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CHRISTIANITY AND THE MYSTERY-RELIGIONS.

THE FAILURE OF THE MYSTERIES.

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It would seem as if at first sight we should rather speak of the success of the Mystery-Religions, because of their rapid spread and long career. If the Salvation Army and the Y. M. C. A., and the Masonic brotherhoods were to take away the prestige of the historic ecclesiastical institutions of the English-speaking world and draw their membership away the result could not be more revolutionary or unexpected than was the victorious sweep of the Oriental religions over the ancient Mediterranean world. The Mysteries conveyed a gospel to the men of their age; yet they failed. Another gospel proved God's power unto salvation. Today the Vatican stands where the last sacraments of the Phrygian *taurobolium* were celebrated. The almost unanimous testimony of antiquity attests the beneficial character of these Mysteries and the blessed results supposed to accrue from initiation therein. Cicero e. g. says that the Greek Mysteries supplied "good cause why we should live with joy and die with a better

hope". The following prayers will give us some idea of the religious enthusiasm awakened by the Mysteries. The prayer of initiation into the Hermetic revelation-religion found in the *Perfect Word* reads thus:

"We give thee thanks, O Most High, for by thy grace we obtained this light of knowledge, Name ineffable honoured in addressing thee as God and blessed in the invocation of thee as Father, because thou didst reveal to all men and women a Father's piety and love and affection and thy most benign working. Thou hast bestowed upon us feeling and reason and knowledge—feeling that we may apprehend thee, reason that we may reflect upon thee, knowledge that by the knowledge of thee we may be glad. Saved by thee we rejoice that thou didst show thyself to us completely: we rejoice that even in our mortal bodies thou didst deify us by the vision of thyself. Man's sole thanksgiving to thee is to know thy majesty. We have come to know thee, O thou Light perceptible alone to our feeling; we have come to know thee, thou Light of the life of man; we have come to know thee, thou fruitful Womb of all; we have come to know thee, thou eternal principle of that which brings forth by the Father's agency. Thus having worshipped thee we have requested no favour from thy goodness, but grant to our entreaty that we may be preserved in thy Knowledge so that we may not fail to attain to this kind of life".

And the prayer of Apuleius upon initiation into the rites of Isis:

"Oh, thou holy and eternal Saviour of the human race, ever lavish in thy bounties to mortals of thy choice. Thou bestowest a sweet mother's affection upon the misfortunes of wretched men. Nor day nor night nor even a moment of time passes which is not replete with thy benefits. By sea and land thou protectest men; Thou dispellest the storms of life and stretchest forth thy right hand of salvation, by which Thou unravellest even the inextricably tangled web of Fate; Thou dost alleviate the

tempests of Fortune and restrainest the harmful courses of the stars. Thee the heavenly ones worship and the gods infernal reverence. Thou turnest the earth in its orb, Thou givest light to the sun, Thou rulest the world, Thou treadest Death underfoot. To Thee the stars are responsive; by Thee the seasons return, and the gods rejoice and the elements are in subjection. At Thy command the winds blow, the clouds bestow their refreshing, the seeds bud, and the fruits increase. The birds that roam the heaven, the beasts on the mountains, the serpents lurking in their den, the fish that swim the sea, are awe-inspired by Thy majesty. But as for me I am too feeble to render Thee sufficient praise and too poor in earthly possessions to offer Thee fitting sacrifices. I lack the eloquence to express what I feel about Thy majesty: no, nor would a thousand lips, nor a thousand tongues, nor a perpetual uninterrupted address suffice. But, a pious though poor worshipper, I shall essay to do all within my power; Thy divine countenance and most holy deity I shall guard and keep forever hidden in the secret place of my heart”.

Speaking of the Mysteries Dr. Hatch has said: “There were elements in some of them from which Christianity recoiled, and against which the Christian Apologists use the language of strong invective. But, on the other hand, the majority of them had the same aims as Christianity itself—the aim of worshipping a pure God, the aim of living a pure life, the aim of cultivating the spirit of brotherhood. They were part of a great religious revival which distinguishes the age”.¹

Let us note certain defects in the Mysteries which conduced to their decadence and rendered them incapable of permanently satisfying the religious instinct:

I. They were freighted with barbarous myths of primitive Naturalism. Cumont² has rightly remarked, “all go

¹ Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church, p. 291 f.

