

SURVIVALS AND CAMOUFLAGES OF MYTHS

CHRISTIANITY AND MYTHOLOGY

The relations between Christianity and mythical thought can hardly be presented in a few pages. For the fact is that their relations raise several quite separate problems. First of all, there is the equivocal use of the term "myth." The earliest Christian theologians took the word in the sense that had become current some centuries earlier in the Greco-Roman world, i.e., "fable, fiction, lie." They therefore refused to see a "mythical" figure in Jesus and a "myth" in the Messianic drama. From the second century on, Christian theologians had to defend the historicity of Jesus against the Docetists and the Gnostics as well as against the pagan philosophers. We shall presently see the arguments they employed to support their thesis and the difficulties they had to meet.

The second problem is in some measure bound up with the first. It does not impugn the historicity of Jesus but questions

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Survivals and Camouflages of Myths

the validity of the literary documents that illustrate it. Origen was already aware how difficult it is to prove a historical event with incontrovertible documents. In our day a Rudolf Bultmann, though he does not doubt the historical existence of Jesus, insists that we can know nothing about his life and character. This methodological position assumes that the Gospels and other primitive documents are full of "mythological elements" (taking myth, of course, to mean "what cannot exist"). It is beyond doubt that "mythological elements" abound in the Gospels. In addition, symbols, Figures and rituals of Jewish or Mediterranean origin were early assimilated by Christianity. We shall later see the significance of this twofold process of "Judaization" and "paganization" of primitive Christianity.

We may add for the moment that the vast number of symbols and elements that Christianity shares with solar cults and Mystery religions has prompted some scholars to deny the historicity of Jesus. They have taken the position opposite to Bultmann's. Instead of postulating, at the beginning of Christianity, a historical person of whom we can know nothing because of the "mythology" with which he was soon overlaid, these scholars have postulated a "myth" that was imperfectly "historicized" by the earliest generations of Christians. To mention only the moderns, from Arthur Drews (1909) and Peter Jensen (1906, 1909) to P.-L. Couchoud (1924) scholars of sundry orientations and sundry degrees of competence have laboriously attempted to reconstruct the "original myth" which they hold to have given birth to the figure of Christ and finally to Christianity. This "original myth," be it said, varies from author to author. A fascinating study could be made of these at once scholarly and daring reconstructions. They betray a certain nostalgia in modern man for the "primordially mythical". (In the case of P.-L. Couchoud the exaltation of the non-historicity of myth at the expense of the poverty of the historically concrete is glaringly obvious). But none of these non-historical hypotheses has been accepted by the specialists.

Finally there is a third problem that arises when one studies the relations between mythical thought and Christianity. It can be stated as follows: If Christians have refused to see in their religion the desacralized *mythos* of the Hellenistic period, what

is the situation of Christianity in respect to the *living myth*, as known in the archaic and traditional societies? We shall see that Christianity as understood and practiced during the nearly two thousand years of its history cannot be completely separated from mythical thinking.

HISTORY AND "ENIGMAS" IN THE GOSPELS

Let us now see how the Fathers attempted to defend the historicity of Jesus both against pagan unbelievers and against "heretics." Faced with the problem of presenting the authentic life of Jesus, that is, his life as it was known and orally transmitted by the Apostles, the theologians of the primitive Church found themselves confronting a certain number of texts and oral traditions circulating in different milieux. The Fathers displayed both critical faculty and "historicistic" leanings by refusing to accept the apocryphal Gospels and the "unwritten sayings" as authentic documents. However, they opened the way to long controversies within the Church, and facilitated attacks on the part of non-Christians, by accepting not one Gospel but four. Since differences existed between the synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John, they had to be explained, and justified, by exegesis.

The exegetical crisis was precipitated by Marcion, in 137. Marcion proclaimed that there was only one authentic Gospel, orally transmitted in the beginning, then written down and sedulously interpolated by enthusiastic partisans of Judaism. Actually this "only valid" Gospel was Luke's, reduced by Marcion to what he considered the authentic kernel.¹ Marcion had used the method of the Greco-Roman grammarians, who claimed to be able to separate the mythological excrescences from antique theological texts. In defending themselves against Marcion and the other Gnostics, the orthodox were forced to employ the same method.

At the beginning of the second century Aelius Theon, in his *Progymnasmata*, showed the difference between myth and narrative; the myth is "a false account portraying truth," whereas

¹ For what follows, see Robert M. Grant, *The Earliest Lives of Jesus* (New York, 1961), pp. 10 ff.

Survivals and Camouflages of Myths

the narrative is "an account descriptive of events which took place or might have taken place."² The Christian theologians, of course, denied that the Gospels were "myths" or "wonder stories." Justin, for example, could not believe that there was any danger of confusing the Gospels with "wonder stories:" on the one hand, the life of Jesus was the accomplishment of the Old Testament prophecies and, on the other, the literary form of the Gospels was not that of myth. More than this: Justin held that the non-Christian reader could be given material proofs of the historical truth of the Gospels. The Nativity, for example, could be proved by the "tax declarations submitted under the procurator Quirinus and (*ex hypothesi?*) available at Rome a century later."³ So too, a Tatian or a Clement of Alexandria considered the Gospels historical documents.

