

## CATHOLICISM AND MYTH

"IT is to be held as an article of faith," wrote Pope Pius IX, "that outside the apostolic Roman Church no man can be saved, for it is the sole ark of salvation."<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, we find in the same pronouncement, we are to hold with equal certainty "that those who are afflicted by ignorance of the true religion, provided that ignorance is invincible, are not accounted in any way guilty by God on that account."

The Church's language is that of paradox. Her decrees, her definitions, sketch out supernatural cosmic realities in huge, generous, sweeping outlines. There is little refinement, distinction, qualification. The faith-lit mind is trusted to press on behind these symbols to the grand totalities symbolized. Thus the Church guards us against seizing the relative sign for the absolute thing, the letter for the Divine Word, representing for us infinitesimal fragments of the integral reality to be believed and loved.

And the total thing which harmonizes, the supernatural reality beyond these seemingly conflicting utterances of a Pope? *It is the Mystical Body of Christ*. As all that is vivified by the presence of the soul of a man is truly his body, even the ends of his fingers and the roots of his hair, so all men supernaturally driven to love God, by the breath of the infinite Spirit, who is the soul of the Church, are truly constitutive elements, members, of Christ's Mystical Body. And as we cannot discover ultimately the exact boundary where the human soul no more informs, vivifies, a man's living body, and beyond which it fringes off into dead matter, like the enamel of the teeth or the blood that is spilt, so too we cannot know the self-imposed limitations of the Holy Spirit who breathes where He wills. All we know is that outside the body, beyond the ambit ringed by the soul, by the Spirit, there is death. Within is life. *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus. Ubi ecclesia ibi Christus. Sed ubi?* We know

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 1647.

where He *is*, but where He is *not* we do not know at all. He is the yeast active, yet *hidden*, in the meal.

And hence the Church's deep cosmic vision of her vocation; of silent, all-penetrating, divine love in unlimited redemptive activity, of unending care and reverence for men, in Christ, however distant from His visible sacramental contacts, however dimly illuminated by the Church's manifest light.

It is a vision erasing all gnostic pokiness from our own sacramental life. Our communions become an unstinting reaching out into the hearts of all men of good-will, of all loving human creatures, that they may be drawn, that we may be drawn, with them, together in Christ, closer into supernatural union, through the whole world, in thought, perception, sensibilities; Eucharistic union becomes the way to world-transformation, the vital germ in the leaven of Christ, permeating mankind from within, imperceptibly, little by little, other-worldlily.

But there is a warning to be made, a true relative evaluation of the elements of this vision to be remembered. A vision putting all men of good-will, all the higher religions, on a complete *equality* with Christianity, is false. It is not only untrue theologically. It is evidently untrue historically and empirically. The pagan religions are unequal in value even among themselves. And they compare only feebly, dimly, with the fulness of the religious sensibility of Christianity. Their myths, their symbolic rites, and their sacrifices, are but inadequate shadows of the Church's realities in their revealed richness and intrinsic efficacy—the Incarnation, Baptism, the Eucharist, the Mystical Body. There is something to be said, it is true, for putting Mithraic sacraments on a *symbolically* equal footing with Christian eucharistic *symbolism*. But, apart from the substantial objectivity of the latter, where is the all-pervading, all-necessary, golden background of the hero and the priest, in his concrete Personality, in the Mithraic mysteries? How compare Christ with Mithra? With Orpheus, Dionysus, Attis, Marsyas, or Odin? We cannot. They are almost entirely

mythic. He is real. They are phantasies projected from the human unconscious—from beneath. He is divine, with an hypnotic fascination, God-given—from above.

Although we need accept no more than perhaps the substance of his theory, Jung has shown, from the data of comparative religion, correlated psychologically, that Mithraism represented the purest and deepest of the mystery religions, with its unconscious psychic power for lifting up human nature, towards a permanent vision and grasp of high moral and religious ideals and activities. He compares and contrasts the hero-rôle of Mithra with the legends of Marduk and Tiâmat, Rahab, Leviathan in his maternal rôle, Nun in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, and the Talmudic myth of Adam and Lilith the Lamia. On a higher plane he compares the death of Balder, slain by the mistletoe; of Osiris, by Sêth; of Apaosha, the black horse, by Tishtriyâ, the white horse (this time the hero), in the Persian song. The heroic theme ultimately underlying all of them, more or less dimly, is the Christian "Those who have overcome shall attain the crown of eternal life."

