

THE PATHOS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN RELIGION

On the basis of studies of the last fifty years, the term 'Mediterranean' has come to acquire an ethnographic, linguistic, and religious value, besides its purely physical and geographic meaning. If anthropology today speaks of a 'Mediterranean race'—located between the extreme west of Europe and the peninsula of Malacca—archeology speaks of a 'Mediterranean civilisation'. Of this civilisation, perhaps even the Indian revelations of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa do not mark the ultimate limit. It derived from a particularly evolved Neolithic, reached its apogee on the island of Crete in the Bronze Age, and spread from there all through the basin of the Mediterranean, continental Greece and Asia Minor (where alternate contacts and conflicts, not necessary to specify here, had characterised for millennia the relations between peoples of various races). This civilisation was succeeded by a more composite one, called the Mycean, with the Achaeans as its fulcrum, a people who had already proved their maritime and warlike skill in Anatolia, between the shores of the Black Sea and the Sporades. Linguistics, in turn, speaks of a 'Mediterranean idiom'. Linguistic studies, in fact, reveal a whole series of toponymic, phonetic,

and morphological relations (constantly growing) between the western Mediterranean, i.e., the Iberian-Basque, Ligurian, Libyan (including the entire Nile delta), Sicilian, and Sardinian world, and the eastern Mediterranean, that is, the Aegean-Anatolian-Caucasian world, including pre-Semitic Syria, Phoenicia, and Canaan. As a result we now take the Mediterranean origin of the Basques and Etruscans for granted. The problem of the Dravidian-Mediterranean congruence, on the other hand, is still debated. Finally, the history of religion speaks of the 'Mediterranean religions'. And precisely as the linguist investigates the problem in what measure and under what conditions the historically ascertained Mediterranean languages betray the influence of the common pre-Indo-European substratum, so the historian of religion, with the same justification, seeks to find out in what measure and under what conditions a common religious substratum, the pre-Aryan, pre-Semitic, pre-Hellenic, and pre-Latin, has operated as a leaven within the body of the historically ascertained religions in the area of the Mediterranean race in general, and more particularly, in the lands enclosing the double basin of the Mediterranean, east and west.

I have used the word 'leaven' purposely, because such was the Mediterranean civilisation for the Aryan-European immigrants: a yeast which fermented within the more recent and totally uncultivated communities, inducing them—once they had become less barbarous—to get aware of themselves and take hold of the world. This is one of the many miracles which history records and which must be believed, even if it has not been canonised in apt old axioms come down through the centuries. What has been said about the conquered Greek and the barbaric victor holds for all times, even the proto-historic.

Such a miracle, then, could be wrought by the contact between most diverse men, in so far as the newcomers had the gift of active receptivity, the capacity, in other words, to elaborate the inheritance of ideas which was and is the object of uninterrupted research by scholars of the first order—Sergi and Messo, Debrunner and Galassi, Evans and Nilssen, Picard and Dussaud, Pestalozza and Patroni, Kalinka and Persson, Glotz, Austran, and Pryluski, Halbherr and Pernier, Gordon Childe and Marshall, Fick and Trombetti, Meillet and Kretschmer, Schukhardt, Schulze, and Nehring, Terracini and Bertoldi, Ribezzo and Kannengiesser, Benveniste, Chantraine, and Cuny, Menendez and Pidal and Tovar, Untersteiner and Schuhl. These are only the most distinguished. Each of them has a highly personal point of view and sometimes disagrees either with his colleagues or with himself—Nilsson, for example. But

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they are men of faith and of good faith, without which not only this work but any research would miss its first aim. Such scholars made of their science—ethnology, religion, archeology, linguistics, philosophy—the instruments for the reconstruction of the Mediterranean cultural world which was the substratum, as we have said, of later civilisations.

Although the difficulty of research and disagreements among the researchers have created and create grave obstacles, delays, and controversies, the work, nevertheless, has continued unimpeded, thanks not only to the labour of the great scholars but also to that of their students, the followers and continuators of a doctrine which cannot be left to die.

If we look at the systems our research has created, we have in some cases the certainty, in others a suspicion that they do not hold absolutely. They boast a merely empirical value. They are instruments of research, an order imposed on the intricate skein of problems so that they can be approached in some way: obligatory stages which serve only the scholar and which are unfailingly modified by science. They are necessary experiences, however, and it would be a mistake not to recognise that.

Two simple truths can be extracted from this diversity of theory, two great truths: truths, note well, not innovations.

