INDIVIDUALISM AND RELIGION IN THE EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE[1]

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Whoever reads the meditations of Marcus Aurelius must be impressed with the constant self-examination which the writer practised. Far on the northern boundaries of his empire, among the Quadi, on the banks of the Gran, he composed his first book, analyzing his own nature, gratefully recounting his obligations to his kin, his teachers, and his friends. All the succeeding books grow out of a similar self-examination, accompanied by self-directed exhortations to fidelity, constancy, and patience. The title which the work bears is indeed the only possible one—To Himself—for self is alike the subject and the object of the author's meditations. The emperor's simple humility, his high desire to fulfil in every way his duty, his patient humanity, shut out effectively all priggishness and offensive egotism from his pages. Marcus Aurelius was not alone in his concern for self. If we look into other ranks of life in the second century, we find the same interest. With all its peace, calm, and nobility, the age of the Antonines was an age of egoism, of valetudinarianism both of body and of soul. Aristides the rhetorician has left us an account of his long and impassioned search for health, which for him was a religious quest. Apuleius, in his anxiety for his soul, had himself initiated into all possible sacred mysteries, until he at last found rest in the holy brotherhood of the servants of Isis. The emperor, the rhetorician, and the superstitious mystic furnish three striking illustrations of the tendency of the time.

Self-examination was no new thing for the philosopher under the empire. While Epictetus, so far as we know, did not incul-

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cate its practice directly, none the less his teaching implies it, for the individual, the self, was the centre of his universe; self-concern was for him the proper interest for the *sapiens;* in self he found the source and warrant of the soul's security and independence. Seneca in a familiar passage tells us how each evening in quiet he reviewed his words and acts of the day, concealing nothing from himself, omitting nothing. This practice he had learned from his teacher Sextius, for that exercise of the Pythagoreans, which their ancient interpreters at least regarded as mnemonic, in the course of time had become a moral discipline. Witness these verses of the *Carmen Aureum:* "Never let sleep come upon thy yielding eyelids until thou hast thrice reviewed each one of thy acts of the day. 'In what have I erred?' 'What have I done?' 'What have I failed to do that I should have done?' Begin with thy first act and review in order. If thou hast done ill, be ashamed; if well, then rejoice."

When one surveys the history of Roman thought from the last century of the republic to the reign of Marcus Aurelius, he finds that the earlier ideal of action was gradually replaced by that of contemplation; that the concept of the individual as an inseparable member of the state yielded to that of the individual, independent of external relations, but the centre of man's thought and interest. Evidence for these individualistic tendencies is by no means confined to the works of the philosophers, but is found in many other forms of literature as well. Among Roman historians Tacitus shows pre-eminently a psychological interest; turning from mere events, he endeavored to find in the human soul the motives of the individual's action. The comparison frequently made between him and Thucydides brings clearly into contrast the interests of the two. The latter is concerned chiefly with events—expeditions, battles, victories, defeats; in his entire account of twenty momentous years few personalities appear: the actors are Athenians, Lacedaemonians, Corinthians, Argives. In like fashion Cato the elder, writing in the middle of the second century before our era, did not even name the Roman leaders in his *Origines.* In Tacitus, however, the actors are not peoples, but individuals. The characters of Tiberius, Germanicus, the two Agrippinas, of Claudius and Nero, of Galba, Otho, and

Vitellius—to mention only some of the chief personages—are clearly drawn. It is true that Tacitus's sense of the dignity required of the historian kept him from sinking to the meaner external details which Suetonius employed, and that he also avoided the carefully balanced antitheses which Sallust used in his elaborate portraits; but none the less we see in every case the individual clearly defined as Tacitus conceived him. The anecdotal character of Suetonius's work, as of the biographies of the Scriptores Historiae Augustae after him, is due to the same interest in personality. In fact, the rise of Roman biography in the latter part of the second century B.C. was coincident with the increase of individualism; likewise among the Greeks the development of this branch of literature, as of realistic portraiture, fell in the period after Alexander. The growth of Roman epistolography was prompted by the same interest as biography; and satire in the sense of *carmen ... maledictum et ad carpenda hominum vitia ... compositum* developed with the spread of individualism until it reached the bitter invective of Juvenal.

