
Gods

Chapter 3 of *You Gentiles* by Maurice Samuels (Pub 1924)



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Chapter 3: Gods

This is the essence of our difference: that we are serious, you are not. The French shading of the word comes nearer my meaning: vous n'etes pas serieux. Not as a matter of intent, but as a matter of constitution

This lack of seriousness, thus uttering itself in your ethics, and governing the character of your relations to each other, must also govern your religion, your symbolized relations with the universe. And I have always felt, in contemplating your religious experiences and declarations, the same alienation from them as from your morality. Your feeling for Godhead partakes of the imaginative and lyrical playfulness which is your essential nature, and whatever may be the formal creed in which your feelings are wrapped their true nature cannot be hidden,

You gentiles are essentially polytheists and to some extent idol worshippers. We Jews are essentially monotheists. I would assert this even if it were not known that we have been singled out for centuries by our obstinate monotheism. I would assert it on the basis of my observations of the worlds I have known.

Monotheism is a desperate and overwhelming creed. It can be the expression of none but the most serious natures. It is a fundamental creed which engulfs individual and mass in an unfathomable sea of unity. In monotheism there is no room left for individual prides and distinctions, no room for joyful assertiveness. Monotheism means infinite absolutism, the crushing triumph of the One, the crushing annihilation of the ones.

To the serious nature it is inconceivable that this world should be at the changing mercy of opposing and uncontrolled forces: that gods of varying power and purpose should be making a sport of their own with us and themselves. But to the sporting nature the ghastly unity of all life and power, the grim and sempiternal-settled predestination of all effort is, when accessible, an intolerable thought.

We Jews are incapable of polytheism. You gentiles are incapable of monotheism.

Given, in the most explicit terms, the definition of monotheism, which you have tried as sincerely as lies in your power to accept, you still fail to make it your own. If life here is a sport and an heroic epic, the origins of life must be the same. Let the exceptions among you proclaim what they will: I know that the creeds of your masses, as I have heard them expounded from pulpits and in homes, as I have read of them in books and in periodicals, are polytheistic creeds. Of the three-in-one, the three is stressed^ the one is the reluctant concession to the dogma.

For where there is the happy and imaginative gentile spirit there cannot be the complete and unconditional prostration of the individual. This utter breakdown of self which is revealed in our prayers before God, in our feelings towards him, is an experience which you are too proud to share. Most of our prayers are helpless repetitions of our helplessness, the stammerings of a child overwhelmed, overmastered, by contemplation of the supreme Unity. You cannot pray thus: at no time, even in the presence of the gods, do you lose your self-possession, your dignity. You too pray, but your prayers, compared with ours, are requests. Your offers of service to Christ the God are the offers of a vassal to a powerful superior. Our prayers, too, beg something, but requests of ours are folded in an abasement, a humility which would be revolting to you.

Hence it is that you have never, in these many centuries of Christianity, produced utterances like those of the prophets, of Job and of David. Your inspirations come from other sources, not from the one source. Your gods are essentially gods of the world, not of the universe. The universal aspect of divinity, its attributes of infinity and eternity, its omnipotence—these find only your formal acknowledgment: but emotionally you are unfitted to give them the true acknowledgment of complete and almost incoherent abasement. That language is alien to your spirit—the terror of the infinite cannot touch you, the eternal you know as it were by symbol and formula—but not by horrified experience. Your very professions of humility are like proud trumpet-blasts, and all your abasements of royalty, your Hapsburg burial ceremonies and anointings by priests are but artistic flourishes which bring into graceful relief the true soldierliness of your character, I do not remember even having met the exceptions which must exist among you : I do not remember ever having heard a gentile pray with that abandonment, that abjectness, that (as it must seem to you) fulsomeness of homage which characterizes our prayer. Only they who (like us) are broken under the burden of realization of the infinite can pray thus; only they who, in dreams and in waking ecstasies and, above all, in instinct, have been touched with the rage of the Undeniable Power can utter such adoration as ours.

Our very anthropomorphisms reflect the difference in our spirit. With our personified God we hold speech such as you would never hold. When we translate infinite extent into infinite individual power, we shadow forth a Being, charged with an intensity of existence, a concentration of life and force, which you are unable to apprehend, being too free in spirit to attribute to any outside force such untrammelled and unapproachable tyranny. So your gods, too, are playthings, higher powers in the tempestuous game of life. All your mythologies were tales of adventure—for your very gods are not serious. And most fascinating are the tales of those gods which you fashioned when your first brilliant blossoming in Greece started out of your turbulent soil. Who could conceive the mythology of Greece as a product of the Jewish people? That grace, that sunny charm, that adventurousness, that quarrelsomeness—could gods like these ever have sprung from us? The emptiness of life and space and time brought forth out of your free and bounding imagination a host of beings, which you imaged with infinite loveliness in stone. One god for heaven and one for the bowels of earth and one for the sea, and gods for music and tragedy, gods for commerce and for voyaging—was not this a charming game, a game of children? Can any one say that this was a serious and desperate attempt to become, in concept, one with the universal spirit of life?