The first is that it is not possible to comprehend and therefore reconstruct the religious thought of a people without investigating the cultural complex (hunting, pastoral, agricultural, etc.) which this thought persistently follows. The other is that in the complex, larger or smaller, of deities which every polytheism possesses, an inevitable sifting takes place, based on the way of life of the gods themselves. Those gods who had nothing to say to men, impassive, strong only in a kind of absent omnipotence, suffered a rapid decline, withered to shadows almost without significance, became 'idle', in a word. The others, vigilant, industrious, sentient to human joy and sorrow, had a longer life: in substance, their pathos guaranteed them immortality.

The Mediterranean religion, according to what we know today, either entirely ignored or quickly eliminated the 'idle' while exalting the living gods and assuming for them a life full of intensity, impulse, and passion; a life which might be called heroic, if that term could be applied to those who stand above the hero.

I have selected three essential moments of this divine life: birth, love, and death, for it is in those moments that the divine life becomes most similar to our human one; both are constrained by the same fatality and open to the same hope of resurrection. Such a view should not seem

inadequate for its lack of historical orthodoxy. I should like to hold with Mircea Eliade¹ that in dealing with the history of religion the emphasis must be laid on the term 'religion' rather than on the term 'history'. In fact, nothing more engages man, the whole man, than religion. It forms his conscience, orients his aims, impregnates his culture (which has been the fertile humus of religious experience), and determines his ultra-terrestrial aspirations. Confronted by such a puzzle, any form of objectivity (which consists in the isolation of facts and data without taking into consideration this vaster complex; without, in short, attempting an interpretation) would come to naught. That realm of *probité scientifique* has had its time and is no longer satisfactory today.

The life of the Mediterranean goddess often contains a set of opposites. She has a second and different way of being, which does not deny the first but heightens it and gives it significance. The goddess mother and virgin; the goddess slaughterer and, at the same time, tamer of wild beasts; the goddess mother and yet lover of her son: all these are not contradictions but amplifications of ways of behaviour, as silence is an amplification of song and shadow of light. Thus we know of goddesses who have been born; but we know also of the goddess who has had no birth, the goddess *apator* and *ameter*: *apator* and *ameter*, because there could not have been a father and mother capable of having generated her in her present powerful personality. In this sense life commences with her. Behind the goddess is a cosmic solitude, tolerable only to the divine; for the human would succumb. The orphan is known also in the history of man; only the history of the gods knows the not-conceived, the not-delivered, the not-born. Life without dawn and without dusk; life which begins—if this verb can be used for one *ab aeterno*—at the apex and spreads out at the apex, without ascent or descent, until the end of its myth. Gaea has no parents, neither does Physis, Isis, or Geshtin; Aphrodite (where she is not the daughter of Zeus and Dione) knew an unbounded matrix stained with the blood of Uranus. Demeter, Thetis, Ephyra, and Hekate present most singular and significant genealogical variants.

To be *ameter* certainly carries more weight for the goddess than to be *apator*; the motherless goddess has eliminated the other self which produced her, either autonomously or with a partner. She becomes a *primum*, beyond whom there is nothing alive. The lack of a father, on the other hand, only enhances the importance of the mother who bore her, an

¹ 'Psychologie et Histoire des Religions' in *Eranos Jahrbuch*, XIX, Zürich, 1951, p. 250.

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obvious reflection of that gynaeocratic order which characterised the Mediterranean world. Kore is the daughter—in the Mediterranean system—above all, of Demeter, while the birth of Athena from her father's head represents the most alarming of the victories the patrilinear regime could have achieved over the opposite order. It is the ugly prodigy excogitated by the Achaeans in the face of the eternal miracle of maternity which nature had suggested to the adoration of the Mediterraneans.

But how is the divine birth expressed in myth? The history of the son—note well, not that of the daughter—is rich in pathos throughout the Mediterranean. Apollo and Zeus were persecuted even before coming into the world (and Leto resolved her problem by bargaining with the island of Delos for refuge; Rhea, by means of an exemplary prayer to her parents, or rather, to her mother, who also had known a maternity harassed by the persecution of Uranus); Hephaestus was abandoned by Hera, who flung him out of heaven, while Adonis was hidden in a magic coffer by Aphrodite, whose lover he was to become one day. A goatish breast nourished Attis as well as Zeus in that Aegean world which is so rich in goats. A stone served to save Zeus, and a colt, Poseidon, from the blind voracity of Cronus.

Entwined with the theme of life there is thus the sense, or rather, the destiny of death: it pursues the creature about to be born (and it is not yet sure that he will be brought to light) or already born (but it is not certain that he can survive). For the rest, Heracles, Attis, Adonis, Dionysus, and even Zeus died at the prime of life (if we want to believe this story about Zeus in spite of Callimachus, who called it one of the many lies of the Cretans).