But for our purpose the greatest importance attaches to Origen. For, on the one hand, Origen was too convinced of the spiritual value of the stories preserved by the Gospels to admit that they could be taken in a crudely literal sense, as simple believers and heretics took them—and for this reason he was a partisan of allegorical exegesis. But on the other hand, when he was forced to defend Christianity against Celsus, he insisted on the historicity of the life of Jesus and attempted to substantiate all the historical testimonies. Origen criticizes and rejects the historicity of the cleansing of the Temple. "In Origen's systematic treatment of inspiration and exegesis he tells us that where spiritual truths did not correspond to historical events, 'the scripture wove into the historical narrative what did not take place—at some points what cannot take place and at others what can take place but did not.'"⁴ Instead of "myth" and "fiction," he uses "enigma" and "parable;" but there is no doubt that for Origen the terms are equivalent.⁵

² Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 15. On Theon, see *ibid.*, pp. 39 ff. Cf. also *The Letter and the Spirit* (London, 1957), pp. 120 ff., and Jean Pépin, *Mythe et Allégorie. Les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes* (Paris, 1958).

³ R. M. Grant, *The Earliest Lives*, p. 21.

⁴ Origen, *De principiis* 4, 2, 9, cited by Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁵ Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

Origen, then, admits that the Gospels contain episodes that are not "authentic" historically though they are "true" on the spiritual plane. But in answering Celsus' criticisms, he also admits the difficulty of proving the historicity of a historical event. "An attempt to substantiate the truth of almost any story as historical fact, even if the story is true, and to produce complete certainty about it, is one of the most difficult tasks and in some cases impossible."⁶

Origen believes, however, that certain events in the life of Jesus are adequately substantiated by historical testimonies. For example, Jesus was crucified in the presence of a crowd of people. The earthquake and the darkness can be confirmed by the historical narrative of Phlegon of Tralles.⁷ The Last Supper is a historical event that can be dated with absolute precision.⁸ So is the ordeal in Gethsemane, though the Gospel of John does not mention it (but Origen explains the reason for this silence: John is more concerned with the divinity of Jesus and he knows that God the Logos cannot be tempted). The resurrection is "true" in the historical sense of the word, because it is an event, even though the resurrected body no longer belonged to the physical world. (The resurrected body was made of air and was spiritual.)⁹

Though he does not doubt the historicity of the life, passion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Origen is more concerned with the spiritual, non-historical meaning of the Gospel text. The true meaning is "beyond history."¹⁰ The exegetist must be able to "free himself from the historical materials," for these are only a "stepping-stone." To overstress the historicity of Jesus and neglect the deeper meaning of his life and message is, in fact, to mutilate Christianity. "People marvel at Jesus," he writes in his *Com-*

⁶ *Contra Celsum*, I, 42, cited by Grant, p. 71.

⁷ *Contra Celsum*, II, 56-59, Grant, p. 75.

⁸ Cf. Grant, p. 93.

⁹ Cf. Grant, p. 78.

¹⁰ See R. M. Grant, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-116, and Jean Daniélou, *Message évangélique et culture hellénistique aux II^e et III^e siècles* (Paris, 1961), pp. 251 ff.

Survivals and Camouflages of Myths

mentary one the Gospel of John, "when they look into the history about him, but they no longer believe when the deeper meaning is disclosed to them; instead, they suppose it to be false."¹¹

HISTORICAL TIME AND LITURGICAL TIME

Origen rightly understood that the originality of Christianity lies above all in the fact that the Incarnation took place in a historical Time and not in cosmic Time. But neither does he forget that the Mystery of the Incarnation cannot be reduced to its historicity. Besides, by proclaiming the divinity of Jesus Christ "to the nations," the earliest Christian generations implicitly proclaimed his trans-historicity. This did not mean that Jesus was not a historical figure, but the emphasis was put primarily on the fact that he was the Son of God, the universal Saviour who had redeemed not only Man but Nature too. Nay, more—the historicity of Jesus had already been transcended by his ascension to Heaven and by the fact that he had returned into the divine Glory.

In proclaiming the Incarnation, Resurrection, and Ascension of the Word, the Christians were sure that they were not putting forth a new myth. Actually, they were employing the categories of mythical thought. Obviously they could not recognize this mythical thought in the desacralized mythologies of the pagan scholars who were their contemporaries. But it is clear that for Christians of all creeds the center of religious life is constituted by the drama of Jesus Christ. Although played out in History, this drama first established the possibility of salvation; hence there is only one way to gain salvation—to reiterate this exemplary drama ritually and to imitate the supreme model revealed by the life and teaching of Jesus. Now, this type of religious behavior is bound up with genuine mythical thought.

It must at once be added that, *by the very fact that it is a religion*, Christianity had to keep at least one mythical aspect—liturgical Time, that is, the periodical recovery of the *illud tempus* of the "beginnings." "The religious experience of the Christian is based upon an *imitation* of the Christ as *exemplary pattern*,

¹¹ *Commentary on John*, 20, 30, cited by Grant, p. 116.

upon the liturgical repetition of the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord, and upon the *contemporaneity* of the Christian with *illud tempus* which begins with the Nativity at Bethlehem and ends, provisionally, with the Ascension." Now, "the imitation of a transhuman model, the repetition of an exemplary scenario and the breakaway from profane time through a moment which opens out into the Great Time, are the essential marks of 'mythical behaviour'—that is, the behaviour of the man of the archaic societies, who finds the very source of his existence in the myth."¹²

However, though liturgical Time is a circular time, Christianity, as faithful heir of Judaism, accepts the linear Time of History: the world was created only once and will have only one end; the Incarnation took place only once, in historical Time, and there will be only one Judgment. From the very first, Christianity was subjected to various and conflicting influences, especially those from Gnosticism, Judaism, and "paganism." The Church's reaction was not always the same. The Fathers fought relentlessly against the acosmism and esotericism of the Gnosis; yet they kept the Gnostic elements found in the Gospel of John, in the Pauline Epistles, and in certain primitive texts. But, despite persecutions, Gnosticism was never wholly extirpated, and certain Gnostic myths, in more or less camouflaged form, reappeared in the oral and written literatures of the Middle Ages.

