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BIANCHI, U.
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UGO BIANCHI

The Ideal Foundations of Greek Cosmogonical Thought

The conceptual evolution of myth and mythology was a unique phenomenon in the history of Greece. The ancient poets recounted myths translating them into *logoi*; they made them make sense in a particular situation and with a particular purpose. One outstanding occasion for narrating myths and ordering them in a coherent whole was theogony, the most ancient form of Greek theology. Writing a theogony in epic hexameters meant at the same time to recount the history of the race of the gods through their successive generations, and to recount the origins of the world, a world in which the setting of humanity was rather peripheral. It meant also to interpret the order according to which, step by step, the world and the family of the gods had been established in their actual shape, as a conclusion of a long lasting series of internal clashes and the final apportionment of new destinies and privileges, by the hands of Zeus, the new ruler of universe¹, to the new gods and also to those, among the old ones, who had survived the dangers of eviction (like the venerable goddess Hekate)².

As we have said, theogony was the first theology of the Greeks. The ancient poets who recounted it were named *theologoi* through all periods of Greek history. Most of them were credited with a great antiquity, also implying their personal proximity to the gods. On the other hand, their authority did not impede problems and criticism concerning their discourse about gods and universe.

We are in a condition to distinguish, among those ancient *theologoi* who wrote in epic hexameters, two categories: those who were epic poets *simpliciter*, first of all Hesiod, the author of the famous poem entitled *Theogony*, in the VII century b.C., and others, whose poems had been put under the name of Orpheus, the legendary singer of Thracia.

We will revert to this distinction. What now matters, is to emphasize the general pattern of the theogonic poems of archaic Greece. They were based on the concept that the gods and the universe as they actually stand had been put into existence as a consequence of an innate movement upwards starting from some primordial, elementary foundations and ending in the actual situation of stability and order³.

If we try to analyze the structure of the most archaic theogony of Greece, the *Theogony* of Hesiod⁴, we discover in it two main criteria, which may be symbolized by a transversal line oriented upwards. The different genealogies of the gods are ordained according to the principle of a chronological succession of generations. This criterion is combined with another, differentiating typologically the various entities or deities included in the system. Thus, a figure like Ouranos, God 'Heaven', can be considered from two points of view: he is the father of Kronos, his successor, and the grand-father of Zeus, the actual ruler of universe; he is a primordial entity, who is characterized by

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such negative qualities as brutality, egoism, uncontrolled sexual activity, and who opposes any change in the totalizing hierogamic structure constituted by the generating couple he forms with Gaia, Mother Earth. Thus he does not hesitate to repress in the womb of his spouse the sons he continuously generates from her. We visualized this situation through a transversal line: the generations of gods follow themselves according to the normal law of procreation; but at the same time the line, not being vertical, marks a kind of typological displacement or disparity between its opposite extremities, Ouranos and Zeus, which is not merely a difference in age, in the order of generations, but also a difference in character; a difference which amounts to a clearcut opposition between a primordial entity which is chaotic, elemental, materially incompatible with any form of evolution and progress, and an entity destined to represent the supreme manifestation of order and justice. On the other hand these are not considered – if we credit for this the interpretation of Aeschylus in his 'Prometheus bound' – as totally inborn qualities of Zeus, but a final acquisition of his, beyond a long series of clashes with the old gods. As for Kronos, he occupies a middle place in the structure. He opposes and mutilates his father Ouranos, but he continues his brutal policy, swallowing his sons, which causes Zeus, the youngest among them, to eliminate him in his turn.

It is superfluous to remark how much this structure of Hesiod's theogony corresponds to other theogonic mythologies of the ancient Mediterranean world. So, for example, the Babylonian epic of creation, Enûma elish, in which the most ancient masculine entity, Apsu, the Abyss, recalls for an aspect Ouranos⁵. He is an 'immobilist', elemental entity who tries to eliminate his offspring, the young gods for their improper conduct, but is eliminated by the wisest of these, Ea, whilst the son of Ea, Marduk, the god of Babylon, vanquishes Tiamat, Apsu's wife, who had tried to avenge her husband (whose homici-

dal intentions she had previously condemned). But a more proximate correspondent of the Greek myth of the Ouranids is given by the Hurrian and Hittite myth of Kumarbi, the 'Hurrian Kronos'⁶. This personage eliminates Anu, the god of Heaven, castrating him, much the same offence that Kronos inflicts on Ouranos, but he is eliminated in his turn by the weather god (Teshub in Hittite), who, like the Greek Zeus, is the ruler of the world as it stands presently.

