

## THE NATURE OF PAGANISM

OF late years there have been signs of a considerable change in the study of comparative religion, in so far as it affects the origins of the Faith and its relations with the Pagan religions contemporary with its earliest period. Not so long ago it was almost assumed as a commonplace fact among scholars that the application of the Comparative Method to the religions of the Roman Empire had disposed of Catholic Christianity's claim to uniqueness; and on the Catholic side the study of Comparative Religion was generally regarded with suspicion and distrust. Plenty of examples of the first attitude could still be found, especially in the works of the older contemporary scholars; but on the whole students of Comparative Religion who concern themselves primarily with the Mediterranean world are becoming more and more disposed to admit the uniqueness of Christianity. Works like W. R. Halliday's *Pagan Background of Early Christianity*, Guthrie's *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (though the authors' very occasional expressions of their personal views on Christianity sometimes seem rather naïve compared with the rest of their work), and Nock's admirable *Conversion* are all examples of this tendency in the work of non-Catholic scholars. And on the Catholic side a really scholarly interest in Comparative Religion is growing up, as is exemplified in the new series of C.T.S. pamphlets on the subject and in many other works. This interest is only part of the general modern tendency among Catholics to pay more attention to that element in non-Catholic religion which is positively good and therefore Catholic, and not to contemplate so exclusively as sometimes in the past the negative element which makes it pagan or heretical.

It seems, therefore, that this is an appropriate moment for some sort of summing up of the relations between Christianity and Paganism from the Catholic point of view and in the light of modern research into the pagan religions. Such a summary must be Catholic, or at least must show a profound and accurate appreciation of Catholic Christianity;

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and it must also contemplate Paganism with sympathy, detachment and a scholarly accuracy. I propose to give, however inadequately, a sketch of the form which such a summary might take, and above all to try to arrive at a definition of religious Paganism, *i.e.* of "paganism" in the sense in which the word can be applied to a definite religion and not in that in which it is so often used in these days as a general term of abuse for any aspect of materialism. This enquiry is not merely of historical interest, for religious Paganism has never been extinct in Europe. It is emerging to-day more clearly than ever both without and, more tragically, within the body of professing Christians, as perhaps the greatest enemy with which the historic Faith has to contend.

What is it, then, which makes us feel, when we pass from the religion of Mithras to the religion of Christ, from the cult of Isis to the veneration of Our Lady, that we have passed into a different world of thought? The greatest similarity is found in the externals of the two faiths, superficially considered. This is natural enough, for, as Halliday has pointed out, the number of religious symbols which appeal universally to men is very limited. Christianity had to express itself in forms that could be understood by those to whom it was preached, in its liturgy and iconography as well as in its language and philosophy. Furthermore those who regard Catholicism as pagan have this much right on their side. Except for the extremer forms of Protestantism and the teaching of a few non-Catholic mystics, blinded by the immensity of their experience to all else, practically all religion has two principles in common. The first is that the Power manifesting itself in the universe can and does communicate its living reality to men through the agency of specific material things (and does not merely make itself intellectually or emotionally perceptible through the material universe as a whole). An inversion of this principle, that by the use of material things man can compel the Power to do what he wants, is the basis of magic. The second is that a man can best impart his knowledge about the Power to other men, or make it for himself the focus of his adoration,

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and can most appropriately worship the Power, through the use of material things—symbolic shapes, pictures, statues, gestures, movements, lights, incense, music. In the worship of the more spiritual religions, the articulate human word, the material expression of the discursive intellect, plays an important part, but it never excludes worship by means of material objects, never becomes, as in Protestantism, the sole material link between God and man.

So much, then, for the similarities between Catholic Christianity and Paganism. But it should be obvious that our consideration of them has not got us very far. For the really important thing about any religion, that which makes the difference, both in theory and practice, to its theology and its way of life, is its conception of the Power behind the universe and of His relation to it and to man. This is the only basis for an adequate differentiation of religion from religion, and indeed of religion from magic. When we look at Christianity and paganism from this point of view we can see the fundamental difference between them even in their externals. Take iconography for example. The central image in a Catholic Church is the crucifix. In a Mithraic cave sanctuary it was Mithras killing the bull. Superficial comparisons have been drawn between the two, but what do they really signify? The Mithraic scene represents a Cosmic act. It takes place in some dim region before the beginning of the world we know. It is a magic act designed to produce fertility. From the blood and seed of the bull proceed all living things. Mithras is a cosmic force, part of the organism of the universe, with no personality apart from his functions as bull killer, as intermediary between Ormuzd and Ahriman, as the Power who brings his initiates through the terrible spheres of the stars to the happy world above them. The crucifix, on the contrary, represents a definite historical occurrence, the putting to death by a perfectly commonplace method of execution, at a precisely stated moment of time, during the term of office of the minor Roman governor Pontius Pilate, of a man, an individual Jew. It further implies that this man was also God, not in the sense of a cosmic force or even the cosmos as a whole, but a free self-

