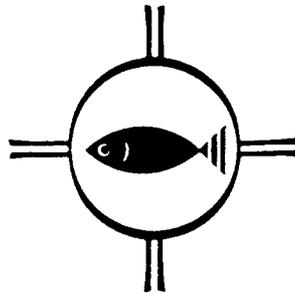


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CHURCH HISTORY

THE EARLY CHURCH
(FROM THE BEGINNING TO THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA)

VOLUME 1 OF II

PAPER 150.001-1

THE EARLY CHURCH
(FROM THE BEGINNING TO THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA)

VOLUME I

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THE EARLY CHURCH (From the Beginning to the Council of Nicaea)
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VOLUME I

CHAPTER I SOME IMPORTANT ASPECTS

History is a fascinating but often difficult subject. We all know how the writing of history is often coloured by prejudices and preconceived ideas, be they religious, sociological or political. Completely unbiased accounts are rare. This is very much the case when it comes to church history and particularly the history of the Early Church. It is not so much that present day scholars are prejudiced as that their sources are. Even the earliest writings extant on which historians have to base their research, are often of a strongly tendentious nature. Many of the Church Fathers and writers of the Early Church were involved in theological disputes of one kind or another with those belonging to other schools of thought.

Though all these groups professed to be followers of Christ there was often no general agreement on doctrine; every school or teacher championed his own. Eventually the school with the largest number of adherents prevailed. Even before Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire a definite doctrine was laid down as orthodox, or "right opinion". But even then, many so-called heresies arose and the history of the Church was for centuries dominated by acrimonious theological disputes.

No present textbook is therefore entirely suitable for the use of the Liberal Catholic student who tries to see the history of the Church in a "liberal" light, free of the straightjacket into which nearly two millennia of a powerful Church "establishment" has molded its own history. There are mainly three subjects that are dealt with inadequately or not at all in the available textbooks on the history of the Early Church:

1. The Actual date of the life and ministry of Jesus.
2. The Essenes and the Dead Sea sect.
3. The Mystery Religions.

1. THE ACTUAL DATE OF THE MINISTRY OF JESUS

There is a strong indication that Jesus Christ lived about a century earlier than the generally accepted date. This theory places his birth at about 105 B.C. and the date of the ministry at about 75-73 B.C. There are no reliable historical records of the life of Christ. The Gospels were written about the end of the first century and were intended as mystery dramas, not history. The system using the alleged date of the birth of Christ as the beginning of the Christian era, and our present system of dating, was introduced by Dionysius Exiguus only in the 6th century.

The Jewish records of Jesus, which are not very friendly, place him a century earlier than the usual accepted date. Some scholars (Mead, Strömholm) have advocated an earlier date. Clairvoyant investigators, notably Bishop Leadbeater and Mrs. Besant, confirm the earlier date. All students should therefore be well aware of this as they will come across it in Liberal Catholic literature.

One of our priests, the late Nevin Drinkwater B.Sc., wrote a two volume work called *The Lost Century* in which he collected most known data in favour of the early date of the ministry of Our Lord. This scholarly work is still in manuscript form awaiting publication.

As Liberal Catholics we are not really concerned whether the generally accepted date or the suggested earlier date is the true one; this may or may not be discovered by historians in the future. As Liberal Catholics we have to keep an open mind on this question - and it really makes no difference to us *when* Christ lived on earth - as we draw our inspiration *from an intense faith in the living Christ*, and, as a Church, *try to serve as a vehicle for the eternal Christ who ever lives as a mighty spiritual*

presence in the world (Statement of Principles).

To make the student familiar with some of the arguments for the earlier date we have included in this paper extracts from the series of articles entitled *The Date of the Ministry and the Dead Sea Scrolls* and the *Chronological Table* from the yet as unpublished book by Nevin Drinkwater mentioned above, and the article *Jesus and Christianity* by E.L. Gardner.

In the latter we find mention of another figure, a Jewish revolutionary by the name of Jesus Barrabas, who was crucified by the Romans at about the usually accepted date. This seems also to have been the view of Bishop Leadbeater, who wrote in *The Inner Life, Vol I*:

The four Gospels... are all founded upon a much shorter document written in Hebrew by a monk named Mattheus, who lived in a monastery in the desert in the south of Palestine. He seems to have conceived the idea of casting some of the great acts of initiation into a narrative form and mingling it with some points out of the life of the real Jesus, who was born 105 B.C., and some from the real life of another quite obscure fanatical preacher, who had been condemned to death and executed in Jerusalem about 30 ad.

This document was presumably the famous "Q", which scholars regard as the main source of the three Synoptic Gospels.

In Acts 5:30 and 10:39 it is mentioned that Jesus was *slain and hung on a tree*. This would point to the earlier tradition of death by stoning (the punishment for blasphemy) after which the body in accordance with Jewish custom was hung on a tree. Those wishing to study the subject more fully are referred to the full series of articles by the Rev. G. N. Drinkwater in *The Liberal Catholic*, Oct. 1956 - June 1957, also to the work by G.R.S. Mead: *Did Jesus Live 100 B.C.?* University Books, N.Y. Results of clairvoyant investigations into the life of Jesus can be found in *Esoteric Christianity* by Annie Besant, Theos. Publ. House, Adyar, and in the Rev. Geoffrey Hodson's book: *Clairvoyant Investigations of Christian Origins and Ceremonial*, St. Alban Press.

THE ESSENES AND THE DEAD SEA SECT

The second subject, which receives only scant attention in the textbooks, is that of the Essenes and the sect of Qumran, now made well known through the discovery of the famous Dead Sea Scrolls.

No religion comes entirely new to man; its Teacher usually bases it on an earlier religion held by the people among whom He appears. So we find the Buddhist religion built on Hinduism, Christianity on the Jewish religion, and Islam on both Judaism, Christianity and the primitive religion of the Arab tribes.

We find at the beginning of the Christian era three main religious groups among the Jews: the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes. Not much was known until recently about the last group except from the works of some ancient writers, mainly Philo and Josephus. But the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 has thrown new light on the Essenes, as most scholars have come to the conclusion that the Qumran sect, which occupied the monastery at the foot of the cliffs where the scrolls were found, were Essenes.