The causes which produced the extraordinary change of interest in the period from the Second Punic War to the age of the Antonines were manifold—political, economic, social, and philosophic. The great period of Roman conquest and struggle which continued to the close of the Second Punic War on the whole fostered a national spirit; the citizen's life was inseparably connected with the state; but, when the stimulus of common dangers from foreign foes and of common victories over them had ceased, new phenomena arose. On the one hand a cosmopolitan spirit appears, on the other we find men trying to realize their own individualities. The course of conquest had widened men's views; contact with other nations and with ancient civilizations had made it impossible to confine their thoughts and interest to the old narrow limit. Hellenism now poured the full stream of its influence into every channel of Roman life, but in Hellenistic thought that revolution has already been wrought which it was to pass on to Rome.[2] The increase of wealth gave men leisure for

[2] On the development of individualism in the Hellenistic period, see Jevons "Hellenism and Christianity," in this REVIEW for April, 1908.

intellectual pursuits or the means of gaining political power, while the realization of selfish ambition was made the easier by the fact that the problem of the poor had become more pressing, so that the demagogue had a larger opportunity. As is well known, political history from the time of the Gracchi to the battle of Actium centres around prominent men, leaders in attempts made more or less openly to override the constitution. Unselfish though the Gracchi may have been, they hurried Rome on a new course; the day Tiberius Gracchus deposed his fellow tribune, he began a revolution which was to end a century later in the establishment of the empire. Political agencies were corrupted and weakened; the allegiance of the citizens was transferred from the state to Marius, Cinna, Sulla; to Caesar, Pompey, Crassus; to Octavianus, Antony, and Lepidus. The ability, and to no small degree the desire, to govern was lost in the people. When the battle of Actium decided the leadership of the Roman world—the form of government which was to ensue had been determined long before that event—peace and security were finally obtained, but at the expense of political power. The assemblies of the people ceased to perform any real functions before fifty years had passed. The Senate, even under Augustus, became hardly more than an advisory board, although the fiction that it was a co-ordinate and independent part of the government was kept up for two centuries. In fact, from the first that which was a dyarchy in theory tended to become a monarchy in reality. Political life, once the free field of action for the Romans of the higher class, was now largely closed; dignity, not power, was the highest possession of the Senate. The equestrian order likewise had little opportunity save in a few administrative and military offices; while the mass of the people was wholly without political activity and without interest in government; indeed so indifferent was the populace that the bloody struggles of the year 69 A.D. between the armed forces of Vitellius and Vespasian interested the masses chiefly as a superior kind of gladiatorial show, which concerned them as little as the murder of Galba had earlier in the same year.

The stifling of political life had its inevitable results; the upper classes turned, some to the empty employments of luxury or to sensuality, while others of a nobler cast devoted themselves to

rhetoric, philosophy, and similar intellectual pursuits. The old ideal of devotion to the state which we find in Cicero, which lay behind Horace's earlier political verse at least, and formed the basis of Vergil's appeal to patriotism, gave way to the concept of a paternal government which was the ideal of Seneca, Pliny, and Dio Chrysostom, as well as the desire of the mob. The influence of Greece and the Orient had overcome the earlier Roman concepts of government. As a result, the national spirit was weakened or gone. Thinking men could no longer effectively make the welfare of the state the object of their thoughts or satisfy their own needs by action in its behalf, but were rather turned in upon themselves. In short, the political changes all tended to give an individualistic direction to Roman thought which was often noble, but was capable of becoming utter selfishness.