The many tribulations of birth do not exclude a certain softness in detail. A smiling meadow for Apollo coming into the world, and a golden ribbon to bind his swaddling clothes; or a ball, golden, of course, as the first plaything of Zeus; or else a varied range of games already marked divine: the game of many jewels, with which Hephaestus adorns Thetis and Eurynome, his saviours in the sea—the first test of the god who was to become the master of smithery; the game of the lyre invented by Hermes barely out of the wicker cradle—the god above all of '*metis*, skilled inventor of arts but sterile to art', as Carlo Diano² has acutely observed; the game of his thievish jokes and famous betrayals; the game—

² '*metis*, che è feconda inventrice di arti, ma sterile all'arte'; *Forma ed Evento*, Venezia, 1952, p. 68.

at least in its spontaneity—of the self-defence of Heracles against the deadly serpents. His was an infancy clearly characterised as such, even if it jumped the ordinary stages, if the swaddling clothes were soon torn, the crib abandoned, the childhood vices early forgotten, by the *kuros* who is already the protagonist of manly undertakings.

The birth of the divine daughter, on the contrary, is much less eventful. The myth of Lete is instructive in this sense. She is the persecuted and mournful mother not so much of Artemis as of Apollo. The former is born almost without labour and assists her mother already in the difficulties of the new birth. With these precedents, her mischievous plucking of hairs from the chest of the big Brontes, who has taken her good-naturedly on his knee (as narrated by Callimachus) loses its flavour; while the pallid infancies of Selene, Hera, and Athena are of very little interest, especially in comparison with the emotionally rich stories of the divine son. But the gynaeocratic order of the environment, I think, helps us to find an explanation: the story of the goddess is not so much concerned with the baby who is born or with the budding girl as with the goddess who is ready for marriage, almost as if her history began at this point. (To the objection that Athena and Artemis were 'pure' virgins in the Greek religion it is easy to respond that they were never thought to be such by the Mediterraneans, who wanted them to be as expert in the one as in the other state of grace; nor were they thought to be virgins even by the Achaeans, whose women invoked them as 'mothers' to obtain their aid in their own labours.) This, then, is why we know nothing of the childish games of Persephone or of Europa while we are well informed of their maiden diversions in the flowered meadow, so dramatically interrupted by the violence of the ravisher. This is why Demeter could do nothing against Persephone's marital destiny. At this point Kerényi's definition of Hera, '*she is the Frau als Göttin*',³ is valid also for Kore.

Thus even without the mother—or rather, in spite of an instinctive though useless opposition on her part—the cycle of the *kore* is completed. One cannot say the same of the *kuros*, of whom the goddess—mother or not—always seems the initiatrix. Isis instructs her son Horos to avenge the father; Gaea arms Cronus to defend her against Uranus who is threatening her; Demeter entrusts Triptolemus not only with the plough but with the secret of triple tillage—as a vase painter of the fifth century shows; and

³ On the life of Demeter-Kore, with which Kerényi has dealt most acutely, see among others 'Mythologisches über Mutter und Tochter' in *Der Psychologe*, Bern, 1951. This is the most recent exposition of his ideas on the subject.

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Phytalus, with the culture of the fig. Cybele makes Attis her faithful hunting companion; and Athena starts the flower of the heroes—the minor gods?—on the most arduous undertakings. This, also, contributes something to our argument.

There is no consensus in the identification of androgynism in certain strangely composed figures: Aphrodite of Cyprus, who unexpectedly appears bearded, like the image of Ishtar taken from the excavations at Susa; Zeus Stratios of Caria and Cappadocia, who has breasts in clusters like the goddess of Ephesus; Isis, called ‘Horos-femmina’ or ‘Ra-femmina’; or Çiva, called *ardhanariçvara*, which means ‘half-woman’: cultural remains, a mythic reconstruction of which would be extremely difficult and always debatable. Let us consider instead the pure androgyne of the Aegeans, Agdistis. This divinity—so full and complete in itself, so inexhaustibly satiated that it suffered neither lack nor excess and was thus non-changing—could not stand its own mute sterility. Whence issued Cybele, free and covetous, with the feminine principle dominating; and also Attis, son before being lover. Incest finds here, I would not say its justification, but its consecration, in the divine act itself which, joining the mother to the son, takes both back to the lost completeness. It is an act always possible but always attended by the same anxiety, the same emotion, the same weakness as with mortals.

