

ment of 'scientific' causality, which is a concept of causality the correctness of which philosophers, and not only scholastic ones, have practically always denied. It seems therefore that Dr Gledhill's apologetic effort to safeguard causality really misses the fundamental point. Statistical physics in no way endangers the validity of the true principle of causality, but it does invalidate the principle of scientific causality.

It is unfortunately true that the languages used by different disciplines have diverged so far that the philosopher, who is called upon to produce a general synthesis from their data, is often at a loss to understand the correct meaning of a scientific statement. Nothing could better illustrate the urgent need for persons who are trained both in philosophy and in the various sciences and if these lines could contribute to the realisation of this, their purpose will have been amply fulfilled.

EDGAR TASCHDJIAN.

POLISH CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS

GENERALLY speaking, we may say that it is the conviction of the ordinary people of Poland that no country has been more entirely Christian from the beginning than their own. Our Lord was born in Poland, they might say, in the midst of a snowy winter and in a thatched cottage such as we still see today, and resembling those found in Ireland, in some isolated place in a distant forest. Although there are caves in certain rocky and mountainous regions in Poland, nevertheless they are remote from the daily life of the majority of the people, and so scattered as to pass unnoticed. Moreover these caves have horrible stories attached to them. Either they are the more or less magical property of the devil who hides in them treasures of uncertain origin, or else they were used by the notorious brigands of the Tatras Mountains who have such a romantic history.

So then the infant Christ came into the world in the heart of the Polish winter and in a thatched cottage or perhaps under the tumbledown roof of a barn or in the stable of some poor peasant. *Szopka*, a classical word meaning 'Christmas Crib' or a marionet theatre proper to the Christmas season, comes from *szopa*, a stall. The word seems to be connected with the French *échope*—like the word 'shop' in English for the pronunciation is the same, 'sz' being pronounced like 'sh'. At any rate, in the *Quo Vadis* of Sienkiewicz, the giant Ursus in speaking of Christ ejaculated: 'Oh, if only our people had been at Golgotha, they would have soon rescued the

Son of God!' Now we know that Ursus and Lydia, although unmistakably borrowed from English tradition, represent the people of Poland.

'If we had only been there!' It is as if one were to say that we would like to make this Jesus our own property because others do not understand him like we do. We are naturally Christian, for we must confess that nothing appears to have any value if we, or our country, have had no part in it. God assuredly is to some extent Polish and is not the Virgin the Queen of Poland? Hence Christmas is a great Polish feast. Witness the folklore contained in Polish carols and the treasures of homely thought they contain. Is not Bethlehem the city of bread? Is not Poland the country of corn?

A French writer travelling in Poland when it was still partitioned before the first World War pointed this out. Corn and bread; bread and corn; everything centres round this. Corn gives daily bread in abundance, bread yielded by these oceans of corn, wheat and barley; and the Bread of Life gives the corn of daily labour. There is a natural Eucharistic background in Poland whence springs the profound and active devotion to the blessed Sacrament; whence also that we may call the Eucharistic aspect of the Polish Christmas.

The sceptical historians of folklore will tell us that at the winter equinox the old pagans of Poland used to celebrate the fertility rites of the sun and the remembrance of the dead, a form of the legend of Proserpine. Whatever may be its origins, and whatever the Church has done in order to capture the soul of this people while respecting it, it is none the less certain that today Christmas is attended by secular rites which make Christmas a most homely feast. Christmas is full of thoughts of wheat, of bread and the heaven that Christ brought us in his presence in the Eucharist on the altar and in his Mystical Body among souls.

Sheaves of corn from the harvest are placed in the four corners of the principal room. Straw is spread on the floor, and, in memory of the crib, straw of different lengths is laid on the dining table at Christmas and this is used for guessing games. On top of the straw a sparkling clean white cloth is laid. This table placed clearly in view in the most important part of the room near the statue of our Lady and the Sacred Heart, with photographs of the family all round, looks quite like an altar. Indeed this is almost a liturgical occasion, a sacred banquet, a family rite. Indeed the Church's liturgy has a place because on Christmas Eve, after the appearance of the first star, the family kneel around this altar until it is time to leave for Midnight Mass. One or two lights, generally candles, are placed on the altar. All other lighting is extinguished for the time being. Food is placed on the table in an almost canonical

order, like vestments prescribed by the rubrics. As it is a vigil, fasting is observed and no meat is eaten then or throughout the preceding day. This rule is strictly adhered to and the meal becomes a kind of Sacrament. The bread is presented in different forms, plain or sugared, gingerbread or made with fruit. To sum up, it is the festival of the *matter* of the Eucharist.

