

PAGAN CHRISTS.

BY THE EDITOR.

JOHN M. ROBERTSON has written a book with the attractive title *Pagan Christs*,* in which he deals with one of the burning questions of comparative religion, the origin and history of the God-man, the incarnate deity that sacrifices itself, accomplishing an atonement for sin through the highest offer imaginable the blood of a dying God.

Mr. Robertson discusses: the naturalness of all belief; the idea of the taboo as a significant stage in the development of religion, magic and also magic in the Old Testament, for Elijah figures as a magician; the interweaving of cosmology and ethics into religion, ancestor worship, and kindred subjects.

An analysis of the report of the crucifixion of Jesus and a comparison with anthropological reports concerning the sacrifice of deified victims, especially among the Khonds, the ancient Mexicans, and other nations, leads our author to the following conclusions:

"On what data, then, did the different evangelists proceed? What had they under notice? Not an original narrative: their dissidence is almost complete. Not a known official practice in Roman crucifixions: for the third Gospel treats as an act of mockery what the first and second do not so regard; and the fourth describes the act of limb-breaking as done to meet a Jewish demand, which in the synoptic narrative could not arise. Mere breaking of the legs, besides, would be at once a laborious and an inadequate way of making sure that the victims were dead; the spear-thrust would be the natural and sufficient act; yet only one victim is speared. Only one hypothesis will meet the whole case. The different narratives testify to the existence of a *ritual or rituals* of crucifixion or quasi-

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crucifixion, in variance of which there had figured the two procedures of breaking the legs of the victim and giving him a narcotic. Of these procedures neither is understood by the evangelists, though by some of them the latter is partly comprehended; and they accordingly proceed to turn both, in different fashions, to dogmatic account. Their conflict is thus insoluble, and their testimony alike unhistorical. But we find the psychological clue in the hypothesis of a known ritual of a crucified Savior-God, who had for universally-recognised reasons to appear to suffer as a willing victim. Being crucified—that is, hung by the hands or wrists to a tree or post, and supported not by his feet but by a bar between his thighs—he would tend to struggle (unlike the Khond victim, whose arms were free) chiefly with his legs; and if he were to be prevented from struggling, it would have to be either by breaking the legs or stupefying him with a drug. The Khonds, we have seen, used anciently the former horrible method, but learned to use the latter also. Finally, the detail of the spear-thrust in the side, bestowed only on the ostensibly divine victim, suggests that in some ritual that may have been the mode of ceremonial slaying. We have but to recognise that among some of the more civilised peoples of the Mediterranean similar processes had been sometimes gone through about two thousand years ago, and we have the conditions which may account for the varying Gospel narratives."

The Eucharist of the God-eating is a ceremony which is by no means limited to Christianity. Mr. Robertson says:

"That there was a weekly eucharist among the Mithracists is practically certain: the Fathers who mention the Mithraic bread-and-wine or bread-and-water sacrament never speak of it as less frequent than the Christian; and the Pauline allusion to the 'table of daimons,' with its 'cup' implies that was as habitual as the Christian rite, which was certainly solemnized weekly in the early Church. And this weekly rite, again, is not originally Mithraic, but one of the ancient Asiatic usages which could reach the Jews either by way of Babylon or before the Captivity."

"That there were both orthodox and heterodox forms of a quasi-Mithraic bread-and-wine ritual among the Jews is to be gathered even from the sacred books. In the legend of the Exodus, Aaron and the elders of Israel 'eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God'—that is, twelve elders and the Anointed One eat a bread sacrifice with a presumptive ancient deity, Moses himself being such. And wine would not be wanting. In the so-called Song of Moses, which repudiates a hostile God, 'their Rock in which

they trusted, which did eat the fat of their sacrifices, and drank the wine of their drink-offering,' Yahweh also is called 'our rock'; and in an obscure passage *his* wine seems to be extolled. Even if the Rock in such allusions were originally the actual tombstone or altar on which sacrifices were laid and libations poured, there would be no difficulty about making it unto a God *with* whom the worshipper ate and drank: and such an adaptation was as natural for Semites as for Aryans.