The failure of the androgyne underlines the triumph of the eternal feminine in a twofold experience: the generative autonomy which exalts the isolated matrix (Gaea is the first autonomous generator of meta-historic times, and the Hera of the Homeric hymn to Apollo Pythios is certainly not the last); or the sacred marriage in a varied range of encounters. Geshtin says to Tammuz, ‘Oh brother, apple of my eye, where is your sister? I am your sister. Where is your mother? I am your mother, the queen Eanna who cries “Oh my husband, oh my son”.’ And Ishtar, who has cast covetous glances at the beauty of Gilgamesh, ‘Oh Gilgamesh, be my lover, honour me with your love; be my bridegroom; I want to be your bride, I will have prepared for you a chariot ornamented with lapis lazuli and gold . . . ’; Isis to Osiris, ‘I am your sister Isis, . . . your divine seed being in my womb, I have brought into the world Horos’; and Anchises to Aphrodite on Mt. Ida, ‘Now neither the gods nor men born to die can restrain me here from joining myself to you in love—quickly then . . . ’; and Zeus to Hera, ‘Now let us lie here, enjoying the pleasures of love: for never has desire for mortal woman or goddess so

wound itself around my heart and made it slave . . . '. These are just a few among the many voices longing for *hieros gamos*. But in what sense are the nuptials sacred? We must not forget that there is a mythic sacredness because the participants are gods, and there is a ritual sacredness when divine action gives significance and direction to human action, gives, that is, life to life. In other words, the encounter between Demeter and Jason in Crete on the ploughed black fields has much more significance for an agrarian society than any other, consummated, e.g., in the grotto of Maia or in the meadow which blooms in honour of Hera. It is not by chance, certainly, that this sacramental act improves the harvest and thus is providential for men, just as, later on, the union of Kore with Hades in the kingdom of the dead will be providential for those initiated to the mysteries. Great mysteries, those of Kore-no-longer-Kore, which require a severe initiation; lesser, those of Demeter, in which the entire agrarian community participates. Thus every couple is made godlike and repeats the divine act which, in metahistoric times, preceded and prepared the ploughing and sowing of the fields. Hence the orgy, the group experience, as the transmitter of energy and life.

I have mentioned the kingdom of the dead. The goddess enters it living and resplendent in her nuptial dress, not to die but to complete her own cycle. The little *kore* in her dies, to be reborn annually and to repeat the mystery for the sake of the adoring initiates. This is the most common type of death suffered by the great immortal goddess, and if in Persephone it assumes a special significance, it is all the same resolved in a cycle of rebirth. The wife becomes virgin again by the sacred magic of a restorative bath.

It is a major question and still debated whether the goddess dies completely, whether she thus experiences an end like that of humans. The findings of Kramer,⁴ e.g., have clarified the Sumerian precedent of the famous story of Ishtar who descends to the nether regions to liberate Tammuz. This is the story of Inanna, overcome down below by the deadly glances of the seven Anunnaki in the service of Ereshkigal. Inanna is transformed into a corpse and suspended from a pole. She will return to life later by the work of Enki. Is this a myth of death or a genuine reflection of a ritual which, through the suspension from a tree or from a pole, brings fecundity and life? And what are we to think of the violent death

⁴ *Sumerian Mythology*, Philadelphia, 1944, pp. 86 *et seq.*

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of the minor 'Potnians' such as Gorgo, Ariadne, Helen, Pasiphae, Phaedra, and Semele? And what of the obstinate immortality of the great 'Potnians' such as Gaea, Rhea, Hera, Demeter, Athena, Isis, and even Ishtar? How could she die, yield, submerge herself, she, the first and unique source of life, the inexhaustible matrix, the eternal creatrix? Where there is no myth of creation, there we see the feminine principle—the Gaea of Hesiod—who produces out of herself the partner and with the partner the divine offspring. Where the act of creation exists, continuity is entrusted to the divine Mother or to the divine Prostitute, and the divinities of the Ishtaritum repeat the action. The goddess does not die because the Mediterraneans see and adore in her that eternal source of life which is in woman. She is inexhaustible in her contribution, which she lives and suffers for a long time. And therefore it is so much more precious, especially compared with the fleet burning contribution of the male.

Yet the goddess suffers the pathos of the death of the *paredro*, and weeps. The divine tears, like prayer, leave men pensive, more on the road to consolation, however, than to despair. The goddess, then, weeps and busies herself with the work of resurrection, a task whose pathos grows in proportion to its arduousness and the remoteness of its fulfilment. Thus Ishtar, descending into the subterranean kingdom for the redemption of Tammuz, divests herself at each portal of the adornments of her beauty, and finally is reduced to the sacred nudity of the penitent who implores the return of her lover. Thus Isis gathers the pieces of the body of Osiris, which were scattered by Seth, and joins them by magic, after having searched, a pilgrim of love, as far as Byblos, to dig the coffin of the god out of the tangle of reeds. Thus the anguish of Cybele, who cannot bear the death of Attis, and the anguish of Aphrodite for Adonis and of Artemis for Hippolytus, whom divine 'witchcraft' will bring to resurrection.

The death of the young god is not apparent, nor even final, and the faithful—who, moreover, have discovered already in their experience as farmers the moving phenomenon of spontaneous rebirth in bulbs—the faithful, as I have said, see death finally conquered and the way to heaven opened by the resurrection of the god.