But with Mithra the symbolic sacrifice is nearly perfect, a holocaust. He has conquered his animal nature (the bull). The animal knows no incest prohibition. Man is man because he conquers the incest wish of the untransformed "*libido*,"<sup>2</sup> the animal nature. Thus Mithra has sacrificed his animal

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<sup>2</sup> I.e. *the total psychic drive, or torrent of energy, of the whole being.* "*Libido*" does not mean merely sexual energy for Jung. We are using it in Jung's sense, not in Freud's. Cf. *Analytical Psychology*, pp. 156, 288 and 347: "I postulate a hypothetical fundamental striving which I designate *libido*. This energy may also be designated as *horme* . . . force, attack, press, impetuosity, violence, urgency, zeal." The metaphysical principle underlying Jung's concept is that of *finality*. Cf. his *Psychology of the Unconscious*, p. 42: "The people of the age of Nero had grown ripe for identification with the *Logos* 'become flesh' for the founding of a new fellowship, united by one idea, in the name of which people could love each other and call each other brothers. . . . The meaning of this cults—I speak of Christianity and Mithraism—is clear; it is a moral restraint of animal impulses. The dynamic appearance of both religions betrays something of that enormous feeling of redemption which animated the first disciples and which we to-day scarcely know how to appreciate, for these old truths are empty to us. Most certainly we should still understand it, had our customs even a breath of ancient brutality, for we can hardly realize in this day the whirlwinds of the unchained *libido*

## BLACKFRIARS

nature, the incest *wish* (or, if the universal applicability of the *Œdipus* doctrine of Jung is not acceptable, animal-biassed passions, *concupiscentia*, in general), and with *that* has overcome the "terrible, death-bringing, Mother." The ethical and religious worth of the symbolism is appreciated if we compare the more primitive Gilgamesh epic. Gilgamesh conquers Ishtar herself, not the wish for Ishtar<sup>3</sup>: here is the primitive phantasy of *overpowering*. In Mithra it gives place to *the ideal of renunciation, the sacrifice of the wish*. This doctrine of infinitely greater ethical and religious worth, unknown to those archaic myths (represented by Gilgamesh, Marduk, and so on), and inchoately glimpsed in those more advanced archaic forms (Osiris crucified, Odin hanged on the tree, Mexican vernal crucifixions), is here in Mithraism purified, clarified, once the symbolism is understood. Symbolically imperfect when compared with these legends of the hanged, the crucified, god, it yet attains a strangely effective psychic form and purificatory power for its initiates.

Nevertheless, "This important change expressed in the Mithraic mystery finds its full expression for the first time in the symbol of the crucified God. A bleeding human sacrifice was hung on the tree of life for Adam's sins. The first-born sacrifices its life . . . hanging on the branch, a disgraceful and painful death, a mode of death which belongs to the most ignominious forms of execution, which Roman antiquity had reserved for only the lowest criminal. Thus the hero dies, as if he had committed the most shameful crime; he does this by returning into the birth-giving branch of the tree of life, at the same time paying for his guilt with the pangs of death. The animal nature is repressed most powerfully in this deed of the highest courage and the greatest renunciation; therefore, a greater salvation is to be expected for humanity,

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which roared through the ancient Rome of the Caesars. The civilized man of the present day seems very far removed from that. He has become merely neurotic. The elementary emotions of the *libido* have come to be unknown to us, for they are carried on in the unconscious: therefore the belief that combats them has become hollow and empty."

<sup>3</sup> But even here is a vague anticipation of the Mithraic ideal, in the renunciation of the terrible Ishtar by the hero.

because such a deed alone seems appropriate to expiate Adam's guilt."<sup>4</sup>

Jung compares the "typical" (but not necessarily literally prophetic) Germanic tree-sacrifices (e.g. Odin), the Mexican sacrifice to Centeotls (on "the tree of our life or flesh"), and the effigy of Osiris from Philae, crucified and wept over by Isis and Nephthys, the sister consort.<sup>5</sup> Analysis of the meaning of the universal *crux ansata* of antiquity would draw us deep into its psychic content, its relation to the needs of man's unconscious striving towards a balanced tension between heroism and desire, between his willing his final purpose and his delighting in the means to that final purpose. It is sufficient to point out its universality, its remarkable appearance again and again throughout the mystery cults of nearly all the peoples of antiquity.

All these are dim, inchoate stirrings towards the ultimate religious expression of Christianity, rich, perfect, final, God-given, manifesting the divine wisdom who knows how to drive the confused and wandering torrents of the soul's desires into integral unity, delicately interlocking the structure of supernatural revelation with the tragic pattern of man's passion-swept imagination and animal nature, with its infantile symbolisms and pathetic half-glimpsed yearnings for Christ. They are mythic types. He is historic, real—just as the sacramental mysteries of those cults were foreshadowings, misty gropings towards an extension of, a participation in, the heroic renunciation of the divinity, for the community, and their liturgies found perfect objectivization in the Christian sacraments, in the Eucharist.

However much truth these archaic systems held, Christianity possesses it all. Mithra is *part* renunciation. Odin is *total* renunciation *half-glimpsed*:

I know that I hung on the windswept tree  
 Nine nights through,  
 Wounded by a spear, dedicated to Odin  
 I myself to myself.

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<sup>4</sup> Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, p. 162.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Max Müller, *Egyptian Mythology*, pp. 122, 123.

