

# THE DEATH OF THE IMMORTALS

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To write a book on the history of religions is a task of peculiar difficulty. The author has the initial task of mastering the enormous amount of factual material; he has then the more delicate task of interpreting it. Moreover, two serious temptations confront him. The first is to bridge by sheer conjecture the lacunae in his evidence, in order to achieve a synthesis. The second is to ignore or misinterpret facts not reconcilable with the pattern of thought preformed in him by his philosophy and creed. For these reasons Professor Haydon's recent book invites a critical review.<sup>1</sup> In the traditions of the University of Chicago it aims at presenting to the intelligent general public the results of scholarly research.

The preface states that "this book is a serious attempt to sketch the personal histories of the gods" (p. ix), and to create out of them a synthetic account of man's religious life. The question, therefore, naturally rises as to Professor Haydon's fidelity to ascertained historical facts. Moreover, his own religious philosophy is transparent in a single sentence: the gods, "like men, are earthborn. The roots of their lives are in the rich soil of human hopes and hungerings" (p. vii). One must, therefore, ask how the postulates of Evolutionism, Immanentism, and the Ritchlian value-theory have influenced his handling of the facts, and his synthetic work.

The structure of the book is significant. The first three chapters explain how the gods are born of human desires and needs, how they change and grow to greatness along with the cultural growth and political stature of peoples, how they die when they no longer measure up to the intelligence and aspirations of the folk who "created" them. These opening chapters are a kind of epitaph, "a backward glance at some gods once great, who were left behind in the march to the modern world" (p. ix). But they are also a prophecy of the fate that awaits the gods still worshipped today; for in the next six chapters Professor Haydon endeavors methodically to trace the same cycle of birth-growth-death in the biographies of the "great living gods." He sees their dissolution approaching: they no longer satisfy man's desires, nor guarantee the values he cherishes. Hence man will find new gods. Or, as the last chapter, "The Twilight of the Gods," suggests, he will take the sensible step of becoming his own god, and achieve by himself the good life for which he has prayed the gods in vain.

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<sup>1</sup>A. Eustace Haydon. *Biography of the Gods* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), pp. xiii + 352. \$2.50.

The major outlines of the biography of the gods, as Professor Haydon sees them, unroll in this fashion. In the course of "man's adventurous climb to humanity from the sub-human" (p. 4), he felt the emotions of wonder and affection for the natural forces of the environment which so beneficently served his needs. With the discovery of language, these hidden and mysterious friends received personal names. The god-embryo was thus developing. It was found first in the nuministic state, as yet not differentiated from the growing grain, the fire, the water. Differentiation came when the phenomena of dreams led our ancestors into the illusion that there is a world of spirits. This animistic illusion begot not only the notion of soul-body dualism, but the further notion of spirits distinct from, but controlling the various nature-forces. Now, to a being so mysterious as a spirit almost anything may be ascribed; hence the gods were soon invested by imagination with the extravagant attributes of omniscience and omnipotence. Riding the tide of his people's surge to political importance, a god next easily reached henotheistic preeminence or monotheistic unicity. Only the accolade of moral greatness was still wanting to him. This was conferred by the "prophets," social idealists and reformers, through the fiction that their own fulminations against unrighteousness and their own dreams of the good life were inspired by the deity. So grows the typical god to majesty, to live in the affections of men for some centuries or millenia, and to decay and die when childish faith in myth yields to philosophy, and uncritical emotion yields to science. Philosophy finds no proof for God, and science shows man how to do for himself and his fellow-man what he has foolishly hoped God would do.

Professor Haydon's literary skill has imparted to this synthesis a deceptive plausibility. But in reality it is simply a blend of a moderate measure of historical data with several unproved or discredited theories. "The adventurous climb of humanity from the level of the sub-human" still awaits demonstration; to state it as a fact is highly unscientific. Furthermore, though a passing reference indicates that the author is not unacquainted with Wilhelm Schmidt and the important ethnological school he represents, yet he completely ignores their findings on primitive man, and makes the gratuitous, aprioristic statement: "The multitude of gods of the religions of primitive ages arose from this non-rational response of feeling" (p. 6). Actually, the trend of the evidence accumulated by Gräbner, Le Roy, Schmidt, and others, has discredited this idea. A multitude of gods is, of course, demonstrable for cultures later and more complex than the primitive, namely, for the primary, secondary and tertiary cultures. Yet even these gods did not arise in the manner indicated by Professor Haydon.