Comparison of the literature of the sect with the New Testament has thrown new light on some of the sources of the Books of the New Testament. It is now clear that St. John's Gospel, for instance, owes much more to a Jewish (Essene) theological background than previously assumed. The sect also manifests astonishing parallels with primitive Christianity, to such an extent that several scholars even regard it as a Christian or pre-Christian sect. One scholar comes to the conclusion that Christianity is *Essenism*.

The last of the scrolls has only recently been translated and it will take some time before all ramifications of this discovery have been explored and their enormous significance for the study of the origins of Christianity is realized. It is of importance to us as Liberal Catholics to follow further developments and study in this field.

What happened eventually to the Essenes? It is generally thought that they were absorbed into Christianity. Some of them may have survived in later Sects such as the Ebionites, Nazoreans and others, living mainly east of the river Jordan. It is the irony of history that these small sects, some of them definitely remnants of early Jewish Christianity were regarded by the fourth Century Church as heretics.¹

In Liberal Catholic literature we are told that Jesus was a member of the Essene community. This idea is not new and was put forward by several scholars even before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Date of the Ministry and the Dead Sea Scrolls, by the Rev. G. N. Drinkwater, included in this paper, should be studied by the student in connection with the subject. Useful references for those interested in further study are A. Dupont-Sommer: *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, Basil Blackwell, and Edmund Wilson: *The Scrolls from the Dead Sea*, O.U.P. Many other works on the subject are available.

THE MYSTERY RELIGIONS

During the first three centuries of our era the most active religious movements in the Roman Empire were what later came to be called the Mystery Religions. They provided for their followers a gradual spiritual advancement in stages during which sacred mysteries were revealed through successive initiations.

As with the Eleusinian and Dionysiac Mysteries, which themselves continued to exist, these religions centred on the initiation of individuals into a sacred 'mystery', through which man attained rebirth, being 'changed', 'enlightened', 'deified'. In one aspect the mystery consisted in the portrayal of a myth concerning the struggles, sufferings, and triumphs of a deity. It was thus a sacramental drama. But its essential aim - achieved, naturally, in very different degrees - was the inner experience of the initiates, gained through their participation in the drama.

Sydney Spencer: *Mysticism in World Religions*

Among many Greek Mysteries the most famous were those held annually at Eleusis. Both the ancient Mysteries and the later mystery cults were all based upon a particular myth or mystery drama, often including the birth, mystical death and resurrection of a saviour God. Terms such as *redemption*, *salvation*, and *perfection* all belong to the language of the mystery cults.

The most important of these were the Mysteries of Isis, the Cult of Cybele, the Great Mother, and, Mithraism. The similarity of some of their ceremonies – as far as we know them – to their Christian counterparts is sometimes quite amazing:

Mithraism had its sacramental service, hardly to be distinguished from ours; it had its Christmas rejoicings, its Easter, its legends of a miraculous birth, and a glorious resurrection.

E.E. Kellett, *A Short History of Religions*, p.262

¹ As may be expected from a religion, the history of Christianity is more a history of ideas than of events. We cannot study the history of the Church without constantly coming across new ideas, new lines of thought, in some cases accepted and incorporated by the Church in its theology, in other cases, rejected and declared a heresy. The word 'heresy' is derived from the Greek *haireises*, meaning choice of 'thing chosen'. It was originally used for the particular views of different philosophical schools. Later it came to be used for what was regard as theological error.

It may be that most religions of that time conformed to the same *archetypal pattern* as had previously been manifested in the ancient mysteries of Egypt and Greece. Christianity was obviously influenced by the various mystery cults, and perhaps we are not too far from the truth if we say that Christianity itself was a Mystery Religion at an early stage of its development.

During the 2nd and 3rd centuries, Christianity showed many signs of being a Mystery Cult. Not only do we read in the writings of some Church Fathers of the *Mysteries of Jesus*, but candidates before being admitted had to undergo a severe training. A short article entitled *Eja Milites Christi* has been included (as an Appendix to Part II) to show this aspect of the Church at that particular period.

History, events, ideas, can be looked at in different ways – through many differently coloured glasses, as it were. Ancient documents can be interpreted in many ways. Undoubtedly Liberal Catholics have their own way of looking at the history of the Church. Since other views, humanist, orthodox, fundamentalist, etc., are available in abundance in the many books on Church History, it seems only right that we should attempt in this Paper to give at least some facets of a Liberal Catholic view.

We have therefore chosen as the main chapters of this Paper extracts from a series of articles published in *The Liberal Catholic* between December 1924 and March 1926, on the history of the early Church by Rev. Dr. J.J. van der Leeuw, LL.D. this series by Dr. van der Leeuw was later published in book form under the title *The Dramatic History of the Christian Faith*. This book is now, unfortunately, out of print.²

CHAPTER 2 THE SETTING OF THE STAGE

There is no more wonderful history than that of the Christian Faith. Even though we of the Liberal Catholic Church do not hold that Christianity is the one and only revelation of Truth to the world and do not believe that God has left His world in darkness until the coming of our Lord, even though we recognize that Truth is eternal and that its manifestations in the great religions of the world are many and varied, each showing forth some especial beauty of its own in the life and teachings of the Great Messengers of divine Truth, yet we cannot help realizing that in our Christian Religion, precious and dear to us as it is, being the Religion of our civilization, we also possess a religious history unequalled in dramatic interest and unique in its variety and wealth of events.

It is impossible in the light of historical research to maintain that Christianity is *sui generis*, a spontaneous growth from nothing, but it is equally impossible to deny that the inspiration of a great Individual was necessary to make Christianity possible.

The material out of which Christianity is made, was there, but the divine touch of the great Master-BUILDER was necessary to form from it the Living Temple of the Christian Faith.

It is ever thus. When the *times are ripe*, when a new ideal is stirring in the hearts and minds of great masses of human beings, there must always appear some great Individual, a truly Representative Man, *who can in his life and works bring to conscious birth that which was vaguely stirring in the hearts and minds of the many. And when a new ideal of life is to be given to all humanity then the One Who appears is the One Who is Representative of all Mankind, its Heart and Life, He Whom we call the Christ.*

² A reasonably good work for a deeper study of the subject is *A History of the Early Church* by Hans Leitzman, in 4 volumes, published by the Lutterworth Press.

