

# The meaning of religion\*

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A very useful distinction can be made between ‘a religion’ and ‘religion.’ The former appears only in a highly developed society in which religious behaviour has been organised by tradition; the latter is universal.

The ordinary conception of a religion includes the notions of a self-conscious ‘church,’ of religious officers whose functions are clearly defined by custom and who typically engage in no other type of economic activity, and of carefully guarded rituals which are the symbolic expression of the life of the church. Generally, too, such a religion is invested with a certain authority by a canonical tradition which has grown up around a body of sacred texts, supposed to have been revealed by God or to have been faithfully set down by the founder of the religion or by followers of His who have heard the sacred words from His own lips.

If we leave the more sophisticated peoples and study the social habits of primitive and barbaric folk, we shall find that it is very difficult to discover religious institutions that are as highly formalised as those that go under the name of the Roman Catholic Church

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or of Judaism. Yet religion in some sense is everywhere present. It seems to be as universal as speech itself and the use of material tools. It is difficult to apply a single one of the criteria which are ordinarily used to define a religion to the religious behaviour of primitive peoples, yet neither the absence of specific religious officers nor the lack of authoritative religious texts nor any other conventional lack can seriously mislead the student into denying them true religion. Ethnologists are unanimous in ascribing religious behaviour to the very simplest of known societies. So much of a commonplace, indeed, is this assumption of the presence of religion in every known community—barring none, not even those that flaunt the banner of atheism—that one needs to reaffirm and justify the assumption.

How are we to define religion? Can we get behind priests and prayers and gods and rituals and discover a formula that is not too broad to be meaningless nor so specific as to raise futile questions of exclusion or inclusion? I believe it is possible to do this if we ignore for a moment the special forms of behaviour deemed religious and attend to the essential meaning and function of such behaviour. Religion is precisely one of those words that belong to the more intuitive portion of our vocabulary. We can often apply it safely and unexpectedly without the slightest concern for whether the individual or group termed religious is priest-ridden or not, is addicted to prayer or not, or believes or does not believe in a god. Almost unconsciously the term has come to have for most of us a certain connotation of personality. Some individuals are religious and others are not, and all societies have religion in the sense that they provide the naturally religious person with certain ready-made symbols for the exercise of his religious need.

The formula that I would venture to suggest is simply this: Religion is man's never-ceasing attempt to discover a road to spiritual serenity across the perplexities and dangers of daily life. How this serenity is obtained is a matter of infinitely varied detail. Where the need for such serenity is passionately felt, we have religious yearning; where it is absent, religious behaviour is no more than socially sanctioned form or an aesthetic blend of belief and gesture. In prac-

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tice it is all but impossible to disconnect religious sentiment from formal religious conduct, but it is worth divorcing the two in order that we may insist all the more clearly on the reality of the sentiment.

What constitutes spiritual serenity must be answered afresh for every culture and for every community — in the last analysis, for every individual. Culture defines for every society the world in which it lives, hence we can expect no more of any religion than that it awaken and overcome the feeling of danger, of individual helplessness, that is proper to that particular world. The ultimate problems of an Ojibwe Indian<sup>1</sup> are different as to content from those of the educated devotee of modern science, but with each of them religion means the haunting realisation of ultimate powerlessness in an inscrutable world, and the unquestioning and thoroughly irrational conviction of the possibility of gaining mystic security by somehow identifying oneself with what can never be known. Religion is omnipresent fear and a vast humility paradoxically turned into bedrock security, for once the fear is imaginatively taken to one's heart and the humility confessed for good and all, the triumph of human consciousness is assured. There can be neither fear nor humiliation for deeply religious natures, for they have intuitively experienced both of these emotions in advance of the declared hostility of an overwhelming world, coldly indifferent to human desire.

Religion of such purity as I have defined it is hard to discover. That does not matter; it is the pursuit, conscious or unconscious, of ultimate serenity following total and necessary defeat that constitutes the core of religion. It has often allied itself with art and science, and art at least has gained from the alliance, but in crucial situations religion has always shown itself indifferent to both. Religion seeks neither the objective enlightenment of science nor the strange equilibrium, the sensuous harmony, of æsthetic experience. It aims at nothing more nor less than the impulsive conquest of reality, and it can use science and art as little more than stepping stones toward the attainment of its own serenity. The mind that is intellectualist through and through is necessarily baffled by religion,

and in the attempt to explain it makes little more of it than a blind and chaotic science.

