigid dogmas, while subtle distinctions of a philosophical or metaphysical sort tend to be imported by more civilised men into the crude primitive faith. The belief that began with frank acceptance of Judaism, plus a personal worship of the Deified Man, Jesus, crystallised at last into the Catholic Faith in one God, of three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.
Quibbles are even made, and discussions raised at last as to the question whether Father and Son are “of one substance” or only “of like substance”; whether the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and the Son, or from the Father only; and so on ad infinitum .
It was largely in other countries than Judæa, and especially in Gaul, Rome, and Egypt, too, as I believe, that symbolism came to the aid of mysticism: that the cross, the tau, the labarum, the fish, the Alpha and Omega, and all the other early Christian emblems were evolved and perfected; and

that the beginnings of Christian art took their first definite forms. Such forms were especially to a great extent evolved in the Roman catacombs. Christianity, being a universal, not a local or national, religion, has
adopted in its course many diverse elements from most varied sources.

Originally, it would seem, the Christian pantheon was almost exclusively filled by the triune God, in his three developments or “persons,” as thus rigorously conceived by the Alexandrian intelligence. But from a very early time, if not from the first dawn of the Christian cult, it was customary to reverence the remains of those who had suffered for the faith, and perhaps even to invoke their aid with Christ and the Father. The Roman branch of the church, especially, accustomed to the Roman ancestor-worship and the Roman reverence for the Du Manes, had its chief places of prayer in the catacombs, where its dead were laid. Thus arose the practice of the invocation of saints, at whose graves or relics prayers were offered, both to the supreme deity and to the faithful dead themselves as intercessors with Christ and the Father. The early Christians, accustomed in their heathen stage to pay respect and even worship to the spirits of their deceased friends, could not immediately give up this pious custom after their conversion to the new creed, and so grafted it on to their adopted religion. Thus the subsidiary founders of Christianity, Paul, Peter, the Apostles, the Evangelists, the martyrs, the confessors, came to form, as it were, a subsidiary pantheon, and to rank to some extent almost as an inferior order of deities.

Among the persons who thus shared in the honours of the new faith, the mother of Jesus early assumed a peculiar prominence. Goddesses had filled a very large part in the devotional spirit of the older religions: it was but natural that the devotees of Isis and Pasht, of Artemis and Aphrodite, should look for some corresponding object of

feminine worship in the younger faith. The Theotokos, the mother of God, the blessed Madonna, soon came to possess a practical importance in Christian worship scarcely inferior to that enjoyed by the persons of the Trinity themselves—in certain southern countries, indeed, actually superior
to it. The Virgin and Child, in pictorial representation, grew to be the favourite subject of Christian art. How far this particular development of the Christian spirit had its origin in Egypt, and was related to the well-known Egyptian figures of the goddess Isis with the child Horus in her lap, is a question which may demand consideration in some future treatise. For the present, it will be enough to call attention in passing to the fact that in this secondary rank of deities or semi-divine persons, the saints and martyrs, all alike, from the Blessed Virgin Mary down to the newest canonised among Roman Catholic prelates, were at one time or another Living Men and Women. In other words, besides the one Deified Man, Jesus, round whom the entire system of Christianity centres, the Church now worships also in the second degree a whole host of minor Dead Men and Women, bishops, priests, virgins, and confessors.

From the earliest to the latest ages of the Church, the complexity thus long ago introduced into her practice has gone on increasing with every generation. Nominally from the very outset a monotheistic religion, Christianity gave up its strict monotheism almost at the first start by admitting the existence of three persons in the godhead, whom it vainly endeavoured to unify by its mystic but confessedly incomprehensible Athanasian dogma. The Madonna (with the Child) rose in time practically to the rank of an independent goddess (in all but esoteric Catholic theory): while St. Sebastian, St. George, St. John Baptist, St. Catherine, and even St. Thomas of Canterbury himself, became as important objects of worship in certain places as the deity in person. At Milan, for example, San Carlo