Thus Christianity is undoubtedly rooted in non-Christian and pre-Christian soil, but the sunshine that made it grow was not derived from existing conditions, but was the glowing Inspiration, the radiant Love of Christ. The drama of Christianity was to be played on a Stage, the World-Stage, in a *setting* which needs to be studied in order to understand fully what the essential and *new* contribution of Christianity was.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS THE CHRIST

In studying the world and time in which Jesus the Christ appeared we must first ask: which world and what time? It is generally accepted that our Lord was born some six or seven years before what we call the beginning of the Christian era. There is however no trustworthy outside confirmation of this, and amongst several scholars of note the theory is gaining ground that the tradition found in the Talmud and Toldoth about Jeshua ben Pandera who lived under the Maccabaeen king Jannai or Alexander (104-78 B.C.), is likely to be the correct, contemporary Jewish record of Jesus the Christ.

The earlier date of Jesus certainly fits in better with the general trend of civilization in the first century B.C. About the middle of that century the birth of the *new* ideal of universal Brotherhood which was the essence of Christian Faith is perceptible, a fact which cannot be explained if Jesus should have lived and taught at the usually accepted time. Thus when we study the time in which Jesus appeared it is well to keep in mind the possibility that He did live at the earlier date. There are however, many religious elements which are to be found both at the earlier and at the canonical date and some of these we can now consider, always bearing in mind that religious movements, which flourished a century after Christ, are yet important as elements in the birth of the Christian Faith, having influenced Christianity when it began to spread as a World-Religion.

More important, however, than the exact time in which our Lord Christ appeared is the world to which He came. Which world was it? Not the world of Palestine. The new Faith was not given to Israel alone, it was given to the civilized world of the day, to the Graeco-Roman world; and if we would understand the history of Christianity we must study that Graeco-Roman civilization even more than that of the Hebrew people where the new life was born, but where it did not come to its consummation.

The Graeco-Roman world had already a long history behind it. It had passed through a *Golden Age*, a time of unity before man awakened to a sense of his own individuality. When this awakening came, in what we term the Greek Renaissance, Greece gave birth to the priceless contributions which will ever be associated with her name; the classical drama, Greek sculpture and architecture and Greek thought. It is Greek philosophical thought which was destined to be one of the chief contributions of Greece to the Christian Faith; from Greece Christianity derived the terminology for its doctrines. Plato was the father of Christian philosophy as Plotinus was to be the father of Christian Mysticism.

Whereas Greece contributed its thought to Christianity, Rome gave it the wonderful structure of its mighty organization. Where Greece inspired, Rome confirmed, where Greece ruled the world of ideals, Rome ruled the material world, where Greece determined the ways of thought, Rome constructed the roads of physical intercourse along which Christianity could travel to the furthestmost parts of the world.

THE MYSTERIES

In a religious sense Greece and Rome, as far as their State-religions were concerned, did not contribute much to the Christian Faith. But then these State-religions had long since lost their influence over the individuals; they were a time-honoured institution, but neither inspired nor satisfied. It was to the Mystery-religions that we must look if we would find the real and living religion in which the cultured man of Greece and Rome could find satisfaction for his religious and mystical life. They inspired enthusiasm, their teaching was vital, their initiations full of solemn

meaning. In the greatest of the Greek Mysteries, those of Eleusis, the main teaching was that of the journey of the soul through periods of existence in matter (the myth of Persephone) to a divine life in the spiritual world, its true home. The way to this higher life was through purification and illumination, *catharsis* and *epopteia*, the same stages which we shall find later on in Christian Mysticism. It was through the medium of St. Paul that much of the teaching and terminology of the Mysteries flowed into the Christian religion and became the means of expressing its spiritual contents. Ideas and terms like that of *spiritual regeneration, redemption, salvation, baptism* can all be traced to the Mystery Religions from which they were derived to express Christian conceptions.

In the Roman world the most popular Mysteries were those of Isis and Mithras. The Mysteries of Isis, coming as they did from ancient Egypt, brought with them much of the Egyptian religious beliefs which thus became vehicles for the expression of Christian thought.

Isis, the great Mother of all, truly the *Consolatrix Afflictorum*, who bore her son Horus, having immaculately conceived him after the death of Osiris, became one of the prototypes of Our Lady and the worship of the two is characterized by the same touch of tender motherhood and comforting love. In Osiris, who in a triumphant resurrection overcame his enemies even in death, we find a conception closely approaching the Christian one of crucifixion and resurrection. As the Christian commemorates the death and resurrection of our Lord Christ and in it sees the hope of his own spiritual Rebirth, so the Egyptian looked upon the death and regeneration of Osiris as the promise of his own Osirification. Truly, we cannot blame those students who in their discovery of the central doctrines of Christianity in pre-Christian religions came to deny the historicity of our Lord. Their mistake was psychological rather than historical, for without a life like Christ's a movement like Christianity could never have been brought about. The material was there but the Master-BUILDER built from it the new Temple of Faith.

The cult of the Great Mother was even stronger in Asia Minor where under the name of Cybele she was worshipped, especially in Phrygia. It is interesting to note that wherever the worship to *God the Mother* was strong in pre-Christian times we find a deep devotion to Our Lady afterwards. Thus the cave near Antioch where Cybele was worshipped is now dedicated to Our Lady; and Ephesus, where the great Temple to Artemis stood as one of the wonders of the world, became the chief centre of worship to Our Lady in Asia Minor.

Other mysteries which contributed elements to the Christian faith were the Mysteries of Mithras, though this connection is doubtful. These Mithraic Mysteries were of Persian origin and became exceedingly popular under the Roman Empire; places of Mithraic worship have been found wherever Rome's power extended.

Mithras was the Son and Champion of God, immaculately conceived, born in a cave, adored by shepherds, worshipped as the *Lord of Love*. Brotherhood was the ideal of those who belonged to the Mithraic Mysteries, and in their agape or *love-feast*, they partook of the body of the God in the shape of consecrated bread, sometimes marked with a cross, a form of spiritual communion not unlike the Christian one.

