DEATH TO LIFE

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STUDENTS of primitive religions have revealed some very important aspects of the natural response of man to the Creator, aspects which have sometimes become overlaid by the more sophisticated types of cultured religion. One of the differences between that natural response and the educated worship of classical times may be seen in the theory and practice of purification, and the comparison between the two bears remarkably on the modern Christian's attitude to mortification.

The almost universal conception of purity and impurity is that of the unmixed and the mixed. The pure note sounds without admixture of over- or under-tones, or of any other sound but its simple music; pure milk has no foreign germ, no water mixed with it. And among the primitive peoples the brand of impurity or defilement arose from the mixture of races, of sexes, of seasons. Men have to keep their weapons and implements apart from the women's household utensils. Spilt blood and death are signs of an unwholesome mixture which contaminates all who come in contact with them. Even the seasons have to be kept apart; the old leaven of the receding year's harvest must be destroyed, or kept utterly apart from the new paste of the first fruits of Spring. In order to live an undefiled life, a man must not mix with women out of wedlock, he must not mix with men of other races and tribes, he must not meddle in affairs not his own.

But such a conception is certainly fundamental to purity, so that purification implies the expulsion of all foreign bodies making up the mixture and the reduction to the one single element, as the bondwoman was expelled in order to keep the Israelitish family pure. But in these primitive religions another aspect of purity and impurity is nearly always present. The things that contaminate or defile, which therefore mix a man's life and make him impure, are nearly always things that come from some power which might in other circumstances help the man or the tribe to become whole and pure. This is easy to see in the common idea of impurity as the unwholesome mixture of the sexes; for the powers involved, themselves make a more fruitful increase in the tribe and a prosperous and pure family life. The forces hidden in nature were

always so fascinating and yet so terrifying; they might bring life or death—like fire, so essential to livelihood and yet so destructive, or the hidden movement of blood which means alternatively death or life. When these hidden forces acted in the wrong manner they contaminated a man or a tribe by being maladjusted as it were to their life. Or rather, man himself was often ill-adjusted to these forces and thus became impure and defiled, bearing about him the seeds of death. The stain incurred by such impurity was therefore not merely a kind of bad chemical mixture, an ill-assorted set of elements that needed to be separated, but it was the result of a power, it was a dynamic thing like a disease. But its power flowed from a hidden source which might be beneficent if it were set in the right relationship with men. Purification in this sense meant not so much the expulsion of foreign elements as the return to the hidden source so that man might be readjusted with it and thus become whole and pure once again.[1]

The meaning, then, of all the strange rituals of purification is to isolate the centre of contagion and stain and so to destroy it as to turn the original power into a beneficent one. These hidden powers are in some way divine; they are associated with 'the gods'. So a man must cleanse himself by separation from the profane life of the world in order to attain safely the divine realms where the forces of nature will transform his life and make him or his tribe whole and healthy once again. In this way ceremonial purification implies the renunciation, at least for a time, of the profane and 'mixed' life of the world. Contact with his fellow men, which is the normal and essential life 'in the world', has to be broken, so he sacrifices companionship by retreat, words by silence. The essentials too of natural life must be sacrificed that he may enter the divine realms; thus he abandons food by fasts, sleep by vigils, work by remaining inactive, and continuation of his family by continence. As M. Caillois has pointed out,[2] the same renunciation of worldly life is practised in purifying the Australian aborigines' neophyte, in preparing the Roman magistrate for his sacrifice on behalf of the city, and, at least in some ways, in making the communicant

1. It is noteworthy in this connection that the words for the stain and for the sacrifice that removed it were the same; that men were defiled by touching the holy consecrated thing like the Ark; that the same word is often used for 'the gods' and for 'the defiled'; that the word 'expiate' means literally to rid oneself of the 'sacred' element contracted by some fault.

2. *Histoire Générale des Religions* (Librairie Aristide Quillet) i, 21 sqq.

ready to approach the Holy Table. In general we might add to this list the good Christian's practice of mortification as a preparation for entering the heavenly courts.