As for Judaism, it gave the Church not only an allegorical method of interpreting the Scriptures, but, most importantly, the outstanding model for "historicizing" the festivals and symbols of the cosmic religion. The "Judaization" of primitive Christianity is equivalent to its "historicization," that is, to the decision of the first theologians to connect the history of Jesus' preaching and of the earliest Church to the Sacred History of the people of Israel. But Judaism had "historicized" a certain number of seasonal festivals and cosmic symbols by connecting them with important events in the history of Israel (cf. the Feast of Tabernacles, Passover, the Hanukkah Feast of Lights, etc.). The Church Fathers took the same course: they "Christianized"

¹² M. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, pp. 30-31. See also Allan W. Watts, *Myth and Ritual in Christianity* (London and New York, 1953); Olivier Clément, *Transfigurer le Temps* (Neuchâtel-Paris, 1959).

Survivals and Camouflages of Myths

Asiatic and Mediterranean rites and myths by connecting them with a "sacred history." Obviously, this "sacred history" exceeded the bounds of the Old Testament and now included the New Testament, the preaching of the Apostles, and, later, the history of the saints. A certain number of cosmic symbols—Water, the Tree and the Vine, the plow and the axe, the ship, the chariot, etc.—had already been assimilated by Judaism,¹³ and they could easily be incorporated into the doctrine and practice of the Church by being given a sacramental or ecclesiastical meaning.

"COSMIC CHRISTIANITY"

The real difficulties arose later, when the Christian missionaries were faced, especially in Central and Western Europe, by *living* popular religions. Willy-nilly, they ended by "Christianizing" the "pagan" divine figures and myths that resisted extirpation. A large number of dragon-slaying gods or heroes became Saint Georges; storm gods were transformed into Saint Eliases; the countless fertility goddesses were assimilated to the Virgin or to female Saints. It could even be said that a part of the popular religion of pre-Christian Europe survived, either camouflaged or transformed, in the feasts of the Church calendar and in the cult of the Saints. For more than ten centuries the Church was obliged to fight the continual influx of "pagan" elements—that is, elements belonging to the cosmic religion—into Christian practices and legends. The success of this intensive struggle was not very great, especially in the South and Southeast of Europe. In the folklore and religious practices of the rural populations at the end of the nineteenth century there still survived figures, myths, and rituals of the highest antiquity, or even from proto-history.¹⁴

The Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches have been

¹³ Cf. Erwin Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, vols. VII-VIII: *Pagan Symbols in Judaism* (New York, 1958); Jean Daniélou, *Les symboles chrétiens primitifs* (Paris, 1961).

¹⁴ Leopold Schmidt has shown that the agricultural folklore of Central Europe contains mythological and ritual elements that had vanished from classic Greek mythology even before the times of Homer and Hesiod; cf. L. Schmidt, *Gestaltbeiligkeit im bäuerlichen Arbeitsmythos* (Vienna, 1952), especially pp. 136 ff.

criticized for accepting so many pagan elements. It is a question if these criticisms were always justified. On the one hand, "paganism" could survive only in "Christianized" form, even if at times the Christianization was rather superficial. This policy of assimilating the "paganism" that could not be destroyed was nothing new; the primitive Church had already accepted and assimilated a large part of the pre-Christian sacred calendar. On the other hand, the peasants, because of their own mode of existing in the Cosmos, were not attracted by a "historical" and moral Christianity. The religious experience peculiar to the rural populations was nourished by what could be called a "cosmic Christianity." In other words, the peasants of Europe understood Christianity as a cosmic liturgy. The Christological mystery also involved the destiny of the Cosmos. "All Nature sighs, awaiting the Resurrection" is a central motif not only in the Easter liturgy but also in the religious folklore of Eastern Christianity. Mystical empathy with the cosmic rhythms, which was violently attacked by the Old Testament Prophets and barely tolerated by the Church, is central to the religions of rural populations, especially in Southeastern Europe. For this whole section of Christendom "Nature" is not the world of sin but the work of God. After the Incarnation, the World had been re-established in its original glory; this is why Christ and the Church had been imbued with so many cosmic symbols. In the religious folklore of Southeastern Europe the sacraments sanctify Nature too.

For the peasants of Eastern Europe this in no sense implied a "paganization" of Christianity, but, on the contrary, a "Christianization" of the religion of their ancestors. When the time comes for the history of this "popular theology" to be written on the evidence that can be traced in seasonal festivals and religious folklores, it will be realized that "cosmic Christianity" is not a new form of paganism nor a Pagan-Christian syncretism. Rather it is an original religious creation, in which eschatology and soteriology are given cosmic dimension. Even more significantly, Christ, while remaining the Pantocrator, comes down to Earth and visits the peasants, just as, in the myths of archaic peoples, the Supreme Being was wont to do before he became a *deus otiosus*; this Christ is not "historical," since popular thought is interested neither in chronology nor in the accuracy

Survivals and Camouflages of Myths

of events and the authenticity of historical figures. This does not mean that, for the rural populations, Christ is only a "god" inherited from the old polytheisms. For, on the one hand, there is no contradiction between the Christ image of the Gospels and the Church and the Christ image of religious folklore. The nativity, the teaching of Jesus, and his miracles, the crucifixion and the resurrection are essential themes in this popular Christianity. On the other hand, it is a *Christian spirit*—not a pagan spirit—that impregnates all these folklore creations; they tell of man's salvation by Christ; of faith, hope, and charity; of a World that is "good" because it was created by God the Father and redeemed by the Son; of a human existence that will not be repeated and that is not without meaning; man is free to choose good or evil, but he will not be judged solely by that choice.