Whether or not the spirit of religion is reconcilable with that of art does not concern us. Human nature is infinitely complex and every type of reconciliation of opposites seems possible, but it must be insisted that the nucleus of religious feeling is by no means identical with æsthetic emotion. The serenity of art seems of an utterly different nature from that of religion. Art creates a feeling of wholeness precipitating the flux of things into tangible forms, beautiful and sufficient to themselves; religion gathers up all the threads and meaninglessnesses of life into a wholeness that is not manifest and can only be experienced in the form of a passionate desire. It is not useful and it is perhaps not wise to insist on fundamental antinomies, but if one were pressed to the wall one might perhaps be far from wrong in suspecting that the religious spirit is antithetical to that of art, for religion is essentially ultimate and irreconcilable. Art forgives because it values as an ultimate good the here and now; religion forgives because the here and now are somehow irrelevant to a desire that drives for ultimate solutions.

## II

Religion does not presuppose a definite belief in God or in a number of gods or spirits, though in practice such beliefs are generally the rationalised background for religious behaviour.

Belief, as a matter of fact, is not a properly religious concept at all, but a scientific one. The sum total of one's beliefs may be said to constitute one's science. Some of these beliefs can be sustained by an appeal to direct personal experience, others rest for their warrant on the authority of society or on the authority of such individuals as are known or believed to hold in their hands the keys of final demonstration. So far as the normal individual is concerned, a belief in the reality of molecules or atoms is of exactly the same nature as a belief in God or immortality. The true division here is not between science and religious belief, but between personally verifiable and personally unverifiable belief. A philosophy of life is

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not religion if the phrase connotes merely a cluster of rationalised beliefs. Only when one's philosophy of life is vitalised by emotion does it take on the character of religion.

Some writers have spoken of a specifically religious emotion, but it seems quite unnecessary to appeal to any such hypothetical concept. One may rest content to see in religious emotion nothing more nor less than a cluster of such typical emotional experiences as fear, awe, hope, love, the pleading attitude, and any others that may be experienced, in so far as these psychological experiences occur in a context of ultimate values. Fear as such, no matter how poignant or ecstatic, is not religion. A calm belief in a God who creates and rewards and punishes does not constitute religion if the believer fails to recognise the necessity of the application of this belief to his personal problems. Only when the emotion of fear and the belief in a God are somehow integrated into a value can either the emotion or the belief be said to be of a religious nature. This standpoint allows for no specific religious emotions nor does it recognise any specific forms of belief as necessary for religion. All that is asked is that intensity of feeling join with a philosophy of ultimate things into an unanalysed conviction of the possibility of security in a world of values.

One can distinguish, in theory if not in practice, between individual religious experience and socialised religious behaviour. Some writers on religion put the emphasis on the reality and intensity of the individual experience, others prefer to see in religion a purely social pattern, an institution on which the individual must draw in order to have religious experience at all. The contrast between these two points of view is probably more apparent than real. The suggestions for religious behaviour will always be found to be of social origin; it is the validation of this behaviour in individual or in social terms that may be thought to vary. This is equivalent to saying that some societies tend to seek the most intense expression of religious experience in individual behaviour (including introspection under that term), while others tend toward a collective orthodoxy, reaching an equivalent intensity of life in forms of behaviour in which the individual is subordinated to a collective symbol. Religions that con-

form to the first tendency may be called evangelistic, and those of the second type ritualistic.

The contrast invites criticism, as everyone who has handled religious data knows. One may object that it is precisely under the stimulation of collective activity, as in the sun dance of the Plains Indians<sup>2</sup> or in the Roman Catholic mass, that the most intense forms of individual experience are created. Again, one may see in the most lonely and self-centered of religious practices, say the mystic ecstasies of a saint or the private prayer of one lost to society, little more than the religious behaviour of society itself, disconnected, for the moment, from the visible church. A theorist like Durkheim sees the church implicit in every prayer or act of ascetic piety. It is doubtful if the mere observation of religious behaviour quite justifies the distinction that I have made. A finer psychological analysis would probably show that the distinction is none the less valid—that societies differ or tend to differ according to whether they find the last court of appeal in matters religious, in the social act, or in the private emotional experience.