Borromeo, at Compostella, Santiago, at Venice, St. Mark, usurped to a great extent the place of the original God. As more and more saints died in each generation, while the cult of the older saints still lingered on everywhere more or less locally, the secondary pantheon grew ever fuller and fuller. Obscure personages,
like St. Crispin and St. Cosmas, St. Chad and St. Cuthbert rose to the rank of departmental or local patrons, like the departmental and local gods of earlier religions. Every trade, every guild, every nation, every province, had its peculiar saint. And at the same time, the theory of the Church underwent a constant evolution. Creed was added to creed—Apostles', Nicene, Athanasian, and so forth, each embodying some new and often subtle increment to the whole mass of accepted dogma. Council after council made fresh additions of articles of faith—the Unity of Substance, the Doctrine of the Atonement, the Immaculate Conception, the Authority of the Church, the Infallibility of the Pope in his spiritual capacity. And all these also are well-known incidents of every evolving cult: constant increase in the number of divine beings; constant refinements in the articles of religion, under the influence of priestly or scholastic metaphysics.
Two or three other points must still be noted in this hasty review of the evolution of Christianity, regarded as a standard of religion; and these I will now proceed to consider with all possible brevity.
In the matter of ceremonial and certain other important accessories of religion it must frankly be admitted that Christianity rather borrowed from the older cults than underwent a natural and original development on its own account. A priesthood, as such, does not seem to have formed any integral or necessary part of the earliest Christendom: and when the orders of bishops, priests, and deacons were introduced into the new creed, the idea seems to have been derived rather from the existing

priesthoods of anterior religions than from any organic connexion with the central facts of the new worship. From the very nature of the circumstances this would inevitably result. For the primitive temple (as we shall see hereafter) was the Dead Man's tomb; the altar was his gravestone; and the priest was the relative or representative who continued for him the customary gifts to the ghost
at the grave. But the case of Jesus differs from almost every other case on record of a Deified Man in this—that his body seems to have disappeared at an early date; and that, inasmuch as his resurrection and ascension into heaven were made the corner-stone of the new faith, it was impossible for worship of his remains to take the same form as had been taken in the instances of almost all previously deified Dead Persons. Thus, the materials out of which the Temple, the Altar, Sacrifices, Priesthood, are usually evolved (as we shall hereafter see) were here to a very large extent necessarily wanting.

Nevertheless, so essential to religion in the minds of its followers are all these imposing and wonted accessories that our cult did actually manage to borrow them readymade from the great religions that went before it, and to bring them into some sort of artificial relation with its own system. You cannot revolutionize the human mind at one blow. The pagans had been accustomed to all these ideas as integral parts of religion as they understood it: and they proceeded as Christians to accommodate them by side-issues to the new faith, in which these elements had no such natural place as in the older creeds. Not only did sacred places arise at the graves or places of martyrdom of the saints; not only was worship performed beside the bones of the holy dead, in the catacombs and elsewhere; but even a mode of sacrifice and of sacrificial communion was invented in the mass,—a somewhat artificial development from the possibly unsacerdotal Agape-feasts of the primitive Christians. Gradually, churches gathered

around the relics of the martyr saints: and in time it became a principle of usage that every church must contain an altar—made of stones on the analogy of the old sacred stones; containing the bones or other relics of a saint, like all earlier shrines; consecrated by the pouring on of oil after the antique fashion; and devoted to the celebration of the sacrifice of the mass, which became by degrees more and more expiatory and sacerdotal in
character. As the saints increased in importance, new holy places sprang up around their bodies; and some of these holy places, containing their tombs, became centres of pilgrimage for the most distant parts of Christendom; as did also in particular the empty tomb of Christ himself, the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem.

The growth of the priesthood kept pace with the growth of ceremonial in general, till at last it culminated in the mediaeval papacy, with its hierarchy of cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests, and other endless functionaries. Vestments, incense, and like accompaniments of sacerdotalism also rapidly gained ground. All this, too, is a common trait of higher religious evolution everywhere. So likewise are fasting, vigils, and the ecstatic condition. But asceticism, monasticism, celibacy, and other forms of morbid abstinence are peculiarly rife in the east, and found their highest expression in the life of the Syrian and Egyptian hermits.

Lastly, a few words must be devoted in passing to the rise and development of the Sacred Books, now excessively venerated in North-western Christendom. These consisted in the first instance of genuine or spurious letters of the apostles to the various local churches (the so-called Epistles), some of which would no doubt be preserved with considerable reverence; and later of lives or legends of Jesus and his immediate successors (the so-called Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles). Furthermore, as Christianity adopted from Judaism the cult of its one supreme divine