## BLACKFRIARS

Christ is total renunciation, fully conscious, wilfully achieved, historically redemptive. Mithraic liturgy, Orphic liturgy, are *phantastic* identifications of the community of the initiate. The Eucharist is full, self-conscious, real identification of the total community, all mankind. All become heroes, victims with Christ. "Bread and wine are the body and the blood of Christ; the food of the immortals who are brothers with Christ, ἀδελφοί, those who come from the same womb. We who are reborn again from the mother are all heroes together with Christ, and enjoy immortal food . . . a mysterious union of man in a spiritual sense."<sup>6</sup> "The cup is the receptacle, the maternal womb, of the god resurrected in the wine; the cup is the cavern where the serpent dwells (cf. the mixing of the water in the cup, symbol of human nature, transformed, offered, redeemed."<sup>7</sup> And cf. the slain bull of Mithra), the god who sheds his skin, in the state of metamorphosis; for Christ is also the serpent (St. John iii, 14)."<sup>8</sup> Such is the cosmic symbolism of "the cup of the blood of Christ." It is not only the community of all men, in Christ substantially present, as co-victims with him. It is the community and intermingling of the thought, the manifold symbolic expressions, the dim, unconscious strivings, of all the religions of mankind. And it is their term, their objective realization, and their purest utterance.

Hence it will remain untrue to say it makes no *difference*, whether a man be a Catholic, or a Buddhist, or any other kind of pagan. He can be saved, can attain holiness, if he is a Buddhist. But the thing is achieved through Christ alone. And it is only in the full, self-conscious communion of the Mystical Body of Christ—the Catholic Church—that the fullness of grace is to be received, the perfect sacrifice of a pure will to be offered up, in full knowledge, in and with and through Christ.

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<sup>6</sup> Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, p. 226.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Summa Theologia*, IIIa, p. 74, a. 6. "Cum in calice vino aqua miscetur, Christo populus adunatur." Note the gentle concession to the *archaic* mysteries, in the *mother* symbolism.

<sup>8</sup> *Psychology of the Unconscious*, *ibid.*

For "nothing of all this means that these various religions are equally true (or false), and that it does not matter to which you belong (provided only you are in good faith). No: in these deepest and most delicate of all matters, even a little more light, more power, more reality—even what "looks" a "little"—means, and is very, profoundly much. It all only means that nowhere does God leave Himself without *some* witness, and without *some* capacity on the part of the soul (always more or less costingly) to respond to and to execute this His witness. And, again, that everywhere the means and the process are from fidelity to the light already possessed (yet often difficult to see owing to the agitations and cowardice of the soul), to further light, which again, in its turn, demands a delicate, difficult fidelity and fresh sacrifices. Yet with each such fidelity and sacrifice, the peace, the power, the joy, the humble fruitfulness of the soul grow. Always it is a search for expansion and happiness, found in acts gently costly and increasingly exacting."<sup>9</sup>

This perfect fulfilment is perhaps seen best in the deepest source of the Church's life—the Liturgy. The supreme mastery of the Liturgy over what may be termed the material dispositive elements of our faith and our religious activity, is very vividly realized by correlation with those pagan pre-Christian sources out of which much of it was born. The idea of a single realized vision in communion, of cyclic representation and identity—*participation*—is especially seen in the Orphic mysteries, and in the Orphic and Dionysiac "liturgies."<sup>10</sup> It is the power and continuity of symbolic and sacramental worship—this principle of identity through "mimetic" representation: the heroic tragedy "represented" and shared.

We catch up and echo back the distant voices and incantations of all peoples, when we live consciously in the Liturgical cycle as it revolves in wisdom and strength, uniting

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<sup>9</sup> Von Hügel, *Letters to a Niece*, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to compare the archaic background of "mimetic" dances of ancestral communion, in Frazer, *Golden Bough*, vii, pp. 378-383.

## BLACKFRIARS

ourselves with Christ, as other Christs, in His Birth and Life and Death and Resurrection, in His every word and thought, emotion, passion, wish, and action, as it comes uppermost and flashes forth from the vast spiritual wheel of the Church's prayer, to depart, when divine wisdom and the prudence of ages sees fit, giving place to the next—Advent giving place to Christmas, Christmas to Lent, Holy Week to Paschal Time, Paschal Time to Pentecost—each with its details of delicate spiritual colouring, sound, and pattern, prayer and psalm, hymn and versicle, lesson, responsory, and canticle. And above all, dominating and vivifying all, the living action of the Mass, in itself and in its extension throughout the day, in all our human actions and relations, offered to God together with Christ. *Co-victims with Him, we "sacrifice the wish"—even our wills.*

The revealed gifts of God are built deep into the psychic needs of fallen men. In this they are supreme among the religions of mankind, giving to these their true orientation and their efficacy. For, "nothing of all this means that these various religions are equally true (or false), and that it does not matter to which you belong. . . . Always it is a search for expansion and happiness, found in acts gently costly and increasingly exacting."

NORBERT DREWITT, O.P.