Yet the selfish satisfactions of great possessions were checked by the time the first century of the empire had passed. The enormous losses caused by the civil wars had been followed, it is true, by a rapid increase of wealth which gave opportunity for an extravagance hitherto unknown in the Roman world; but, as Tacitus in a familiar passage points out, waste and imperial oppression had done their work before Nero's death, so that with Vespasian, under force of necessity and the imperial example, a simpler mode of life began to prevail. Yet the happy age of the Antonines after Domitian's reign of terror could not restore the wasted wealth. Agriculture had never been successfully revived; oppressed by a system of slave labor and many centuries of bad management, the economic condition of the West steadily grew worse. This fact goes far to explain the general pessimism of the second century of our era. Empty rhetoric was not able to lighten this gloom; scientific pursuits, which had been followed with no little interest during the first century of the empire, as is attested by Seneca and Pliny the elder, and which might have provided intellectual satisfaction to the educated class, had been largely abandoned from lack of good scientific method. Marcus Aurelius thanks heaven that he never wasted his time on natural philosophy. Furthermore, among the intellectual classes there had actually developed a certain ascetism, a scorn of the body, which stood at diameter with the older Hellenic satisfaction with

life and with the former Roman physical vigor. The welfare of the soul, the safety of self, had become the chief interest of men. Nor was this interest confined to the upper classes; the humbler grades of society were moved by the same desires.

While political changes tended to develop individualism, the social changes of the period under consideration seem at first sight to tend rather toward cosmopolitanism. Rome's population from an early period was composite; but during the closing century of the republic and the first of the empire it became international, as is shown by every grade of society. The literary class was hardly Italian after Cicero's day. Toward the close of the republic and in the Augustan age, we find Furius Bibaculus, Catullus, Vergil, Cornelius Gallus, Aemilius Macer, Nepos, and Livy from upper Italy; Varro Atacinus and Pompeius Trogus from Transalpine Gaul. In the next century Gaul had become the teacher of the Britons—"Gallia causidicos docuit facunda Britannos"—while Spain furnished the two Senecas, Columella, Pomponius Mela, Lucan, Quintilian, Martial, Herennius Senecio, and perhaps Valerius Flaccus; and Africa had become the nurse of advocates—"Africa nutricula causidicorum."

The international character of the population, however, is naturally seen more clearly in the trading and lower classes. The numerous slaves and freedmen were made up of all nations, although chiefly Greeks and Orientals; so large were the additions made by manumission to the ranks of the freedmen that Augustus felt it necessary to have a law passed restricting to one hundred the number of slaves to whom freedom could be given by will; this very number shows how serious the danger of swamping the Italian elements was felt to be. Immigration from the East had been great. Under Augustus an embassy from King Herod was attended by eight thousand Jews resident at Rome; in 14 A.D., four thousand freedmen tainted with Jewish and other Oriental superstitions were banished to Sardinia; under the empire a large Oriental quarter developed in what is now Trastevere. Voices of protest against this invasion were not lacking. Lucan declared that the single city of Rome was receiving the whole world's dregs; and Juvenal vowed that he could not endure the capital, with its flood of Greek-speaking peoples from Asia

Minor and Syria—"Long since the Syrian Orontes poured its flood into the Tiber." Furthermore, society was rapidly affected by the number of plebeians and freedmen who came to wealth and influence. The vulgar pretensions of the rich parvenu became one of the stock subjects for the satirist. Petronius has given us Trimalchio, who made a cool ten million by a single lucky venture; Juvenal depicts the rich upstart, whose pierced ears showed that he was born on the banks of the Euphrates, but who none the less demands precedence over praetors and tribunes because of his four hundred thousand a year. In the imperial service, until Hadrian's day, freedmen were widely employed in positions of power and authority. Many a knight or senator traced his ancestry back to a wealthy *libertus;* the upper classes were recruited and often revivified from below, while the lowest class was constantly looking forward to the possibility of wealth and social advancement. Such influences broke down the social narrowness of an earlier day, when the Roman noble prided himself on being a noble of a city-state apart from the rest of the world, member of a class, not impregnable, it is true, but seldom invaded from below. Nor must we forget the effect of the decay of family life which is eloquently testified to by the vain marriage laws of Augustus and the efforts of his successors. The constant flux of society, the varied nationalities living at Rome representative of the complexity of the vast empire, alike operated to substitute a cosmopolitan spirit for the earlier provincialism, and uniting with the influence of a common allegiance and a common law which bound the empire together, made men feel, before the age of the Antonines, that they were no longer citizens of a town or district, but of the world. Yet these same influences loosened the bonds that bind the individual in a coherent society, and left him in a certain isolation.

