THE DYING GOD

Pagan, Psychological and Christian[1]

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'IT is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.' (John 11, 50.) You will remember that those words are attributed by the Fourth Gospel to Caiaphas, and that it tells us that 'he spoke not of himself, but being the high priest for that year, he prophesied'. We are told that it was this official utterance of the High Priest that decided the authorities to put Jesus of Nazareth to death.

This remarkable fact is nowhere mentioned, so far as I can recall, in the twelve large volumes of Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Yet the pronouncement of Caiaphas might well have served as a motto for the whole work. Frazer, combining encyclopaedic knowledge with rare literary grace and dramatic effect, and with much of the excitement of a detective story, set out to solve a mystery—the mystery of a haggard, hunted 'priest of the wood' by the shores of Lake Nemi long ago, a priest who had plucked a golden bough, a priest who had murdered his predecessor, and who was now sleeplessly awaiting his own murderer and successor. And you remember how clue leads to clue as Frazer's vast researches fan out into space and time, ransacking the annals of history, archaeology, the literature of all nations, comparative religion, anthropology, folklore. Slowly there emerges the hint of a worldwide pattern of belief and practice according to which it is expedient that one should die for the people that the whole nation perish not; that the slayer and the slain should alike be some embodiment of divinity, a divine king or priest or his son, or some representative or substitute or effigy, whose death and torment is somehow necessary if the life or power which he embodies, and on which the people depend, is to survive or revive. Frazer's researches also showed the astonishing resem-

1 The unabridged script of the fourth of a series of five talks, transmitted on the Third Programme of the B.B.C., November 10th, 1951. The three previous talks, on ethnological aspects of 'The Dying God,' had been given by Professor Henry Frankfort. The fifth will appear in our next issue, and both will be included in expanded form in Fr White's forthcoming volume, *God and the Unconscious* (Harvill Press).

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blances between many of the rites and ceremonies—usually associated with a New Year—which accompany this death and revival, among peoples widely separated in space and time and levels of culture.

Professor Frankfort has told us that the facts are not actually quite so simple as Frazer—and, more conspicuously, some of Frazer's followers and codifiers—might lead us to suppose. He has brought weighty objection to our calling it a pattern at all, and I must agree that the word implies something far too rigid. But I do not know another word which would describe what, we are agreed, needs to be described: namely, several similar phenomena which, in greater or lesser number, are commonly though not invariably found clustered together in a similar situation or context. But there can be little doubt that eagerness to find resemblances has obscured differences which, especially to the student of a particular culture, are at least equally significant. That discussion I must leave to experts in that field.

But there is another question of similarities and differences to which Professor Frankfort has only alluded. He told us that 'We can gauge the significance of such symbols as the divine child, the suffering mother, the god who passes through death to resurrection, because they recur in Christianity'. He also reminded us that Frazer and his generation claimed to see their '"dying god" behind the figure of Christ, a totemic feast behind the Last Supper . . . a mother goddess in a primitive sense behind the Mater Dolorosa'—and (I may add) very much more in the way of impressive similarities between Christian beliefs and practices and these so-called fertility rites and cults.

Let us look briefly at a few of the facts—only a few out of a vast abundance. Frazer alone noted hundreds of parallels in the practices, beliefs, games, folklore and rituals of so-called Christian and so-called pagan peoples, all pointing to some common ancestry or inspiration in the rites of the dying and rising god. But he did not always distinguish beliefs and customs (many of which would hardly pretend to be specifically Christian), found locally and unofficially in Christian countries, from those we find officially and universally in traditional Christian creeds and liturgies. Even if we confine ourselves to the latter, the resemblances to the so-called *pattern* of the Rites of Spring are unmistakable.

Nearly all the features with which Frazer and his followers have

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familiarised us may be witnessed to this day during the celebration of Holy Week and Easter in any church where the ancient rites of the Eastern or Western Churches are performed in their fulness. They begin with the '*rite d'entrée*': the ritual of entry into a holy place—or mood—on Palm Sunday: the solemn procession to the Church, the knocking-on and opening of its doors; there 'golden boughs' of palm and olive are carried and distributed to be (as for Virgil's Aeneas) the passport to the coming mysteries. There follows the narration of the events to be re-enacted. Then, on succeeding days, there is the alternation of rejoicing and lamentation (in the Greek church it is still called the *Threnos*); mourning not only *for* the condemned, dying and dead one, but *with* him in mystical identification. There is the sacred banquet, the sacrificial communion, the setting-up of the *stauros*, the pole or cross; the solemn extinguishing and later kindling of light and fire; there are traces at least of the 'light-mindedness' or 'folly' in the banging of books at the end of Tenebrae—and in southern countries, where it is accompanied with fireworks and general pandemonium, it can amount to very great folly indeed. There is the recitation of the story of creation, and of previous deliveries of the people. There is the pouring of water on the earth; and though there is not the *Hierosgamos*, the sacred mating of the priest-king with the representative of the goddess, there are unmistakable resemblances to it when the flaming Paschal candle, representing Christ, is plunged into the font to the accompaniment of prayers whose references to sexual union and fertility are explicit. At Easter (and the Venerable Bede tells us the name is that of an old goddess of dawn) there are the baptisms (the initiations or illuminations of neophytes), there is (or at least there was—it still survives in the Dominican ritual) the search for the lost and hidden life which had died: the Easter morning search for, and triumphant return of, the Bread of Life which had been hidden and ignored since Good Friday. The whole cycle of fast and feast reaches its climax in the Easter Sunday Mass, the enthronement and offering of the risen conqueror of death returned from the underworld; and the partaking by the faithful of his reunited body and blood.