Let one example do for many. The religion of the Plains Indians is different in many of its details from that of the Pueblo Indians of the Southwest.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless there are many external resemblances between them, such as the use of shrines with fetishistic objects gathered in them, the colour symbolism of cardinal points, and the religious efficacy of communal dancing. It is not these and a host of other resemblances, however, that impress the student of native American religion; it is rather their profound psychological difference. The Plains Indians' religion is full of collective symbols; indeed, a typical ethnological account of the religion of a Plains tribe seems to be little more than a list of social stereotypes—dances and regalia and taboos and conventional religious tokens. The sun dance is an exceedingly elaborate ritual which lasts many days and in which each song and each step in the progress of the ceremonies is a social expression. For all that, the final validation of the sun dance, as of every other form of Plains religion, seems to rest with the individual in his introspective loneliness. The nuclear idea is the 'blessing' or 'manitou' experience, in which the individual puts himself in a rela-

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tion of extreme intimacy with the world of supernatural power or 'medicine.'

Completely socialised rituals are not the primary fact in the structure of Plains religion; they are rather an extended form of the nuclear individual experience. The recipient of a blessing may and does invite others to participate in the private ritual which has grown up around the vision in which power and security have been vouchsafed to him; he may even transfer his interest in the vision to another individual; in the course of time the original ritual, complicated by many accretions, may become a communal form in which the whole tribe has the most lively and anxious interest, as is the case with the beaver bundle<sup>4</sup> or medicine pipe ceremonies of the Blackfoot Indians.<sup>5</sup> A non-religious individual may see little but show and outward circumstance in all this business of vision and bundle and ritual, but the religious consciousness of the Plains Indians never seems to lose sight of the inherently individual warrant of the vision and of all rituals which may eventually flow from it. It is highly significant that even in the sun dance, which is probably the least individualised kind of religious conduct among these Indians, the highwater mark of religious intensity is felt to reside, not in any collective ecstasy, but in the individual emotions of those who gaze at the centre pole of the sun dance lodge and, still more, of the resolute few who are willing to experience the unspeakably painful ecstasy of self-torture.

The Pueblo religion seems to offer very much of a contrast to the religion of the Plains. The Pueblo religion is ritualised to an incredible degree. Ceremony follows relentlessly on ceremony, clan and religious fraternity go through their stately symbolism of dance and prayer and shrine construction with the regularity of the seasons. All is anxious care for the norm and detail of ritual. But it is not the mere bulk of this ritualism which truly characterises the religion of the Hopi or Zuñi.<sup>6</sup> It is the depersonalised, almost cosmic, quality of the rituals, which have all the air of preordained things of nature which the individual is helpless either to assist or to thwart, and whose mystic intention he can only comprehend by resigning himself to the traditions of his tribe and clan and fraternity. No private

intensity of religious experience will help the ritual. Whether the dancer is aroused to a strange ecstasy or remains as cold as an automaton is a matter of perfect indifference to the Pueblo consciousness. All taint of the orgiastic is repudiated by the Pueblo Indian, who is content with the calm constraint and power of things ordained, seeing in himself no discoverer of religious virtue, but only a correct and measured transmitter of things perfect in themselves. One might teach Protestant revivalism to a Blackfoot or a Sioux; a Zuñi would smile uncomprehendingly.

### III

Though religion cannot be defined in terms of belief, it is none the less true that the religions of primitive peoples tend to cluster around a number of typical beliefs or classes of belief. It will be quite impossible to give even a superficial account of the many types of religious belief that have been reported for primitive man, and I shall therefore be content with a brief mention of three of them: belief in spirits (animism), belief in gods, and belief in cosmic power (mana).