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subsistent Being outside the cosmos, with a reality independent of it or of the performance of any function. And while Mithras or Isis or Attis or the old Olympians have no existence or importance apart from the performance of their functions, or the playing of their parts in some magical drama, the crucifixion, in itself an ordinary occurrence, derives its importance from the Being Who suffered it. Mithras is important because he killed the bull, Isis because she collected and revived the scattered members of Osiris. But the Crucifixion is important because it was Christ Who was crucified.

The same difference may be noticed in the attitude of the mystery religions and of Christianity to their respective efficacious rites, or, using the word very loosely, "sacraments." Again the immanentist character of Paganism shows itself, and the functional character of the pagan Gods. The "sacrament," blood bath, lustration, or ritual meal, was not necessarily regarded as magical. Certainly they were originally acts of magic, automatic appropriations of a Power without any question of its consent, or of its being the sort of thing that could consent. The Neo-platonist philosophers who supplied Paganism with an official theology also took the magical view. Even Plotinus believed all intercessory prayer to be magical. He makes this clear in the great treatise of the Fourth *Ennead* entitled "Questions concerning the soul." But, as far as we can tell (our information about the attitude of the average devotee of the mystery religions is remarkably scanty), there was a religious devotion to the mystery Gods, and presumably therefore a religious attitude to their rites alongside of and confused with magical beliefs. This is best attested for the cult of Isis, both by inscriptions and by our most important literary source, the end of the "Metamorphoses" of Apuleius. But I think the predominance of the magical attitude is made clear by its complete triumph in Neo-Platonist theology. In any case the rite was thought of as the laying hold of a Power immanent in the cosmos and only important in virtue of a definite function, whether that function was the giving of fertility to the crops or of immortality to the soul. It was

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never the free co-operation of the will of man with the will of a free transcendent extra-cosmic God through some material means, which is the Christian sacrament. One result of the Pagan conception was the custom of initiation into many mysteries or more than once into the same mystery. (The effect of the first reception of the taurobolium, or bath of bull's blood, was supposed to wear off after a fixed period of time.) The object of the initiate was to get as many powers, or as much of one power, into him as possible.

It would be possible to illustrate this difference in very great detail. It could be shown to underlie the remarkably casual development of the Christian liturgy as contrasted with the desperate seriousness with which every detail of the Pagan rites was taken. One could perhaps trace it in the profound adaptations made by the Church in what it took from the common stock of religious symbolism, so that it is now widely agreed to be impossible to demonstrate the direct borrowing of the most important Catholic rites or ceremonies from paganism. It might be shown how many of the great heresies, all the earliest ones, were attempts to paganize Christianity, to bring it into conformity with the spirit of the age. It might be shown to be the basic reason why the mystery groups became small and rather exclusive cliques, admission into which was often an expensive business, while Christians regarded it as their duty to preach salvation to all men under heaven. This leads on to another difference which it will perhaps be worth while to try to relate in rather more detail to the fundamental difference in religious conceptions under discussion, since it is often pointed out as the most striking difference between Christianity and Paganism. This is that Paganism, apart from the Orphic Sectaries, had ritual, regarded as of vital importance, but no doctrine (till the Neo-platonist philosophers and their revered oracle-mongers provided it with one), but in Christianity the doctrine was of primary importance and the fundamentally very simple ritual followed from it. The reason for the difference is clear. For the Pagan, aspiring only to lay hold of a cosmic power,

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the all-important thing was to discover through what means the power would consent, or could be forced, to work. Such Pagan revelations as claimed to exist consisted largely of information of this sort. But the aim of the Christian is to bring his own free personality, his intelligence and will, into right relationship with the intellect and will of a free cosmos-transcending God, and consequently Revelation, the knowledge of what God is, how He regards the universe, and what He requires of man, is of central importance to him.