As can be seen, in this kind of theogony the theme of violence is implicit, on the part of the old gods, who are also elemental *archai* (principles), against the new gods, who are more explicitly personal agencies. In other words, *chaos* is against *kosmos*, the indifferently and primordial against the differentiate and supreme. This violence calls for another violence, the reaction of the new gods, which results in the elimination of the ancient ones. These, in accordance with their elemental character, are reduced to 'things', the 'elements' of the new universe. Ouranos is reduced to 'heaven', the abode and the floor of the celestial gods⁷; Apsu is reduced to 'abyss', where Ea situates his abode, his nuptial room, where he generates with his wife Damkina the great god Marduk. Marduk will rescue the young gods from the menace of the monstrous comrades of Tiamat, and take from the most terrible among them, Kingu, the tablets of destiny.

But two further characteristics of this kind of mythology are to be emphasized. First of all, the primordial entities are not deprived, even after their defeat, of an aura of sacrality, which is intrinsic in them. Apsu, the Abyss, remains characteristically 'pure', the receptacle of wisdom and magic power, even if these attributes are in a sense inherited by Ea, who vanquished him. As for Ouranos, he somehow continues to hold the capacity of a prophet, as we shall see. The same holds true for the Hurrian god Heaven, who prophesies to Kumarbi his vanquisher the destiny to which he will be subjected in his turn, by the hands of the weather god, the final heir of

divine power⁸.

Now, this notion of a lasting sacrality of the primordial entities, mostly reduced to elements and to abodes for the young gods, and particularly their lasting prophetic capacity, are also important from another point of view. Prophesying, as they do, the future events of the race of the gods, they implicitly emphasize the coherence of the whole story in which they participate as protagonists and victims. This is a paradox, in a sense. But another, more astonishing paradox is found in the myth of the Uranids. Namely, just as the events concerning Kronos and Zeus are prophesied by Ouranos (and Gaia, Mother Earth)⁹, so the events concerning Ouranos and Kronos are attributed to the 'will' and the disposition (*boulè*) of Zeus, a Zeus – we must remark – that had not yet been generated by Kronos¹⁰. This is more than *licentia poetica* and stereotypical phrase. This means that the providential will of Zeus, which is commonplace in the world of today, is projected in the past; it is conceived as already ruling the diachronical series of events concerning his divine predecessors¹¹. *Inter alia*, this paradox contributes to emphasize – not less than the prophetic knowledge of Ouranos – the coherence of the whole story, which is meant to express a unitary structure, in which the later events are entangled with the former, in a series which 'makes sense'. This implies prophecy and divine will and providence, be it only in the context of an ascending, 'evolutionary' series of divine characters, among which the capacities of a prophet and a providential will are pertinently 'distributed'.

So much for the theogony of Hesiod, in the context of what we call the 'Olympian' religion of Greece, in contradistinction, as we shall see, to its mystic, and particularly the mysteriosophic religion.

Let us only add a word, concerning Hesiod and the Olympian religion. In Hesiod's theogony, according to the upwards oriented structure of the system, Zeus, the diadoque of the race of the Olympians and the actual

ruler of universe, is necessarily depicted as the youngest among his brothers, whom he rescues from the belly of Kronos; – whilst in Homer, another example of Olympian religion, but not primarily interested in theogony, Zeus is heavenly patriarch, the oldest among his brothers: Poseidon, the god of waters, and Hades, the god of the Nether World, among which the rule of the universe was distributed¹².