"But there are clearer clues. Of the legend of Melchizedek, who gave to Abraham a sacramental meal of bread and wine, and who was 'King of Peace' and 'priest of El Elyon,' we know that it was a subject of both canonical and extra-canonical tradition. He was fabled to have been 'without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like unto the Son of God.' As the name meant King of Righteousness, and El Elyon was a Phœnician deity, the legend that Abraham paid him tithes tells simply of one more extra-Yahwistic cult among the Israelites; and the description cited must originally have applied to the Most High God himself. 'Self-made' was a title of the Sun-Gods, and King of Righteousness a title of many Gods (not to mention Buddha) as well as of Yahweh and Jesus. It is vain to ask whether the bread-and-wine ritual was connected directly with the solar worship, or with that of a King of Peace who stood for the moon, or both moon and sun; but it suffices that an extra-Israelitish myth connected with such a ritual was cherished among the dispersed Jews of the Hellenistic period. And the use made of the story of Melchizedek by Justin Martyr and Tertullian, as proving that a man could be a priest of the true God without being circumcised or observing the Jewish law, would certainly be made of it by earlier Jews of the more cosmopolitan sort.

"Further, the denunciations of the prophets against the drink-offerings to other Gods did not veto a eucharist eaten and drunk in the name of Yahweh. Those denunciations to start with are a proof of the commonness of eucharists among the Jews about the exilic period. Jeremiah tells of a usage, specially popular with women, of incense-burnings and drink-offerings to the Queen of Heaven. This, as a nocturnal rite, would be a 'Holy Supper.' And in the last chapters of the Deutero-Isaiah we have first a combined charge of child-sacrifice and of unlawful drink-offerings against the polytheistic Israelites, and again a denunciation of those who 'prepare a table for Gad, and that fill up mingled wine unto Meni.' Now, Meni, translated 'Destiny,' is in all likelihood simply Men the Asiat-

ic Moon-God, who is virtually identified with Selene-Mene the Moon-Goddess in the Orphic Hymns, and like her was held to be twy-sexed. In that case Meni is only another aspect of the Queen of Heaven, the wine-eucharist being, as before remarked, a lunar rite. Whether or not this Deus Lunus was then, as later, identified with Mithra, we cannot divine. It suffices that the sacrament in question was extremely widespread."

Similar parallels as those concerning the Eucharist can be traced between the Gospel accounts of the miracles of Jesus and other saviors, not only Mithras and the demigods of mythology, but also to an historical personality, Apollonius of Tyana, whose life as told by Philostratus has been embellished with many legends. Mr. Robertson says:

"A close comparison of the story of the raising of Jarius' daughter with the story in Philostratus, to which it is so closely parallel, gives rather reason to believe that the Gospels copied the pagan narrative, the Gospel story being left unmentioned by Arnobius and Lactantius in lists in which they ought to have given it had they known and accepted it. The story, however, was probably told of other thaumaturgs before Apollonius; and in regard to the series of often strained parallels drawn by Baur, as by Huet, it may confidently be said that, instead of their exhibiting any calculated attempt to outdo or cap the Gospel narratives, they stand for the general taste of the time in thaumaturgy. Apollonius, like Jesus, casts out devils and heals the sick; and if the Life were a parody of the Gospel we should expect Him to give sight to the blind. This, however, is not the case; and on the other hand, the Gospel story of the healing of two blind men is certainly a duplicate of a pagan record."

