

THE PAGEANT OF LIFE

BY MARGARET WINFIELD STEWART

A HISTORY can be written of "The Dance of Life" and no one is surprised to find it portrayed as an age-long quest for the beautiful. It may seem presumptuous to make the same claim for religious formalism, which is undoubtedly responsible for many of the ugliest pages in history. We have been so accustomed to think of Religion as a thing apart, that it is difficult to judge it for what it really is—a medium of self-expression.

"As far back as we can go in human history, we find ourselves face to face with well established ceremonies. . . . Human society seems to begin with it, and though civilization may, in a sense, be said to have led to the gradual banishment of ceremonial, one might be justified, in the light of history, in believing that ceremonial will not wholly disappear so long as human society remains."¹ As chief source of its ability to perpetuate itself is its power to furnish a means of artistic expression to the rank and file. In all tribes every initiated member, in modern churches each "communicant" has his part to play. This is probably why the most inarticulate are the most devout, for religious ceremonial throughout all history has been the dramatization of man's inarticulateness. More creative and analytical minds may find it impossible to sink into the abandonment of reason the churches call religion but many still cling to the rites and forms. Whoever achieves complete expression of all that is in him will do so only because of the paucity of that which is in him. Those most richly endowed with the personality which springs from sources which are in us but not of us will feel some vague sense of kinship for this panorama of human experience which is the nearest possible expression of the substrata of racial inheritance now popularly known as "the unconscious".

¹ A. W. Cooke. *Sacraments and Society*.

Drama in all its branches is certainly the lineal descendant of religious ceremony and among the "intelligentsia" fills the need which has been so artfully fed through the ceremonies and so thoroughly understood by the priesthood of the Catholic church. A modern "problem play" will take three hours to expound some minor point of present day sociology and a Catholic high mass will act out the history of the ages in an hour and a half. The only modern play which approximates its significance is O'Neill's "Emperor Jones", which tells the same story in another form.

The Catholic priesthood tells us that the function of the church is to equip its votaries for the future life. To one who watches it function it is more apparent that it bridges the gap between us and our past life, thereby giving to its followers the sense of unity and continuity with the forces which has made them that they call their faith. An arrogant Emperor Jones, so isolated from his racial traditions that he believes himself superior to them, finds in them only terror and defeat when a time of stress brings them welling up within him. A devout Catholic, trained from babyhood into subconscious co-ordination with his traditional heritage, finds peace and escape from daily trials in its forms.

We have had a Reformation which stripped the church of its ceremonies and left it all dogmas. Every year that reformation is meeting with greater defeat as the Protestant churches, one by one, adopt the forms and ceremonies against which Protestantism protested. The next reformation will have to be one which will strip the church of its dogmas and leave it all its ceremonies. The only successful modernism will be one which will accept as fundamental the fact that the instinct for dramatizing the gropings of the human mind into ritualistic pantomime is one that does not, will not and cannot die.

One modern Catholic writer, in defending a "resort to that ceremonial . . . which can address certain energetic faculties of man to which speech has no access; which can stir depths of emotion . . . no ably reasoned argument can ever plumb", makes the indisputable claim that "in one fashion or another, ceremonial has begun in our own times, to win back a part of the prestige which was repudiated by the reformers. Their churches seem to regret that repudiation more and more and to look with kindlier eye on the venerable rites of the Church of the Ages."²

² H. T. Henry. *Catholic Customs and Symbols*.

How literally the church of which he speaks is the church of the ages and how truly venerable its rites one will have to seek other authorities to learn, but he will not have far to seek. The internal evidence is conclusive enough without resort to history. A true child of the Reformation witnessing a Catholic service for the first time will be shocked and dismayed at the obvious "heathen practices" he will see. But if he tarries long enough and returns again he will soon find that those same heathen practices have a charm and attraction that appeals to something in him deeper and older than his sixteenth century revolts. Protestant churches have learned this to their sorrow and the gradual reversion to type noticeable everywhere is almost laughable. But if the "high brow" who laughs will turn the laugh in upon himself, he will profit by the experience. The adoption of Catholic forms by Protestants as the only means of self-preservation is merely a repetition of the process by which the Catholic church adopted the forms and creeds which held the imagination of the people it strove to convert. Each of the cults it absorbed had in its turn absorbed an earlier one, back to the beginning of time. Survival of the fittest in religion is a process of adaptation and assimilation. As the human skeleton today tells the whole story of its evolution and retains the atrophied remains of functionless organs, so the ceremonies of the Catholic church are the evolutionary skeleton of human thought, encumbered with all the outworn machinery that has ceased to have practical use. But the human family must build on the skeleton which holds it together, whether it likes it or not. Its structure may be archaic and stupid but without it the organism becomes a formless mass of flesh.