Things being so, we can understand that the basic scheme of Olympian theology, as far as the actual setting of universe is concerned, is horizontal, in the sense that the abodes of the gods are transcendent and parallel in relation to abodes of living men. Gods, being in heaven or in the Nether World, transcend equally these, as well as those gods – gods of mountains, springs or woods – who apparently belong to the same level of men, but *de facto* transcend them, being situated in inaccessible and mysterious spots. This horizontal scheme, not less than its theogonic prehistory, is typical of Greek polytheism. Gods are ranged at different, topographical levels, side by side, according to their 'departmental' capacities. Notwithstanding the special position of Zeus, there is no question here of God, but of gods (an exception among others: the Zeus of Aeschylus, Agamemnon vv. 160–178); there is no question of man, but preeminently of human categories, Greeks and barbarians, free men and slaves, nobles and commoners; there is no question of Destiny, but of destinies. Conceivably, there is no question of communication (structural, not episodic) between divine and human along a vertical line, a way downwards and a way onwards, as it will be possible for mystic, particularly mysteriosophic religion¹³, and for the 'new theology' which will be treated in the last part of this presentation.

But let us pass on to an interesting part of mysteriosophic religion, the Orphic theogonies. As we have already hinted, whilst Olympian religion implies a clearcut dis-

inction, indeed opposition in character between gods and men and their respective destinies and privileges, mystic religion implies an interference, or rather an intermingling between the two levels. This is particularly evident in mysteries (Orphism), particularly engaged in a metaphysical speculation concerning Oneness and Multiplicity, and in a dualistic anthropology, implying the divine or celestial nature of soul, imprisoned in a mortal body and destined to be rescued from it¹⁴.

A first character of Orphic theogonies¹⁵ is common to them and to the 'Olympian' Theogony of Hesiod. Both are founded on the notion of an ascending and evolutionary process, symbolized by a transversal line. This process starts – in the Orphic theogonies – with chaotic, material (or anyway generating) entities such as Night or Chronos ('Time') and culminates in the universe as it presents itself today, unfolded in its main constituents, Heaven, Earth and Sea.

But there are substantial differences with Hesiod's Theogony. The primordial beings of Orphic theogony, as it may be seen from the most ancient evidence of these, the vv. 690–702 of a comedy of Aristophanes, 'The Birds', are not so concrete and corporeal as Mother Earth and, after her, Father Heaven were in Hesiod. The first, generating entity in the Orphic theogony of Aristophanes¹⁶ is Mother Night, accompanied by three characters (Chaos, the dark Erebus and Tartarus) who share in the obscure emptiness of Night. But the difference increases and becomes decisive if we consider the second stage. This is represented in the Orphic theogony of Aristophanes, as well as other Orphic theogonies, not by a violent Kronos, but by a cosmic Egg (here called *hypemion*, 'full of wind', void?), which, paradoxically enough, is generated by female Night in the womb of the neuter Erebus. The Orphic notion of the cosmic Egg – clearly utilized by Aristophanes for the sake of his comedy, whose choral protagonists are the Birds – expresses a mythological theme

spread in quite a lot of cosmogonies all around the world, from Phoenicia to India, Carelia and Polynesia¹⁷. Apart from the novelty of implying a kind of procreation different from that of the mammals, i.e. a less anthropomorphic mythical motif than that of Ouranos and Gaia, – a kind of procreation more adequate to a speculative cosmogony –, the Orphic Egg is also new insofar as it expresses the notion of an implicit totality, which awaits to be unfolded in the different elements of the universe, brought to its actual shape. This happens when the Egg gives birth to a young Demiurge, called Eros, 'Love', by Aristophanes¹⁸, and Phanes, 'the splendid One', and Protogonos, 'the first born', in other sources¹⁹. With the manifestation of this Demiurge – as other parallel sources put it – all different parts of the universe come into light, i.e., into formal existence, first of all heaven and earth, from the two halves of the egg's shell²⁰.

The outstanding importance for the history of Greek theology of this kind of Orphic theogony and cosmogony cannot be overrated. The old, Olympian and polytheistic structure of theogony, though not devoid, as we have seen, of some 'unitaristic' implications, is decidedly transcended. The Orphic notion of a unity-totality²¹, be it only on the level of the implicit, is far from crude pantheism. We can better speak of 'theopantism'²², that is, a conception according to which the Deity penetrates the world and at the same time transcends it. This appears clearly from a fragment of tragedy of Aeschylus, the 'Heliads'. The Athenian poet mentions here a notion of Zeus who, at variance with other references to the same god in the other tragedies, is clearly Orphic and theopantistic in character: 'Zeus is the *aether*, Zeus is Earth, Zeus is Heaven, Zeus is all-things, and what transcends them'²³; a conception similar, in one respect, to an Indian theopantistic formulation concerning Purusha, the primordial Male Person: 'a quarter of him are all the beings, three quarters of him are the Immortal in heaven'²⁴ (something similar is said