In an old Mithraic liturgy the candidate says: *Let me, though now held down by my lower nature, be reborn into immortality - that I may become mentally reborn, that I may become initiated, that the Holy Spirit may breathe in me!* Truly this prayer would not be amiss in any Christian ritual, yet it belonged to a non-Christian Mystery religion. Thus the Mysteries provided the spiritual framework of Christianity; just as Greece gave the mental structure and Rome the physical.

WHY PALESTINE?

But it was to Israel that we must look for the emotional element.

Many have wondered why Christianity was born in Palestine, in a faraway obscure country instead of in the heart of the Roman world. Why not in Rome, why not in Alexandria, where all cultures, Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Hebrew met? But if we study with an open mind we shall understand. Palestine, to begin with, was not so obscure a country. Through it ran the trade route from Egypt to Asia-Minor. Travelling was slow in those days, so that a traveller had ample opportunity to absorb anything new along his route and carry it on to the country of his destination. But even more than that, Jews were to be found all over the world, then as now, and anything started in Palestine would soon spread over the entire world.

That, however, which made Israel destined to be the home of the Lord, was the emotional nature of the Hebrew nation; a fervent, almost fanatical, faith, a fiery devotion, a stern, uncompromising morality. These were great elements for the making of the new religion; then as now the maxim holds good that it is the emotional element in religion which determines its appeal to the world at large. With all their shortcomings the Jews could furnish that element; their worship of the one God was often narrow and fanatical, Jehovah at times was no more than a tribal Deity, but He was also the *One second to none*, the Living God of the Prophets. Their nature might be stern but they were the one people whose morality was one with their religion, ingrained in their life; their expectation of the Messiah might be a material one, of a King to make Israel great, but at least they expected one and some were ready to receive Him. The Pharisees and Sadducees might be hypocritical and proud, but there were Brotherhoods like the *Essenes* and the *Therapeuts* in whom a deeply mystical faith and a very true brotherhood were to be found.

Thus Israel was chosen to receive the Lord. There alone the perfect Life could be lived which was to kindle a flame of Love enveloping the earth; there could be sown the seed from which could spring the mighty faith of Christianity which was to illumine the Western world.

Such was the setting of the stage on which the great Drama was to be played, such the world waiting for Him Who came to bring the greatest gift of all, that of a Divine Life lived amongst men.

The student should at this stage read Chapter 4 of *Esoteric Christianity*, "The Historical Christ". This chapter embodies the results of clairvoyant investigations made into the life of Jesus by Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater at the turn of the century.³

CHAPTER THREE THE BIRTH OF THE NEW FAITH

The world at the time of Christ's coming knew most of the teachings that Christianity has come to consider as its own. There were those who knew and worshipped one God; the doctrine of the Trinity was familiar to many, the existence of Divine Mediators between God and Man was recognized, they were called *Son of God*, *Saviour-God*, *Lord*, were thought of as immaculately conceived, proving their Divinity by miracles and finally conquering death itself in a triumphant Resurrection. Again, the Graeco-Roman world knew those teachings about man, his origin and destiny which so many look upon as specifically Christian. The Initiates of the Mysteries knew that the world surrounding man was not the real world, but rather a prison-house in which the Divine Spirit of man was exiled from its true home, the world of the Spirit eternal. They knew that man could gain life in that world by renouncing the things of this world, that he could be regenerated, attain to a second Birth which would make him more than man, would make him God. They

³ Note that the author mentions the names of the Roman Consuls at the time of the birth of Jesus. The Consuls were two annually elected magistrates in ancient Rome and as their names were carefully recorded this fact has been used by historians since ancient times for dating the past. The clairvoyant investigator therefore only had to check who the Consuls were in Rome at the time of a certain event to obtain its correct date – S. von Krusenstierna.

treasured sacraments of Baptism and of mystic Union to the Great God in the sacred communion of the Agape or Love-Feast.

All this was known to the world to which Christ came; the elements of Christianity could be found scattered throughout the world. But the one thing lacking was the power to live according to the knowledge thus possessed. The coming of Christ gave that power.

To the Jews of His time, expecting the coming of a Messiah as a king in all his glory that was to make Israel great amongst the nations, the manner of Christ's coming must have been a lesson in itself. He came without the privileges of outer power or possession to further the work that He was to undertake. He had renounced all those weapons that the man of the world thinks indispensable in his struggle to achieve. He did not stoop to defend Himself when attacked; ever in those short but marvellous years of His ministry did He use His superhuman powers to assert Himself. His strength throughout lay in the Kingdom within, not the kingdom without.

His enemies conquered Christ in this world of matter; He allowed Himself to be conquered, for only thus could He teach the supreme lesson that He came to teach; that nothing from without can ever conquer the Spirit within and that man in death can triumph over both life and death. Could anything be more wonderful than this message taught by Christ in His life?

He came to a world of complicated civilization without anything or anyone to support Him, without privilege, protection or power. He never defended or protected Himself, never cared for or worried about His existence, allowed His enemies to take Him and kill Him.

And yet the message He lived became the Gospel of untold millions; yet these three years of ministry became the foundation of a new world; yet He became the inspiration of a new religion which was to last for many thousands of years. A life of utter purity and universal love, of childlike simplicity and of God-like wisdom was the message He brought to a world in agony, teaching it that thus alone man could gain the Kingdom of God, in which all problems and troubles were solved.

That, the teaching He lived, was the essential, the new thing He gave to this world; from that spread Christianity; by that living Fire it is maintained.

Then as now, the Christian Faith is centred in the living Christ, then as now His life of love and purity is the way to the Kingdom of God--the way He went, the way we follow.



Our next chapter deals with St. Paul and the beginnings of Gentile Christianity. With St. Paul and his missionary journeys, we enter that part of the history of the Early Church as is described in the Acts of the Apostles. It should be born in mind that this is a composite document drawn from various sources (see G. N. Drinkwater's remarks in Appendix I). The first chapters are regarded as a continuation of, or epilogue to, St. Luke's Gospel.