First, he overemphasizes the "non-rational response of feeling"; as a matter of fact, the gods were much more the product of *reason* seeking an explana-

tion of the world and of man's own self. Secondly, he assigns a crucial role to animistic ideas arising from dreams, that is out of all proportion to the ascertained facts; Wilhelm Schmidt has delineated the very modest part that objective ethnology allows to animism in the formation of religious ideas.<sup>2</sup> Again, the author confuses a very clear issue when he implies that monotheism is the common apogee of developing religions. The only monotheism attested by the history of religions is that of the Old and New Testaments; Allah of the Koran is the product of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Finally, by his treatment of the prophets the author reveals his captivity in rationalist theory. And his climactic tableau—the philosopher scattering the shadowy gods with reason's torch, while the savior-scientist proclaims the redemption of mankind—is, in the light of contemporary realities, almost too fantastic to be taken seriously.

The developments in the rest of the book are no less doubtfully solid. Chapter IV contains a neat synthesis of the career of Ahura Mazda. It does not commend itself to one who recalls that Iranian religion is a tangle of Avestan, Magian, Zoroastrian, and Mithraic threads, in whose handling scholars experience many wise uncertainties. Though it be true that the Iranians culturally were very close to the Aryans of India, it is rash to make Ahura Mazda a photostatic copy of Vedic Varuna. After this risky venture the author essays to skate on still thinner ice in his discussion of Zarathustra. This "prophet of Iran" is one of history's problem-children. Some competent historians hold that he was a movement rather than an individual; many profess great uncertainty as to his date; most refuse to define his precise contributions to Iranian religion. Very little of such uncertainty appears in the book's account of him and his work; all is detailed with assurance. The chapter concludes with a sketch of Zoroastrianism under Mohammedan rule, and with a notice of modern efforts to reinterpret Ahura Mazda. The last sentence is a prophecy which echoes the author's theme-song, and which is calculated to afford cold comfort to devout Parsees: "When the twilight shadows gather about him (Ahura Mazda), he will be lost to men, not because he has wandered too far into the shadow of abstractions, but because his work will be finished when men have acquired his qualities of wisdom and goodness, and are able to take from his shoulders the burden of making and preserving the good world" (p. 88).

The tragedy of India's history cannot but elicit the sympathy of people in happier lands. A race of exceptional intellectual and spiritual potentialities has there been forced for generations on end to live in chronic destitution, shackled by caste, abused by misrule, misguided by their priests. An aura of sympathy does pervade Chapter V, "The Gods of India," but unfor-

unately it is sympathy for the tortuous philosophy of the Brahmins and for the religious ideas in whose name they dupe and debase the Hindu populace. Pseudo-mystic, hair-splitting, allogical rather than illogical, Brahminical philosophy is a hoary wall which shuts out the light of truth from India. Furthermore, the Brahmins traffic shamelessly in the superstitions of the common people, careless that Siva, Krishna, and other gods are deifications of all that is indecent, and that cult-practices are obscene.<sup>2</sup>

Occasion has been sought in an earlier chapter to lament "the dark shadow of the Christian God which fell upon the Mediterranean, bringing death to a multitude of gods" (p. 51), and "the blight of Christian intolerance" (p. 56), under which the Celtic gods withered. Here he rates it a glory of India that "the arrogant attitude of the high God of Semitic-Christian tradition does not appear" (p. 89); instead, "the long life-stories of the gods of India unfold in the mellow atmosphere of universal tolerance" (p. 90). Ignoring the cheap calumny, we may remark that tolerance has never distinguished the Brahmins when any religious movement threatened to loose their own strangle-hold upon the people.