Just so many heathenish adulterations of the pure milk of the Gospel, it may be said. But the matter cannot be disposed of so easily, on any hypothesis. For the Catholic or Orthodox Christian

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who joins, for instance, in the Palm Sunday procession is not usually thinking of Nemi or Virgil or Frazer or even of the crops; he is thinking of the Gospel story of the entry of Christ into Jerusalem and his welcome with palm and olive branches; and so it is throughout the rest of the celebrations. And it is just when we turn to the Gospel stories of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ that the similarities become quite astonishing.

Frazer himself noticed this. He had a section on the 'Crucifixion of Christ' which is very striking. In his later editions he relegated it to an appendix, because, as he said, 'the hypothesis which it sets forth has not been confirmed by subsequent research, and is admittedly in a high degree speculative and uncertain'. This hypothesis was to the effect that Jesus Christ was compelled to play the actual rôle of victim in the cruel ritual murder of a substitute for a 'dying god'—if not by the Roman soldiers in celebration of their Saturnalia, then more probably by the soldiers of Herod and the mob in celebration of Purim, which Frazer held to be a Jewish adaptation of the Asiatic equivalent of the Saturnalia, the Sacaea. His quotation of Dio Chrysostom's description of the latter is certainly impressive: 'They take one of the prisoners condemned to death, and seat him upon the king's throne, and give him the king's raiment, and let him lord it. . . . But afterwards they strip and scourge and crucify him.' Whatever is to be thought of the hypothesis, the resemblances to the Gospel story are unmistakable. And there are many more which Frazer did not mention. Not only is there the continual parallel of the Gospel narrative and the Church ritual, and of the latter with so many features of the so-called pattern of the 'dying god', but there are several other incidents in the Gospel to remind us of features frequent, if not universal, in the 'pattern'. There is, for instance, the *agon* in the garden, though it is now—and this is very significant—an interior and not an external combat. There is the striking of the victim by the servant of the high priest. We notice that at the last supper Jesus Christ not only takes the customary corn and fruit, bread and wine, it is the Passover meal to which he gives a new significance. The Old Testament had already given an added meaning to what appears to have been part of an older fertility rite; now the like meal is a 'new testament' in flesh and blood. The daughters of Sion weep for him on his way to Calvary, much as their mothers had wept there centuries before for the dying

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Corn-God, Tammuz—to the horror of the prophet Ezekiel. There are many parallels in the literature of the 'dying god' to the opening of tombs and the raising of the dead which, we read in St Matthew's gospel, accompanied the Crucifixion. The subsequent 'descent into hades', the underworld, of which we read, not indeed in the Gospels but in the epistles of St Peter and St Paul, is one of the more universal features of the 'pattern'. Very striking too is the Easter morning search the women for the body of the dead Christ; and we notice that it is not Mary the Virgin but Mary the sinner, to whom much had been forgiven because she had loved much, who takes the lead. 'They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him', she says. In her language the word for 'my Lord' must have been Adoni; and only some inhibition of mistaken reverence can prevent us from being reminded of Aphrodite, seeking and weeping for Adonis, 'for he is dead'. According to another, St Luke's, account, the woman's search is greeted with the reproachful question; 'Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here; he is risen.' And however it may be pictured or conceived, as a return from departed life as in Mesopotamia, as life issuing from only apparent death as in Egypt, as a final and definitive attainment of life in a new and immortal dimension as by St Paul, the answer to the search of Aphrodite or Astarte or Isis or Mary Magdalene is the same. 'The King is dead; long live the King' is the constant motif of the mysteries of the dying god in all their varieties and guises, elevations and debasements.

I have stressed—it may be thought that I have grossly overstressed—some similarities between the Christian and pagan mysteries. I must leave to another occasion a discussion of their very important differences, and of what a believing Christian is to make of all this. But before we can profitably discuss these differences at all, perhaps something should be said about symbols and symbolism, and about the very important contribution which the psychology of the unconscious has made to this subject in general, and to that of the 'dying god' in particular.