We may cite two examples of the primitive practice of purification which have been preserved down to our own day. Death has always naturally been regarded as the greatest contamination and defilement. All those who were associated with a dead man, particularly his immediate family and relatives, were regarded as bearing the seeds of death. They were therefore excluded from the normal life of the tribe during the period when the stain of death was fully active. By this method of isolation the family was purified of the death-defilement, the power of perdition was transformed into a beneficent power, or rather the mourners were set once again in the right relationship with that divine power so that they could return to normal life, for the remains of the dead had become relics and the dead man himself had entered the regions of the sacred ancestors. The period of mourning, though not quite so common at the present time, must be a survival of this same system of ritual purification. Again, any out-pouring of blood, since it signified the ebbing of the life principle, was regarded as contaminating and also demanded a period of isolation and purification, so that the mother after child-birth, particularly on the occasion of the first child, was submitted to a similar process concluding with the rites which re-established her in the common life. The Jewish system, which we still celebrate on the feast of the Purification of our Lady, has survived in the Christian rubric for the churching of women, though Christian practice has turned the ceremony into an act of thanksgiving.

From these practices, and many other similar rituals associated with initiation and purification, we may conclude that the original idea behind purification was not that flesh and blood were evil, and that the world was contaminating because it was such a confused mixture of flesh and spirit. The only dualism suggested was that between the realm of the sacred or divine, and that of the profane or ordinary human life. Things essential to the normal physical life of man had to be sacrificed, such as blood or even life, in order that by such a *catharsis* the divine power which lay hidden in the flow of life and which had become an evil influence should be 'placated' and begin to be exercised in a healthy and wholesome manner in man's regard. In this way a man enters into union with

the divine so as to allow the divine to work unitedly in man. Purification is indeed a way to unity, that men should become so simple and unmixed as to be able to be joined with the simplicity of God.

With the increasing sophistication of human culture this primitive idea of purity gave place to a more refined conception, which is to be found most perfectly expressed in Plato and the Neoplatonists. The increase of reflection upon the nature of their human mind led to the idea that the purity of man was to be found in his mind, and that in so far as his mind-soul was mingled with the body it remained impure. Here we find the idea of purity being anchored exclusively to the unmixed and the simple. Man, as made of body and soul, is an impure compound. But there is no sense of a power working for the benefit or the destruction of man, no sense of a stain that is contagious and disruptive. So Plato in the *Phaedo* describes Socrates's preparation for drinking the hemlock as the supreme act of *catharsis*. In order to purify ourselves we must get rid of ears and eyes and the whole body with its passions, for these make 'the disturbing element' in a man's life and hinder the acquisition of pure knowledge. In this life the soul is mixed up with the troublous element of the body which is the seat of pain and the source of loves and lusts, of fears and fancies (n. 66). It is therefore at death that the soul is cleansed of the 'foolishness of the body'. 'And what is this purification but the separation of the soul from the body . . . the habit of the soul gathering and collecting herself into herself, out of the courses of the body; the dwelling in her own place alone, as in another life so also in this as far as she can—the release of the soul from the chain of the body' (67). This is indeed a 'mortification', something that brings death to senses and sense-life. But is it a Christian idea of the mortification and penance that purifies the soul?

The Neoplatonists naturally developed this aspect of the Platonic dualism very intensely. Flight from the world was counselled in order to liberate the soul both from cares and from the disturbance of pleasures. For the soul had to strip itself of its lower nature in order to elevate itself to the realms of its origin, namely the Spirit. Purification is principally a question of constant self-discipline, mainly by means of the discipline of thought. The soul must disengage itself from the body and withdraw to its own place. 'It will hold itself above all passions and affections', says

Plotinus. 'Pain it may combat, but failing the cure it will bear meekly and ease it by refusing to assent to it' (I, 2, 5). The pure soul becomes so remote from any disturbance by the passions that a man should not feel sympathy for other men's troubles. The passionless state in which the soul could remain unmoved by any exterior happenings became the ideal which was closely allied with the apathy of the Stoic. But it lays itself open to the desire for escape, as a man seals off one after another of his senses and passions until he finds himself a thinking being attached rather precariously to an almost defunct physical body. This system of mortification, then, is calculated to destroy the physical side of man but to preserve the mind in a sure and composed state of contemplation. This really amounts to a type of human perfectionism in which the pure is synonymous with the philosophical mind full of wisdom but untouched by bodily needs or desires. This does necessitate a certain mortification, a death to the physical self. And this mortification ploughs deeper than the self-denial of the athlete who, in order to keep in physical trim, must deny himself many pleasures of the table and other luxuries. The well-trained body might prove a source of disturbance or distraction to the wise man, so that he needs must reduce its power and effectiveness.