We can define, therefore, with some degree of accuracy, the difference between Christianity and the type of Paganism current at the beginning of the Christian era. It turns on the conception of God. The pagan god is essentially immanent, part of the workings of the Cosmos, functional, primarily a Power and only secondarily (and rather for the myth-maker than the worshipper) a person. By "functional" I mean that the pagan god has for his worshippers no existence apart from the performance of some special activity. The divine name and cult-attributes form a complex symbol of some principle of action in things, or sometimes of the group-life in a human society. This last form of religious Paganism, particularly significant for us to-day, is found, I think, wherever a god is worshipped as the tutelary deity of this or that city; but especially in the Hellenistic cults of the Fortune of a city or state and in Roman emperor worship (which often took the form of the joint cult of Rome and Augustus). This is true not only of the popular polytheist religions but also of nearly all the great Greek religious philosophies. The Stoics identify God and the cosmos (though there was always an unconscious struggle in Stoicism towards a more transcendent conception of God). Plotinus, on whose foundation the later Neo-platonists built, often with little understanding of their master, is, in spite of inconsistencies, profoundly monistic. It is the inner universe that is important for him, the world of the self that is identical with the underlying reality of the cosmos. The One is both core of the self and supreme principle of reality. The mystical union is not the unification by love of the soul with God, from whom it nevertheless remains distinct, but the realization of a pre-

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existing identity. "Thou wert the All, but something else other than the All was added unto thee and thou art become less by the addition."

The pagan gods, whether of the popular religion or of the philosophers, were not necessarily conceived of as immanent in the cosmos or any part of it; but they are always bound to it, never free. They are either subject to its laws, impersonal Necessity or Fate, or at least by its external co-existence, inseparably and organically connected to it. They have no meaning apart from the cosmos or their function in it. Take the corn from Demeter, or the Bull, the mystery ritual and the giving of immortality from Mithras, or the cosmos from the stoic Zeus, and nothing remains. Plotinus in his treatise *Against the Gnostics* says that the Good would not be the Good if it did not eternally produce the next stage below it in the hierarchy of Being. But the concept of the Christian God and all concepts of God deriving from the Old Testament are independent of His cosmic function. We can think of God the Father apart from the creation, of God the Son apart from the Incarnation, and conceive them free, rich in the plenitude of being, adorable, though the world had never been created or redeemed. God for the Christian is free of the cosmos. He brings it into being and enters into relations with it of His own free will. Pagan religion is essentially cosmocentric, Christian theocentric. This is why the question of the eternity of the world was of cardinal importance in the struggle between Christianity and paganism.

It is possible that my classification may be felt to be too sweeping. In an article of this length it is impossible to indulge in documented and detailed discussion of individual questions, even important ones, or to make all the exceptions and reservations necessary in a full-length study of the subject. I do not at all wish to deny that, just as a pagan attitude of mind could and can be found among Catholics, so a close approximation at least to the Christian concept of God sometimes appeared among the pagans of the Mediterranean civilizations. Both phenomena are often to be found in unexpected places. But it does seem that underlying the

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whole vast amorphous collection of religions other than Christianity, Judaism and Islam, there was a common conception bafflingly indefinite and unformulated in its manifestations which I have been trying to isolate. I believe also that this conception persisted through the Middle Ages in the background of Western thought, began to revive at the Renaissance and the Reformation and is one of the dominant factors in the religious situation to-day. The world outside the Church is by no means crudely materialist. It is often deeply religious. But its religion is becoming more and more pagan and not Christian, though it may be in any stage of transition from Christianity to Paganism. Whenever a divine power in humanity or in any part of it, or in nature as a whole, is substituted for the transcendent God of Christian orthodoxy, and whenever the perfect expression of that immanent power in an earthly state replaces the attainment of the soul to the vision of God, then we have Paganism in an extreme form, remoter from Christianity than that of the mystery religions. All conceptions of an evolving God, a God who is himself involved in the cosmic process or to whom the world is necessary, are a return to the Pagan cosmocentrism. And whenever a corporate or individual sense of the divine within is set in the place of the Revelation and authority of traditional Christianity we are well on the way to Paganism. It is this revival of religious Paganism which makes particularly valuable the study of its older forms with which the early Church had to contend, and especially of the Pagan religious revival of the later Empire and its neo-platonic theology in which Paganism becomes formulated and self-conscious. For by this study we shall not only arrive at an historical perception of the uniqueness of the Faith, but at a clear conception of its perennial and most formidable enemy.

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