An appreciation by the non-conformist that these characteristics which endure in spite of vicissitudes are simply strivings toward artistic expression, that the empty forms which he condemns are the real substance and the theological explanations of them pure verbiage, may help *him* toward the adaptation without which his survival is doubtful.

The capacity of ritual forms to "be born again" is unlimited. Many of the forms which the Catholic church has adopted from ancient usages did not appear until the middle ages. They apparently lay dormant for hundreds of years and then reappeared in practically the same form as in pre-Christian days. They have in them the same urge as the seasonal rebirth from which they grew and which they commemorate, and all the Luthers and all the

modernists that have been or are to be are but as the frosts in the fall, tending to stem a too rank growth. All the howlings and all the ragings of the chilling storms of the "intellectuals" may leave the strange growths of religious thought winter-killed for a time, but a vernal equinox will come again in a season or a millenium and prove how impotent they are as against the strange impulse for resurrection latent in these outward forms with which man has clothed his aspirations toward the forces he does not understand. Just as certainly as men will dance while feet have muscles, regardless of what moralists think of it, so religious ceremonial will last so long as men's minds grope outwards, no matter what reformers think of it.

Even the pure religionist seeking converts for his faith expresses himself in much the same way as our modern phallic worshipper with his violent contempt for religion. "The world about us is filled with a beauty faintly surmised, dimly glimpsed; to be expressed or rather insinuated by symbolism rather than by words, a visible parable of increate Beauty. And out of this mysticism, clothing with happy fancies what we perceive with our poor senses, come 'thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.'" Whether our deity be Aphrodite, Pan or Christ we speak the same language, but each is shouting his part too loud to catch the harmony.

Whatever our deity, of the thousands the earth has produced, there will be startling similarities in our manner of "getting out of our systems" the desire to find expression for a something within us, whether we call that something an artistic sense, boredom or religion, or whether we belong to a tribe in South Africa, the patricians of Rome or the bald-headed row at the Zeigfeldt Follies. This is as true in the field of doctrine as of form.

The success with which the Catholic church has organized and capitalized this quality in human nature is conclusive evidence of the ability and intelligence, if not always the integrity, of its leaders. If there are parts in every service that "play down" to the stupidity of portions of the congregation, some other part will prove seductive bait in angling for the interest of a higher type.

Nothing that modern standards will tolerate is omitted from the sensuous appeal of a Catholic service, and all the various types of appeal that have succeeded through the ages are crowded in, as far as time will permit. Their churches are as gorgeous as they can make them. Sunlight is filtered seductively through stained glass

windows. The altar candles have something mysterious about them; the elaborate priestly vestments are carefully planned as to color scheme; the incense makes you drowsy, and the sudden silences bring into strong relief the infinitely varied music, ranging from the weird, barbaric responses that are undoubtedly very like what one would hear from a band of head-hunters starting on a raid, to brilliant masses on which the greatest of the world's musicians have expended untiring effort.

No part of this was invented by the Catholic church. The Mystery Religions dominating the Roman world in the early Christian era "aimed especially at quickening the emotional life. . . . No means of exciting the emotions was neglected in the passion play, either by way of inducing careful predispositions or of supplying external stimulus. Tense mental anticipation, heightened by a period of abstinence, hushed silences, imposing processions and elaborate pageantry, music loud and violent or soft and enthralling, delirious dances, the drinking of spirituous liquors, physical macreations, alternations of dense darkness and dazzling light, the sight of gorgeous ceremonial vestments, the handling of holy emblems".³

It is much more difficult to find elements in the Christian religion that are original than to find evidence to prove that most of it is not. Like most religions founded on the teachings of an individual, the nucleus is a new contribution of philosophical thought, but the value of a brilliant mind and a devoted life has been more nearly swamped in the case of Jesus than any other instance. If Jesus was himself responsible for his claim to divinity, he has paid dearly for the temporary advantage it gave him as a teacher by making his value to posterity one-half what it should have been. The Greek philosophers were fortunate in having been born into a religious environment that frankly had no relation to philosophy, intelligence or sense, and so there was no tendency to combine philosophy and religion. Their teachers have therefore remained teachers of the intellect, while their mythology and all its elaborate pageantry has descended to us so interwoven with the philosophy of Jesus that both have lost their meaning.