The religious cannibalism of the ancient Mexicans is well known from the history of the conquest of the country by Cortez. Mr. Robertson having mentioned the awful festivals that were celebrated with these most inhuman rites of human sacrifice adds:

"The recital of these facts may lead some to conclude that the Mexican priesthood must have been the most atrocious multitude of miscreants the world ever saw. But that would be a complete misconception: they were as conscientious a priesthood as history bears record of. The strangest thing of all is that their frightful system of sacrifice was bound up not only with a strict and ascetic sexual morality, but with an emphatic humanitarian doctrine. If asceticism be virtue, they cultivated virtue zealously. There was a Mexican Goddess of Love, and there was, of course, plenty of vice; but nowhere could men win a higher reputation for sanctity by living in

celibacy. Their saints were numerous. They had nearly all the formulas of Christian morality, so-called. The priests themselves mostly lived in strict celibacy; and they educated children with the greatest vigilance in their temple schools and higher colleges. They taught the people to be peaceful; to bear injuries with meekness; to rely on God's mercy and not on their own merits; they taught, like Jesus and the Pagans, that adultery could be committed by the eyes and the heart; and above all they exhorted men to feed the poor. The public hospitals were carefully attended to, at a time when some Christian countries had none. They had the practice of confession and absolution; and in the regular exhortation of the confessor there was this formula: 'Clothe the naked and feed the hungry, whatever privation it may cost thee; for remember, their flesh is like thine, and they are men like thee; cherish the sick for they are the image of God.' And in that very same exhortation there was further urged on the penitent the special duty of instantly *procuring a slave for sacrifice to the deity*.

"Such phenomena carry far the challenge to conventional sociology. These men, judged by religious standards, compare closely with our European typical priesthood. They doubtless had the same temperamental qualities: a strong irrational sense of duty; a hysterical habit of mind; a certain spirit of self-sacrifice; at times a passion for asceticism; and a feeling that sensuous indulgence was revolting. Devoid of moral *science*, they had plenty of the blind instinct to do right. They devoutly did what their religion told them; even as Catholic priests have devoutly served the Inquisition. This is one of the central sociological lessons of our subject."

Now it seems that the barbarous practices of sacrifice and the infliction of suffering should have become extinct in civilised countries, but wherever the ancient sentiment continues the same tendencies prevail, and will lead to the performance of similar cruel ceremonies. Thus, even in the United States, some religious performances of this type have been continued in defiance of the authorities that are trying to suppress them. The sun dance in the Indian reservations has been abolished only during the latter third of the 19th century; but even among Christians, the native inhabitants of New Mexico, even in recent times a repetition of the Passion Play has been performed which in the cruelty of its performance is paralleled only in the dim past of pagan savagry. Mr. Robertson quotes the following account of the New Mexico Passion Play from an American paper, dated Santa Fe, N. M.:

"Among the Americans who flock once in ten years to see the

Passion Play at Oberammergau, there are few who know of the more realistic performance given yearly by the Penitentes of New Mexico. This performance was first adequately described by Adolphe Bandelier in a report issued by the Smithsonian Institution about ten years ago.

"The full title of the Penitentes is Los Hermanos Penitentes, meaning the Penitent Brothers. The order was established in New Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest under Coronado, about 1540. The purpose of the priests who accompanied the Spaniards was to form a society for religious zeal among the natives. They taught the natives that sin might be expiated by flagellation and other personal suffering. As time passed, the Indian and half-breed zealots sought to improve their enthusiasm by fiercer self-imposed ordeals of suffering. The idea of enacting the travail of the Master on Calvary was evolved. Hence the Passion Play of the Penitentes on each Good Friday.

"Mr. Bandelier learned from the Spanish archives that as early as 1594, a crucifixion, in which twenty-seven men were actually nailed to crosses for a half-hour, took place on Good Friday, 'after several weeks of pious mortification of the flesh with knives and cactus thorns.' The Penitentes numbered some 6,000 at the time of the American-Mexican war in 1848. The Catholic Church has long labored to abolish their practices. So have the civil authorities. Fifty years ago there were branches of the Penitentes in seventeen localities of the territory, and crucifixions took place in each of the branches. The organization has since gradually died away. Nowadays the sole remnant of the order is in the valley of the San Mateo, seventy-five miles north-east from Santa Fé. There is no railroad nearer than sixty miles.

