

THE WORSHIP OF MYSTERY

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FAITH and Worship, like Christian life itself, are principally concerned with mystery, the divine mysteries with which we are brought into contact through the Incarnation. It is no mere coincidence that both the Christian faith and the Christian liturgy are essentially bound up with the Christian mystery: and to go even further, the very mysteries of pagan cults apparently so foreign to any aspect of the Christian religion, are themselves related by essential ties to the faith and the worship of the Christian. We must first establish the connection between all these elements before we can see the importance of the life of faith in the life of worship.

When man is confronted by the real God he is at once presented with that which is all knowable and so infinite in its perfection as to be beyond his own capacity to know. The reality of the divine being is too intelligible for man, like the intensity of light that obscures the objects of vision. Confronted by the reality of God he cannot recount what he sees, but rather is he overcome by the awareness of what is utterly beyond his possession or mastery. This is the Mystery and man's first attitude is not one of affirmation but of worship, the attitude of the creature before the source of every creature.

And Moses said: I will go and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the Lord saw that he went forward to see, he called to him out of the midst of the bush and said: Moses, Moses. And he answered: Here I am. And he said: Come not nigh hither, put off the shoes from thy feet; for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground. And he said: I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face: for he durst not look at God. (Exodus 3.)

Before the mystery of 'I am who am' Moses bowed down accepting the word of God in faith and worshipping the object of his belief. Faith is the attitude of man towards the 'I am who am' as soon as he perceives this reality. St Paul shows how faith in this way was always the source of divine worship. Faith, he

says, is the substance of things to be hoped for . . . 'By faith we understand that the world was framed by the word of God, and that from invisible things visible things might be made. By faith Abel offered to God a sacrifice . . .' (Hebrews 11). The effect of the Presence is to lead the human creature to offer sacrifice beginning with the sacrifice of his mind to all Truth, abandoning its very life-spring in its autonomy in judging, but concluding in the full, external sacrifice offering the whole being and all being back to its source.

The mystery of faith, then, is the mystery of cult. This is not limited to the specifically Christian faith and worship; for the Presence with its infinite depths of reality is everywhere and at all times. Every bush, every small flower and great tree is in fact burning and not consumed by the Presence which is closer to it than it is to itself. That is what St Paul means: 'By faith we understand that the world was framed by the word of God'. From every creature comes the voice of God and within is discovered the source of every creature. This every man is bound to begin to realise; when the storms rise and destroy his flocks and harvest, he feels his very being is threatened and he turns towards the mysterious source of his being. He placates his gods with sacrifice; he invents elaborate ceremonies round the elemental waters and fire and earth. Truly he 'invents' them, for he finds them in part within him. This is not Christian sacrifice or Christian faith, but it is man confronted with Him who Is, and man reacts in the same way to the same mystery—he worships and he believes. Man, every man, cannot escape this relationship with the Presence from whom he derives his being; it is inevitable that there should be a natural disposition in human nature for faith and worship, because God has made this nature and this nature wherever it exists is dependent upon him, with a dependence which is that of a conscious being. Consciousness reacts to the great Mystery of God by faith and worship. If you present a young animal for the first time with water you do not have to demonstrate the rubrics of lapping it with the tongue or sucking at it through the lips or diving into it, as the case may be. The animal has within it the dispositions to drink the way his fathers drank or swim the way his fathers swam. The presence of the water immediately calls forth this power. The presence of the Mystery immediately brings forth capacities of faith and worship which were part of the man's nature as an

intelligent creature. The natural disposition in man for faith and worship lies in his being related to the Being.