It does not lie within the scope of this article to outline this "popular theology." But it is obvious that the cosmic Christianity of the rural populations is dominated by nostalgia for a Nature sanctified by the presence of Jesus. It is, in some way, a nostalgia for Paradise, the desire to find again a transfigured and invulnerable Nature, safe from the cataclysms brought by wars, devastation, and conquests. It is also the expression of the "ideal" of these agricultural societies, constantly terrorized by allogeneous warrior hordes and exploited by the various classes of more or less autochthonous "masters." It is a passive revolt against the tragedy and injustice of History, in the last analysis against the fact that evil proves to be no longer only an individual decision but, increasingly, a transpersonal structure of the historical world.

But to return to our theme, it is clear that this popular Christianity has kept alive certain categories of mythical thought even down to our day.

ESCHATOLOGICAL MYTHOLOGIES OF THE MIDDLE AGES

In the Middle Ages we witness an upwelling of mythical thought. All the social classes depend on their mythological traditions. Knights, artisans, clerks, peasants, accept an "origin myth" for their condition and endeavor to imitate an exemplary model. These mythologies have various origins. The Arthurian cycle

and the Grail theme incorporate, under a varnish of Christianity, a number of Celtic beliefs, especially those having to do with the Other World. The knights try to follow the example of Lancelot or Parsifal. The trouvères elaborate a whole mythology of woman and Love, making use of Christian elements but going beyond or contradicting Church doctrine.

It is especially in certain historical movements of the Middle Ages that we find the most typical manifestations of mythical thought. Millennialist exaltation and eschatological myths come to the fore in the Crusades, in the movements of a Tanchelm and an Eudes de l'Etoile, in the elevation of Frederick II to the rank of Messiah, and in many other collective messianic, utopian, and prerevolutionary phenomena, which have been brilliantly treated by Norman Cohn in his *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. To dwell for a moment on the mythological aureole of Frederick II: the imperial chancellor, Pier delle Vigne, presents his master as a cosmic Saviour; the whole world was awaiting such a cosmocrator, and now the flames of evil are extinguished, swords are beaten into plowshares, peace, justice and security are firmly installed. "More than all this—Frederick possesses a unique virtue which binds the elements of the universe together, reconciling heat with cold, the solid with the liquid, all opposites with one another. He is a cosmic messiah whom land and sea and air unite in adoring. And his coming is a work of divine providence; for the world was sinking toward its end, the Last Judgment was already at hand, when God in his great mercy granted a reprieve and sent this pure ruler to make an age of peace and order and harmony in the Last Days. That these phrases fairly reflected Frederick's own view is shown by the letter which he addressed to his birthplace, Jesi near Ancona; for there he makes it quite clear that he regards his own birth as an event possessing the same significance for mankind as the birth of Christ and Jesi as a second Bethlehem. Probably alone among medieval monarchs, Frederick believed himself to be divine in virtue not of his office but of his inborn nature—nothing less than incarnate God."¹⁵

¹⁵ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, p. 104. On the messianic claims of Frederick II, cf. E. Kantorowitz, *Frederick the Second, 1194-1250* (English trans., London, 1931), pp. 450 ff., 511 ff.; N. Cohn, pp. 103 ff.

Survivals and Camouflages of Myths

The mythology of Frederick II did not disappear with his death, for the simple reason that his death could not be believed: the Emperor must have retired to a distant country, or, according to the most popular legend, he was sleeping under Mount Aetna. But one day he would wake again and return to claim his throne. And in fact, thirty-four years after his death an impostor was able to convince the city of Neuss that he was Frederick II *redivivus*. Even after this pseudo-Frederick was executed at Wetzlar, the myth did not lose its virulence. In the fifteenth century it was still believed that Frederick was alive and would live until the end of the World, in short, that he was the only legitimate Emperor and that there would never be another.

The myth of Frederick II is only a famous example of a far more widespread and persistent phenomenon. In fact, the religious prestige and eschatological function of kings survived in Europe to the seventeenth century. The secularization of the concept of eschatological King did not extinguish the hope, deeply rooted in the collective soul, for a universal renewal brought about by the exemplary Hero in one of his new forms—the Reformer, the Revolutionary, the Martyr (in the name of the freedom of peoples), the Party Leader. The role and mission of the Founders and Leaders of the modern totalitarian movements include a considerable number of eschatological and soteriological elements. Mythical thought transcends and discards some of its earlier expressions, outmoded by History, and adapts itself to the new social conditions and new cultural fashions—but it resists extirpation.

As to the Crusade phenomenon, Alphonse Dupront has well demonstrated its mythical structures and eschatological orientation. "At the center of a crusade consciousness, in the cleric as in the non-cleric, is the duty to free Jerusalem... What is most strongly expressed in the crusade is a twofold fulfillment: an accomplishment of the times and an accomplishment of human space. In the sense, for space, that the sign of the accomplishment of the times is the gathering of the nations about the sacred mother city, the center of the world, Jerusalem."¹⁶

¹⁶ Alphonse Dupront, "Croisades et eschatologie" (in *Umanesimo e esoterismo*. Atti del V Convegno Internazionale di Studi Umanistici, a cura di Enrico Castelli, Padua 1960, pp. 175-198), p. 177.

The proof that we are here in the presence of a collective spiritual phenomenon, of an irrational drive, is, among other things, the Children's Crusades that suddenly began in Northern France and Germany in the year 1212. The spontaneity of these movements appears to be beyond doubt: "No one urging them, either from foreign lands or from their own," says a contemporary witness.¹⁷ Children "having at once two characteristics that were signs of the extraordinary, their extreme youth and their poverty, especially little herd-boys,"¹⁸ take the road, and the poor join them. There are perhaps thirty thousand of them, and they walk in procession, singing. When asked where they were going, they answered: "To God." According to a contemporary chronicler, "their intention was to cross the sea and do what kings and the mighty had not done, to recapture Christ's Sepulchre."¹⁹ The clergy had opposed this rising of children. The French crusade ended in catastrophe. Reaching Marseilles, they embarked in seven large ships, but two of these ran aground in a storm off Sardinia and all the passengers were drowned. As for the other five ships, the two treacherous ship-owners took them to Alexandria, where they sold the children to the Saracen leaders and to slave-dealers.

