The Metaphysical Factor in Paganism

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Those traditions which it is customary to call “pagan” are characterized not so much by an actual polytheism as by an immanentism which permeates all of their aspects. In the opinion of the monotheistic religions, the theological sinfulness of “paganism” is obvious: it ignores (whether consciously or inertially) the one transcendent and apophatic (i.e., formulated in negative terms) principle, the recognition and unconditional worship of which constitutes the sine qua non of monotheism. Among the three monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam hold to this line altogether consistently, whereas Christianity alone takes significant steps in the other direction by asserting the central figure of its cult and dogma to be the immanent hypostasis of the Divine, God the Son. At the same time, Christians have also inherited the Abrahamic argumentation of the other branches of monotheism against “pagans.”

Yet, in our opinion, it would be wrong to reduce all of the differences between monotheism and non-monotheism to the recognition of the supremacy of the transcendent principle, since within the monotheistic traditions themselves there have unceasingly appeared currents which, while unconditionally recognizing the justness of transcendentalism, confer a special metaphysical value to immanent realities, thus being de facto in solidarity with the “pagan” position. We have in mind first and foremost the esoteric dimensions of the Abrahamic religions (Sufism and extreme Shi’ism in Islam, Kabbalah in Judaism, and Hesychasm in Christianity), where the accent invariably falls on the immanence of the Divine Presence. Thus, without ignoring the transcendence of the transcendent, the immanent can be metaphysically accented.

What are the deep reasons which condition this?

An answer to this crucial question would not only rehabilitate paganism, but would also illuminate the most mysterious and secret sides of the “non-pagan” traditions. In one of his public lectures, Geydar Dzhemal precisely defined this problem when he noted that there is a profound opposition, one which has determined the dialectics of sacred history over the last millennia, between the Abrahamic concept of faith as a super-ethical volitional act turned “from here to there”, and the “pagan” concept of the Empire as an expression of the immanent divine force running “from there to here.” The monotheistic inspiration undermines the immanent grounds of the Empire, while the “pagan” force of immanent sacrality in turn deprives monotheism of its uniqueness and uncompromising nature. If the metaphysical truth of transcendentalism is obvious, then where do pagans find justification for their doctrines? What is the secret of the immanent Empire?

Without claiming to offer a complete (much less exhaustive) exposition of this most complex problem, we shall express a few considerations which might help somewhat clarify the essence of the matter. The sphere of the immanent is always de facto a sphere of multiplicity regardless of whether the question at hand concerns the real multiplicity of the manifest or merely the primordial duality of being and non-being inherent to the highest region of ontology, where pure being confronts the transcendent and the non-being encompassing it. This whole sphere is subject to the law of “metaphysical entropy”, according to which every logically ensuing metaphysical modality must obviously be lower in quality than the previous, that is to say inferior on the level of “metaphysical energy.” Monotheism begins with this statement and affirms the principle of transcendent unity, which confronts the whole volume of immanent multiplicity. This principle is organically connected to non-being, since transcendentalism inversely correlates to the sphere of the immanent, which means on the higher plane pure being that encompasses and synthesizes everything immanent. This apophatic, negative unity of non-being is the most logical, metaphysical response to the fact of “entropy.” Remaining within the framework of this picture of metaphysics, asserting anything else as a higher reality is simply absurd, since such would be tantamount to denying the finiteness of being and denying death which, in reality, exists as a quality dominating all metaphysical levels with the exception of non-being itself, which corresponds to the deepest essence of death itself. The most vulnerable point of transcendentalism is the very foundational picture of metaphysics and its basic postulate, the fact of entropy.

Many “pagan” traditions, especially the most metaphysically developed of them – Hinduism – are perfectly aware of the impeccable logic of monotheistic metaphysics, yet still carefully avoid the use of the term “monotheism” with regards to themselves. But by abandoning the upper pole of monotheism, they also renounce its lower immanent component, namely, the understanding of being as multiplicity, as a sphere of entropy. Both poles are thus denied with the same persistence. On the doctrinal level, this can be seen most easily of all in the relationship of both doctrines to the emergence of being. Monotheism in all of its variants is inevitably associated with “creationism”, i.e., the conceptualization of creation as alienation. Paganism in turn invariably insists on “manifestationism”, i.e., on the concept of manifestation and the self-discovery of the principle in being. The essence of the difference between these two traditions lies in the determination of the relationship between being and its hidden source in non-being. Creationism argues that being (and in rarer cases, the cosmos or even the visible universe) arose as a result of the separation of “part” of non-being, a part doomed from the first moment of creation to relate to its source as towards something different from itself. Creationism thus postulates a fundamental and “naturally irremovable”, radical Otherness of creation from its transcendent creator.

Manifestationism, on the other hand, denies this radical Otherness, instead asserting the oneness and substantiveness of the manifest and its unmanifest source. Being here is understood not as part of metaphysically preceding non-being, but as its being-other, as its means of “existing” (naturally, the word existing here is used here as a not too appropriate metaphor).