The immediate connecting link in the process was the Mystery Religions, thriving in the Roman Empire in the time of Jesus. "The Mystery Religions were lowly and simple enough in their

³ S. Angus. *The Mystery Religions and Christianity.*

origin. They arose from the observation of the patent facts of recurring death and subsequent rebirth in nature, and from the attempt to see in the alternations of winter and spring, decay and generation, sunset and sunrise, a symbol of the life and hope of man and a replica of the divine life, which in primitive thought was conceived merely as the all-vitalizing energy resident in nature. Their origin belongs apparently to a remote period of civilization which was pastoral rather than agricultural. Two centers of the ancient Mysteries, the wild plateau of Phrygia with its emotionalism, and Thrace, the homeland of the Dionysiac-Orphic Mysteries, have exercised an enormous influence in the religious history of Europe.

. . . A Mystery Religion was a divine drama which portrayed before the wondering eyes of the privileged observers the story of the struggles, sufferings and victory of a patron deity, the travail of nature in which life ultimately triumphs over death and joy is born of pain. This was impressed on the beholder by a solemn mimic representation. Thus in the spring festival of the Great Mother, the Myth of Attis was rehearsed in a passion-play. The sacred pine tree under which the unfaithful youth had mutilated himself was cut down. The tree then, prepared like a corpse, was carried into the sanctuary, accompanied by a statue of the god and other symbols. Then followed the lamentation of Attis with an appropriate period of abstinence. On the Day of Blood the tree was buried, while the mystae in frenzied dances gashed themselves with knives to prove their participation in the sorrows of the god that they might have fellowship in his joy. Next night the Resurrection of Attis was celebrated by the opening of the grave. In the darkness of the night a light was brought to the open grave while the presiding priest anointed the lips of the initiates with holy oil, comforting them with the words: "Be of good cheer, ye mystae of the god who has been saved; to you likewise shall come salvation from your trouble. The initiates gave vent to their emotions in a wild carnival; they made their confession that by eating of the tympanum and drinking of the cymbalum they had been rendered communicants of Attis."

It is a safe deduction that Christian missionaries of 2,000 years ago, confronted with the problem of defeating ingrained devotion to the Myth of Attis, solved the problem in the same way that a Christian missionary of today proposes to combat the ingrained devotion of a Chinese to his ancestors. "The strongest centers of

opposition to Christianity are Ancestor Worship and Fungshu . . . What is to be our Christian approach to this inspiring system of belief. . . . These and similar beliefs of Ancestor Worship have to be replaced by the truth as we know it in Jesus. . . . We have a doctrine, comprehensive and inspiring, and enshrined in the Apostle's Creed, the belief in the Communion of Saints, which embraces much, perhaps all, that there is in this aspect of Ancestor Worship." ⁴ As the Communion of Saints, according to this gentleman's plan, is to be made to absorb ancestor worship, so it has undoubtedly been made to absorb totem worship and a variety of others. If there was one fairly exclusive heredity that Christianity could claim it was its belligerent monotheism, but when it found that every village and every clan was tenaciously devoted to its "patron saint", which originally undoubtedly walked on four feet or swam with fins, there was nothing to do but translate that god into the "Communion of Saints which embraces much" and make the best of it.

That this is the source of the animal symbolism in Christianity is also certain. "Christ was also symbolized by the dolphin, the king amongst fishes. The ancients considered it sacred and esteemed killing it sacrilege. It inhabited the purest waters, was an emblem of strength and swiftness, was fond of human society, was patient and valorous, gave loving care to its single offspring. . . . He was symbolized by the Pelican, which legendary lore had characterized as feeding her brood, in case of need, with her own blood; . . . the griffin, because in its dual body it represented the two natures of Christ united in His divine personality. . . . The cock symbolized variously Christ, St. Peter, and the preachers of Christ; and similarly the eagle symbolized Christ as well as the beloved disciple," while "the signet ring of a Christian should have an engraving of a dove or a fish, or a lyre or an anchor, or a man fishing." That all of this was alien to anything in the teachings of Jesus or the heredity of the Jews who were his first followers is certain. It is the sort of thing in which all primitive religions abound and that its adoption by Christianity was the absorption of habits of mind that would not be killed is self-evident.