The "German" crusade followed the same pattern. A contemporary chronicle tells that in 1212 "there appeared a boy named Nicolas who gathered around him a multitude of children and women. He affirmed that, by order of an angel, he must go with them to Jerusalem to free the Saviour's cross and that the sea, as formerly for the people of Israel, would let them pass dryshod."²⁰ They were unarmed. Starting from the region around Cologne, they traveled down the Rhine, crossed the Alps, and reached Northern Italy. Some of them got as far as Genoa and Pisa, but they were turned back. Those who managed to reach Rome were obliged to admit that they were backed by no

¹⁷ Paul Alphandéry and Alphonse Dupront, *La chrétienté et l'idée de croisade*, II (Paris, 1959), p. 118.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁹ Reinier, cited by P. Alphandéry and A. Dupront, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

²⁰ *Annales Scheftlarienses*, text cited by Alphandéry-Dupront, p. 123.

authority. The Pope disapproved of their project, and they were forced to return. As the chronicler of the *Annales Marbacenses* puts it, "they came back starving and barefoot, one by one and in silence." No one helped them. Another witness writes: "The greater part of them lay dead from hunger in villages, in public places, and no one buried them."²¹

P. Alphandéry and A. Dupront have rightly recognized in these movements the elect role of the child in popular piety. It is at once the myth of the Holy Innocents, the exaltation of the child by Jesus, and the popular reaction against the Crusade of the Barons, the same reaction that appeared in the legends that crystallized around the "Tafurs" of the earliest crusades.²² "The reconquest of the Holy Places can no longer be expected except from a miracle—and the miracle can only come about in favour of the purest, of children and the poor."²³

SURVIVALS OF THE ESCHATOLOGICAL MYTH

The failure of the Crusades did not put an end to eschatological hopes. In his *De Monarchia Hispanica* (1600), Tommaso Campanella begged the King of Spain to furnish the money for a new Crusade against the Turkish Empire, and, after the victory, to establish the Universal Monarchy. Thirty-eight years later, in the *Ecloga* addressed to Louis XIII and Anne of Austria to celebrate the birth of the future Louis XIV, Campanella prophesies the *recuperatio Terrae Sanctae*, and, with it, the *renovatio saeculi*. The young king will conquer the whole Earth in a thousand days, laying the monsters low, that is, subduing the kingdoms of the infidels and freeing Greece. Mohammed will be driven out of Europe; Egypt and Ethiopia will again be Christian, the Tartars, the Persians, the Chinese and the whole East will be converted. All peoples will be united in one Christendom and this regenerated Universe will have one center—Jerusalem. "The Church," Campanella writes, "began at Jerusa-

²¹ Texts cited by Alphandéry-Dupront, p. 127.

²² On the "Tafurs," cf. also Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, pp. 45 ff.

²³ P. Alphandéry and A. Dupront, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

lem, and to Jerusalem it will return, after circling the world."²⁴ In his treatise *La prima e la seconda resurrezione*, Campanella no longer sees the conquest of Jerusalem, in the manner of St. Bernard, as a stage on the way to the Celestial Jerusalem but as the establishment of the messianic reign.²⁵

It is needless to multiply examples. But it is important to stress the continuity between the medieval eschatological conceptions and the various "philosophies of History" produced by the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century. During the last thirty years it has begun to be realized what an exceptional role was played by the "prophecies" of Gioacchino da Fiore in instigating and articulating all these messianic movements that arose in the thirteenth century and continued, in more or less secularized form, into the nineteenth.²⁶ Gioacchino's central idea—that is, the imminent entrance of the world into the third age of History, which will be the age of freedom since it will be realized under the sign of the Holy Spirit—had considerable repercussions. This idea ran counter to the theology of History accepted by the Church from the time of St. Augustine. According to the current doctrine, perfection having been achieved on Earth by the Church, there will be no *renovatio* in the future. The only decisive event will be the second coming of Christ and the Last Judgment. Gioacchino da Fiore brings back into Christianity the archic myth of universal regeneration. To be sure, it is no longer a periodic and indefinitely repeatable regeneration. Yet it is none the less true that Gioacchino conceives

²⁴ Campanella's note to verse 207 of his *Ecloga*, cited by A. Dupront, "Croisades et eschatologie," p. 187.

²⁵ Critical edition by Romano Amerio (Rome, 1955), p. 72; A. Dupront, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

²⁶ Ernesto Bonaiuti deserves the greatest credit for having begun the revival of Gioacchinian studies with his edition of the *Tractatus super quatuor Evangelia* (Rome, 1930) and his book *Gioacchino da Fiore* (Rome, 1931). Cf. also his two important articles: "Prolegomeni alla storia di Gioacchino da Fiore" (*Ricerche Religiose*, IV, 1928) and "Il misticismo di Gioacchino da Fiore" (*ibid.*, V, 1929), reprinted in the posthumous volume *Saggi di Storia del Cristianesimo* (Vicenza, 1957), pp. 327-382. See also Ernst Benz, "Die Kategorien der religiösen Geschichtsdeutung Joachims" (*Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 1931, pp. 24-111) and *Ecclesia Spirituality* (Stuttgart, 1934).

Survivals and Camouflages of Myths

the third age as the reign of Freedom, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit—which implies transcending historical Christianity and, in the last analysis, abolishing all existing rules and institutions.