As we have seen already, historical records of early Christianity are extremely scant. But the missionary activities of St. Paul as described in Acts give us a glimpse of the young Church during the fifth and sixth decades of the first century. Together with the Epistles of St. Paul (some of which according to scholars were not written by him) they give us some idea of the life of the Church at that particular period. It is not until about 100 years later that we enter a historically more documented period.

S. von Krusenstierna

CHAPTER 4 ST. PAUL AND THE SPREADING OF THE FAITH

The Founder of the Christian Faith did not make a new Religion nor did He found a Church. He, like all great Teachers, lived a life in which the Divine became manifest to man on earth and, through that life, taught men the wonder of their own divinity. That was His mission, that His message. To descend from that height to what men in their material blindness call essential in the starting of a new Movement - organization, rules and rulers - would have been to deny that which He, the perfect Wisdom, knew as the truly essential teaching and enabling men by example to live according to the one commandment by which men would know them as His disciples: that they should love one another.

One of the grandest elements of Christ's life is His never-failing trust in the all-sufficiency and power of the spiritual ideal, knowing, as He alone could, that as long as it was strong and pure, His mission would succeed and all details of organization would follow naturally. And they did. During the life of a great Teacher, the disciples He gathers round Him do not feel the need of an organized movement; He, the Teacher fills their life, He is the movement. It is only when He has left this earthly life and the disciples suddenly find themselves thrown back on themselves, left to their own resources, that the need for consolidation of that which binds them is felt.

The working of the Holy Ghost was not without its dangers to the early Church as also in later ages. Just as under the name of mysticism much vague sentimentalism and even hysteria goes hidden, to the detriment of true mystics, so, too, side by side with true inspiration we find a wide range of psychic, mediumistic and illusionary experiences pretending to be manifestations of the Holy Ghost. We read in his Epistles how St. Paul had to warn the early Churches against these excesses and aberrations; a century later the Montanist heresy was to endanger the life of the Church in a similar manner.

Still there was no church, nor a new religion. The Apostles looked upon the message of Christ as intended for Israel alone and having as its main purpose the purification of the Jewish Faith. Their hopes of Christ as an earthly king, making Israel great had been shattered, but rose again in the expectation of Christ's near return (chiliasm) for which Israel had to be prepared so that this time He might accomplish His mission as an earthly ruler.

Meanwhile the number of followers grew, including native Jews as well as Greek-speaking or Hellenic Jews.

ST. PAUL AND HIS WORK

There is no denying the greatness of St. Paul. He was a man of great strength, passionately intent on the work he was doing, whether that of destroying or propagating the new faith. He had vision, which the other apostles seem to have lacked, and saw the enormous future of the new Faith Christ had kindled. He changed it from a Jewish sect to a universal religion, from an ill-defined movement to a well-organized Church, from inarticulate beliefs to clearly expressed dogmas. Having been initiated in the Mysteries and taught there the possibility of man's spiritual rebirth through mystic death and resurrection, he saw in the new movement the historical embodiment of the mystery-teaching and in the story of Christ, especially in His death and resurrection, a vehicle for the central truth of the Mysteries. Hence the historical Jesus Christ plays practically no part in the Pauline teaching; the Christ of St. Paul is the divine within man, the mystic Christ. In thus emphasizing the glorious reality of the Christ within, to be crucified and reborn in every human soul, St. Paul did not, as some would have it, betray Christianity and make it subservient to his own teaching.

Those who thus accuse St. Paul of perverting the new faith, lose sight of the fact, that Christ, the

World-Teacher, is both God and Man. By His manhood, He is the fruit of human evolution, having risen through many lives from the level of primitive man to that of Perfect Man, having reached the goal of human evolution in becoming one with the Divine Life, from Which all come, to Which all return, and of Which we are oblivious during our human pilgrimage. As such Christ is the perfect human being, become Superhuman in reaching the end of human evolution.

If it be true, and it seems likely, that Jesus Christ lived and taught about 75 B.C. and was not crucified but stoned and His body hung on a tree (Acts 5:30 and 10:39), then in making the manner of His death that of death on the Cross, the pious compilers of the Gospel-stories had already mixed the story of Jesus the Christ with that of the mystic Christ. In the same manner the story of Christ in nature, the mythic Christ, who in the mythology of most races is found under many names as the Sun-God, whose death in winter and rebirth after the shortest day (Christmas) are representative of the life of the Cosmic Christ in Nature, whose cosmic life-story again is one with the historical life of Jesus the Christ, was worked into the Gospel story, so that it finally became, not only the story of a life on earth, not only the story of each human soul, but the story of the Divine Life crucified in Nature, reborn through nature, the story of Christ, the Second Logos, the Cosmic Christ, Who in this manifestation in Nature is the source of the Sun-God myth, the Mythic Christ.

Truth is greater than the finite mind of man and our inability to see all aspects and meanings of a truth does not mean that they do not exist. St. Paul saw and rightly emphasized the truth of the mystic Christ, in and through the story of the historic Jesus Christ, thus preserving for later Christianity a precious heritage of mystic life which else might have been lost sight of.

Yet it cannot be denied that St. Paul, who had never met Jesus the Christ, who had not been inspired by the example of this fragrant life of gentleness, compassion and serenity, does not show forth either in his life or writings that very element which was Christ's great gift to the world. St. Paul alone could never have conveyed to us the great lesson Christ taught by this Life. St. Francis could have done it, his life breathes that same fragrance of Christ's life, but St. Paul was a passionate and even somewhat dogmatic propagator of a doctrine, an able organizer, in fact the founder of the Church, but not one who trod in His footsteps. Yet, a man like St. Paul was necessary for the work that was to be done, a character like his essential to the success of it. His missionary zeal led to dogmatism, but without it the Jewish sect would not have become the world-religion.

St. Paul thought in the magnitude of continents where the other apostles thought in the magnitude of villages. He saw all mankind waiting for the message and he brought it. Practically alone he overcame the resistance of those who desired to keep the new message for Jews only and resented his attempts to spread it to the Gentiles.

Alone he planted the seed of the new faith throughout Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece, forming small and devoted groups of followers wherever he went and keeping in touch with them, instructing and exhorting them, by correspondence. It was a gigantic task for any one man to have undertaken and accomplished. It is true he was helped by fellow-disciples, true also that others did work similar to his in establishing important Churches in Rome, Alexandria and elsewhere.