figure, now no longer envisaged as Jahweh, the national deity of the Hebrews, but as a universal cosmopolitan God and Father, it followed naturally that the sacred books of the Jewish people, the literature of Jahweh-worship, should also receive considerable attention at the hands of the new priesthood. By a gradual process of selection and elimination, the canon of scripture was evolved from these heterogeneous materials: the historical or quasi-historical and prophetic Hebrew
tracts were adopted by the Church, with a few additions of later date, such as the Book of Daniel, under the style and title of the Old Testament. The more generally accepted lives of Christ, again, known as Evangels or Gospels; the Acts of the Apostles; the epistles to the churches; and that curious mystical allegory of the Neronian persecution known as the Apocalypse, were chosen out of the mass of early Christian literature to form the authoritative collection of inspired writing which we call the New Testament. The importance of this heterogeneous anthology of works belonging to all ages and systems, but confounded together in popular fancy under the name of the Books, or more recently still as a singular noun, the Bible, grew apace with the growth of the Church: though the extreme and superstitions adoration of their mere verbal contents has only been reached in the debased and reactionary forms of Christianity followed at the present day by our half-educated English and American Protestant dissenters.

From this very brief review of the most essential factors in the development of the Christian religion as a system, strung loosely together with a single eye to the requirements of our present investigation, it will be obvious at once to every intelligent reader that Christianity cannot possibly throw for us any direct or immediate light on the problem of the evolution of the idea of God. Not only did the concept of a god and gods exist full-fledged long before

Christianity took its rise at all, but also the purely monotheistic conception of a single supreme God, the creator and upholder of all things, had been reached in all its sublime simplicity by the Jewish teachers centuries before the birth of the man Jesus. Christianity borrowed from Judaism this magnificent concept, and, humanly speaking, proceeded to spoil it by its addition of the Son and the Holy Ghost, who mar the complete unity of the grand Hebrew ideal. Even outside Judaism, the selfsame notion had already been arrived at in a certain mystical form as the “esoteric doctrine” of the Egyptian priesthood; from whom, with their peculiar views as to emanations and Triads, the Christian dogmas of the Trinity, the Logos, the Incarnation, and the Holy Ghost were in large part borrowed. The Jews of Alexandria, that eastern London, formed the connecting link between Egyptian heathenism, Hellenic philosophy, and early Christianity; and their half-philosophical, half-religious ideas may be found permeating the first writings and the first systematic thought of the nascent church. In none of these ways, therefore, can we regard Christianity as affording us any direct or immediate guidance in our search for the origin and evolution of the concepts of many gods, and of one God the creator.

Still, in a certain secondary and illustrative sense, I think we are fully justified in saying that the history of Christianity, the religion whose beginnings are most surely known to us, forms a standard of reference for all the other religions of the world, and helps us indirectly to understand and explain the origin and evolution of these deepest among our fundamental spiritual conceptions.

Its value in this respect may best be understood if I point out briefly in two contrasted statements the points in which it may and the points in which it may not be fairly accepted as a typical religion.

Let us begin first with the points in which it may.

In the first place, Christianity is thoroughly typical in the fact that beyond all doubt its most central divine figure was at first, by common consent of orthodox and heterodox alike, nothing other than a particular Deified Man. All else that has been asserted about this particular Man—that he was the Son of God, that he was the incarnation of the Logos, that he existed previously from all eternity, that he sits now on the right hand of the Father—all the rest of these theological stories do nothing in any way to obscure the plain and universally admitted historical fact that this Divine Person, the Very God of Very God, being of one substance with the Father, begotten of the Father before all worlds, was yet, at the moment when we first catch a glimpse of him in the writings of his followers, a Man recently deceased, respected, reverenced, and perhaps worshipped by a little group of fellow-peasants who had once known him as Jesus, the son of the carpenter. On that unassailable Rock of solid historical fact we may well be content to found our argument in this volume. Here at least nobody can accuse us of "crude and gross Euhemerism." Or rather the crude and gross Euhemerism is here known to represent the solid truth. Jesus and his saints—Dominic, Francis, Catherine of Siena—are no mere verbal myths, no allegorical concepts, no personifications of the Sun, the Dawn, the Storm-cloud. Leaving aside for the present from our purview of the Faith that one element of the older supreme God—the Hebrew Jahweh,—whom Christianity borrowed from the earlier Jewish religion, we can say at least with perfect certainty that every single member of the Christian pantheon—Jesus, the Madonna, St. John Baptist, St. Peter, the Apostles, the Evangelists—were, just as much as San Carlo Borromeo or St. Thomas of Canterbury or St. Theresa, Dead Men or Women, worshipped after their death with divine or quasi-divine honours. In this the best-known of all human religions, the one that has grown up under the full eye of history, the one whose gods and saints

are most distinctly traceable, every object of worship, save only the single early and as yet unresolved deity of the Hebrew cult, whose origin is lost for us in the mist of ages, turns out on enquiry to be indeed a purely Euhemeristic god or saint,—in ultimate analysis, a Real Man or Woman.