We cannot here present the various eschatological movements inspired by Gioacchino. But we must at least refer to some unexpected continuations of the Calabrian prophet's ideas. Thus, for example, Lessing in his *Education of the Human Race* elaborates the thesis of continual and progressive revelation culminating in a third age. To be sure, Lessing thought of this third age as the triumph of reason through education; but it was none the less, he believed, the fulfillment of Christian revelation, and he refers with sympathy and admiration to "certain enthusiasts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries," whose only error lay in proclaiming the "new eternal Gospel" too soon.²⁷ Lessing's ideas aroused some repercussions and, through the disciples of Saint-Simon, he probably influenced Auguste Comte and his doctrine of the three stages. Fichte, Hegel, Schelling were influenced, though for different reasons, by the Gioacchinian myth of an imminent third age that will renew and complete History. Through them this eschatological myth influenced certain Russian writers, especially Krasinsky, with his *Third Kingdom of the Spirit*, and Merejkowsky, author of *The Christianity of the Third Testament*.²⁸ To be sure we are now dealing with semiphilosophical ideologies and fantasies and no longer with the eschatological expectation of the reign of the Holy Spirit. But the myth of universal renovation in a more or less imminent future is still discernible in all these theories and fantasies.

"THE MYTHS OF THE MODERN WORLD"

Some forms of "mythical behavior" still survive in our day. This does not mean that they represent "survivals" of an archaic mentality. But certain aspects and functions of mythical thought

²⁷ Cf. Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 208.

²⁸ Karl Löwith, *op. cit.*, p. 210, draws attention to the fact that this last work inspired *Das dritte Reich* by the Russo-German author H. Moeller van der Bruck. Cf. also Jakob Taubes, *Abendländische Eschatologien* (Bern, 1947), who compares Hegel's philosophy of history with Gioacchino da Fiore's.

are constituents of the human being. We have discussed some "myths of the modern world" elsewhere.²⁹ The problem is complex and absorbing; we cannot hope to exhaust in a few pages what would furnish the material for a large volume. We will confine ourselves to briefly discussing some aspects of "modern mythologies."

The importance of the "return to the origins" in archaic societies is well-known. Now, this prestige of the "origin" has also survived in the societies of Europe. When an innovation was to be made, it was conceived, or presented, as a return to the origin. The Reformation began the return to the Bible and dreamed of recovering the experience of the primitive Church, or even of the earliest Christian communities. The French Revolution had its paradigmatic models in the Romans and the Spartans. The inspirers and leaders of the first successful radical revolution in Europe, which marked not merely the end of a regime but the end of a historical cycle, thought of themselves as restoring the ancient virtues praised by Livy and Plutarch.

At the dawn of the modern world the "origin" enjoyed an almost magical prestige. To have a well established "origin" meant, when all was said and done, to have the advantage of a noble origin. "We find our origin in Rome!" the Romanian intellectuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries proudly repeated. In their case consciousness of Latin descent was accompanied by a kind of mystical participation in the greatness of Rome. Similarly the Hungarian intelligentsia found a justification for the antiquity, nobility, and historical mission of the Magyars in the origin myth of Hunor and Magor and in the heroic saga of Arpad. All through Central and Southeastern Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century the mirage of "noble origin" aroused nothing short of a passion for national history, especially for its earliest phases. "A people without history" (read: without "historical documents" or without historiography) "is as if it did not exist!" This anxiety is perceptible in all the national historians of Central and Eastern Europe. Such a passion for national historiography was, to be sure, a consequence of the awakening of nationalities in this part of Europe. Then too, it was soon

²⁹ Cf. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, pp. 23-38.

transformed into an instrument of propaganda and political warfare. But the desire to prove the "noble origin" and "antiquity" of one's people dominates Southeastern Europe to such an extent that, with few exceptions, all of the respective historians confined themselves to national history and finally wound up in cultural provincialism.

The passion for "noble origin" also explains the racist myth of "Aryanism" which periodically gains currency in the West, especially in Germany. The socio-political contexts of this myth are too well known to require discussion. What is of concern for our study is the fact that the "Aryan" represented at once the "primordial" Ancestor and the noble "hero", the latter laden with all the virtues that still haunted those who had not managed to reconcile themselves to the ideal of the societies that emerged from the revolutions of 1789 and 1848. The "Aryan" was the exemplary model that must be imitated in order to recover racial "purity," physical strength, nobility, the heroic ethics of the glorious and creative "beginnings."

As for Marxist communism, its eschatological and millennialist structures have been duly noted. We remarked not long ago that Marx had taken over one of the great eschatological myths of the Asianico-Mediterranean world: the redeeming role of the Just Man (in our day, the proletariat), whose sufferings are destined to change the ontological status of the world. "In fact, Marx's classless society, and the consequent disappearance of all historical tensions, find their most exact precedent in the myth of the Golden Age which, according to a number of traditions, lies at the beginning and the end of History. Marx has enriched this venerable myth with a truly messianic Judaeo-Christian ideology; on the one hand, by the prophetic and soteriological function he ascribes to the proletariat; and, on the other, by the final struggle between Good and Evil, which may well be compared with the apocalyptic conflict between Christ and Antichrist, ending in the decisive victory of the former. It is indeed significant that Marx turns to his own account the Judaeo-Christian eschatological hope of an *absolute* [end to] *History*; in that he parts company from the other historical philosophers (Croce, for instance, and Ortega y Gasset), for whom the tensions

of history are implicit in the human condition, and therefore can never be completely abolished.”³¹

MYTHS AND MASS MEDIA

Recent studies have brought out the mythical structures of the images and behavior patterns imposed on collectivities by mass media. This phenomenon is found especially in the United States.³¹ The characters of the comic strips present the modern version of mythological or folklore heroes. They incarnate the ideal of a large part of society, to such a degree that any change in their typical conduct or, still worse, their death, will bring on veritable crises among their readers; the latter react violently, and protest by sending thousands of telegrams to the authors of the comic strips or the editors of the newspapers in which they appear. A fantastic character, Superman, has become extremely popular, especially because of his double identity; although coming from a planet destroyed by a catastrophe, and possessing prodigious powers, Superman lives on earth in the modest guise of a journalist, Clark Kent; he is timid, unassertive, dominated by his colleague Lois Lane. This humiliating camouflage of a hero whose powers are literally unlimited revives a well known mythical theme. In the last analysis, the myth of Superman satisfies the secret longings of modern man who, though he knows that he is a fallen, limited creature, dreams of one day proving himself an “exceptional person,” a “hero.”