⁴ T. W. James. "The Christian Approach to Ancestor Worship," in *The Chinese Recorder*, November 1925.

The sanctity of numbers is also "as old as the bill." "Why there should have become a holy number has long been the subject of speculation. One modern theory suggests that, as man has three finger joints his reckoning arose from his fingers and three became the base of order, hence holy. Another contends that three is the base of all rhythmical movements and man is a rhythmical creature. Still another theory is that, as some savages cannot count beyond two, three became synonymous with the all of perfection. Aristotle said long ago that three represents all and hence is the perfect number."⁵ And so we have trinities all over the world—Hindu, Buddhist, Christian. "Four among some savages was a holier number than three, notably over all the western world, where, both in North and South America, four, based on the four directions (cardinal points), was the really religious number. Five, too, has a limited sanctity, especially in India. . . . Then again seven is, if anything, the truly religious number, as sacred in India as in Greece." Then we have the truly catholic religion that, when in doubt, takes them all. "Many numbers have been clothed with religious symbolism. If, for instance, we take the arithmetical series from one to ten, inclusively, we shall find some liturgical or devotional aspect in each of them." Here is evidence of a tardy reception of some hobby that new converts would not forego. "The addition of octaves to feasts of the saints is apparently not older than the eighth century."

The confession is not new. "Even in the scanty remnants of the Mysteries we have ample evidence that at least several of these—the Somothracian, Lydian, Phrygian, Syrian and Egyptian—anticipated Catholicism in the establishment of a confessional." The confessional is common to the Buddhists of India and the savages of Peru.

"Incense, too, was inherited by the Christian church from Mediterranean usage (all the Semites except the Arabs used it) and the Buddhistic church inherited it from the Brahmans. The ritualistic halo was borrowed from Greece and this apparently was carried to India, as the rosary was carried from India to the Christian church." "While candles had been used by the pagans in their worship they are in themselves indifferent things. The Church, a wise mother of souls, endowed them with a spiritual meaning undreamt of by Jew or pagan."

⁵ E. W. Hopkins. *Origin and Evolution of Religion.*

The conception of the Eucharist is certainly the evolution of a very old idea which has been common to most religions. "That there was a firm belief, in the earlier stages of religion, of participation in the god by eating him in a sacramental meal cannot be questioned. In the Thracian-Dionysiac Mysteries the celebrants by such a meal share in the divine life of the god. . . . And in the Dionysus-Zagreus cult the communicants rushed madly upon the sacrificial animal, tore it to pieces and ate it raw, believing that the god was resident in the offering. Cumont believes that the original significance of the eating of a sacred animal in the Phrygian cults was that 'it was believed that thus there took place an identification with the god himself, together with a participation in his substance and qualities' and that in certain mystic meals of the Syrian cults the priests and the initiates, by eating the fish sacred at Atargatis considered themselves to be devouring the life of the diety." A bewildered Catholic priest traveling in Tartary so gets the cart before the horse as to exclaim: "The devil so mimics the Catholic Church there, that although no European or Christian has ever been there, still in all essential things they agree so completely with the Roman Church as even to celebrate the Host with bread and wine; with mine own eyes I have seen it."⁶

Modern Catholic priests, however, are better informed and, in even popular books written for the laity, count it safer and saner to admit the obvious. "Solemn and public processions were not infrequent in the Church after she had emerged from the darkness of the catacombs. She selected for them by preference the days dedicated by pagan Rome to the honor of the false gods, and thus gently corrected the traditions of the false worship *without sacrificing the established physical habits of the people*. April 25 had been a pagan procesional day of suplication for a good harvest, styled the Robigalia. It next became a day of procesional Christian prayer." The same writer, speaking of the ember days in the Catholic Church, explains their origin in "the profoundly wise action of the Church in regard to the pagan celebration by Rome of the deities presiding over agriculture. Pagan Rome had its days of feast in June, September and December to propitiate these deities and implore blessings on seedtime and harvest. The Church simply gave men's devotional activities the right direction, substituting for the pagan