² Religions orientales dans le paganisme romain p. 107 f.

back to a distant era of barbarism and have inherited from this savage past a multitude of myths, the offensiveness of which might be dissimulated, but not suppressed, by a philosophical symbolism, and of practice of which all the mystic interpretations could but ill conceal the fundamental crassness, the survival of a crude naturalism''. This atavism to primitive naturalism was a feature of the religious life of the Hellenistic-Roman era. The Oriental cults attempted to cast off what was repulsive in order to adapt themselves to the West and to the deepening moral conscience, but they retained enough of their past to disqualify them for the needs of the present. Magical formulae were ingredients of their prayers. Much of the ritual was savage and bloody, requiring extremes of asceticism or degenerating into excesses. The most impressive of ancient sacraments, the *taurobolium*, or bath in bull's blood, was offensively bloody and carried along with its spiritual symbolism memories of a savage past. Though these Mysteries made a serious effort to keep pace with the needs of every age, they were burdened with an excessive conservatism which contributed to their decadence and thus bequeathed Christianity an instructive object lesson.

If gorgeous ritual, impressive ceremonial, aesthetic cult, artistic edifices and images, and a costly priesthood, could save a religion these Mystery-Religions would have succeeded, especially those of the Great Mother, and Isis, and the Unconquered Sun.

II. The Mystery-Religions linked themselves with a pseudo-science, Astrology, and with a pseudo-religion, Magic, which contributed to their popularity for a time but undermined their spirituality. The Mediterranean world was invaded by a trinity of quasi-religious forces which in their alliance threatened to sweep all before them—the Mystery Religions, Astrology, and Magic. For ages these enslaved the ancient world. The Mystery-Religious stooped to magical practices because of their un-

spiritual conception of the relation of man to the deity. Magic was also in demand as one means of redemption from the omnipresent Dualism of the age and also as a means of warding off demons. Astrology played its part by shackling the ancient world with Determinism from the oppressiveness of which men sought refuge in the Mysteries. When we consider the powerful and popular combination of the Mystery-Religions, Astrology, and Magic, we realize more vividly the force of the words of St. Paul: "for we have to struggle, not with blood and flesh, but with the angelic Rulers, the angelic Authorities, the potentates of the dark present, the spirit-forces of evil in the heavenly sphere" (Moffat).

Every living religion must take into account the spirit of the age; it must interpret the *Zeitgeist*. But a living religion must not conform to, but transform, the spirit of the age. Herein Christianity succeeded—not absolutely, but far beyond her rivals. Astrology by its tyrannous fatalism drove men to Magic to combat, through the theory of universal sympathy, the baneful influence of the astral deities, while Magic drove men to the Mystery-Religions, which in their heyday, afforded Magic its potent apparatus. If we could adequately realize the incubus of Astrology and the constant nightmare of Magic upon the Graeco-Roman age we could better understand the success of the Mystery-Religions and the appeal of Christianity as the religion of redemption. Magic did not do its evil work only in the grossest forms, such as necromancy and the mixing of poison-potions, but in driving men to religion for purposes which were not essentially religious. The exact formulae or ritual wherewith to approach and compel the Deity were sought, and this knowledge was of an esoteric character not to be divulged to everybody. Prayers degenerated into incantations and sacraments were endowed with a magical efficacy.

III. Another weighty cause of the ultimate failure of the Mystery-Religions was that they represented an ex-

treme type of religion which did not hold the social and the religious instincts of man in equipoise. There are two clearly marked types of religion, the social-ethical or political, and the individualistic-mystic or personal type. The former might be designated (in Hegel's phrase) religions of utility, and the latter religions of redemption. The one type goes "the trivial round" of common life; the other seeks to enjoy the vision beatific. These two types appear prominently in the Graeco-Roman period. The political type is represented in its strength and in its weakness by the city-state religions of Greece and Rome, and in its strength by the religion of Israel. The personal type is represented by the Mystery-Religions and the Greek religious philosophies. Into the one men entered by birth, into the other by rebirth. Each type represented an important facet of divine truth but for the time of its predominance obscured another equally valuable truth. "The epoch-making transition", says Prof. Bacon, "is the advance of the human mind from that type of religion which, by emphasizing the social ideal, exalts moral obligation, to that type which, by emphasizing the individual ideal, exalts mystical aspiration". The Mysteries proved of inestimable value in introducing the principle of voluntary choice in religious concerns, by stressing the personal aspects which deepened the self-consciousness, by proclaiming the need of regeneration, by directing the mind to immortality, and by fostering that mysticism which makes the things unseen real. The appearance of personal religion in contrast to political religion was a decided advance. The next question which presented itself was: are these two types capable of a synthesis? If we accept Hegel's formula of evolution—thesis, antithesis, synthesis—we might say that the Greek and Roman religions represented the thesis, the Mystery-Religions the antithesis, while Judaism represented both thesis and antithesis, but labored in vain to discover the synthesis which only Christianity offered. Christianity was faced