But only Paul had a Luke to make his work immortal. The fame of having made a universal religion from an obscure Jewish sect, of having spread this religion through almost the entire civilized world of his day, of having established the Christian Church as such and having given it a coherent doctrine, will forever be associated with the name of St. Paul. Jesus the Christ brought the new impulse, realized the new ideal, St. Paul made the new religion, even though some may say he unmade it.

Without him and his less famous helpers in missionary work, the new faith might not have become the universal religion.

He freed it from its Jewish shackles and enabled a world to participate in the new Life. It was unavoidable that in the process something of Christ's essential message should be lost, that the inspired character of the earliest days should give way to the more dogmatic type of the established religion. But the great work had been begun: the Christian religion was born.

CHAPTER 5 THE GOSPELS

Many scholars now regard the Gospels as allegory and mystery-drama, intended not as history (though certain historical events are included) but as instruments for the propagation of doctrine (Dibelius, Bultmann, and others).

In Bishop Leadbeater's view, the original, much shorter document upon which the Gospels were based, was written in Hebrew by a man named Matthaëus who lived in the southern Judean desert.

He sent this document to a friend of his who was the chief abbot of a huge monastery at Alexandria and suggested to him that he, or some of his assistants, might perhaps recast it, and issue it in the Greek language. The Alexandrian abbot seems to have employed a number of his young monks upon this work allowing each of them to try the task for himself and to treat it in his own way. A number of documents of very varying merit were thus produced. Four of these still survive to us, and to them are attached the names of the monks who wrote them, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The splendid passage with which the Gospel of St. John opens was not original but quoted, for we found it in existence many years before the time of Christ in a manuscript which was even then of hoary antiquity.

(C.W. Leadbeater, *The Inner Life*: Vol. I)

THE GOSPELS AS A MYSTERY DRAMA

G. N. Drinkwater wrote in an article called *Christianity, the Great Synthesis*:

It has been observed from the earliest times that certain incidents in the lives of some of the gods and heroes of antiquity bear a marked resemblance to some of the events in the Gospels.

To give but one example, Epiphanius mentions a 'mystery' celebrated at the temple of Kore at Alexandria. A wooden image of a baby, marked with a cross of gold on its forehead, was brought in and a chant was sung. "The Virgin has given birth to the Aeon."¹

It was even supposed by some writers that Satan had sought to discredit Christianity by anticipating many of its features in 'heathen' cults! Thus, Justin Martyr, c. 150, commenting on the legend that Perseus was born of the virgin Danae, wrote: When I hear that Perseus was begotten of a virgin, I understand that the deceiving serpent has counterfeited this."²

In an article on Tammuz³, Dr. S. H. Langdon says that in the Babylonian form of the rite, Tammuz is called Bel or Marduk. He is represented as having been imprisoned in the lower world at the Nisan or New Year festival and a priestess weeps at his sepulchre. A malefactor was slain with Bel and together they descend to the land of darkness. In the meantime his garments are given to Ishtar, his virgin mother, and his body is laid in a sepulchre from which he shortly comes forth.

¹ Haer. LL., 22

² Dialogues with Trypho, c. 70

³ Tammuz: Encyclopaedia Britannica 14th edition

Arthur Weigall⁴ points out that Antioch was one of the earliest seats of Christianity, yet the death and resurrection of Tammuz was celebrated there every year.⁵ Furthermore, the rite of Tammuz had influenced the Jews long before the days of Christianity, as is shown by Ezekiel reproving the women of Jerusalem for weeping for the dead Tammuz even at the gate of the Temple.⁶ Jerome was horrified to discover that the place selected at Bethlehem by the early Christians as the scene of the birth of Jesus was none other than a shrine of Tammuz. As Dr. Langdon justly remarks: That this cult had direct influence on the origins of Christianity cannot be denied.

Another religion that had close affinities with Christianity was Mithraism. Mithra was originally a Persian conception of the Deity. The cult was introduced into the Roman world about 68 B.C. and survived until 376 A.D. during which time it had even reached England, as remains at York and Chester show.

The Mithraists had a eucharistic service and also a rite of baptism in which the candidates were baptized by water and the Priest made a sign on their foreheads.

Particularly strong evidence is furnished in G. T. Sadler's *Behind the New Testament*, p. 43. He shows that the description of the Mysteries of Isis given at the end of the *Metamorphoses* or *Golden Ass* of Apuleius bears a remarkable resemblance to the details of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus.

Since Lucius (Apuleius' hero in the *Metamorphoses* and presumably Apuleius himself) was under a vow of secrecy he could only hint at his experiences, nevertheless he mentions several significant points.

Slightly condensed, Sadler's account is as follows, the words in italics indicating resemblances to the crucifixion story:

In the procession of Isis was one who "counterfeited a *soldier*." Others played the parts of *magistrates*. Some were *women* in white *raiment*. A number had torches (John XVIII, 3). The initiates wore white *linen* robes (Mark XIV 51, 52: XV 46). One bore a *palm tree* (John XII, 13). Apuleius (or Lucius) received a *linen* cloak for he had "striven to cover his nakedness" (Mark XIV, 51, 52). The procession came to the *temple* and the *priests* retired, but one of them called "the *scribe*" mounted a *tribunal* and recited prayers. Lucius was told to *drink no more wine* for a season (Mark XIV.25). Then "a *linen* robe that no man had yet worn was cast about me" (Mark XV. 46). "I drew nigh to the confines of *death*, I trod the threshold of Proserpine, I was borne through all the elements, and *returned to earth* again" (I Peter III, 19; Eph. IV.9).

"*In the morning*" (Mark XV, I - the initiation of Lucius and the trial of Jesus were both in the night) "I came forth clothed in the twelve *cloaks* that are worn by the initiate" (Luke XXIV, II). I ascended the wooden tribunal or dais, arrayed in a *robe* made only of *linen*; it was richly *embroidered...in diverse colours*" (John XIV, 5: Luke XXIII, II). "My head was *garlanded* with a fair crown of spotless palm, whose leaves stood out like rays" (cp. crown of thorns: Mark XV, 17). "The *curtains* were suddenly withdrawn and the people thronged in to gaze on me." (Matt XXVII, 51, Luke XXIII, 45, 48). "The *third day* the initiation was consummated" (Mark X, 34; VIII, 31; Matt., XXVII.,64).