But a most potent influence in the period we have been considering was philosophy, and above all Stoicism. When introduced, this system appealed to the Romans because it fitted action, it worked in practical political life; when that life was gone, the resistent elements of Stoicism were brought to the front and became a source of moral strength and of spiritual consolation. Stoicism at its birth had been influenced by the new concept

of a world-wide empire just realized by Alexander. In his treatise on the state Zeno first taught the doctrine of the common citizenship of man in a state identical with the world, and at once gave his philosophy that cosmopolitan stamp which in spite of all changes it retained to the end. The latest leaders among the Stoics—Seneca, Musonius, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius—dwell on citizenship in the cosmos, in which all reasoning men are brothers by virtue of their very reason. It is not wholly alien to our subject to note the extent to which the Stoic ideal of the brotherhood of man was realized under the empire. Though no attempt was made to illustrate the equality of the *servus sapiens* and the *Caesar sapiens* by replacing Caesar with the slave, the Stoic teachings, more than any other influence, led to the amelioration of the condition of the slave and to care for the children of the poor and for orphans, while the jurists Paulus, Ulpian, and Florentinus fixed permanently in written law the doctrine of the freedom and equality of men, secured to them by a law of nature superior to all human law. In short, the dominant philosophy of the second century of our era was at one with the cosmopolitanism of every-day thought and practice. But cosmopolitanism is the very soil in which individualism grows best. When the close bonds of state, society, and religion are broken down, as they were in Greece during the Hellenistic period, or as they were, *mutatis mutandis*, in the Roman world after the Second Punic War, the individual is always turned in upon himself, and, unable to feel the demands of the larger world as his fathers felt the claims of their provincial state, finds in self the centre of his interest. Philosophy of every school had long made self the subject of man's thought and measure of his world. The sophistic dictum, "man is the measure of all things," and the personality of Socrates had accomplished that. The Stoic doctrine of perception and concept, which is closely allied to the nominalism of the Cynics, and above all the ideal of the self-sufficient wise man, fostered egoism; and, further, the Stoic doctrine of ἀπάθεια led in this direction hardly more insistently than the Epicurean τὸ μακαρίως ζῆν and the Sceptic ἀταραξία.

To resume then briefly, political changes cut the Romans off from the great fields of activity in which the higher classes had

once found their satisfaction, and forced them to turn to unsatisfying pursuits. Economic decay, following on the period of extravagant luxury, deprived many of the satisfactions which the possession and expenditure of money give, and before the close of the second century of our era had produced a deep pessimism. Social changes had broken up the old class solidarity. Finally, philosophy had made men feel themselves citizens of the world, but of a world whose centre was the individual. Cosmopolitanism and individualism were therefore equally the results of the complex influences which I have sketched above.

I now wish to consider some of the results of the development of individualism so far as religion was concerned. In spite of all shocks and catastrophes, there is no question that at the close of the republic a strong religious sentiment still persisted among the people. Its existence is well attested by the poem of Lucretius, by many passages in other writers, and by the fact that the religious reforms of Augustus were based upon it. The means of religious expression, however, were unsatisfactory; the approved Graeco-Roman religion inculcated scrupulosity in fulfilling one's duty towards the gods, in properly paying them one's obligations, and, no doubt, offered a certain aesthetic satisfaction; but it made no moral demands on the worshipper beyond those of duty; it was objective and external, a community affair rather than the individual's dearest concern. But both national interest and the Hellenic confidence in the satisfactions of this life lost their hold. A new sense of moral guilt, stimulated in Italy no doubt by the horrors of the civil war, finds expression in Vergil, Horace, and in Livy's preface. Seneca recalled with new emphasis Plato's definition of the sum of righteousness—imitation of God: "The first point in the worship of the gods is to believe that the gods exist; second, to render unto them their own majesty, to render their own goodness without which there is no majesty; to know that the gods are they who preside over the world, who direct the universe by their power, who protect mankind, and sometimes have regard for individuals. These neither bring evil nor have it in themselves; but they chastise and check some men, they inflict penalties, sometimes they punish under the guise of blessings. Wouldst thou propitiate the gods? Be thou good thyself. He