Buddhism, which is discussed in Chapter VI, found the atmosphere anything but mellowly tolerant, so long as it offered a challenge to Brahminism. It means much when history testifies that Buddhism did not prosper in those parts of India which remained consistently under native dynasties, though it prospered in the north and northwest where sovereignty shifted from one foreign dynasty to another. It was unable to maintain itself even in the middle Gangetic basin where all its holy places were located: to this fact we have the mournful testimony of the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims Fa Hsien and Hiuen Tsang. Even where Sakya Muni's doctrine had a measure of success on Indian soil, we find the explanation largely, as Professor Haydon implicitly admits, in Buddhism's willingness to compromise with Hinduism. Hindu gods and Hindu practices were taken over with ever increasing facility: it was by following of the line of least resistance that Buddhism survived in India, till the Moslems sacked the wealthy monasteries and drove the bhikhsus into exile. But by that time the Buddhist laity was nearly indistinguishable from the Hindus, and easily passed under the complete control of the Brahmins. Incidentally, this same willingness to compromise has been a large factor in Buddhism's progress through all eastern lands. At the present time, Japanese Buddhist leaders are falling over backwards in their eagerness to reinterpret Buddhism as the truest expression of Nippon's politico-religious ideology.

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<sup>2</sup>Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion* (London: Methuen, 1931), p. 84; cf. also pp. 237-41. Also, Pinard de la Boullaye, *L'Etude comparée des religions*, Vol. I, 572-5.

The discussion of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, which throughout oozes sweetness and diffuses light, closes on a note of fulsome laudation: "Buddhism has provided divine help for all the various needs of mankind more lavishly than any other religion the world has known" (p. 163). To be sure, if the chief of mankind's various needs is the need to be hoodwinked by a predatory monasticism, and to be enslaved to the beliefs and practices of a fantastic polytheism. "Buddhist intellectuals in Ceylon and Siam, in China and Japan are proud that Buddhism can meet the age of scientific thought with an advantage over western religions in that it is not fettered to the idea of a personal god who created and directs the course of world events (p. 164). Christianity, of course, is understood to be the chief of the religions so fettered.

"For five hundred thousand years or more, this historic land (China) has been the home of man" (p. 166). Such unproved assertions belong to Sunday Supplement literature. Faithful to his evolutionist postulate, that all the gods were born far down on this side of man's beginning (p. 1), the author is at exquisite pains to minimize the evidence for a High God (Ti'en or Shang-ti) in early China. His first argument is his familiar thesis that early gods are products of the simplest human emotions, and cannot have the transcendent character of high gods. Secondly, he adduces a thin speculation of Professor Creel on the meaning of the ancient pictograph for Ti'en. Thirdly, he chooses to discount earliest Chinese literature's testimony to the transcendence of Ti'en or Shang-ti by the bald assertion that that literature presents a late and highly sophisticated view of the gods. Finally, he presses the soft pedal on the voice of Chinese religious consciousness which in all ages speaks of the Heaven God.

The chapter on Amaterasu-Omikami should help Americans to wake up to the seriousness of the war thrust upon us last December 7th. Enlisted against us are not only the armament and seasoned fighters, but the religious soul of Nippon. The fiction of a chosen race under a divine emperor appeals to the risibilities of our press and radio, but it is fundamental in Japanese culture, and to it more than to any other factor must be attributed the appalling energy and daring of our foe's push to the south. On two other questions the chapter is less than clear. On p. 201 we read: "The word kami, which came to mean god . . ." Yet D. C. Holtom, a leading authority, cited approvingly by Professor Haydon in another connection, says: "The translation of 'God' by 'kami' is unfortunate and misleading. Such connection was first set up by the Protestant missionaries . . . some of whom had served in China prior to transfer to Japan. In China they had become aware of the difficulties to be encountered in the translation of the term 'God', and as Americans, had favored the word 'shin' or 'shem' for that

purpose. In Japan they found that the same ideogram read 'kami' and without any deep consideration of the matter settled on the use of this word in their translation of the Bible, thinking that inasmuch as the Chinese 'shen' and the Japanese 'kami' were written with the same ideogram, they were identical in meaning. . . . The Roman Catholic Church has dealt effectively with this problem through an authoritative decision that the designation 'Tenshu' (Lord of Heaven) shall be used officially as the name of the Supreme Being of Christian belief."<sup>3</sup>