⁴ *The Paganism in our Christianity*, p.10

⁵ *Ammianus Marcellinus*, XXII, 9

⁶ *Ezekiel*, 8:14

Can any one doubt that the Gospels are Mystery Dramas?

It would seem that the best hypothesis to cover the facts is the view, long familiar to Theosophists and Liberal Catholics, that the Gospels are in the main Mystery Dramas and were never intended by their original authors exactly to represent the life of the Lord.

(from *The Liberal Catholic*, July 1932)

THE SECOND COMING

In primitive Christianity the belief was very strong that the second coming of Christ, the *parousia* was imminent. This was usually combined with Millenarianism (*Chiliasm*) or the belief in a thousand year period of happiness for mankind after the Second Coming. These beliefs have been common among many Christian groups from the early days of the Church right up to the present day.

In the days of the infancy of the Christian Church, hope took the form of the expectation of the imminent return of the Lord to earth either to bring the whole world to an end and to translate His faithful people to some better world above the skies or to overthrow the wicked here in this world and establish His heavenly kingdom in place of existing dominions and world powers. There is no doubt about the widespread and confidently held belief in the near coming even in the generation that was contemporaneous with the Lord's earthly life in Palestine. It is unmistakable in the very earliest Christian literature, in the Epistles commonly attributed to St. Paul, to the Thessalonians for instance; and at the very end of his first epistle to the Corinthians, the Aramaic words Maran atha or Marana tha occur. They mean 'The Lord cometh' and seem to be a sort of password or watchword of some order of believers in the Coming that have somehow slipped into the Epistle. 'Where is the promise of His coming, for since the fathers fell asleep all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation?' So a late writer in the New Testament represents mockers of his time challenging him and his belief that the Lord will return to establish new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness (II Peter II, 4 and 13). There is no doubt about the belief in those earliest days, but the Lord did not return then.

That persistent, widespread belief in the early return of the glorified Lord to earth is one of the strangest most inexplicable mysteries of early Church history.

There is no doubt about it. The belief was almost universally held by Christians and it died very hard. Or perhaps it is more true to say that it never died. It kept appearing and reappearing all down the centuries. It became an article of the creeds both Eastern and Western.

Certainly the words attributed to our Lord in the Gospels may have, perhaps we may say must have, originated the thought. He did say, or so He is reported to have said, 'this generation shall not pass till all these things be fulfilled' (Mk. 13, 30), and 'There be some that stand here that shall not taste of death till they have seen the Kingdom of God come with power' (Mk 9, 1; Lk. 9, 27), or 'till they have seen the Son of Man coming in his Kingdom.' (Mt. 16,28).

But such sayings as these are capable of other explanations. For instance they may have been a foretelling of such an event as the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. In any case they do not seem sufficient to account for a belief so persistent and widespread as the belief in the Lord's imminent reappearance.

(Rt. Rev. F.W. Pigott in *The Liberal Catholic* October 1955, p. 231)

CHAPTER 6

SHORT SUMMARY OF HISTORY UP THE END OF THE FIRST CENTURY A.D.

The Dead Sea Scrolls and the excavations at Qumran throw some light upon a sect that lived there between about 100 B.C. and 70 A.D. This sect possessed many of the characteristics of primitive Christianity and revered a "Teacher of Righteousness" who had been put to death by the Jewish authorities in about 73 B.C. The sect is generally thought to be identical with, or a branch of, the Essenes that have been described by Philo and Josephus.

We read in the Acts of the Apostles of the missionary journeys of St. Paul (approximately 1-64 A.D.) and others between about 40 A.D. and 65 A.D. There were clashes between the Jerusalem faction of the movement which wanted to keep strictly to the Jewish Law and the Pauline faction which wanted to bring the new faith to the non-Jewish world.

The latter faction won entirely, mainly due to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. The Temple was destroyed and the Palestine Jews spread all over the lands around the Mediterranean, joining their brothers already in the Diaspora (dispersion). The *Mother Church* of Jerusalem ceased to function. Jewish Christians were soon entirely outnumbered by Gentile converts.

The first literature of the new movement is thought to have originated between 50 A.D. and about 100 A.D. The epistles of St. Paul are regarded as the earliest, but scholars are undecided which of the epistles carrying his name were actually written by St. Paul. The Four Gospels, Acts and Revelation are thought to have been written at various times towards the end of the century, Mark being regarded as the earliest.

By the end of the first century the new movement, variously called the Church (Ecclesia) or New Covenant, had won its first battle. This had been fought against its own Jewish origins. It now enters the stage of history no longer as a Jewish sect but as a separate religious movement slowly spreading into the various provinces of the Roman Empire.

From early times a secret mystery rite appears to have existed in the Church. Both the Letters of St. Paul and the Synoptic Gospels give strong indications of this, partly in allegorical language. The institution of the Holy Eucharist as described in the Synoptics is obviously a description of such a rite. The student should in this connection read the Chapter *The Apostolic Mystery Rite* by G. N. Drinkwater in his booklet *Food in the Early Church* (St. Alban Press). For a clairvoyant view see *Clairvoyant Investigations, Etc.* by Geoffrey Hodson, chapter II.

CHAPTER 7

CHRIST OR EMPEROR · THE AGE OF MARTYRDOM

With the birth of the Christian religion as such, the second act of the Drama of the Christian Faith closes and the curtains rise on the next act. The one in which the young religion will have to undergo and overcome the attacks of the world around it.

In the Prologue to the drama, we have seen the setting of the stage, the conditions of the world into which Christ came; the first Act showed His Coming and the kindling of the fire of the New Faith and in the second Act we saw how from the inspiration Christ had given, the Christian religion as such originated and spread throughout the civilized world of that day. Now, in the third Act, the new religion will have to find its place in the world surrounding it, adjust itself to existing conditions, both influencing them and undergoing their influence. It was inevitable that this interaction with the outside world and this adjustment to it should be a time of struggle.