with the problem of satisfying both the social and the individual instincts of man, of combining the two complementary truths that "we are members one of another" and "all souls are mine". Christianity vindicated its superiority in proving "a reconciliation of the two types in a higher synthesis of an ethical religion of Redemption, which redeems from this world, and yet enables men to find in this world a sphere of moral activity and progress". It held together in beautiful equipoise the two sublime ideas of a divine social and spiritual order, called the Kingdom of Heaven, and of the inestimable worth of the individual personality. The co-extension of morality and religion, to us a common-place, was not such to the Graeco-Roman age. Christianity made it a common-place, and has enabled us to unite the subjective and objective aspects of religion and to balance the centrifugal and the centripetal forces of the soul.

IV. Another fatal defect which militated against the ultimate and lasting victory of the Mystery-Religions lay in their weakness intellectually or theologically. Sooner or later criticism is turned upon faith, but a religion rooted in the spiritual nature of man has nothing to fear from "man's meddling intellect". From the very beginning of the career of the Mystery-Religions their intellectual inferiority was apparent to the educated who for this reason had recourse to the religious-philosophic systems. The Mystery-Religions never secured the services of Greek philosophy so fully and loyally as did Christianity and could not bear its solvent properties upon their faith. Hence as a rule an earnest man had to choose between the vague Mysteries and formulated Greek thought. Consequently, as remarked by Prof. Lake, there were two main currents to one or other of which the efforts made to answer the intellectual curiosity and to satisfy the yearnings of unhappy souls belonged: "Those whose interest was primarily intellectual, or, at all events, demanded a theology which was intellectually

acceptable, were strongly influenced by the metaphysics of the Neo-Platonists and the ethics of the Stoics. In them they seemed to find a reasonable explanation of the universe, a "weltanschauung" which corresponded to facts, and a rule of life which satisfied the conscience and seemed to offer a lasting happiness. On the other hand those whose interest was chiefly religious, in the narrower sense of the word, were attracted by the Oriental Mysteries".¹ As the Mysteries made advances to thinking men there arose apologists like Apuleius and Plutarch, who attempted to work out a theology to justify the claims of these religions. Plutarch clearly aims to prove that the doctrines of Egypt are consonant with the advancing thought of his day. Isis appears as a mother of sorrows, a goddess of benign sympathy, and Osiris, "passes into the eternal Love and Beauty, pure, passionless, remote from any region of change or death, unapproachable in his ethereal splendor, save, as in moments of inspired musing, we may faintly touch him as in a dream".² All that devotion and philosophy could do was done by Plutarch for the Mysteries.

Christianity stood the test of criticism which so often resulted in the evaporation of the vague ideas of the Mysteries. It had nothing to fear but rather much to gain by the application of enquiry. It had its symbols, but they were simple and unoffensive. It is true that Celsus ridiculed Christianity as a peasant religion, and that Lucian mocked it as the cult of a "gibbeted sophist", and that Paul says that not many wise accepted the gospel. It is true, too, that Christianity made its first strides among the lower classes. Some Christian apologists were misguided enough to attempt to magnify Christian doctrine by asserting, "I believe it because it is absurd". But this is not all the truth. It was only natural that Christianity, as a religion of Redemption, should be more readily

¹ The Earlier Epp. of St. Paul, 2nd. ed. p. 40.

² Dill; Roman Society, p. 575.

accepted by the class among whom conservatism was less hampering, but at no time was Christianity hereby a peasant religion. It satisfied the heart and mind of the same subtle and original thinker who declared that not many wise had accepted the doctrine of the Cross; it appealed to cultured minds like that of the Fourth Evangelist or the author of the beautiful *Epistle to Diognetus*. The Christian apologists were able to expound the fundamental truths of Christianity in the language of Greek philosophy. No other religion in such a short time called forth such a theological literature in which its adherents attempted to make explicit the truths implicit in their faith. This, of course, produced such a crop of heresy as alarmed ecclesiastical leaders—Gnosticism, Doceticism, Montanism. It was in the Gnostic controversy that Christianity was brought into closest contact with philosophy in the ancient world, by which it gained through a clearer formulation of its faith.

Christianity offered a deeper, because more spiritual, message than did the Mystery-Religions to the theosophic mind of the Orient, the metaphysical mind of Greece, and the legalist mind of Rome. However brilliant the allegorical exegesis, however lovely and imposing the symbolism, there remained at last in the Mysteries but evanescent vapory myths, whereas the Christian apologist could appeal to truth more intelligible because enshrined concretely in the Word made flesh.