⁶ F. B. Jevons. *Introduction to the History of Religion*.

deities the One True God; even as St. Paul made the altar which the Athenians had dedicated to the Unknown God the text for his timely sermon on the One True God." And so, out of the profound wisdom of the church, the festival of late December celebrated so widely and persistently since history began was declared to be the date of the birth of Jesus, though such unbiased authority as the Encyclopedia Britannica will tell you that the gospel stories of the nativity contain uncontrovertible evidence that the event could not have been at that time of year. The same authority can be cited for the claim that Easter, which is not stationary but is determined by astronomical calculation, is the spring festival as to which "the memory of men runneth not to the contrary." As it always had been celebrated and obviously always would be, regardless of what significance was attached to it, it was identified with the Resurrection. Since the relation of the egg and the rabbit to the story of Calvary could not be explained, nor could their popularity be suppressed, they have wisely been left without explanation.

In its oft reiterated claim to being a "joyous" religion, the score on which Catholicism has contributed most to the joy of nations is its music. Here its history is the same. "The sacred songs and chants of the early Christians were derived from traditions both of Hebrew and Greek origin. . . . The type of these primitive hymns is most like the 'Sanctus' and the 'Gloria' of our Eucharistic service. It is natural to suppose that strains like these would have been used in a very remote age by every people."⁷ The naturalness of the supposition will not be disputed by any who have listened attentively. The chant of the priest may be so little in accord with our modern idea of music as to seem merely foreign and strange, but the harmonized responses of the chancel choir, forming the connecting link between the chant and the elaborate, brilliant music of the modern mass, makes the picture so complete that it takes but a poor imagination to conjure up from their resting place the endless succession of generations whose "Hymn to the Sun" is reproduced.

"All ancient worship was ritualistic . . . and the liturgies and ceremonial rites were intimately associated with music. The music so extravagantly praised in antiquity was, vocally, chant or recitative, ordinarily in a single part. All evidence and analogy indicate that the Hebrew song was a unison chant or cantilla-

⁷ F. L. Humphreys. *The Evolution of Church Music.*

tion. . . . In theory, style, usage and probably to some extent in actual melodies also, the music of the primitive [Christian] church forms an unbroken line with the music of pre-Christian antiquity. The relative proportion contributed by Jewish and Greek musical practice cannot be known. There was at the beginning no formal break with the ancient Jewish church . . . In the freedom and informality of the religious assembly as it existed among the Hellenic Christians, it became the practice for the believers to contribute impassioned outbursts. . . . This was the 'glassolalia' or 'gift of tongues' alluded to by St. Paul . . . but it is not to be supposed that the Corinthian Christians invented this custom, since we find traces of it in the worship of the ancient pagan nations. . . . Out of a musical impulse of which the glossalalia was one of many tokens, grew the hymns of the infant church. . . . But the weight of evidence and analogy inclines to the belief that the liturgic song of the church, both of East and West, was drawn partly in form and almost wholly in spirit and complexion from the Greek and Greco-Roman practice. But scanty knowledge of Christian archaeology and liturgies is necessary to show that much of form, ceremony and decoration in the worship of the church was the adaptation of features anciently existing in the faiths and customs which the new religion supplanted." ⁸

Most of us feel a need of seeking external stimulus to internal coordination. Some of us go to symphony concerts, others to church, some go to a doctor and some of us get drunk. None of these finds what he seeks as completely as the Catholic whose life is wrapt up in the endless routine of his church, for he seeks and finds a coordination of forces deeper than either of the other routes can reach. No one who is associated with them can dispute that they do draw from their services a sense of well-being and contentment which is probably responsible for the high percentage of good health and good nature among them.

The favorite indictment of the Catholic church is that it is "a relic of barbarism." This is putting it mildly. It is a vertible museum of barbarism, and therein lies its beauty and its value. The constituent elements that make up the best products of civilization are "relics of barbarism."

The appeal of organized religion is and has always been to emotion and impulse. The same is true of music, the dance,

⁸ Edward Dickinson. *Music in the History of the Western Church.*

and to a lesser degree, painting, sculpture and drama, and the world is richer for each of them. When the non-conformist recognizes that Religion is one of the Fine Arts he will find in it a thing of greater value than it is to the believer for his appreciation will be intelligent, and there is no reason why his emotional enjoyment of it could not and should not be as great.