about Prajapati, the other divine-cosmic character of Vedic religion)²⁵. The theopantistic trend of Orphic speculation is seen in another kind of theological and cosmological speculation. It is a famous verse, which was part of a poem, the first allusion to which is found in a passage of Plato (*Leges* IV, 715 e)²⁶, whilst the first quotations from it are found in the recently discovered Papyrus of Derveni²⁷ and in the treatise *de mundo* attributed to Aristotle (7, p. 401 a 25)²⁸: 'Zeus (is) the beginning (*archè*), Zeus is the middle (*mesa*), out of Zeus all things are made' (so *ap. Schol. Plat., Leg. p. 451*)²⁹. In the text of Plato *ho theos*, 'God', is substituted for Zeus, and *teleutè*, 'conclusion', corresponds to *archè*.

The theological formulation of this Orphic verse transcends theogony and expresses a new theology, speaking not only of an implicit unity and totality of both the divine and the cosmic, but emphasizing a divine unity and totality *in actu*, still in a conception which is theopantistic. According to this, one and the same God subsumes in himself and transcends the three stages of becoming. Another text expressing the Orphic concern for the Oneness and totality was attributed to the legendary Musaeus: 'All things are derived from the One, and all things return to It'³⁰, a formulation not perfectly equivalent to the preceding one, given its cyclical (dynamic, dialectical) implication, an implication which does not omit to emphasize the ontological superiority of the One; something not dissimilar from the speculation of the Sicilian Orphic Empedocles.

Let us comment now on two fundamental texts, of Aristotle and Plato, expressing more clearly than Orphism and Empedocles a theological novelty, with completely transcends the far-fetched genre of theogony.

In his *Metaphysics*, XIII, IV 1091 ab, Aristotle remarks that the ancient poets, that is the writers of theogonies, Hesiod and the Orphics, distinguished sharply between those entities which were conceived as primordial (*protai*) – such as Night, or

Ouranos, or Chaos, or Okeanos – and Zeus, the supreme ruler of universe. Then he proceeds to ask himself which is the relationship between what is 'perfect' (*to agathon kai to kalon*) and what is elemental and primordial (*ta stoicheia* and *hai archai*). He remarks that not only the old poets and *theologoi*, but also some *theologoi* of his own age admitted that the perfection of being manifests itself only through a process of becoming. Finally, he remarks that this incompatibility between what is primordial and what is supreme does not derive from a difficulty to conceive innate goodness and perfection as proper to what is absolutely primordial; it derives rather from the difficulty to conceive Oneness as a First Principle, particularly if the Principle (*archè*) is conceived as an element (e.g., water, or fire, etc.). In other words, according to Aristotle, a decisive step in theology will only be made once the *theologos* is prepared to abandon the old speculations of the *physiologoi* – the 'philosophers of nature' like a Thales – and of the authors of theogonies, both of them positing an element (or an elementary entity) as the first beginning of a developing universe, and to substitute for them a new notion, that of a First Principle in which Beginning and Oneness perfectly coincide: a Principle which is at the same time First and Supreme. Doing so, Aristotle would contend, theology and *philosophia prima* (i.e. metaphysics) will coincide. A position, we may add, that transcends by far the Orphic theopantism of the cosmic Egg and of Zeus being *archè*, *mesa* and *telos* (beginning, middle and fulfilment), a theopantism which seems to be middle way between the Aristotelian *motor immobilis* and the 'god' of the Stoics being *anima mundi* in the sense of fiery spirit penetrating the universe. Only the Neopythagoreans and Neoplatonists will rescue Orphic theology and theogony from its theopantistic implications, interpreting them in the sense of Platonic dualism (the noetic vs. the sensible and corporeal).