Much the same could be said of the detective novel. On the one hand, the reader witnesses the exemplary struggle between Good and Evil, between the Hero (= the Detective) and the criminal (the modern incarnation of the Demon). On the other, through an unconscious process of projection and identification, he takes part in the mystery and the drama and has the feeling that he is personally involved in a paradigmatic—that is, a dangerous, “heroic”—action.

³⁰ *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, pp. 25-26.

³¹ Cf., for example, Coulton Waugh, *The Comics* (New York, 1947); Stephen Becker, *Comic Art in America* (New York, 1960); Umberto Eco, “Il Mito di Superman” (in *Demitizzazione e Immagine*, a cura di Enrico Castelli, Padua, 1962, pp. 131-148).

Survivals and Camouflages of Myths

The mythicization of public figures through the mass media, the transformation of a personality into an exemplary image, has also been analyzed. "Lloyd Warner tells us of the creation of such a public figure in the first section of his *The Living and the Dead*. Biggy Muldoon, a Yankee City politician who became a national figure because of his colorful opposition to the Hill Street Aristocracy, had a demigodic public image built up by the press and radio. He was presented as a crusading man of the people attacking entrenched wealth. Then, when the public tired of this image, the mass media obligingly turned Biggy into a villain, a corrupt politician seeking personal profit out of the public necessity. Warner points out that the real Biggy was considerably different from either image but actually was forced to modify his style of action to conform to one image and fight the other."³²

Mythical behavior can be recognized in the obsession with "success" that is so characteristic of modern society and that expresses an obscure wish to transcend the limits of the human condition; in the exodus to Suburbia, in which we can detect the nostalgia for "primordial perfection"; in the paraphernalia and emotional intensity that characterize what has been called the "cult of the sacred automobile." As Andrew Greeley remarks, "one need merely visit the annual automobile show to realize that it is a highly ritualized religious performance. The colors, the lights, the music, the awe of the worshippers, the presence of the temple priestesses (fashion models), the pomp and splendor, the lavish waste of money, the thronging crowds—all these would represent in any other culture a clearly liturgical service... The cult of the sacred car has its adepts and initiati. No gnostic more eagerly awaited a revelation from an oracle than does an automobile worshipper await the first rumors about the new models. It is at this time of the annual seasonal cycle that the high priests of the cult—the auto dealers—take on a new importance as an anxious public eagerly expects the coming of a new form of salvation."³³

³² Andrew Greeley, "Myths, Symbols and Rituals in the Modern World" (*The Critic*, Dec. 1961, Jan. 1962, vol. XX, No. 3, pp. 18-25), p. 19.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

MYTHS OF THE ÉLITE

Less attention has been paid to what could be called the myths of the *élite*, especially those crystallized around artistic creation and its cultural and social repercussions. These myths, be it said, have succeeded in imposing themselves beyond the closed corporation of the initiate, principally because of the inferiority complex that now afflicts the public and official art circles. The aggressive incomprehension of the public, of critics, and of the official representatives of art toward a Rimbaud or a Van Gogh, the disastrous consequences—especially for collectors and museums—produced by indifference toward innovating movements, from impressionism to cubism and surrealism, have been hard lessons for the critics and the public as well as for art dealers, museum directors, and collectors. Today their only fear is not to be advanced enough and hence not to be in time to recognize genius in a work that is at first sight unintelligible. Perhaps never before in history has the artist been so certain that the more daring, iconoclastic, absurd, and inaccessible he is, the more he will be recognized, praised, spoiled, idolatrized. In some countries the result has even been an academicism in reverse, the academicism of the “*avantgarde*”—to such a point that any artistic experience that makes no concessions to this new conformism is in danger of being stifled or ignored.

The myth of the damned artist, which obsessed the nineteenth century, is outmoded today. Especially in the United States, but also in Western Europe, audacity and defiance have long since ceased to be harmful to an artist. On the contrary, he is asked to conform to his mythical image, that is, to be strange, irreducible, and to “produce something new.” It is the absolute triumph of the permanent revolution in art. “Anything goes” in no longer an adequate formulation: now every novelty is considered a stroke of genius beforehand and put on the same plane as the innovations of a Van Gogh or a Picasso, even if the artist only mutilates a poster or signs a sardine tin.

The significance of this cultural phenomenon is the greater because, perhaps for the first time in the history of art, there is no longer any tension between artists, critics, collectors, and the public. They are all in agreement always, and long before

Survivals and Camouflages of Myths

a new work is created or an unknown artist discovered. The one thing that matters is not to have to say later that one did not understand the importance of a new artistic experience.

