

The Preparation of the Gentiles.

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NO side of ancient life has received fuller illumination in recent years than the side of popular religion; and evidence has accumulated to show what an important part was played in the thought and practice of the common people by the Mystery religions, mostly of Oriental origin. It is increasingly recognized that their strongest hold was among those classes in which Christianity spread most rapidly. Consequently, men have begun to realize that these faiths formed part of the environment in which Christian doctrine and practice took shape; and the similarities which these cults present in certain particulars have from time to time been pressed unduly, as if they were evidence that the Church had borrowed both belief and practice from its earlier rivals. A closer and soberer study will show that this is not the case to any great extent. Their relation to Christianity will be found to be, *not* that of parent, but rather that of pioneer. It is not so much that they supplied either the material out of which the Church built, or the pattern and model by which she worked, as that they prepared the way for her advance by breaking down certain barriers of custom and creed, by accustoming men to new views of the unseen and their relation to it, and by rousing in them hopes, longings, and desires, which they could stimulate, but not satisfy, and which found a lasting satisfaction in the Church and the Church's Lord.

The old State religions of Greece and Rome had gradually lost their hold on the minds of men. That of Greece, with its æsthetic beauty of myth and statue and building, belonged to a period of childhood both in the intellect and morals. The world had outgrown it; it could satisfy men's senses, but not their mind or conscience. Its stately ceremonial and glorious temples lacked a soul, and had no answer to the awakening individuality

of man. "Cujus regio ejus religio" was of its essence, and a man professed a creed not because it appealed to him or satisfied him, but because it was part of his duty as a citizen. On other lines the old Roman religion, with its childish deification of every event of life or feeling and capacity of man, and its meticulous ritual, cramped the soul, and at the same time failed to supply any real sanction for the civic morality which it undoubtedly attempted to foster. The philosophy of the day, on the other hand, which had discarded the childish and barbarous elements of the established faiths, and moved on a higher plane, lacked the power to stir the masses, and touched only the leisured few. Plato's words in the "Timæus" give the coldly intellectual nature of the purest of Greek beliefs: "To find, however, the Maker and Father of this universe is a serious task, and when one has found Him it is impossible to tell of it to all men" ("Timæus," 28 c).

But there existed in Greece, side by side with the State religion and the Olympian deities, another expression of the religious life—the cult of the Chthonian gods (gods of the underworld) and the mysteries, the best-known of which are those celebrated at Eleusis. This side of Greek life probably represents the religion of an earlier race, which survived in an inferior position, when the pantheon of the conquering peoples became the object of national worship; and gradually it became increasingly prominent, just because it met in some measure the needs which the State religion failed to supply.

The myth round which these mysteries centred was a nature myth. Demeter, the corn goddess, lost her daughter Persephone, who was carried off to the underworld by its god as his bride. Ultimately she was restored to her mother, who sought for her with wailing and tears for six months of the year. It was the death of vegetation in winter and its rising to life again in spring which this story summed up, and the secrecy with which the sacred rites were performed and the dramatization of the story, with its alternations of sorrow and joy, gave to men, as Aristotle says, "impressions and emotions, rather than

definite instruction." That which the native genius of Greece supplied in the mysteries of Demeter and Dionysus, the Romans, with their lack of inventive imagination, drew from the Oriental religions, which in many respects closely resembled the Greek mysteries. The worship of Cybele and Attis, the mother-goddess of Anatolia, and her son, was the first to reach Rome, by official invitation, in 205 B.C.; and soon the grave Roman patricians found that their invited guest was one who repelled and shocked them just in proportion as she impressed and attracted the masses. The splendour of the processions, the savagery of the votaries' self-mutilation, the barbarism of the baptism by blood, and the promises of future welfare beyond the grave, stirred feelings of awe and wonder and hope which the old Roman faith had never touched. The same may be said of the next invasion, which came unbidden and unwelcome, which was repressed even to blood—the worship of Serapis, the Hellenized form of the old Egyptian religion. Whatever be the origin of the name Serapis (whether Osirapis, or Sar-apsu from Babylon, or a local god of Sinope on the Euxine), the Greeks had seized on the touching nature myth of Isis' search for her dead husband, Osiris, who had been foully murdered by Set or Typhon, a myth in origin having close resemblance to the preceding ones. It dealt in picture and allegory with the continual dissolution and reconstruction going on in nature, and argued from the analogy of this to a similar experience for the individual. The genius of Hellas laid hold of this suggestive theme, took from it the crudities and inconsistencies of its native forms, clothed it in the Greek language and in beauty of expression, and sent it forth on a career of conquest through the whole Mediterranean basin. It appealed particularly to women, and its lustrations, its impressive ritual, its daily services, its general air of mystery, and its insistence on the life beyond the grave, made it, at least in the first century, perhaps the most successful of all these rival creeds which jostled one another in the ports of the inland sea. Its language still finds an echo in the prayer for "abodes of refreshment" (*sedes refrigerii*) in the

burial office of the Roman Church and in the very Canon of the Mass itself.

The absorption of Syria into the Empire during the first century B.C. introduced yet another element into the seething ferment of the religious thought of the time; Syrian slaves poured into Italy—"Jam pridem Syrus in Tiberim defluxit Orontes"—and brought the Semitic ideas of religion with them: the god and goddess, representing the male and female principles in nature, the ideas of tabu and impurity, familiar to us from the Mosaic legislation, and, under the influence of the more distant Babylonia, the belief in the influence of the heavenly bodies on the lives of men, which we term astrology. Gradually these ideas were clarified, and we get the various local Baalim regarded as different manifestations of the One God most high, *Zeús Ἕψιστος*. Some of these manifestations became famous in the West; Jupiter Dolichenus, the local Baal of Duluk, near Aintab, in North Syria, has his dedications along the line of the Roman Wall between Newcastle and Carlisle; and in the last stages of the struggle between Paganism and Christianity the acknowledgment of the "One God Unconquered," to which the Syrian Baal had contributed, along with the Persian Mithras, was the last and strongest position held by the dying creed.

