The Archaic Belief in Name

This is a preliminary to the study of name-mysticism or that form of mysticism which is essentially related with the faith in the holy name. By the term "archaic belief in name" the present writer means that kind of belief in name which had been prevalent in ancient times and is still alive in the existing uncivilized societies, as distinguished in the way of thinking from the modern conception of name. There is hardly any doubt that such belief is taking on some important role in forms of name-mysticism, such as mysticism of Nembutsu in Buddhism, Mantra-yoga in Hinduism, Dhikr in Mohammedanism, Philokalia in the Eastern Church, etc.

The present article is divided into three parts: 1) its traits; 2) its origin; 3) its implication.

1) After a cross-cultural survey of the archaic belief and praxis in relation to name, the present writer puts the traits of the belief in the way of thinking as follows: (1) The name participates in the substance of its bearer. Consequently, the control of some name means the control of its bearer himself. (2) The name itself is an independent power and existence. Its power and existence are mostly derived from the bearer himself, but sometimes they are derived from the giver of the name. (3) The name needs to be kept in secret in order that it may be kept in its powerfulness.

2) The problem of the origin of such belief is beyond the reach of the historical investigation, because its origin is assumed to lie in the prehistoric past. It can only be discussed relatively, that is, in relation with some primordial experience or primordial cultural creations of early man, such as ritual, magic, religion or language. The present writer calls attention to the following two theories that deal with this problem in this way. According to Preuss, Vierkandt, Marrett and others, the origin of the archaic belief in name may be traced in the stage of magic in which oral or bodily expressions of some intense emotion, hitherto merely subjective, begin to bear magical power. Another theory by Usener and Cassirer holds
that name itself has appeared as an immediate objectification of "mythico-religious" experience and as such equivalent to the "momentary god" as Usener calls it. Otto's theory of the "original sound" and "original term" may be situated on the same line.

3) On the one hand, the archaic belief in name is most likely inseparable from the above-mentioned anonymous, mythico-religious experience. On the other, if the essential function of language through which only man is enabled to see realities symbolically and thus control them is taken into consideration, it will hardly be denied that the archaic belief involves a dim awareness of such essential function of language in it. This two-sidedness of the archaic belief should be borne in mind in the investigation of forms of faith in the holy name and name-mysticism in higher religions.

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