

EURIPIDES AND CHRISTIANITY

As certain also of your own Poets have said

THE problem of the just pagan has haunted the imagination of Christendom. It troubled Dante. It raises for us the question—What is the relation of all that is noble in the pagan world to the Christian faith? How far was the mind of that world prepared by its past to receive that faith; how far was that preparative element the outcome of chance or of Divine purpose? And as we regard history in the light of a mere record of human activity or of the unfolding of that purpose, so will our answer be.

In the *De Civitate Dei*, Saint Augustine gathers together the history and the faculties of man and relates them to the Will of God. Eusebius entitled one of his books the *Præparatio Evangelica*. Clement of Alexandria wrote in the second century, "To the Jews was given the Law, to the heathens Philosophy, to guide them to Christ." And later in the same book, "Greek philosophy prepares the soul for receiving faith on which the truth builds knowledge" (*γνώσις*). And Augustine himself asserts in his *Retractations* that "what we now call the Christian religion existed among the ancients and was from the beginning of the human race until Christ Himself came in the flesh; from which time the already existing true religion began to be styled Christian."

Modern research has proved the theory of the *Præparatio Evangelica*. It has analysed it and classified its currents. It has become entangled in the fascination of its origins. The study of Greek religion discloses two current forms. There is the religion of Olympus, with its cold anthropomorphic gods; the formal and, if we may borrow the terminology of mysticism, the "external" religion of Greece. Secondly, there are the Mysteries—the vital, "in-

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ternal " religion. All mysteries contain two dominant forms—(1) a purification, preliminary to (2) a sacramental rite. In the cult of Dionysus we find the passion, death and resurrection of the god, from which the hope of immortality springs; the union of the votary with the god by the sacramental eating of a symbol of his body, or by spiritual espousals; the present life viewed as a purification for final union and perhaps a renewed purification after death. That of Attis contains the same elements, and in addition a Lent and Easter, with a sacred drama of the god's death and resurrection. Plato wrote of the Mystes, " whoever goes uninitiated to Hades will lie in mud, but he who has been purified and is fully initiate when he comes thither will dwell with the gods." It is hard to distinguish between this and " *extra ecclesiam nulla salus.*"

If Plato laid the foundation for Augustine and Aristotle for Aquinas, Euripides was, among the poets, in some measure the precursor of Christianity. In working to destroy the Homeric religion he struck through to a deeper stratum of thought, in that spirit which leads men to salvation by the " baptism of desire." His influence was wider in range and more intimate in operation than that of other classical writers. The later pagan world read Æschylus and Sophocles; they absorbed Euripides.

In approaching his position in the " evangelic preparation " we must first note two facts. He was born at Phlya, which was a centre of the Olympian religion and of the Mysteries. The influence of both permeated his boyhood. Secondly, he was four years old at the time of the Persian invasion. The victory over the Persians was the victory less of Athens than of the ideal for which Athens stood. Euripides was born into the intellectual awakening of Greece. It is the interaction of these influences

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which accounts for the difficulties and apparent inconsistencies in his work. He is the poet of philosophy; but he remains the imaginative boy of Phlya, transmuting into song the spiritual hopes of the Mysteries. And to them he returns at the end of his life to make the ultimate statement of his belief in the *Bacchæ*.

But before examining the *Bacchæ* in relation to the *Præparatio Evangelica* we must note the landmarks of his journey towards the religion of which that play is the expression. His work falls into three periods—those of his youth, his critical, and his constructive genius. A “mechanical” philosophy, realism, sympathy, and freshness characterize the first, and at its close Euripides rose immediately to his full height in the *Medea*. In this play and in the *Hecuba* he deals with the problem of wronged woman, and his answer is hate. As he writes it, it is a splendid and terrible answer, but one which bears no hope for humanity.

To the Greeks, life was the object of intense, conscious desire. Nowhere is the clinging to it more passionate than in their literature. Hades is not life, but the *Hippolytus* contains the first hint of a future life. “But if there is anything dearer than this life the darkness covers it . . . and we are sick with love for this thing that shines upon earth because we have no knowledge of another life nor any revelation of things below the earth. And so we are borne on legends.” It brings its reaction in Aristophanes’ taunt about “women who say that life is not life.” In the *Phrixus* it is carried further. “Who knoweth if the thing that we call death be life, and our life dying?” And in the *Medea* Euripides speaks of death as ἄλλο σχῆμα βίου and in the *Ion* as ἄλλας βιώτου μορφάς. In the *Helen* he states that “the individual mind of dead men has no separate life, but has deathless consciousness as it merges in deathless æther.”

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In the *Heracles* we have the condemnation of suicide, which with his refusal to countenance the unnatural vice which even Socrates upheld, are perhaps morally the two points where he stands out most from his age and looks forward to the moral code of Christianity.