But where faith is concerned outside the true revelation of God by himself, these dispositions give a conflicting and cacophonous sound when they are brought to the surface of reality. The beliefs are infinite in their diversity and contradictions. But the worship, although so varied and diverse in its manifestation of cult and sacrifice, nevertheless has a certain unity, and approaches much closer to the true worship, as St Paul pointed out to the Athenians: 'What therefore you worship without knowing it, that I preach to you'. And he goes on to preach in terms of this essential presence of God in all things; the great Mystery that all are bound to worship knowingly or without knowing. (Acts 17.) The rites already express, without the human expression of words, the realities of the Mystery; they show by symbols and gestures what revelation is to make explicit in the faith. In other words the primitive religions—and indeed all religions that have developed in good intention and apart from the specific guidance of God who gives the faith—have expressed in these outward symbols the inner mystery, neither of which they properly understood. St Paul preaches in words of revelation and faith what the Athenians have expressed in their unknowing celebrations of the mysteries. '*Teste David cum Sybilla.*' The rites surrounding the Dying God expressed an attempt to share in the redemption by Christ without the knowledge that there be a Christ. These mysteries, then, are the first unwitting gestures of faith trying to express the inexpressible, trying to come into real contact with the 'Reality' which mysteriously lies hidden beneath things of any existence.

We can say now, with our faith instructed by the revelation of Jesus Christ, that the Mystery of God present within and around and above all creation is the mystery of the Threefold Personal God. Before the Word became man to give us this faith, the Mystery was the same though man could not know. He tried to express the mystery and to receive the impress of its reality upon himself by means of religious cult. So he sacrificed to the Mystery, in honour of the Mystery, and in that central act of liturgical worship rather than in any words or traditional mythology he came near to piercing through the outer crust of appearance and reaching the Presence of the Triune. St Paul, in the same sermon to the Athenians, said that for the one approaching God it was

necessary to believe that he is and that he is the rewarder of the righteous. This in fact was what pagan worship professed in its sacrifice. It was because the primitive and the pagan approached God that they had an inkling of this fundamental belief. It could be seen, no doubt, in germ in some of their mythology and strange beliefs; but it really existed here in their sacrifice precisely because they were striving to approach the Mystery. In all this worship, therefore, the pagan was tasting the first sweetness of faith, and preparing the way for the true faith and true worship which sprang from the fuller, deeper revelation of the Mystery by Christ.

The modernist, of course, who denied the objective reality of this Mystery was led to maintain that the different ways of worshipping God or the gods gradually developed the different faiths, that instead of the worship being created by the Presence, the Presence in all the variety of explanation and relationship with the world was created by the worship; the faith emerged from the way people behaved in their religious worship. For the modernist the ancient phrase *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi* was made to mean that it was prayer in all its variety of expression, both verbal and dramatic, that created the creed, that, springing up from man's inner subconscious, the law of his psychology produced these extensions and projections of his ideas and so became his beliefs. The modernist seems to have had his facts perfectly correct, but he leapt to the wrong conclusions and put the cart before the horse, the cut before the knife. He was not sufficiently sure of the objective reality of the Presence to see that when the sun shines vigorously the plants curl up in different shapes according to the nature of their fronds and stems, and when the Presence of the Mystery shines on Man he bows down and his bows and gestures of reverence vary according to the nature of his history and culture.

But having made this simple adjustment by putting objective truth first before subjective apprehension of the truth, then we can see how important is the dictum of *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*. The law of Prayer is the law of human nature presented by the divine mystery. At first this mystery is presented by the rather vague and not always certain voice of nature, with its regular seasons and its cycle of life and death. And from this man bursts forth in praise of Sun and Rain, and he bakes the newly-reaped corn in the shape

of the moon and takes it to his goddess. Next the mystery is presented by the certain but diverse and multitudinous voice of many prophets beginning with the greatest of Prophets, Moses himself, who, after Adam, had approached the Mystery nearer than any living man. From this contact burst forth the prayer and praise of the Israelites:

Let us sing to the Lord, for he is gloriously magnified: the horse and the rider he hath thrown into the sea. . . . Let fear and dread fall upon them, in the greatness of thy arm; let them become immovable as a stone, until thy people, O Lord, pass by. . . . Thou shalt bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance, in thy most firm habitation which thou hast made, O Lord: thy sanctuary, O Lord, which thy hands have established. The Lord shall reign for ever and ever. . . . So Mary the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand: and all the women went forth after her with timbrels and with dances. And she began the song to them, saying: Let us sing to the Lord, for he is gloriously magnified: the horse and the rider he has thrown into the sea. (Exodus 15, 1-21.)