That point alone I hold to be of cardinal importance, and of immense or almost inestimable illustrative value, in seeking for the origin of the idea of a god in earlier epochs.

In the second place, Christianity is thoroughly typical in all that concerns its subsequent course of evolution; the gradual

elevation of its central Venerated Man into a God of the highest might and power; the multiplication of secondary deities or saints by worship or adoration of other Dead Men and Women; the growth of a graduated and duly subordinated hierarchy of divine personages; the rise of a legend, with its miracles and other supernatural adjuncts; the formation of a definite theology, philosophy, and systematic dogmatism; the development of special artistic forms, and the growth or adoption of appropriate symbolism; the production of sacred books, rituals, and formularies; the rise of ceremonies, mysteries, initiations, and sacraments; the reverence paid to relics, sacred sites, tombs, and dead bodies; and the close connexion of the religion as a whole with the ideas of death, the soul, the ghost, the spirit, the resurrection of the body, the last judgment, hell, heaven, the life everlasting, and all the other vast group of concepts which surround the simple fact of death in the primitive human mind generally.

Now, in the second place, let us look wherein Christianity to a certain small extent fails to be typical, or at least to solve our fundamental problems.

It fails to be typical because it borrows largely a whole ready-made theology, and above all a single supreme God, from a pre-existent religion. In so far as it takes certain minor features from other cults, we can hardly say with

truth that it does not represent the average run of religious systems; for almost every particular new creed so bases itself upon elements of still earlier faiths; and it is perhaps impossible for us at the present day to get back to anything like a really primitive or original form of cult. But Christianity is very far removed indeed from all primitive cults in that it accepts ready-made the monotheistic conception, the high-water-mark, so to speak, of religious philosophising. While in the frankness with which it exhibits to us what is practically one half of its supreme deity as a Galilean peasant of undoubted humanity, subsequently deified and etherealised, it allows us to get down at a single
step to the very origin of godhead; yet in the strength with which it asserts for the other half of its supreme deity (the Father, with his shadowy satellite the Holy Ghost) an immemorial antiquity and a complete severance from human life, it is the least anthropomorphic and the most abstract of creeds. In order to track the idea of God to its very source, then, we must apply in the last resort to this unresolved element of Christianity—the Hebrew Jahweh—the same sort of treatment which we apply to the conception of Jesus or Buddha;—we must show it to be also the immensely transfigured and magnified ghost of a Human Being; in the simple and forcible language of Swinburne, “The shade cast by the soul of man.”
Furthermore, Christianity fails to be typical in that it borrows also from pre-existing religions to a great extent the ideas of priesthood, sacrifice, the temple, the altar, which, owing to the curious disappearance or at least un-recognisability of the body of its founder (or, rather, its central object of worship), have a less natural place in our Christian system than in any other known form of religious practice. It is quite true that magnificent churches, a highly-evolved sacerdotalism, the sacrifice of the mass, the altar, and the relics, have all been imported in their fullest

shape into developed Christianity, especially in its central or Roman form. But every one of these things is partly borrowed, almost as a survival or even as an alien feature, from earlier religions, and partly grew up about the secondary worship of saints and martyrs, their bones, their tombs, their catacombs, and their reliquaries. Christianity itself, particularly when viewed as the worship of Christ (to which it has been largely reduced in Teutonic Europe), does not so naturally lend itself to these secondary ceremonies; and in those debased schismatic forms of the Church which confine themselves most strictly to the worship of Jesus and of the supreme God, sacerdotalism and sacramentalism have been brought down to a minimum,
so that the temple and the altar have lost the greater part of their sacrificial importance.
I propose, then, in subsequent chapters, to trace the growth of the idea of a God from the most primitive origins to the most highly evolved forms; beginning with the ghost, and the early undeveloped deity: continuing through polytheism to the rise of monotheism; and then returning at last once more to the full Christian conception, which we shall understand far better in detail after we have explained the nature of the yet unresolved or but provisionally resolved Jehovistic element. I shall try to show, in short, the evolution of God, by starting with the evolution of gods in general, and coming down by gradual stages through various races to the evolution of the Hebrew, Christian, and Moslem God in particular. ‘And the goal towards which I shall move will be the one already foreshadowed in this introductory chapter,—the proof that in its origin the concept of a god is nothing more than that of a Dead Man, regarded as a still surviving ghost or spirit, and endowed with increased or supernatural powers, and qualities.