has worshipped them rightly who has imitated them." Again, "The divine nature is not worshipped with the fat bodies of slain bulls, nor with gold or silver votive offerings, nor with money collected for the sacred treasury, but with a pious and upright will." Epictetus regarded the praise of God to be man's first duty: "I am a rational creature, and therefore I should praise God; this is my task; I will do it, nor will I leave my part, so long as I may keep it; and I urge you to join in this same song." Such passages show the change which had taken place in Roman religious thought. The time had indeed come before Seneca wrote when many an individual was possessed by a sense of moral unworthiness, when he demanded some spiritual satisfaction for himself, some assurance that he could personally enter into communion with divinity and find a warrant therein for his own security.

This warrant and satisfaction were given by the cults imported from the East. The hold these cults had at Rome and in much of the West can only be understood, I believe, in connection with the changes which we have been hastily reviewing. Their introduction began early, for the Great Mother of the Gods was imported by state action in 204 B.C.; but her orgiastic worship was so abhorrent to the Romans that at least three centuries seem to have passed before the state allowed Roman citizens to become members of her priesthood. On the other hand, the Dionysiac mysteries, coming by way of southern Italy, spread rapidly after the Second Punic War; although their excesses had to be checked in 186 B.C., their hold was so great that the authorities did not try to forbid but only to regulate initiation into them. The famous Pythagorean books, which a timid senate burned in 181 B.C., should be reckoned with the religious rather than with the philosophic movements of the period, if we may presume to separate the two. A century later Sulla's campaigns in the East brought in the Cappadocian Ma, and gave the legions their first acquaintance with the Persian Mithras. Soon after, Isis with her associates had established herself on the capitol, whence she defied all efforts to dislodge her. It may be claimed that these divinities under the republic were worshipped only by foreigners and the lower classes, but this is certainly not true of the first century of the empire. It must be remembered that these cults offered, in

crasser form perhaps, the same satisfactions and assurances that were given by the Eleusinian mysteries, which had always enjoyed high social favor; and the fact that Nero was at one time devoted to the Dea Syria, that Otho, Vespasian, and Domitian favored the Egyptian divinities, secured these Orientals some following among the official, if not among the intellectual classes. As a matter of fact, there is little doubt that all grades of society, with the possible exception of the most intellectual circles, in which ancient traditions or rationalistic views were strong, were profoundly affected by the tide of orientalism which rose rapidly in the latter part of the first and throughout the second century of our era. Mithras became prominent in Trajan's day; soon after, the *taurobolium*—the rite of blood—was introduced into the worship of the Great Mother, whose festivals were greatly extended before the close of the second century. It is unnecessary to name all the Oriental gods whose devotees were to be found in Italy and the West; many of them, it is true, appealed chiefly to the people of the land from which they sprang, but many were worshipped by Roman citzens. All required penances and purification, all offered through their mysteries a communion with the divine, and gave a warrant of safety in the present life and the life to come. Upon the neophyte who was to be admitted to the sacred band of the *Isiaci* were imposed continence and abstinence from animal food and wine; he began the day of his initiation with sacred ablutions and prayers, and was baptized with holy water from the Nile; then, clad in a linen robe, he was led into the holy of holies where the secret ceremonies were performed. Although we are naturally ignorant of what was actually done in these mystic rites, there can be no doubt of the effect on the initiate. Apuleius's hero Lucius exclaims in ecstasy, "I have approached the threshold of Proserpina, and after being carried through all the elements I have returned into the upper world; at midnight I have seen the sun flashing with a brilliant light; the gods of heaven and hell I have approached in very person and done them obeisance face to face." Many other moving ceremonies were performed, closing with a sacred meal, all calculated to impress the novice and to satisfy his religious desires. The rites of admission to each of the three grades in the mysteries of