Another fundamental text for the new theology of the Greeks is Plato, *Republic* II 379 a. He expresses himself concerning the proper models (*typoi*) of any legitimate discourse about God (*theologia*). The model consists in this, that God (*ho theos*, that is, God in the absolute, as emphasized by the article *ho*) must always be represented as he really is, also by the poets. Now, God is essentially good (*agathos... toi onti*) and for this reason he cannot be considered as a universal cause extending its effects indiscriminately to good and evil. For this reason the poems of Homer must in Plato's view be kept away from the young – that Homer who dares to represent Zeus apportioning good and evil unto mankind from two mythical pits. Only when it is a question of apparent evil, e.g. of punishments inflicted to culprits for pedagogical reasons, can we say that God inflicts them.

It is clear that we are faced here with a theology which is a theodicy, that is, as Leibnitz who introduced this term defines it, a reflection 'on the goodness of God, the liberty of man and the origins of evil'³¹. Thus, the text of Plato is (without anachronism) complementary to that of Aristotle.

The latter considers the problem from the point of view of metaphysics, Plato (in this text) from the point of view of morals, as applied to the notion of God. One basic presupposition is common to both: we cannot relativize the notion of the Deity and his perfection. According to both, God is not placed at the end of a developing universe, nor does he constitute the very core of this, but he occupies the summit of a vertical line which is open downwards. In Platonic terms, God is 'innocent' (*anaitios*) of evil; this comes into existence only at an inferior level, that of souls, corporeity and matter. All Platonic speculation (the medio-Platonists such as Plutarch and Numenius) and all speculation owing to Platonism (Hermetism, gnosticism, Philo of Alexandria, and within certain limits Origen) will dwell on the modalities of this fact, and the relative height, in that vertical line, at which the origin of evil should be located. But this is another topic. Suffice it here to have commented on that rotation of 90 degrees in the theological horizon of ancient Greece, from the old theogonies down to the theodicy of Plato and the Platonists and their dualistic ontology.

NOTES

¹ Hesiod, *Theogony* (= Th.), 881–885, cfr. 504.

² Th. 411 ff., cfr. 418 ff. and 441 ff.

³ Bianchi 1953, 137–191.

⁴ Cfr. note 3.

⁵ Pritchard 1969, 60–72.

⁶ Güterbock 1946. Otten 1950. Pritchard 1969, 120 f.

⁷ Th. 128.

⁸ See note 6.

⁹ Th. 464 and 475, cfr. 210.

¹⁰ Th. 465.

¹¹ Bianchi 1953, 138 f.

¹² Bianchi 1953, 139 and 149 f.

¹³ As for the meaning of the words 'mystic' and 'mysteriosophic' in the context of the present research, see Bianchi 1976, 2 ff., 6 ff. and Bianchi 1978, 159 ff., 187 ff.

¹⁴ As for 'Orphism', see Bianchi 1978, 187–195.

¹⁵ For the relevant fragments, see Kern 1922, pp. 80 ff., 130 ff.

¹⁶ Kern 1922, frg. 1.

¹⁷ Bianchi 1953, 174, 176, 180, 182 and Bianchi 1958, 207–210. Staudacher 1942. Numazawa 1946. See also Lukas 1893 and 1894.

¹⁸ See note 16.

¹⁹ Kern 1922, frgg. 54 and 56.

²⁰ See e.g. the Mithraic-Orphic relief in Modena: Vermaseren 1956, vol. I, nos. 695 f., fig. 197.

²¹ According to the 'Orphic' Musaeus, 'all is generated from the One, and (all) resolves itself in It' (Dionigenes Laertius, Proem. 3). Cfr. also the 'one form' (*morphe mia*) wherefrom the different elements of the world (Heaven, Earth, and the Ocean) derive through a process of mutual separation. This process may be viewed according to the different sources as positive or negative: see, respectively, Euripides frg. 484 N.² and Apollonios Rhodios, *Argonautika* I 496 ff. (Kern 1922, frg. 29).

²² This term was introduced – in relation to Indian materials – by Scharbau 1932.

²³ Frg. 70 Nauck².

²⁴ In the hymn to the Purusha, *Rigveda* X 90. Cfr. Bianchi 1960, 69.

²⁵ Bianchi 1960, 68.

²⁶ Kern 1922, frg. 21.

²⁷ Merkelbach 1967, 21–32.

²⁸ Kern 1922, frg. 21 a.

²⁹ Kern 1922, frg. 21.

³⁰ Kern 1922, frg. 21.

³¹ Leibniz 1710.