That primitive peoples are animistic—in other words, that they believe in the existence in the world and in themselves of a vast number of immaterial and potent essences—is a commonplace of anthropology. Tylor<sup>7</sup> attempted to derive all forms of religious behaviour from animistic beliefs, and while we can no longer attach as great an importance to animism as did Tylor and others of the classical anthropologists, it is still correct to say that few primitive religions do not at some point or other connect with the doctrine of spirits. Most peoples believe in a soul which animates the human body; some believe in a variety of souls (as when the principle of life is distinguished from what the psychologists would call consciousness or the psyche); and most peoples also believe in the survival of the soul after death in the form of a ghost.

The experiences of the soul or souls typically account for such phenomena as dreams, illness, and death. Frequently one or another type of soul is identified with such insubstantial things as the breath,



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or the shadow cast by a living being, or, more materially, with such parts of the human body as the heart or diaphragm; sometimes, too, the soul is symbolised by an imaginary being, such as a mannikin, who may leave the body and set out in pursuit of another soul. The mobile soul and the ghost tend to be identified, but this is not necessarily the case.

In all this variety of primitive belief we see little more than the dawn of psychology. The religious attitude enters in only when the soul or ghost is somehow connected with the great world of non-human spirits which animates the whole of nature and which is possessed of a power for good or ill which it is the constant aim of human beings to capture for their own purposes. These 'spirits,' which range all the way from disembodied human souls, through animals, to god-like creatures, are perhaps more often feared than directly worshipped. On the whole, it is perhaps correct to say that spirits touch humanity through the individual rather than through the group and that access is gained to them rather through the private, selfish ritual of magic than through religion. All such generalisations, however, are exceedingly dangerous. Almost any association of beliefs and attitudes is possible.

Tylor believed that the series: soul, ghost, spirit, god, was a necessary genetic chain. 'God' would be no more than the individualised totality of all spirits, localised in earth or air or sea and specialised as to function or kind of power. The single 'god' of a polytheistic pantheon would be the transition stage between the unindividualised spirit and the Supreme Being of the great historical religions. These simple and plausible connections are no longer lightly taken for granted by the anthropologists. There is a great deal of disturbing evidence which seems to show that the idea of a god or of God is not necessarily to be considered as the result of an evolution of the idea of soul or spirit. It would seem that some of the most primitive peoples we know of have arrived at the notion of an all powerful being who stands quite outside the world of spirits and who tends to be identified with such cosmic objects as the sun or the sky.

The Nootka Indians of British Columbia, for instance, believe in the existence of a Supreme Being whom they identify with daylight

and who is sharply contrasted both with the horde of mysterious beings ('spirits') from whom they seek power for special ends and with the mythological beings of legend and ritual. Some form of primitive monotheism not infrequently coexists with animism. Polytheism is not necessarily the forerunner of monotheism, but may, for certain culture, be looked upon as a complex, systematised product of several regional ideas of God.

The idea of 'mana,' or diffused, non-individualised power, seems to be exceedingly widespread among primitive peoples. The term has been borrowed from Melanesia, but it is as applicable to the Algonquian, Iroquois, Siouan, and numerous other tribes of aboriginal America as to the Melanesians and Polynesians. The whole world is believed to be pervaded by a mysterious potency that may be concentrated in particular objects or, in many cases, possessed by spirits or animals or gods. Man needs to capture some of this power in order to attain his desires. He is ever on the lookout for blessings from the unknown, which may be vouchsafed to him in unusual or uncanny experiences, in visions, and in dreams. The notion of immaterial power often takes curious forms. Thus the Hupa Indians of Northwestern California believe in the presence of radiations which stream to earth from mysterious realms beyond, inhabited by a supernatural and holy folk who once lived upon earth but vanished with the coming of the Indians. These radiations may give the medicine-woman her power or they may inspire one with the spirit of a ritual.

I can hardly do more than mention some of the typical forms of religious behaviour, as distinguished from belief, which are of universal distribution. Prayer is common, but it is only in the higher reaches of culture that it attains its typically pure and altruistic form. On lower levels it tends to be limited to the voicing of selfish wants, which may even bring harm to those who are not members of one's own household. It is significant that prayers are frequently addressed to specific beings who may grant power or withhold ill rather than to the Supreme Being, even when such a being is believed to exist.