Thus, if in the first case the very unknowable essence of the Creator is the absolute answer and absolute completion of metaphysics, then in the second case the supremacy of the source of manifestation over itself is relativized, and the problem of being as a fact is not annulled, but rather remains a constantly open question (as in Parmenides’ thesis “Being cannot not be”). In this pagan perspective, there is no horizon of death, since death decides nothing, but only postpones or transfers the same question to a new level. Pagan traditions emphasize the consequence of this inner logic to be an aspect of the transmigration of beings that is conditioned by the fatal inevitability of the problem of being, which is not annulled by returning to the source.

This non-monotheistic approach does not place the manifest above the un-manifest, but merely radicalizes the question of the aim of manifestation, its mission, and the message it contains. It takes this question to its final limits. The finiteness of being is not assigned any decisive importance here, since the non-absoluteness of this finiteness is fixed and does not give any satisfactory answer to the reason and meaning of its emergence. In this perspective, being itself ceases to be the reign of descent and entropy and becomes the expression of some kind of special, metaphysically un-obvious truth. It is precisely for this reason that the principle of oneness thus loses all of its significance and, from a redeeming transcendent horizon, turns into some kind of self-evident statement, a statement of the obvious, the true, but the insufficient. On the other hand, multiplicity itself acquires a purely qualitative character: it is no longer a diluted and “entroping” unity, but the fabric of the gnostic message, in which every detail and every symbol is important and irreplaceable. Thus arise the “gods”, “angels”, and “messengers”, the spokesmen of the special gospel, the sender and addressee of which remain metaphysically unknown within both being and non-being. Thus arises as the crown of pagan metaphysics the notion of “Atman”, the subject, the living, immanent “god”, the qualitative which cannot be exhausted by the determining of being or non-being, that which participates in both but is not identical to one or the other. The subject is the special figure of the non-monotheistic tradition; it is the center of the imperial worldview, the concentration of its essence.

Thus, the subject is the summative, synthesized term of paganism without which the pagan perspective simply loses its raison d’etre. This subject coincides in essence with the two other emphatically immanent modalities of Tradition defined by the terms “spirit” and “light.” It is no coincidence that where traditional doctrines emphasize the terms “light”, “spirit,” and “I”, we are dealing with what monotheism frequently defines as “pagan heresy” or the “heresy of paganism.” This can be seen in the names of various gnostic groups, such as the Brotherhood of the Free Spirit, the Children of Light, etc. In addition, the very Sanskrit term Atman means both “spirit”, “I”, and “self.” It is also curious that, beyond Abrahamic, creationist monotheism’s cursing of “pagans and gnostics”, even the Zoroastrians found their “light gnosis” of Mani to be “heretical.”

However, the “light of the subject” is not an analogue or even a synonym of the “light of being.” It is a completely different light of an absolutely different quality. It is the “light of the problem” born out of the fact of the co-existence of being and non-being regardless of whether this existence is real (i.e., when being de facto is) or potential (i.e., when being is de facto “already not” or “not yet”). Hinduism specifies that alongside the Atman (the subject in being) there is the Paramatman (the subject in non-being). Thus, gnostic-“pagan” immanentism is an immanentism of an altogether different nature, one which is irreducible to any one of the modalities allocated by monotheism.

But does this immanentism remain really immanent? After all, in contrast to the strictly monotheistic optic, this immanentism cannot be satisfied by the transcendent member of the monotheistic dyad (the creator) as the metaphysical final and supreme. However, it does not follow that creation is not a final and exhaustive answer for immanentism. The immanentism of the “problem of light” can be explained by the need to merely fix the very fact of being, thereby not allowing it to disappear in the inexorable logic of monotheistic “ethics.” Here being serves as none other than “proof” of the non-absoluteness of being, and both being and non-being are no longer divorced (as in monotheism), but are fused together, thus becoming one and the same pole of the problem facing a complete Other, without which and outside of which this great problem would not exist. If this is so, then immanentism becomes in fact an expression of the highest and most convincing metaphysical transcendentalism, in which the transcendent quality is borne not out of the monotheistic Creator (who is metaphysically identical to non-being), but something beyond him himself, something so distant and great that it assigns to cause and effect equal metaphysical rights, thereby by making both into but a lower pole of the problem that is turned into the absolute and unattainable top.

In this perspective, the whole “pagan” (or more precisely, immanentist) complex acquires an altogether special meaning. Manifestation and its structure, which are accentuated and thoroughly deciphered by “paganism”, cease to be a not so important consequence of the Creator, who is valuable only relatively and with certain reservations. Rather, these questions become the text of the problem that is of equal significance to both creation and the Creator himself. Hence logically arises the goal of manifestation which, by the very fact of its presence (or the possibility of its presence), testifies (with the means of qualitatively lower principles compared to the principle of non-being) to something that is incomparable and eternal and which is superior to this non-being.