We cannot, of course, here analyze the mythology of the modern élites in all its manifestations. We shall confine ourselves to a few remarks. First of all, we may note the redeeming function of "difficulty," especially as found in works of modern art. If the élite revel in *Finnegan's Wake*, or in atonal music, or in *tachisme*, it is also because such works represent closed worlds, hermetic universes that cannot be entered except by overcoming immense difficulties, like the initiatory ordeals of the archaic and traditional societies. On the one hand, one has the experience of an "initiation," an experience that has almost vanished from the modern world; on the other hand, one proclaims to the "others" (i.e., the "mass") that one belongs to a select minority—not, as once, to an aristocracy (for modern élites lean toward the left), but to a gnosis that has the advantage of being at once spiritual and secular in that it opposes both official values and the traditional Churches. Through their cult of extravagant originality, of difficulty, of incomprehensibility, the élites advertise their escape from the banal universe of their parents while at the same time revolting against certain contemporary philosophies of despair.

Basically, being fascinated by the difficulty, not to say the incomprehensibility, of works of art expresses the desire to discover a new, secret, hitherto unknown meaning for the World and human life. One dreams of being "initiated" and thereby made able to understand the occult meaning of all these destructions of artistic languages, these "original" experiences that, at first sight, no longer seem to have anything in common with art. The torn posters, the empty, scorched, slashed canvasses, the "art objects" that explode on opening day, the improvised plays in which the actors' speeches are drawn by lot—*all this must have a meaning*, just as certain incomprehensible words in *Finnegan's Wake* come to be fraught with many meanings and values and with a strange beauty for the initiate when he discovers that they are derived from modern Greek or Swahili words disfigured by aberrant consonants, and enriched by secret allusions to possible puns when they are spoken aloud and very fast.

To be sure, all the genuine revolutionary experiences of modern art reflect certain aspects of the contemporary spiritual crisis or at least of the crisis in artistic knowledge and creation. But what concerns our investigation is the fact that the "élites" find in the extravagance and unintelligibility of modern works the opportunity for an initiatory gnosis. It is a "new world" being built up from ruins and enigmas, an almost private world, which one would like to keep for oneself and a very few initiates. But the prestige of difficulty and incomprehensibility is such that, very soon, the "public" too is conquered and proclaims its total acceptance of the élite's discoveries.

The destruction of artistic languages was accomplished by cubism, dadaism, and surrealism, by atonality and "musique concrète," by James Joyce, Becket, and Ionesco. Only the epigones are left furiously demolishing what has already been demolished. For the genuine creators are not willing to take their stand on ruins. Everything leads us to believe that the reduction of "artistic Universes" to the primordial state of *materia prima* is only a phase in a more complex process; just as in the cyclic conceptions of the archaic and traditional societies, "chaos," the regression of all forms to the indistinction of the *materia prima*, is followed by a new creation, which can be homologized with a cosmogony.

We cannot here develop and refine these few observations, for the crisis in the modern arts is only of subsidiary concern to our study. Yet we must dwell for a moment on the situation and the role of literature, especially of epic literature, for it is not unrelated to mythology and mythical behavior. We do not intend to discuss the "origins" of epic literature; it is well known that, like the other literary genres, the epic and the novel continue mythological narrative, though on a different plane and in pursuit of different ends. In both cases it is a question of telling a significant story, of relating a series of dramatic events that took place in a more or less fabulous past. There is no need to go over the long and complex process that transformed some particular "mythological material" into the "subject" of an epic. What we consider important is the fact that in modern societies the prose narrative, especially the novel, has taken the place of the recitation of myths in traditional and popular societies. More than this—it is possible to dissect out the "mythical" structure of

Survivals and Camouflages of Myths

certain modern novels, in other words, to show the literary survival of great mythological themes and characters. (This is true especially in regard to the initiatory theme, the theme of the ordeals of the Hero-Redeemer and his battles with monsters, the mythologies of Woman and of Wealth.) From this point of view we could say, then, that the modern passion for the novel expresses the desire to hear the greatest possible number of "mythological stories" desacralized or simply camouflaged under "profane" forms.

No less significant is the fact that people feel the need to read "histories" and narratives that could be called paradigmatic, since they proceed in accordance with a traditional model. Whatever the gravity of the present crisis of the novel, it is none the less true that the need to find one's way into "foreign" universes and to follow the complications of a "story" seems to be consubstantial with the human condition and hence irreducible. It is a difficult need to define, being at once desire to communicate with "others," with "strangers," and share in their dramas and hopes, and at the same time the need to know what *can have taken place*. It is hard to conceive of a human being who is not fascinated by "narrative," that is, by a recounting of significant events, by what has happened to men endowed with the "twofold reality" of literary characters (for, on the one hand, they reflect the historical and psychological reality of members of a modern society, and on the other they possess all the magical power of an imaginary creation).

But it is especially the "escape from Time" brought about by reading—most effectively by novel reading—that connects the function of literature with that of mythologies. To be sure, the time that one "lives" when reading a novel is not the time that a member of a traditional society recovers when he listens to a myth. But in both cases alike, one "escapes" from historical and personal time and is submerged in a time that is fabulous and transhistorical. The reader is confronted with a strange, imaginary time, whose rhythms vary indefinitely, for each narrative has its own time that is peculiar to it and to it alone. The novel does not have access to the primordial time of myths, but in so far as he tells a credible story, the novelist employs a time that is *seemingly historical* yet is condensed or prolonged, a time,

then, that has at its command all the freedoms of imaginary worlds.

More strongly than any of the other arts, we feel in literature a revolt against historical time, the desire to attain to other temporal rhythms than that in which we are condemned to live and work. One wonders whether the day will come when this desire to transcend one's own time—personal, historical time—and be submerged in a "strange" time, whether ecstatic or imaginary, will be completely rooted out. As long as it persists, we can say that modern man preserves at least some residues of "mythological behavior." Traces of such a mythological behavior can also be deciphered in the desire to rediscover the intensity with which one experienced or knew something *for the first time*; and also in the desire to recover the distant past, the blissful period of the "beginnings."

Here too, as we might expect, there is always the struggle against Time, the hope to be freed from the weight of "dead Time," of the Time that crushes and kills.