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A second type of religious behaviour is the pursuit of power or 'medicine.' The forms which this pursuit take are exceedingly varied. The individual 'medicine' experience is perhaps illustrated in its greatest purity among the American aborigines, but it is of course plentifully illustrated in other parts of the world. Among some tribes the receipt of power, which generally takes place in the form of a dream or vision, establishes a very personal relation between the giver of the blessing and the suppliant.

This relation is frequently known as individual totemism. The term totemism, indeed, is derived from the Ojibwe Indians, among whom there is a tendency for the individual to be 'blessed' by the same supernatural beings as have already blessed his paternal ancestors. Such an example as this shows how the purely individual relation may gradually become socialised into the institution typically known as totemism, which may be defined as a specific relation, manifested in a great variety of ways, which exists between a clan or other social group and a supernatural being, generally, but by no means exclusively, identified with an animal. In spite of the somewhat shadowy borderland which connects individual totemism with group totemism, it is inadvisable to think of the one institution as necessarily derived from the other, though the possibility of such a development need not be denied outright.

Closely connected with the pursuit of power is the handling of magical objects or assemblages of such objects which contained or symbolise the power that has been bestowed. Among some of the North American Indian tribes, as we have seen, the 'medicine bundle,' with its associated ritual and taboos, owes its potency entirely to the supernatural experience which lies back of it. Classical fetishism, however, as we find it in West Africa, seems not to be necessarily based on an individual vision. A fetish is an object which possesses power in its own right and which may be used to affect desired ends by appropriate handling, prayer, or other means. In many cases a supernatural being is believed to be actually resident in the fetish, though this conception, which most nearly corresponds to the popular notion of 'idol,' is probably not as common as might be expected. The main religious significance of medicine

bundles, fetishes and other tokens of the supernatural is the reassuring power exerted on the primitive mind by a concrete symbol which is felt to be closely connected with the mysterious unknown and its limitless power. It is of course the persistence of the suggestibility of visual symbols which makes even the highest forms of religion tend to cluster about such objects as temples, churches, shrines, crucifixes, and the like.

The fourth and perhaps the most important of the forms of religious behaviour is the carrying out of rituals. Rituals are typically symbolic actions which belong to the whole community, but among primitive peoples there is a tendency for many of them to be looked upon as the special function of a limited group within the whole tribe. Sometimes this group is a clan or gens or other division not based on religious concepts; at other times the group is a religious fraternity, a brotherhood of priests, which exists for the sole purpose of seeing to the correct performance of rituals which are believed to be of the utmost consequence for the safety of the tribe as a whole. It is difficult to generalise about primitive ritual, so varied are the forms which it assumes. Nearly everywhere the communal ritual whips the whole tribe into a state of great emotional tension, which is interpreted by the folk as a visitation from the supernatural world. The most powerful means known to bring about this feeling is the dance, which is nearly always accompanied by singing.

Some ethnologists have seen in primitive ritual little more than the counterpart of our own dramatic and pantomimic performances. Historically there is undoubtedly much truth in this but it would be very misleading to make of a psychology of primitive ritual a mere chapter in the psychology of æsthetic experience. The exaltation of the Sioux sun dancer or of a Northwest Coast Indian who impersonates the Cannibal Spirit is a very different thing from the excitement of the performing artist. It seems very much more akin to the intense reverie of the mystic or ascetic. Externally, the ritual may be described as a sacred drama; subjectively, it may bring the participant to a realisation of mystery and power for which the fetish or other religious object is but an external token. The psycho-

logical interpretation of ritual naturally differs with the temperament of the individual.

#### IV

The sharp distinction between religious and other modes of conduct to which we are accustomed in modern life is by no means possible on more primitive levels. Religion is neither ethics nor science nor art, but it tends to be inextricably bound up with all three. It also manifests itself in the social organisation of the tribe, in ideas of higher or lower status, in the very form and technique of government itself. It is sometimes said that it is impossible to disentangle religious behaviour among primitive peoples from the setting in which it is found. For many primitives, however, it seems almost more correct to say that religion is the one structural reality in the whole of their culture and that what we call art and ethics and science and social organisation are hardly more than the application of the religious point of view to the functions of daily life.