Isis were essentially similar. In the mysteries of Mithras there were no less than seven grades in all, the first three of which were preliminary to full communion; lustral ablutions, self-restraint and abstinence, an oath, and tests of courage and constancy were required. A holy communion was regularly celebrated by the devotees, who thus recalled the final act of Mithras upon earth, and strengthened themselves for their warfare with the powers of evil, in which struggle Mithras was the ally of the faithful, protecting them in this world and assuring them immortality hereafter. In the worship of Mithras, Isis, and indeed in most if not all similar cults, matins and vespers, recurring festivals and fasts, sacred processions and reunions of the *sacrati*, satisfied religious desires and stimulated religious emotion. The ecstatic joy which the devout soul felt may be well illustrated by the opening of the hymn of praise to Isis which Apuleius puts into Lucius' mouth: "Thou holy and eternal preserver of mankind, thou dost ever cherish mortals by thy kindness, thou dost show the sweet affection of a mother toward the wretched in their afflictions. Neither day, nor night, nor briefest moment passes without thy bounty; thou protectest man on land and sea, and driving away the storms of life thou dost extend thy saving hand," etc. Of the reality of the religious satisfaction which these Oriental cults brought there can be no question; and the joyful anticipation of the future which the *sacrati* possessed was not less than that of an Eleusinian initiate of the third century whose tombstone declares, "Death is not only no evil, but is a blessing to mankind." It was then through such mysteries that the individual found assurance of his own security. Not by reason or philosophy, but by penance, purification and mystic communion he secured his peace. In fact, before the close of the second century of our era the world had passed from rationalism to mysticism.

It has, however, been maintained that these Eastern worships did not exert so powerful an influence as the above implies, that the number of their devotees was not large, and that they did not swamp the older gods. It is very true that dedications to the old Roman and Graeco-Roman gods continued to be set up into the fourth century, but the phenomenon of a state or tra-

ditional worship supported and carried on by men whose beliefs are quite at variance with the doctrines of that worship is no strange thing in modern times; still less remarkable was it in antiquity, when men were not bound by the exclusiveness of monotheism, but were ready to see the divine anywhere; the priest of Mithras could set up a dedication to Jupiter without hesitation or any sense of incongruity, although his concept of Jupiter was probably profoundly modified by the ideas he derived from the East. As to the number of dedications to the Oriental gods, they form a large proportion of the total number preserved to us, and come from almost every portion of the western part of the empire, so that there is no reason to doubt that the total number of devotees was very considerable. Furthermore, no one can study the religious history of the first three centuries without seeing how completely men's thought was permeated with ideas derived from the pagan East.

The victory of mysticism carried with it the doom of Stoic philosophy; in spite of all the modifications which that system had undergone, even the intellectual world demanded something more satisfactory than the virtue of the self-sufficient *sapiens;* men felt the need of help from a divine source, and this assistance the Oriental mysteries secured them. Marcus Aurelius was the last of the Stoics, because the Roman world had absorbed what Stoicism had to give; but Stoicism had helped to prepare the way for the Neo-Pythagoreanism and Neo-Platonism of the third and fourth century. Side by side, or rather in connection with these pantheistic religious philosophies, we see the Oriental gods reach their highest influence.

The same individualistic tendencies which fostered the spread of Oriental paganism contributed to the expansion of Christianity. This offered similar rewards and imposed similar obligations. It was, however, free from those crude and repulsive legends which were connected with every one of the pagan cults, and which could only be explained away for the cultivated devotee by some rationalistic effort or by a violent exercise of faith. Not only did it have a nobler character in its origin, but it offered a loftier satisfaction and warrant to those who accepted it. The world into which it came was bound together in an empire whose

roads were to be the highways for its missionaries to remotest lands. But this is not the place to trace the history of early Christianity. In Marcus Aurelius' day it was comparatively weak in the West, but before a century had passed it had spread enormously; in fact the battle between paganism and the religion of the cross had been already won.