With the question of the meaning of 'kami' is connected the burning issue of the observance of State Shinto, to which the present Japanese government obliges all subjects of the empire. Professor Haydon's treatment of it is insidious and unfair. He mentions the explicit separation of State Shinto from Sectarian Shinto, and then says of the former: "Toward this form of worship there may be no conscientious objection, for failure to do obeisance before the ancestress (Amaterasu-Omikami) of the Emperor is classed as disloyalty to the nation. The religious freedom guaranteed by the constitution is not infringed in theory, for State Shinto may not be classed with Buddhism, Christianity, Mohammedanism, nor even the Sectarian Shinto, which is recognized as a religion. The sun-goddess (Amaterasu-Omikami), under this state mantle, has won some singular triumphs over the foreign divinities who have dared to invade her Island Kingdom and the hearts of her subjects. The understanding deities of Buddhism would not be concerned, but the proud, intolerant 'only' gods of Christianity and Islam must view with amazement the spectacle of adherents of their faiths bowing before Amaterasu" (p. 214). We submit: (1) there is no question here of a 'form of worship'; (2) Amaterasu herein receives neither obeisance nor gains any triumphs; (3) the obeisance is an act of patriotism, comparable to that of the Briton who uncovers when the Union Jack passes by. In proof we cite, from a mass of official documentation and explanatory literature, the reply of the Ministry of Education to the question of the Archbishop of Tokyo: "Concerning the visits of students and school-children to the shrines, we answer the question on the 22nd day of the current month as follows. The visit of students and school-children at the shrines is prompted merely by pedagogical considerations. In this case the obeisance which is demanded from the students, school-children and others is naught else than the expression of love of country and loyalty to the Emperor."<sup>4</sup> Four years later the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, satisfied that the obeisance at the shrines had no religious connotation, instructed the Apoltolic Delegate of Japan to that

<sup>3</sup>*Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. III, n. 1, pp.1-2.

<sup>4</sup>Published in the Japanese newspaper *Zasshu*, under date of Sept. 30, 1932.

effect, and permitted Catholics to conform to state requirements in the matter.<sup>5</sup>

Full rein is given to the imagination in the biography of Yahweh, "an unimportant figure whose fortune was made by a happy alliance with a federation of Semitic tribes" (p. 218). "The tribes of Israel, nomad immigrants who began to filter into the land of Palestine early in the second millenium B.C.," allied themselves with "the Judean tribes who, inspired by Moses, moved northward" from the Negeb, bringing with them the storm-war-god Yahweh. For this ethnology the author, in default of proof, offers none. For Yahweh's character he cites the metaphorical third and fourth verses of Debbora's canticle and Moses' prayer: "Arise, O Lord, and let thy enemies be scattered, and let those that hate thee flee from bfore thy face" (Numbers 10:35). The tribes of Israel identified Yahweh with one of their own gods, and the alliance went on to the conquest of Palestine. There follows (pp. 225-229) a classic instance of perverse interpretation. The Scripture account of the long struggle of the prophets and the better kings to preserve the people from idolatry is made out to be a process of syncretism by which the war-god Yahweh took over the functions of the Baalin. Here, too, the prophets first enter, to loom large through the rest of the chapter. It goes without saying that no supernatural mission is allowed them. They are social reformers (pp. 230-232), "interpreters of an historic tragedy," who salvaged Yahweh's reputation after the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities (pp. 233-235), transformers of Yahweh from a national god to a god of afflicted individuals (p. 235), "daring dreamers" who proclaimed that even a conquered Yahweh was still the greatest of the gods (p. 236). Curiously, the author dates Isaias both in the eighth century and after the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities (compare pp. 232, 233 with p. 237).

The Christian God, as Chapter V describes Him, was formed by a syncretism of Jewish and Hellenic elements. He was preserved unchanged for a thousand years by a conservative fideism; He was partly reconciled with reason by the medieval Scholastics; He was "given the last sublime exaltation by Calvin"; He has now shamefacedly entered the twilight zone, His pretensions unmasked by science, philosophy, and history. It is a bit hard to decide whether the chief characteristic of this chapter is flat misinterpretation of Christian sources, or singular ineptitude for scientific theology. It is asserted that Jesus did not claim to be God, and that His claim to be Messias was simply an interpretation of Him by His early Jewish disciples (p. 252). Even St. Paul, the writer adds, knew nothing of Jesus' divinity, "for neither he nor his Jewish contemporaries could have placed Jesus on an equality with God"

<sup>5</sup>Cf. the letter of the Congregation, dated May 26, 1936, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, Vol. XXVIII, 406.

(p. 253). In this formula Professor Haydon's favorite aprioristic method comes to expression: "St. Paul *could* not have . . ." The fact, however, is that the text of the Gospels contains clear witness to the divine claims of Christ, and the letters of St. Paul abundantly attest his full acceptance of their truth.