As if to accentuate this and to bring in the Faith and the Church and the real Sacrament we have what might be called the 'lay hosts' or 'holy breads'—in Polish *opłata* (*oblata*). These are oblong pieces of biscuit made like altar breads with the usual patterns stamped on them—crosses, the *Christus* monogram and the divine Child. These are made by nuns and are blessed and distributed to the faithful of each Parish by the Sacristan. Two or three of these breads may be tied together with coloured paper and embellished with a holy picture or a golden star and given as presents. Sometimes the little packets are decorated with lace and paper angels much to the delight of children, and the nuns give them out to the good ones as prizes. Whether these breads are elaborate or simple the idea is always the same, they are 'lay hosts'.

The Christmas cakes are placed in a large dish and the meal cannot begin until all members of the family and guests have taken part in the 'breaking of bread', guests first, and the family in order afterwards. It is then that the season's greetings are expressed. The moment is a solemn one, full of peace, and all have a feeling of fellowship with the invisible world, not only with the departed of whom loving mention is now made, but also with all creation redeemed by God's grace, grace made tangible to us by the Child so soon to be born in the 'House of Bread' at Bethlehem and typified by the bread on the table before the participants. Preceded by the sign of the Cross it is a real spiritual communion. It is a reminder of Easter in the early days of the Church, of the *agape* of the first Christians and a foreshadowing of the Mass to follow at midnight.

It will not be out of place to mention here that in Poland it is the custom to be present at the Mass, *Rorate*, in honour of Our Lady, Mediatrix of Grace, every day at dawn throughout Advent. People love this Mass, and flock to it in every single church whether in town or village. If the bread ceremonies make one think of Demeter, this Mass emphasises that the Polish Christmas is pre-eminently Christian and has been so for centuries. The Mass, *Rorate*, has a poetic literature of its own, its own legends and its own established place in the national life. It existed when the lord of the manor came to assist at Mass with his retinue. At this Mass, a long white wax candle tied with a blue band is placed in the

most prominent place behind the altar and separate from the candles required by the rubrics. This candle represents the light of hope in the dark night of daily life.

The 'holy breads' retain their place of honour throughout the octave of Christmas; on a silver plate in aristocratic homes or upon a decorated dish among the peasants. They are used for blessing any new visitor to the house during the Christmas period or they are sent to friends or posted to dear ones living in exile in distant Siberia. We thought those times had gone but now they are here once more.

Anyone unable to be present with his relations at the 'Breaking of Bread' would feel the loss deeply. The faithful have generally been to Confession and Communion during Advent, but if there is a prodigal son in the family it is at this moment above all others that he will return to his father's house. Who can measure the effect that the remembrance of this ceremony of the bread may have upon the lost sheep of the family when he receives the 'holy bread' thus sent from home?

It is a sort of Mass in the living room, the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament at home. This custom however bears no relation to any custom of the primitive Church which would have been too mediterranean in style and too distant in time when Poland was converted to the faith. Nor most certainly is it connected with the organised paganism of Mount Olympus. From the soil to corn; from corn to the Bread of Life, and back again to the soil—this is the whole story.

Now that we are passing through a period of active liturgical renovation and of insistence on the different aspects of the Communion of Saints in the essential nature of the Church, and of the renewed Eucharistic attitude of Christians, it will be deeply interesting to study the presence of this simple rite in Poland and in the rest of the Slavonic countries. Other customs are the different *theophories*, the star of the three Wise Men that children carry about the village when singing their carols. There are also special Christmas shows—marionets of the Adoration of the Shepherds and of the Wise Men; the massacre of the innocents and the punishment of Herod—or shows by living actors the repertory of which consists in a combination of *commedia del arte*, mystery plays of the Middle Ages, and *auto da fé* in the manner of Calderon.

In their varied forms, fable and mystery, satire and lyric, national tradition and sacred history, combined, they merit a detailed study not as the relics of the Middle Ages but as an example of the continued growth of a people who has not lost its soul.

B. KREUZA.