It is precisely in this sense that the “pagan” universe is theomorphic or, even more precisely, “angelomorphic.” Its elements are essentially revelations of the “world of light” beyond non-being, beyond the Creator. If we attentively examine the quality of this angelomorphic, “pagan” universe, we see that there is no opposition between the gnostic “anti-demiurgic” pathos and the immanentist accents of “paganism.” The “anti-demiurgism” of the gnostics can be explained by the rejection of the understanding of the actuality of the Creator as a single answer to the question of the purpose of creation. Such “anti-demiurgism” is polemical and takes aim first and foremost at monotheistic metaphysics, at the very founding logic of this metaphysics. From this perspective, the gnostics were essentially extreme transcendentalists. But the negative nature of the demiurge – or, more precisely, his complete dissatisfaction with the quality of the universal answer – does not diminish anything in the mission of manifestation, which in and of itself is the gnostic attack against its creator, its author. The sign that is encrypted in the cosmos and worshipped in “paganism” is immanent and visualized only as immanent. But this “pagan” immanentism is actually equivalent in its conclusions and in its very logic and source of impulse to gnostic transcendentalism. After all, there can be no suggestion that non-being is insufficient within its own pure self-identity. Such an argument could be drawn up only out of the deep deciphering of its antithesis (being), which reveals its dissatisfaction on the one hand (as the Creator of something imperfect) and on the other reveals certain transcendent potentials which remain problematic and hidden under the metaphysical status quo, but which could also awaken in the form of the light dimension of the universe, as the resurrecting immortal spirit, the eternal “I” of the Savior.

The gods of “paganism” are the subjective parameters of manifestation. They are not so much self-sufficient and self-satisfying principles in the likes of the God of monotheism as much as they are angels in the etymological sense, i.e., “messengers”, “spirits.” In accordance with this logic, John the Theologian, in his most esoteric gospel, utters a phrase which is completely alien to orthodox creationist monotheism: “God is spirit.” Within the framework of pure monotheism, such a downgrading of the principle, the source of all things spiritual and material, to merely one modality, to the spirit, sounds akin to blasphemy. In the pagan perspective, on the other hand, it is difficult to say anything more true and more just. It is no coincidence that it was John the Theologian who became the patron of European Christian esoterism.

In the Christian perspective, the Holy Spirit is the Consoler, the Paraclete, the main deputy in being of other hypostases which are absent in a given moment. For example, before the coming of the Son Christ, he “speaks through prophets”. After Christ’s Ascension, he “consoles and instructs” the once again orphaned world. Only thanks to him are the mysteries of the Church realized. The Holy Spirit of Christianity is the most immanent hypostasis of the Divine, and it is the identification of this hypostasis with the essence of the Divine that is beckoned by John the Theologian’s formula.

Finally, there is one final metaphysical aspect of paganism which ought to be emphasized. Every paganism is necessarily eschatological. This statement may surprise some, given that it outwardly contradicts the above. After all, the “pagan” approach to metaphysics is not obliged to especially accentuate the problem of the end of the world, the end of being, insofar as the absorption of manifestation by the principle not only says nothing to “metaphysical paganism”, but only “annoyingly” postpones the resolution of the great problem without adding anything substantive to it.

However, there is one fundamental consideration which makes eschatologism a necessary and extremely important component of immanentist tradition as a whole, which indeed has a place in the majority of historical “pagan” traditions, especially Aryan paganism. The eschatologism of immanentist doctrines is radically different from the monotheistic positive appraisal of the end of being to be the end of illusion and, as follows, an element of the absolute, unbroken fullness in the bosom of the principle of non-being.

Paganism envisions for the end times not a return to a unity lost in manifestation, but a return to primordial duality. It is no accident that Zoroastrian cyclology calls the final stage of sacred history vicharishn, literally “separation.” Only at the moment of contact between being and non-being is the pagan revealed the whole depth of his doctrine, with all the paradoxical implications. This border realized at the final point of manifestation is the point of departure for the questioning of the subject, who here can only view both metaphysical realities (both exhaustive being and incumbent non-being) as something that does not principally satisfy him, hence his turn to the source which might be beyond both being and non-being.

On the pragmatic level, eschatologism is an essential feature of metaphysically fully-fledged paganism, since the true immanentism of authentic tradition cannot and should not be a doctrine of absoluteness and the non-transcendence of “this world”, which would render it an anti-tradition and anti-nomist materialism. For the subject of pagan immanentism, being is not the final sought-after shore or “paradise.” Rather, it is a symbol of the fact that non-being itself is not this “paradise.”

Thus, pagan tradition has no illusions as to the finiteness of being. On the contrary, this finiteness and non-absoluteness, taken and recognized as such, is attractive to this tradition in being. Hence, eschatology naturally becomes the center of the pagan worldview, guarding pagan metaphysics from fetishism and the inertial worship of being.

The true “pagan” Empire, as well as the true ‘pagan’ subject, are necessarily eschatological. The power which emanates “from there”, on which every true Empire rests, is not a banal affirmation of the identity of being with itself. The “pagan” component in metaphysics is charged with a paradoxical and truly transcendent “energy” which leads much further than the impeccable and unique, yet limited power of faith. This is made especially clear in the critical moments of the unfolding of being, in radical eschatological moments – only then can pagan metaphysics fully demonstrate its deepest foundations.

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