Whether we are comparing the Christian and pagan mysteries, or whether we are comparing pagan 'dying gods' among themselves, we shall, I suggest, only confuse the issue if we fail to distinguish — at least in principle — between a symbol as a bare observable or recorded fact, and the meaning or interpreta-

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tion of the fact. We cannot at once argue from a similarity of fact to a similarity, let alone an identity, of meaning; as Frazer seemed inclined to do. Whatever a serpent on a pole 'meant' to an Israelite in the desert, or to a fourth-century Greek, it did not mean, as for us, that its bearer belongs to an Army Medical Corps; but nor can I say *a priori* that those 'meanings' for different minds (and meaning is meaningless except in relation to some mind) are unrelated. All must depend on the evidence of those minds themselves. And here I would repeat and emphasise what Professor Frankfort said so excellently in his last talk: 'The appeal of religious symbols is not dependent on a correct understanding of their original meaning. Once created, their lasting forms challenge the imagination; they may be charged with a new significance which they themselves called forth, and may stimulate a new integration in alien surroundings.' Incidentally, that is a very perfect description of the functioning of what Jung calls archetypes, which are not at all (as Professor Frankfort seems to suppose) to be *acccepted a priori* but by contrariwise to be postulated as in some unknown way *existing a priori*, by reason solely of the empirical evidence. But nor are they something fixed and immutable uninfluenced by the stimuli that arouse them, or by the new significance which they themselves call forth. As Dr Austin Farrer, talking of our dying god or divine priest-king, has well put it: 'When human kings arose, invisible divine kings stood behind their thrones... Now, if kings arose with divine support, we might suppose that the divine king was already known: for how can the human king be clothed with divine authority except by a divine king already acknowledged? But then, on the other hand, until men have seen human kings, how can they know what a divine king would be? In fact, the human king and his divine archetype arise at once; each makes the other.'

Psychologists tell us that symbols are polyvalent. This means that the same symbol can have a variety of meanings—though usually interrelated meanings—for different minds, or even for the same mind. But it means also that the meaning of a true symbol is not exhausted when we have found some rational formula which will define or 'explain' it. A living symbol is very much more than a shorthand device for what can be expressed more fully and accurately. A symbol cannot only be thought about and restated conceptually; it can also be imagined, intuited,

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seen or heard, felt. A symbol, as we say, 'does something to us', it moves us, shifts our centre of awareness, changes our values. Whether it is just looked at or heard, acted out, painted out, written out or danced out, it arouses not only thought, but delight, fear, awe, horror, and the rest. Here we touch on one of the big differences between Freud and Jung. Freud seems to have viewed the symbol *only* as a source of disguised and disgreeable information for the resisting consciousness. Jung saw that it was very much more than that; that it was the very instrument which, just because it was polyvalent, transformed consciousness itself and thereby the sick personality. This is what Jung means when he calls the symbol the psychological machine which transforms energy into work, much as a turbine transforms the untamed, useless energy of a torrent into power that can be controlled and applied. He suggests incidentally that the so-called fertility rites did have an actual causal effect on the crops and the food supply; not indeed directly by sympathetic magic, but by releasing, directing, transforming the otherwise dissipated energy of primitive peoples into actual agricultural labour, which without them would have been a psychological impossibility.

However that may be, the analytical psychologist does watch the actual functioning of symbols produced in dream and phantasy by his patients, and by himself. He sees something at least of their actual causes and effects, and the rôle they consciously or unconsciously play in moulding character and behaviour for weal or woe; and he has a language or a jargon into which to translate their 'meaning'. And he finds this very noteworthy fact, that the old symbols and images and rites which we associate with the dying god are still brought forth spontaneously in the dreams of modern men, and are still, consciously or otherwise, immensely potent in shaping his life. The *rite d'entrée*, the plucking of the tree of life, the quenching and kindling of light and fire, the combat, the spilling of blood and water, the being made a fool of, the descent into the underworld, the search for the buried treasure—all these, in countless different guises, are regular features of analytical healing—just as they have been found to be regular features of the seeming gibberish of the old alchemists. But most notably he finds the *motif* of the central sacrifice, the putting to death of the old ruler of the personality, the old king or divinity or mediator with life and divinity, the dominant psychological

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function of the sick personality, whose powers have waned, whose usefulness has been outlived, and who must die if a more robust successor is to take his place and healthy life is to revive. For always the priestly law holds good, in the individual as in society: It is expedient that one should die for the whole, lest the whole perish. The dying god is not just an obsolete museum-piece for the study of archaeologists. Analytical psychology has limitations which we must yet consider; but at least it has shown that the dying god is not dead: he is still very active and alive.

Note: Fr Victor White's second talk will appear in the March issue of BLACKFRIARS.

THE REAL ANSWER TO COMMUNISM

DOUGLAS HYDE

SEVERAL times since I left the Communist Party nearly four years ago to become a Catholic, young priests have told me that they proposed engaging in argument or debate with members of the Communist Party. In every case they have been convinced that they had not only been given all the answers to the Marxists when they were in the seminary but, in addition, that those arguments were so devastating, so unanswerable, that any audience, any Communist even (if he were honest), would at once be obliged to accept them and to admit the intellectual defeat of Marxism. But it is not as easy as that, as a brief discussion of the lines they proposed to follow and an indication on my part of the answers which the Communists were likely to produce has usually soon demonstrated.

It is absolutely right that the young priest should be sent out with a knowledge of Marxism—for it is now, apart from anything else, the basis of all education from the elementary school to the university in nearly a quarter of the world today—and it is obviously necessary that he should be given entirely convincing answers at the time, or the consequence might well be that our seminaries would begin to produce members of the Communist Party instead of Catholic priests. But, when visiting seminaries,

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