Compare with this our own first gropings, our own first clumsy expression of the universal spirit which sought utterance in us. Even as an absolute tribal ruler our God was One, was master, a serious God. And out of that God-unity which we felt even in our primitive limitations, grew at last that concept which touched with undying ecstasy the lips of our prophets and cast over the life of the entire people, for all time, the shadow of omnipresence and omnipotence. Even when our God was a jealous God, his jealousy was absolute: he would brook no, homage but to him, no acknowledgment but of him. But the jealousies of your gods were only the jealousies of sport. They did not seek universal mastery and exclusiveness—only superiority. To be *primus inter pares* was the ambition of your gods, with mastery each in his own domain; but our God sought universal dominion in our hearts—such dominion as made all other homage inconceivable.

Your gods gave you loveliness and joy and battle. You liked your gods and served them with alternating loyalties: you pitted one against the other, appealed from one to the other, plotted with one against the other. Your gods were kings and princelings, mightier than you and more splendid. But no god of yours was the King of Kings in your soul. Your gods have never grown up, nor any single one among them. Nor have you grown into your god, but have always remained external, proud and warlike and free, paying homage as of old, but retaining the mastery over yourselves. You do not know of a God who is ALL, a God in whom you are, a God who has reduced you to the dust, to the infinitesimal, in whom you are a breaking foam—a bubble on an infinite sea—it breaks: and it was born and is gone, for ever and ever.

And so, despite occasional exceptions, which I acknowledge freely, the dedication of all life, all being, to God's will and way, is alien to you. You are not naturally steeped in God. You salute him and bring him homage. Your relations with your gods are occasional, even if inevitable: but you cannot compare that with the immanence and intimacy of God-head in Jewish life. God is a common-place experience in Jewish life. He is the tacit continuous miracle of all our days and nights, thoughts and experience.

We cannot conceive of a duality—religion and life, the sacred and the secular. A Jew is a Jew in everything, not merely in prayers and in synagogue. In the eyes of a pietist, a Jew who does not follow the rules and regulations of the synagogue, who even denies all dogma is not a non-Jew: he is a bad Jew, a sinful and rebellious Jew.

In the orthodox world of Jewry, every act and incident is an acknowledged Jewish phenomenon: acknowledged, that is, openly, by prayer. The whole day is saturated with God, or with Jewishness. Our Jewishness is not a creed—it is ourself, our totality.

Indeed, it may be fairly said that the surest evidence of your lack of seriousness in religion is the fact that your religions are not national, that you are not compromised and dedicated, en masse, to the faith. For what value has God for you if you do not surrender to him, even formally, all your gifts and faculties, all your skill and emotion? This is an amazing duality of allegiance: one is an Englishman first—and then a Christian 1 An American first, and then a Baptist! Your most generous loyalties, your readiest sacrifices, are inspired by your nationalism. Your faculties are national: you claim, "This is typically American." "This is typically British." "This is typically French." You cut this off at once from God, and the best of yourselves you withhold from him.

But in the Jew, nation and people and faculties and culture and God are all one. We do not say: "I am a Jew/" meaning, "I am a member of this nationality": the feeling in the Jew, even In the free-thinking Jew like myself, is that to be one with his people is to be

thereby admitted to the power of enjoying the infinite. I might say, of ourselves: "We and God grew up together."

To have built up a great nation, millions of human beings —schools, armies, art galleries, books, legislatures, theaters, immense newspapers— is not this the all in all of national achievement, the best and strongest in you? —to have done this without your god as the central ideal. Is that taking your religion seriously? No: any nation that takes its religion seriously is a nation of priests.

You will tell me that such things have been among you, that you have had national religions, national gods. I do not believe it: I have certainly seen no evidence in any record which has come to my attention. For we must distinguish between a patron or tutelary god and a national god. The first is an especially assigned power. The second is the complete reflex of the people, a god who is born with the people, who is its *raison d'etre*, without whom the people would not have come into national existence. You have had patron or appropriated gods: we have a national God. In the heart of any pious Jew, God is a Jew. Is your God an Englishman or an American?

There is no real contradiction between this confessed anthropomorphism and my claim that we Jews alone understand and feel the universality of God. In anthropomorphism we merely symbolize God: we reduce the infinite, temporarily, to tangible proportions: we make it accessible to daily reference. For neither we nor you can carry on the business of ordinary living on the plane of constant abstraction. It is not because of your anthropomorphism that I accuse your religious feelings of being trivial. It is because of the manner of your anthropomorphism, it is because of what your anthropomorphism produces.

And thus, by natural reaction, we in our anthropomorphism are all the more personal because in our abstraction we are truly abstract. Because we alone are dedicated to the infinite, our God, when anthropomorphized, is our own God. I might say that there is no Jew who does not believe in God. The free-thinking Jews, the agnostic or atheistic Jew like myself, simply does not anthropomorphize him. In his religious emotions the atheist Jew is as different from the atheist gentile as the confessing Jew from the confessing gentile-Christian.

For if gods are the rationalized explanation of religious emotions they differ in acceptance and denial even as these emotions differ. And of course by "religious" emotions we only mean one aspect of all emotions. Your emotions, your life-reactions differ fundamentally from ours—why, I cannot tell. But as in morality you are freer, sporting and variegated, so your gods are many, varied and manly. And our gloomy and merciless monotheism, intolerant in abstraction and in personification, is the eternal enemy of your gods.

Chapter4: Utopia

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