The second period culminates in the *Ion* which raises the question of the poet's attitude towards the Olympian religion. Euripides' rationalism was a means to an end. He destroyed the gods in order that they might give place to God. Berlage wrote, "in religione Græca deis propter ipsam potestatem licuisse contemnere virtutem: secundum Euripidem vero naturæ divinæ proprium est virtus." He arrives at his concept of God through the personification of natural forces. He is approaching this in the "hate" of the *Medea* and *Hecuba*. In the *Hippolytus*, Aphrodite is a law of nature; in the *Helen*, emotion follows the same process—"the recognition of friends is God." In the *Trojan Women* he stands on the threshold of a constructive monotheism—"Zeus, whoever thou art, most difficult to know, whether a force of nature or the mind of man." It is from the gradual development of this belief that the realization came upon him that "God, if he is truly God, has no need of anything," and that the anthropomorphic trappings of Homeric theology are the "miserable tales of minstrels." One may compare the words of St. Paul at Athens—"Neither is He served with men's hands, as though He needed anything, seeing it is He who giveth to all life and breath and all things."

Palamedes was falsely accused and put to death. He is the just man of Plato who "will be scourged . . . and at last . . . crucified." Of him Euripides sings, "Ye have slain, ye Greeks, ye have slain the nightingale: the winged one of the Muses who sought no man's pain." It is as if, like Plato, he unconsciously looked forward to the Passion of

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Christ and the antiphon of Good Friday—"Quia eduxi te . . . parasti crucem Salvatori. Ego eduxi te . . . et tu me tradidisti principibus sacerdotum."

Some deeper spiritual influence produced the change which is felt in the *Trojan Women*. Again we have the problem of wrong, and now Hecuba seems to pass through her anguish to a state of spiritual liberty. In the last period the *Electra* reveals another sign of this change—Heaven pitying human suffering. We have but to recall the Aphrodite of the *Hippolytus* withdrawing from suffering as something Heaven may not look upon to understand the measure of this advance. Once more in the *Orestes* Euripides deals with the problem of wrong. The climax of passions is even more intense than in the *Medea* and *Hecuba*. Yet, unlike them, the *Orestes* ends in peace and the conquest of beauty. The solution of forgiveness finds its echo in the *Helen*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and *Phœnissæ*. Euripides has gone through the ideas of his age and found that solution of sorrows which is the essence of Christianity.

Finally, we may consider the *Deus ex machina*. Why does Euripides use this? Obviously not to get out of an awkward situation. It is deliberately employed. It enters late in his work and increases in effect. It coincides roughly with the change in Euripides, which was a change toward recognition of the supernatural. This first appears in the personification of natural, which are becoming supernatural, forces in the *Hippolytus*, and it is here and in the *Medea* that the *Deus ex machina* tentatively appears. It coincides with the solution of forgiveness and culminates in the *Orestes*. It is more deliberately brought into the *Bacchæ* than into any other play. Does not Euripides mean by it that the solution of human problems lies in the supernatural?

The meaning of the *Bacchæ* is the greatest problem

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in Greek literature. It is Euripides' last and most constructive work. It contains the statement of his religion. But what is this? Attempts have been made to find in the *Bacchæ* an exact parallel with the Passion; but the text will not admit of this. At the same time it is impossible to read and re-read this play without being constantly reminded of phrases and situations which recall the Passion and lead to the view that there is some degree of subconscious prophecy throughout the work. The nature of poetic inspiration is sufficient to explain this. For, allowing that the Divine purpose was working towards Christianity, the Divine Spirit was the author of all that was noble in pagan literature, and the inspiration of the poet is that Spirit working in a greater or less degree. Euripides' mind outran his age not by years but by centuries. The interaction of a great mind and of a larger portion of the Spirit produced a result which was in fact prophetic. Not that Euripides could have explained or even formulated such a thing. But it remains, a consciousness of the soul.

Teiresias bidding Cadmus pray for their persecutor, the faith that can move mountains which is given to the votary of Dionysus still more, phrases in the mouth of the god (who is also man—the priest and victim of the ritual) when captured by Pentheus, phrases like "God Himself will unloose me when I will," and "even now He stands close by and sees what I suffer," and "thou knowest not what man thou art nor what thou dost," and "said I not there was One who should set me free," are significant. But it is the Chorus who state the poet's religion. They sing of it as a "sweet labour," a "toil that wearies not," and of the votary "Blessed is he who experiences the rites of initiation: he hallows his life and fills his soul with spiritual ecstasy, worshipping on the mountains with holy cleansing rites." One

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remembers that the "cleansing rites" of the Mysteries were a washing away of sins. They describe the "Kingdom" of Dionysus as being in the ecstasy of the religious dance, in laughter and the vanishing of care which comes when the beauty of the vine appears in God's feast. And the "beauty of the vine" is the grape-blood that is the blood of the god. The wisdom of the world is held as nought compared with the calm life, the tranquil thought of the religious. True wisdom is not that of the world and the striving of the mind at thoughts that lie beyond human power; and life is short. The second strophe of this first chorus has been taken as destructive of the poet's belief because it admits the sexual orgies that were common to the Mysteries. But there is a distinct contrast between the passage referred to and what follows, which is introduced with a contrasting "but," and instead of desiring "amours that soothe the mind" the Chorus long for Pieria, the source of song and the holy grove of Olympus, "for there is grace and desire and freedom to worship God." The sudden change makes it clear he is saying "I admit the evil in the Mysteries as they are; but what I mean by the worship of Dionysus is the worship of the source of poetic inspiration."