It is interesting to notice that this idea of the pure as being identical with 'unmixed' knowledge, is to be found running through nearly all the religious systems of the further East as soon as they achieve any cultural level. Confucianism and Taoism both tend to identify human evil with ignorance so that purification is a way of knowledge. The mystic way begins with a period of isolation and withdrawal from worldly pleasures before it reaches to vision. First the senses must be emptied, and then the soul. 'Union with the Tao is not obtained except by emptiness', and then the spirit receives the pure knowledge. And Buddha himself after his 'conversion' attempted the ascetic way of mortification, fasting until he was starving, but he did not find enlightenment that way. Afterwards, however, he was granted a knowledge which gave him freedom from all bondage and he taught a similar way of detachment—emancipation by the destruction of desire, coolness by the extinction of the passions—which surely must bear a close resemblance to the Neoplatonic conception of purity. The *Bhagavad-Gita*, too, coming from India of the fourth

century B.C., preaches a detachment to rid the soul of the mixture with the flesh and its passions. The *Gita*, it must be said to its greater renown, has a profound conception of the place of sacrifice and worship in this way of purification. After listing all the ways of purification practised by those who seek higher realities, it continues: 'All these understand the meaning of sacrificial worship. Through worship their sins are consumed away. They eat the food that has been blessed in the sacrifice. Thus they obtain immortality and reach Brahman.' But the reward of all action is to be found in enlightenment, and the whole process of sacrifice seems to be associated with some sort of *gnosis*.

Those who try to find the same theme throughout all the greater religions nearly always pick up this thread which is spun by a cultured and rather introspective tendency in religion. The more primitive rituals are abandoned or granted only a kind of lip-service while the whole of human reality is reduced to the soul and to its activity in knowledge. Purification is not concerned with expiating sin and returning to the realm of the divine in order to become once more attuned with them; it is simply a matter of the abandonment of the impurity of ignorance. And this is to be found not only in the Far Eastern religions, but in the great stream of Christian literature that springs from Neoplatonic sources—particularly, of course, from the writings of the pseudo-Areopagite.

The fact is, however, that this limited and somewhat dualistic attitude towards purification does not represent the full Christian teaching, which is more clearly expressed in the word 'mortification'. A number of Christian writers and spiritual directors do in practice advise this neo-platonic *catharsis*, counselling the penitent who is disturbed by human relationships or financial difficulties, for example, to withdraw into some sort of sealed-off compartment in which he can sit in contemplative tranquillity. The system of sealing the entrances to the compartment vary—it may be by simply withdrawing to the presence of God in the soul, relying utterly on his providential will, remembering the fleeting nature of the sensible world, and so on. But running through much of this advice is the desire to liberate the soul from its mixture with the passions, to purify it in a negative way rather than to purge and cleanse the whole man. To advise someone not to get involved

with other people may well be taken in the same sense as Plotinus's advice to avoid sympathy with other people on account of its disturbing effect upon the soul. To practise a kind of holy 'apathy' in this way has little to do with the Incarnation or the Transfiguration.

The early Christian neo-platonists attempted to impose on this philosophical humanism the 'wholesome' doctrine of the Word-made-flesh. Père Danielou has shown how St Gregory of Nyssa turns to the passion of Christ to explain the true way of purification. Mortification principally consists in the share in the Passion, and the Passion is communicated to the soul by the sacraments. Thus the knowledge which is pure and wholesome is not simply the philosophical wisdom of Socrates but the knowledge of the suffering and death of Christ. The divine power comes down upon the soul through baptism and penance and conveys to it a share in the purity of God; for God is purity. Here indeed we find a trace of the primitive purification in which the individual retreats to the source of existence, to the divine realms, in order to re-organise himself in the divine regard. The Christian was bound to accept the doctrine of original sin as a kind of stain that was more than mere mixture and contained some powerful forces of evil within it. The pagan neo-platonist did not take sin into account, and, as we have seen, was ready to put human evil down to ignorance or lack of education. The Christian in accepting the Passion accepted the fact of moral evil.

