

## THE GREEK IDEA OF SIN

BY ALEXANDER KADISON

IT IS not one of the least tragic consequences of theology that its distinctive marks are often left upon those who are supposed to have become emancipated from its influence. Among other of its concomitants, the myth-making tendency is seldom entirely absent as a factor in militant Rationalism. And one of the myths of popular Freethought—a myth which scholarly Freethinkers might well disdain to use as a weapon against Christianity—is embodied in the naive belief that the idea of sin was virtually non-existent in ancient Greece. To me, for one, it comes as something of a mental shock to find so able and eminent a critic as William Archer giving currency to this piece of mythology, which, in point of historical accuracy, is about on a par with, say, the ecclesiastical version of the part played by Freethinkers in the French Revolution.

There was recently published, in the London *Literary Guide*, an article by Mr. Archer, entitled, "The Superstition of 'Sin'." In this article, after quoting another writer's assertion that, "For Christianity the crigin and seat of moral evil lies in the will, whereas for the Greek it lay in the intellect," and then somebody else's assertion that, "The very word for sin meant originally 'a missing of the mark'," Mr. Archer goes on to say:

"Oh, what a wise people the Greeks were! And what a reversion to barbarism is the whole Judæo-Christian ethic! One may wonder, indeed, whether the words quoted do not slightly flatter the Greeks—whether some tinge of the irrational, theological conception of wrong-doing did not now and then creep into their thinking. In the main, however, there is no doubt that the superstition of 'sin' which has garkened the minds of men for twenty centuries, and fatally impeded the evolution of a sane morality, is of Hebraic origin."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Literary Guide* (London), April, 1924.

The suggestion that possibly "some tinge" of the irrational idea of sin may "now and then" have "crept" into the thinking of the Greeks, is what, in our colorful American slang, would be termed "rich." Anybody who is familiar with the history of religion ought to know that the idea of sin was neither of Hebraic nor of Hellenic origin, but was common to all ancient religions, just as it is common to all religions today. And anybody who is versed in ancient Greek literature knows that, so far from having been free from the "superstition of "sin," the Greeks were as much dominated and obsessed by it as any other people of antiquity, barring none. Though we have inherited some romantic notions about "the glory that was Greece," it was precisely in that much-lauded land that the sin-idea prevailed in its cruelest, most barbarous, and least rational form. For the Greeks, generally speaking, did *not* regard the intellect as the origin and seat of moral evil; for them the seat of moral evil lay in the proscribed act itself, and the origin of moral evil lay in the ineluctable decrees of the capricious gods.

Turn to Homer, Hesiod, or Sophocles, to Pindar, Aeschylus, or Solon, and it will almost instantly become evident that the conception of sin pervaded the Greek consciousness—and not in the sense of a mere "missing of the mark," but in the more oppressive sense of any conduct (whether of omission or of commission) that was offensive to the deathless gods. Furthermore, whereas in Judæo-Christianity sinful behavior—actual sin, as distinguished from innate depravity, *i. e.*, original sin—is conceived of as conscious and voluntary, the Greeks believed that sin could be committed not only knowingly and wilfully, but even involuntarily and unconsciously. Indeed, whenever any person was the victim of signal misfortune, it was inferred that he must have sinned grievously against the supra-human powers; and whenever any dire calamity befell a city or a state, it was taken for granted that some citizen must have been guilty of a monstrous sin crying to a wrathful heaven for expiation.

Since a national literature mirrors the thought, the temper, and the superstitions of a people, it is not without significance that the most poignant of the immortal Greek tragedies revolves wholly about the idea of sin—sin unwittingly committed, yet most cruelly atoned for. In the *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles, King Oedipus sins against the gods entirely without his knowledge. His conduct, in fact, is but the fulfillment of divine prophecies made before his birth. Nevertheless, his sins must be expiated just as completely as if they had been conscious and deliberate. So Oedipus, brought after years

of ignorance to a realization of the enormity of his wickedness, is crushed beneath the weight of the soothsayer's revelation. He loses his beloved Jocasta and, in the frenzy of his grief, puts out his eyes. Then, after a heartrending farewell to his children, the blinded, utterly humbled ruler—viewed as a plague-spot which has to be eradicated—is driven from his polluted kingdom.

Need we consider in detail the *Ajax* of Sophocles? Or the *Hippolytus* of Euripides? Or his *Iphigenia at Aulis*? Need we refer to the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle? But why go on? Even the most cursory inspection of Greek literature makes it all-too-clear that the nightmare of sin lay like an incubus upon ancient Greek religion no less than upon the religion of Judæa or upon Christianity.

"Oh," exclaims Mr. Archer in the passage that I have quoted, "what a wise people the Greeks were!" But Athens was the pearl and pride of Greece; yet was it not by a jury of enlightened Athenians that Socrates—a Theist with pronounced Agnostic leanings—was found guilty of Atheism and condemned to drink the hemlock? Had Mr. Archer and I been fellow-citizens of Socrates, we too—Agnostics both—should have had to quench our thirst for truth with that fatal beverage.

In our zeal for the propagation of Freethought, it behooves those of us who call ourselves Rationalists to examine our evidence very critically and, as far as possible, to avoid the intellectual sin of overstating our case. While we carry on the good fight against the old religions with their myths and their dogmas, let us take care not to evolve a new religion with an inverted dogmatism and a mythology of its own.