Dionysus gives the joy of his wine that frees from pain to the prosperous and lowly with equal hand. Euripides speaks of this wine in a manner which shows it to be an essential factor not only in the mystery but in the religion for the expression of which he makes the mystery a framework. But Dionysus hates (*μισῶει*, the word is strong) that man who shuts these things out of his life, just as in the Church that man alone is condemned who, knowing the truth and knowing it to be truth, deliberately rejects it.

In the fourth chorus is a refrain which might

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but for one thing be taken to refer to the coming triumph of the Bacchanals over Pentheus. It begins with the question, "What is wisdom? What is the fairest gift of God to man?" and then asks, "Is it to overcome one's enemies?" The answer is, "Beauty is always dear." The meaning of this may be gathered from the line which occurs just after the repetition of this refrain—"Blessed is he who has risen above his striving. . . ." Euripides when he speaks of "enemies" is talking of those enemies of the soul which war against devotion, and he who attains to their conquest must rise above his striving. And this conquest is also the seeking of the strength of God (τό θεῖον σθένος) "which comes slow but, faithful, comes at last." Euripides had waited for this inner strength, the revelation of God's power in the soul, and it had come to him in old age. "And to those who heed it not it comes too, but to them as a judgment hunting them. It is no use seeking knowledge beyond the laws of God. Nor is it hard to believe that this has strength—whatever it be that is Godhead—the law that is eternal and grounded in Nature and abides long time." At the climax of the play, just before the messenger comes in to announce the slaughter of Pentheus, the Chorus break out, "Knowledge, I bear thee no grudge. My pleasure is in seeking thee. But there are other great and shining things. Oh, to live the life of beauty, day and night, to be pure and holy, to live the religious life, to cast aside the laws that are outside justice and to honour God."

There are two difficulties to the view that the *Bacchæ* is a glorification of Dionysus, even if we accept Dionysus as merely the symbol of Euripides' own religion. In the first place Dionysus behaves like a devil. In the second, the worship of him ends in a tragedy in which everyone is ruined except the Chorus

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and the god himself. The key to the explanation of both these difficulties seems to be in the lines, "What the simple herd of men believe and practise, that I ought to accept." Euripides in this respect is applying the same reasoning to the Mysteries as to the Olympian religion. He is critical but constructive. He saw the hysterical possibilities latent in the Mysteries. He seems to say, "These Mysteries, if taken up by the world in general, must lead to madness; nevertheless it is from the source of the Mysteries that the true religion is to come." Such a view was amply confirmed by the event. In the Roman Empire the mysteries developed into orgies of vice, the fires of which were fed by religious hysteria from which the world was rescued by Christianity. Nevertheless it was the Mysteries which enabled the pagan world to understand the new religion. In another aspect the Mysteries endangered Greek life. They might end in monasticism. It is this which enrages Pentheus, that the women have gone off into the mountains to form a religious community. For Greek life was social; and the virtue of the individual was conceived in relation to the State. With the Chorus it is different. They are Asiatics to start with, and they have been faithful to Dionysus and are therefore filled with his ecstasy, but the women on Kithæron had denied his godhead and his punishment is on them in the form of possession.

There is dual thought throughout the *Bacchæ* just as there is the dual personality of Dionysus. On the one hand Euripides is weaving poetry round the Mystery, at the same time as he examines it in the light of its power to save or destroy mankind. On the other he is grasping at a spiritual ideal. The whole thing is like a mystic trying to express a vision in common speech. When Pentheus is interrogating Dionysus he asks him where he got his religion from.

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“ God revealed it to me.” “ How did this god appear to you ? ” “ Face to face and gave me these rites.” “ What shape had he ? ” “ What shape he chose : it was not I ordained it.” This is the language of a man who has experienced some mystical state. He has a conviction of the presence of God, coupled with an inability to materialize the Presence into any human form. It is possible that Euripides puts these words in Dionysus’ mouth merely in the spirit of the dramatist ; but if so, it is a miserable evasion, seeing that Dionysus is aware of his identity with the god. It is much more probable that Euripides is speaking of himself, and is recalling some mystical experience which he underwent in the Macedonian woods. The fact that the *Bacchæ* is so entirely different from any other of the Plays supports the same conclusion. It is the only explanation of the sudden wealth of religious thought which the play contains. Such an hypothesis is also sufficient to account for its prophetic character. And there is one line in the speech of Teiresias which cannot be accounted for in any other way, οὗτος θεοῖσι σπένδεται θεὸς γεγως. “ Being god he is poured out in libation before the gods.” It has been usual to suppose that throughout this speech Euripides is presenting a rationalistic analysis of the origin of the cult. And those who insist upon this admit that this line, standing where it does, is meaningless. But there is just one explanation. Dionysus is god and also man : he is priest and victim. May it not be that the spirit that laid its hand upon the poet at Macedon, in some unfathomable way communicated to his mind the vision of God as man, shedding His Blood for man and afterwards sustaining and refreshing him with His own Body and Blood ? In fact, is it not Euripides prophetically envisaging the Mass ?

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