But this did not take these early Christian writers all the way. They still held on to the idea that the body was a prison house and a dark cloud which enclosed the soul within it. They still sought a contemplative state which would be undisturbed, despite their looking steadfastly at the disturbing spectacle of the crucifixion. And we find this element in a great deal of the subsequent spiritual literature, primarily where it treats of detachment or 'holy indifference'. All the time the balance has to be readjusted by reference to the Word-made-*flesh* and to his suffering and death, when he, already utterly pure, willingly entered the realms of death in order to triumph over sin and death. This was the great Ritual Purification of all time in which the world of man was cleansed of its evils, a ritual which summed up the primitive gropings for a way of returning to realms of the divine in order that the powers which worked evil might work good. In this act

of purifying the human race, Christ accepted willingly the supreme contamination of suffering and death, so that by death and suffering life might come to the individual; this was truly death to self, and 'mortification'. Mankind was liberated from the stain of sin because the head of mankind had voluntarily offered himself in such a way as to re-enter, body and soul, through death to the divine realms of life. The outpouring of the precious blood, a thing which in the profane order was always regarded with such a horror of contamination and defilement, thus cleansed not merely the soul but the body too. Christ did not rise a victor over the flesh in such a way as to have no 'lower nature', no body and no emotions. Body and soul were 'purified' on behalf of the whole race, the members of his mystical body.

The rite of the one unique Sacrifice continues daily. This great act of ritual purification is presented in the Mass in such a way that every day the individual Christian can have all his stains and contaminations removed by contact once more with the victim of Calvary. He comes to assist at Mass so that cleansed by this act of sacrifice, he may be carried up to the heavenly altar, a pure sacrifice, associated with Christ and so re-introduced into the divine realms.

The Christian's insistence on the supreme efficacy of the Passion and death of Christ as the source of all purification, prevents him from becoming dualistic and platonic, and it makes him begin his life of the spirit by accepting death in the death of Calvary. This is the true source of mortification, a supernatural source bringing the power of God's purity to the soul and body of man, so that he can return after Mass to his normal life among men, cleansed and made whole. He will not cease to mortify himself and bring his flesh under subjection to the spirit. On the contrary he will be ready to adopt a more than utilitarian attitude to self-denial and the overcoming of the passions. He will see that suffering and 'death'—the outpouring of blood—have redemptive value, they render it possible for a man to make reparation in union with Calvary for his sins and those of other men, those of the world. The idea of fasting in order to annul the sting of passion becomes only a small part of the Christian's mortification. The sense that man is 'mixed' until the soul is separated from the body cannot remain before the crucifix which stands before the tomb of resurrection. The Christian is mixed principally with moral guilt,

encumbered by a weight of sin. This has to be shed, the mixture separated into its component parts.

If we turn to the earliest Christian literature, this attitude to the meaning of mortification cannot pass unnoticed. Before the influence of the Platonic schools had made itself felt among the better-read Christians, we find St Paul insisting on the need to die with Christ in order to cleanse both flesh and spirit together. Père Prat has an outstanding page on the contrast between Paul with his Jewish respect for the Creator of earth and heaven, and the Platonic dualism of the philosophers of his day (cf. Prat: *Theology of St Paul*. English translation vol. i, p. 234). When, nearly fifty years after Paul, St Ignatius of Antioch journeyed to Rome for his martyrdom, we find the same attitude to purification as mortification with Christ in his Passion: 'For all these sufferings which he endured for our sakes that we might be saved. And he truly suffered, as also he truly raised himself up. Nor is it the case as some unbelievers affirm that he suffered only in semblance. . . . For I know and believe that he was in the flesh even after the resurrection. . . . They touched him and believed, being united with his flesh and spirit. Therefore they also despised death, and were found to rise above death. . . .' (To the Smyrneans, 2 and 3.) All those spirited epistles are full of this fire of purification, written by a man who was about to die with Christ in reality. He was convinced, not that death would remove the 'mixture' of body and give him freedom of mind, but that through his death he would reach to the resurrection in God. And this same conviction should be at the foundation of the Christian's daily assistance at the great act of ritual purification of the whole human race.