In concluding, attention may be called to the wide distribution of certain sentiments or feelings which are of a peculiarly religious nature and which tend to persist even among the most sophisticated individuals, long after they have ceased to believe in the rationalised justification for these sentiments and feelings. They are by no means to be identified with simple emotions, though they obviously feed on the soil of all emotions. A religious sentiment is typically unconscious, intense, and bound up with a compulsive sense of values. It is possible that modern psychology may analyse them all away as socialised compulsion neuroses, but it is exceedingly doubtful if a healthy social life or a significant individual life is possible without these very sentiments. The first and most important of them is a 'feeling of community with a necessary universe of values.' In psychological terms, this feeling seems to be a blend of complete humility and a no less complete security. It is only when the fundamental serenity is as intense as fear and as necessary as any of the simpler sentiments that its possessor can be properly termed a mystic.

A second sentiment, which often grows out of the first, is a feeling for sacredness or holiness or divinity. That certain experiences or ideas or objects or personalities must be set apart as symbols of ultimate value is an idea which is repellent to the critical modern mind. It is none the less a necessary sentiment to many, perhaps to most, human beings. The consciously justified infraction of sentiments of holiness, which cannot be recognised by the thinking mind, leads frequently to an inexplicable personal unhappiness.

The taboos of primitive peoples strike us as very bizarre and it is a commonplace of psychoanalysis that many of them have a strange kinship with the apparently self-imposed taboos of neurotics. It is doubtful if many psychologists or students of culture realise the psychological significance of taboo, which seems nothing more nor less than an unconscious striving for the strength that comes from any form of sacrifice or deferment of immediate fulfillments. Certainly all religions have insisted on the importance of both taboo, in its narrower sense of specific interdiction, and sacrifice. It may be that the feeling of the necessity of sacrifice is no more than a translation into action of the sentiment of the holy.

Perhaps the most difficult of the religious sentiments to understand is that of sin, which is almost amusingly abhorrent to the modern mind. Every constellation of sentiments holds within itself its own opposites. The more intense a sentiment, the more certain is the potential presence of a feeling which results from the flouting or thwarting of it. The price for the reality and intensity of the positive sentiments that I have mentioned, any or all of which must of necessity be frequently violated in the course of daily life, is the sentiment of sin, which is a necessary shadow cast by all sincerely religious feeling.

It is, of course, no accident that religion in its most authentic moments has always been prepared to cancel a factual shortcoming in conduct if only it could assure itself that this shortcoming was accompanied by a lively sense of sin. Good works are not the equivalent of the sentiment of ultimate value which religion insists upon. The shadow cast by this sentiment, which is a sense of sin, may be intuitively felt as of more reassuring value than a benevol-

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ence which proceeds from mere social habit or from personal indifference. Religion has always been the enemy of self-satisfaction.

### Notes

- 1 *Ojibwe* (also *Ojibwa*, *Ojibway*, *Chippewa*): an indigenous American people of the Great Lakes region and northern plains of the United States and Canada.
- 2 *Sun dance of the Plains Indians*: a ceremony central to the religious identity of the Indigenous peoples of the Great Plains. The name ‘sun dance’ derives from the Sioux name for the ceremony, *Wi wanyang wacipi* or ‘sun gazing dance’. See ‘Sun Dance’ in the Encyclopedia of the Great Plains: <<http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.rel.046>>
- 3 *Pueblo Indians of the South West*: known also as Puebloans, are an indigenous American cultural group consisting of multiple tribes which have agricultural, material, and religious practices in common.
- 4 *Beaver bundle*: a wrapped collection of sacred items (sacred bundle, medicine bundle) of the Blackfoot Indians.
- 5 *Blackfoot Indians*: an indigenous American people whose traditional lands span parts of southern Alberta and Saskatchewan in Canada, and northern Montana in the United States. See the website of the Blackfeet Nation: <<https://blackfeetnation.com/>>
- 6 *Hopi or Zuñi*: Pueblo Indian groups of New Mexico and northeastern Arizona, respectively. Modern spelling: Zuni.
- 7 *Tylor*: Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917), English anthropologist who reintroduced the term ‘animism’ into common use. He regarded animism as the first phase in the development of religions, as set out in his work *Primitive Culture* (1871), of which an extract appears on the following pages.