Or again Moses breaks forth in a prayer springing from his contact with the Presence of the Mystery:

Hear, O ye heavens, the things I speak; let the earth give ear to the words of my mouth. Let my doctrine gather as the rain, let my speech distil as the dew, as a shower upon the herb, and as drops upon the grass. Because I will invoke the name of the Lord: give ye magnificence to our God. The works of God are perfect, and all his ways are judgments: God is faithful and without iniquity, he is just and right. (Deuteronomy 32, 1-4.)

And the Presence in the cloud covered the tabernacle and the glory of the Lord filled it, so that even Moses could not enter for the brightness of that splendour (Exodus, 40). And in honour of that presence came the goats and rams and lambs, the oxen and the turtledoves to be slaughtered and eaten, or burnt before the Lord who is mighty and the source of all life. So the Israelites, centred on the presence of the Mystery, necessarily prayed and worshipped and believed. But it was not permitted them to enter into the inner sanctuary of the mystery and their faith and worship remained crude and superficial.

Finally, the Mystery is presented by the one Word of God, permitting man to be enveloped in the mystery of the Trinity

itself. The mystery now is the concrete one of the second person of the Trinity become man; the Word made flesh brings the Presence down into the life of everyman with the result that his reverence and worship is more interior than before and more interlocked with his faith. But even so it is not even now a question of intellectual affirmations which are subsequently expressed in the form of rites and ceremonies. This was a much later development. At first it remained the simple approach of the worshipper to the Truth of God become man. The prayers and actions of the men and women thrown together round Christ were at first those of people who are certain only of one thing—the saving mystery of this man. St Peter expressed his conviction that this man was the Son of the living God. And the apostles fell at his feet in supplication at times of peril: 'Lord save us, we perish'. But when it came to accepting the different truths which the Word was revealing to them to constitute their faith, they first of all preferred to cling to this one saving Presence without any further judgments. So when our Lord reveals the duty of eating his flesh and drinking his blood which was to become the heart of Christian worship, the apostles prefer to repeat their act of faith in the Presence without committing themselves to further affirmations: 'To whom can we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life!' Until after Pentecost, at least, they are weak and unsure of themselves in expressing Christian truths which were becoming the articles of the faith, but they were readier to do and to act their acceptance of the Mystery of Emmanuel, God with us.

Christ, therefore, taking into his hands the loaf to be blessed on that vigil of the Pasch, says 'This is my body. . . . Do this in commemoration of me.' Immediately the action was taken on by the followers of Christ as the 'mystery of faith', but as a mystery that of its essence implied worship, something to be done in memory of the death on Calvary and in honour of the Father; and so they went from house to house breaking bread from that moment. But it was a thousand years before the successors of the apostles formulated the article of the Creed which expressed the precise nature of their action. And indeed up to the present day the Church seeks to formulate more clearly in what that simple action of worship precisely consists. At the Last Supper, however, the apostles possessed the real mystery; they took and ate and their faith was confirmed. And when the Church affirms that the

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apostles, being so close to the mystery of the Incarnation, had an explicit faith in the whole body of Christian truth as it was later to appear, this is surely not to be understood in terms of a kind of formulation of the pages of Denzinger in their minds' eye, but rather in their accepting the Mystery of the Real Presence in its totality and living it in worship and in preaching, i.e., in action towards God and towards man.

To sum up, the Presence of God is the Mystery which lies at the heart of every religion and therefore of every form of worship. The recognition of this mystery calls forth incipient faith, which without revelation is formulated in a thousand and one strange systems of gods and spirits, but which is expressed in action in rites and ceremonies, also diverse in the extreme, but which express the same unformulated faith in the creaturely dependence on God and the necessity to recognise this dependence. When at length faith becomes a supernatural act informed by the revelation of this presence, the same relationship exists between this true faith and the worship that springs from it. The fact of the revealed mystery is accepted by the true believer, and this acceptance demands first of all the action of worship which is also the full confession of faith; and as faith is thus fulfilled in public prayer, so is it perfected in its wholeness and sorted out into its parts. *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi.*

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