All these cults, containing, as we shall see later, elements of real value for the religious development of man, had a fatal weakness. Taking their origin in nature myths which dealt with the mysteries of fertility and reproduction, they were all of them tainted, and more than tainted, with sensuality and impurity. Faiths which were based upon immoral fables could not stem the tide of licentiousness which was threatening to engulf Græco-Roman civilization; they might preach purity and practise asceticism, but their very basis prevented them from denouncing the opposite vices. Nor is it true to say that this charge is due to the hostility of the Christian fathers, from whom we draw much of our information with regard to them. The witness of Juvenal, and of Apuleius, with regard to the

worship of Isis, that of Lucian concerning the Syrian goddess, and the police measures of the senate in the case of the Mother-goddess of Anatolia, supply ample evidence on this point, without drawing on Christian testimony.

One cult alone, and that not very prominent till a slightly later date—that of the Persian sun-god, Mithras—was free from this stain, and it is not without significance that it was Mithraism which alone of all these worships seriously contended with Christianity for the mastery of the world. At the end of the second century the religious fate of the Empire was trembling in the balance; for, as M. Renan has said, "If Christianity had been checked at its birth by some fatal malady, the world would have been Mithraist" (Marc Aurele, p. 579).

It came to Rome apparently in the time of Pompey from Cilicia, and gradually grew in influence, largely through the attraction which it exercised over the army. M. Cumont's map of its distribution is in this respect most instructive. Apart from Italy, its greatest hold was along the frontiers of the Danube, the Rhine, and the Tyne; its discipline was military in character, and it used military metaphors even more freely than Christianity. Its insistence on the manly virtues of truth and courage, its emphasis on the brotherhood existing between all those who had passed through the stages of initiation, which was expressed by common sacramental meals, and its active propaganda, all drew men under its sway. Its weak side lay, *first*, in its unattractiveness to women, who had to go elsewhere for satisfaction to their more emotional natures; *secondly*, in its close alliance with the Imperial throne, to the support of which it lent a strong doctrinal basis, for it was always ready to recognize in the ruler of the Empire an incarnation of the sun-god; and, *thirdly*, in its readiness to recognize other creeds of a lower polytheistic type. These failings, along with one fundamental weakness which it shared with the other mystery cults, brought about its final extinction.

Let us try for a few moments to estimate the part which these cults played in the great process of preparation. Remember

the main characteristics of the old Græco-Roman religion ; it was a state affair, a matter of nationality rather than of conviction. So far as it was not civic it was individualist ; no such thing as voluntary congregational worship was known. It had no satisfaction for the intellect, and little for the conscience—for these, men had turned to philosophy—and it was singularly unemotional. Now, in every way these foreign cults were a great contrast. They were for the most part independent of the State, and dependent on their power of attracting the individual by conviction ; they made, as we have seen, a strong appeal to the emotions ; and this was due partly to their congregational mode of worship, which aroused those strange waves of feeling of which men seem capable only in the mass. Their origin as nature and solar myths left room for speculation and inquiry as to the origin and nature of the world, which occupied, if it did not satisfy, the mind ; and, for all their moral failings, they connected religion and conduct as they had never been connected in the West before, by their insistence on certain moral requirements from their initiates ; so they aroused conscience. Even more directly they prepared by familiarizing men with the idea of sin and the need of atonement, by their conceptions of union with the deity whose experience they shared (“ Be comforted, mystæ ; since your god is saved, you, too, shall be saved from all your pains,” ran a couplet which has been preserved), and by sacramental meals in which this union was expressed and strengthened. Further, their speculations and promises with regard to the life beyond the grave met without satisfying man’s questionings about his personal future. Their likeness to Christianity was often noted. “ Habet ergo diabolus Christos suos,” said Firmicus Maternus, a Christian apologist. Nor do we gain anything by denying the similarity ; for it but points to the irrepressible longings of a struggling humanity, which were met by the coming of the Son of Man. But the contrast between them lay deep, and in it we may find the explanation of the failure even of the best of them, and of the success of the Christian faith. In the long run they were based on myths,

stories which expressed in allegorical form the processes and phenomena of nature ; their deities and heroes were personifications of natural forces ; and so they tried to explain man, and to satisfy man from below, from the physical world ; and they failed to meet the needs which they undoubtedly aroused and encouraged. Christianity claimed, and claims, to be based on facts of history ; its first missionaries and their successors, however high ideas they might have formed about their Founder, always proclaimed Him as a *Man*. And the presence of that curious phrase "under Pontius Pilate" in the shortest summary of the faith is evidence of the value set by the Church on this historical foundation. It was a *Man* who had been born, and suffered, and died ; it was a *Man* who had risen from the dead, the first-fruits of them that slept ; it was because Christianity was based, not on a Personification, but on a Person, that it finally triumphed. It explained man from above ; it declared that the highest possible revelation of God was given through a perfect Man ; and asserted that manhood found its explanation in the Divine. The Mystery religions, if you will, prepared the "sick souls," to use a modern psychologist's classification, to whom the Man Christ Jesus was to give health and life, because, God as well as man, He was the one true Mediator.