In the second century, Professor Haydon continues, "a brilliant galaxy of preachers and apologists—Justin, Tatian, Tertullian, Irenaeus, Origen—all professed that he was God" (p. 254), because Hellenists, succeeding Jews in Church leadership, "linked him, through his resurrection, in function and prestige with the company of dying and rising gods." This is untrue. The men mentioned and the rest of the Church's apologetes know the dying and rising gods only as abominable myths. For their teaching on Jesus' divinity they appeal explicitly to the Gospels and to apostolic tradition. But to pursue Professor Haydon's exposition: The Christians now had two gods, and a third, the Holy Spirit, arose out of some obscure Scriptural expressions. There follows a picture of Christians in the late second, third, and early fourth centuries trying to decide whether they had one or three gods, until Constantine ordered them to make up their minds. The Council of Nicea thereupon assembled and defined the compromise formula: "God, one in nature and triune in persons."

The picture is false in all its lines. The faith of Christians during the ante-Nicene period never wavered, but held firmly to the Gospel teaching of One God and a Trinity of Persons, though as yet the terminology expressing the mystery had not crystallized. The Council of Nicea was summoned to decide whether Arius had been justly condemned and deposed by his own bishop. As a supplement to the ratification of the condemnation, the Council defined, not Christ's divinity, which was never considered open for debate, but His relation to the Father. The most that can be said is that Arianism and Nicea stimulated the Church's theologians to seek a more satisfactory formulation of trinitarian doctrine. Professor Haydon chooses to ignore the very names of the Cappadocian Doctors, Basil and the two Gregories, chiefly instrumental in this formulation. On St. Augustine, whose *De Trinitate* developed the doctrine to a perfection not to be surpassed for several centuries, we are treated to the following trivial remarks: "He inherited a Trinity, but the distinction of Persons was not necessary for him" (p. 260); "Augustine found it (the Trinity) empty of meaning" (p. 274). The remaining references to the Holy Trinity are cut of the same cloth. The doctrine is represented as a meaningless shibboleth imposed on the Church at Nicea(!), which left thinkers profoundly perplexed but blindly submissive to authority.

Grace and redemption are flicked with similarly scornful fingers: "God



predestined some for eternal life and by irresistible grace saved them. All others he foreordained for punishment and, by withholding his grace, allowed them to drift to the doom the guilt of their sins deserved" (p. 261). So the professor reads St. Augustine, and thereafter merely reiterates that this black predestination was the Church's sole concept of grace (pp. 266, 269). The doctrine that Christ satisfied for human sin was unknown till St. Anselm (d. 1109) deduced it from medieval feudalism: a serf (man) could not of himself make reparation for an offense against a lord (God). Complete disregard is shown for the evidence of the Gospels, the canonical Epistles, and the writings of the Fathers, wherein all the elements of the doctrine that St. Anselm synthesized in his *Cur Deus Homo* are contained in numerous passages.

Finally, whither fares the Christian God? In concluding his remarks on Yahweh Professor Haydon introduces us to the "thoughtful men who view the long vista of human history from the mountain heights of modern knowledge, for whom Yahweh has become as nebulous as the lost gods who died when he was young" (p. 248). Their ascent to their dizzy coign of vantage is described in as blatant a paragraph as this reviewer has ever read (pp. 276-7). These thoughtful men (John Dewey, for one) have numbered the days of the Christian God. They see how intellectually disreputable faith in Him has become. They see the disappearance of His usefulness, now that man has discovered his own capabilities: "When man at last assumes responsibility for the creation of the values he desires, and finds the plastic stuff of reality yielding readily to his molding intelligence and will, some day he will look up from his work, surprised to find that God has taken the opportunity to disappear" (p. 313). Asking no pardon, one may freely say that this is not only blasphemy, but nonsense.

Sufficient has been said to indicate the unreliable character of Professor Haydon's work from the scientific standpoint. A word may be added about the value of his message at the present moment. As America girds herself for the certain anguish and the uncertain fortunes of war, a voice from a famous midwestern center of learning speaks for her heartening the slogan of that cynical, anthropocentric humanism of which the war itself has completed the discrediting: "There is no one to save you. Save yourselves." The speaker seems oblivious of the paradox. One wonders what heart for suffering and for victory his message could create.