"Some 300 Mexicans still cling to the doctrine that one's misdeeds are to be squared by physical pain during forty days of each year, finally closing with a crucifixion. Most of the Penitentes live at Taos, a very old adobe pueblo. They are sheep and cattle herders. Not one in a dozen of them can read and write in Spanish, and they have as little knowledge of English as if they lived in the heart of Mexico.

"The Penitentes keep their membership a secret nowadays. They meet in their primitive adobe council chambers (*moradas*) at night, and they conduct their flagellations and crucifixions as secretly as possible. Charles F. Lummis, of Los Angeles, Cal., was nearly shot to death by an assassin for photographing a Penitente crucifixion a few years ago. The Penitentes have several night meetings

during the year, but it is only in Lent that they are active. They have a head, the *Hermano Mayor*, whose mandates are strictly followed on pain of death. Adolphe Bandelier has written that up to a half century ago there were instances of disobedient and treacherous brother Penitentes having been buried alive.

"On Good Friday the *Hermano Mayor* names the ones who have been chosen to be the *Jesus Christ*, the *Peter*, the *Pontius Pilate*, *Mary*, the *Martha*, and so on, for the play. Notwithstanding the torture involved in the impersonation, many Penitentes are annually most desirous of being the *Christ*. The play is given on El Calvario. While the *pipero* blows a sharp air on a flute the man who is acting the part of the Savior comes forth. His only garment is a quantity of cotton sheeting or muslin that hangs flowing from his shoulders and waist. About his forehead is bound a wreath of cactus thorns. The thorns have been pressed deep into the flesh, from which tiny streams of blood trickle down his bronzed face and over his black beard. In a moment a cross of huge timbers that would break the back of many men is laid upon his shoulders. He grapples it tight, and, bending low under the crushing weight, starts on.

"On the way a path of broken stones has been made, and the most devout Penitentes walk over these with bare feet and never flinch. The counterfeit Christ is spit upon by the spectators. Little boys and girls run ahead of the chief actor that they may spit in his face and throw stones upon his bending form. When El Calvario is reached, the great clumsy cross is laid upon the ground. The actor of Christ is seized and thrown upon it. The assemblage joins in a chorus of song, while several Penitentes lash the man's hands, arms, and legs to the timbers with cords of cowhide.

"In several localities in Colorado and New Mexico it was once the practice literally to nail the hands of the acting Christ to the timbers of the cross, but the Catholic priest of this generation put a stop to that. There is no doubt that people have died from the tortures of the Passion Play. Only two years ago the Government Indian Agent in the San Rita Mountains reported several deaths among the Penitentes, because of poisoning by the cactus thorns and the lashing the men had endured. The Penitentes believe that no death is so desirable as that caused by participation in the acting of the travail of the Lord.

"After the first half hour of noise and flagellation about the cross at El Cavario the excitement dies away. The crucified man, whose arms and legs are now black under the bonds, must be suffering indescribable pain, but he only exclaims occasionally in Spanish,

'Peace, peace, peace,' while the Penitentes who have had no part in the punishment prostrate themselves silently about the cross. As the sun slowly descends behind the mountain peaks the *pipero* rises to his feet and, blowing a long, harsh air upon his flute, leads a procession of the people back to the village. Some of the leading Penitentes remain behind and lower the man from the cross. Then, following the narrative of the scenes on Calvary, his body is wrapped about with a mass of white fabric, and is carried to a dug-out cave in the hillside near at hand. In the cave the bleeding and tortured body of the chief actor is nursed to strength. If the man is of great endurance and rugged physical strength he will probably be ready to go home to his family in the evening, conscious of having made ample atonement for long years of sin, and having earned a reputation that many men in Taos have coveted."