The new Sect, which had first been looked upon with derision, gradually began to be feared and finally, even hated, as it spread and became a power with which to be reckoned. The Jewish faith was a *religio licita* and as long as the new faith formed part of the Jewish religion, it was protected by the tolerance that Rome had for the religions of the nations it conquered. But when, with the change from a Jewish sect to a universal religion, the new faith broke with the Jewish religion and became independent, it lost that protection and had to rely on its own strength. The hatred of the Jews for the followers of Christ, which existed already during the lifetime of the great Teacher, became even stronger when Christianity opened its doors to Jews and Gentiles alike; riots between Jews and Christians became frequent and it was only natural that the authorities should blame the latter for them - the more so as the Jews lost no opportunity in maligning the Christians and sowing suspicion against them whenever they could.

But that which chiefly made the Christians unpopular in an age of imperialism was that they were of no race or nation, but essentially universalist in type. The Jews, too, were hated, but their religion was at least nationalistic in character and whereas national ideals were respected, the new ideal of internationalism, being adverse to the imperialistic tendencies of Rome, naturally called forth opposition.

Then as now men were only too ready to believe evil of that which was unknown or new and no accusations were too base to be used against the Christians. The main charge of course was that of immorality; it was said that their love feasts were in reality shameless debauches, in which all conceivable excesses were committed; they were accused of child-murder as part of their religious ritual and people were only too willing to believe that they were incendiaries and dangerous revolutionaries.

The early Christians looked upon the world surrounding them as a dangerous enemy trying to tempt them away from the spiritual life, and their fanatical fight against Pagan creeds was partly due to fear of that world which they had not really overcome. They had inherited the almost dogmatic and jealous worship of one God from their Jewish ancestors and no sin could be worse in their eyes than that of worshipping other gods. It was this uncompromising denial of any other worship but their own which brought about the final clash between the followers of Christ and the Roman authorities.

EMPEROR WORSHIP

The national state-religion of Rome was no longer a vital creed, but the recently instituted Emperor-worship was the most precious bond of unity the growing Empire possessed. The usual form of the worship would be to burn incense in front of the statue of the Emperor or bring a victim to be sacrificed and after the sacrifice to partake of the offerings in the sacrificial meal. In the early days of Christianity it was one of the conditions on which the Apostles would allow St. Paul and his helpers to spread the Faith to the Gentiles, that they should abstain from food that had been offered to idols. Christianity did not suffer anything, or anyone, to share in the worship, which was due to God alone, and while they were willing to give to Caesar what was Caesar's they refused to give him what was God's.

This refusal to participate in the worship of the Emperor, which had become a symbol of the unity of the Roman Empire, was one of the main causes, if not the sole cause of the persecutions which followed.

Up to this time Christianity has been tolerated, though not recognized as a *religio licita*. Christian communities were allowed registration as burial clubs, and we even know of one instance where registration took place for a guild of dyers or "purple-dippers," which in reality was a Christian congregation. For a while they could work unmolested in this manner and enjoy the legal privileges

granted to such clubs and guilds. But now as a result of the continual riots both with Jews and Pagans and of the hatred which the new faith aroused because its followers were different from the rest, but most of all as a result of the accusations of disloyalty and anarchism made against them, this toleration changed to persecution.

It is a curious fact that the worst persecutions invariably took place during the reign of the most high-minded and noble emperors. The reason why the best emperors were so severe in their persecutions was that they, more than any others, realized the danger of the growing faith for the Roman Empire and felt it their duty to stop it at all costs. The result of the persecutions however was exactly the opposite. Instead of destroying the young Church, they only served to make it stronger by weeding out the weak and faint-hearted and by inspiring and strengthening the remainder by the noble example of the martyrs. Martyrdom, far from being considered a misfortune, was looked upon as a most desirable consummation. The certitude of gaining the crown of martyrdom and the everlasting bliss of heaven was sufficient to make many desire martyrdom eagerly, so much so that the magistrates at times had to restrain those who tried to force martyrdom upon themselves.

The Edict of Decius, issued in the year 250, fixed a date by which all had to make public profession of paganism. A commission of magistrates was appointed for each locality, the names of the inhabitants were called out, and each, in veil and crown, had to offer a sacrificial victim, or, at least, incense and a libation; to renounce Christ and partake of the sacrificial meal. Those who fell off from Christianity in this manner were called the *lapsi* and amongst these again we can distinguish the *sacrificati*, those who had brought a sacrificial victim, the *thurificati*, who had offered incense, and the *libellatici*, who had procured a certificate or *libellus* from the magistrates without actually having taken part in the worship. In later years the church was to know serious controversies with regard to the possible return to the church of these different groups of *lapsi*.

The last great persecution took place under Diocletian, who in the year 303 issued three edicts, each one more severe than the previous one. The Diocletian persecution was the last great effort to crush out Christianity, and, terrible as it was, it yet meant the failure of the authorities to destroy the Christian Church. The persecutions far from destroying the church had made it stronger and the blood of the martyrs truly proved the seed of the church.

CHAPTER 8 THE APOLOGISTS

As the Church grew it had to adapt itself to the philosophical climate of the times as well as taking its stand against both orthodox Judaism as well as other religious movements and philosophies. We find about the middle of the second century various writers of Apologies in defence of the new Faith.

The most famous of these apologists was Justin the Martyr (c. 100 –165 A.D.). In the year 150 he addressed an *Apology for Christianity* to the Emperor Antoninus Pius. He also wrote *A Dialogue With Trypho the Jew*, defending Christianity against Judaism.

The importance of the apologists lies in the fact that they tried to present Christianity (which was often looked down upon as a grave superstition by the cultured people of the day) as a coherent and philosophically reasonable faith. Justin identifies the God of Christianity with the transcendent God of Plato and tries to integrate Christian beliefs with the classical philosophical tradition.

This had to some extent already been done by St. Paul and in St. John's Gospel, but now we find for

the first time a Christian theology beginning to take shape which, though based on Jewish Monotheism, nevertheless owes its development almost entirely to classical Greek philosophy. In the centuries to come we find that much of this philosophy became an integrated part of Christianity.

CHAPTER 9 GNOSTICISM

Christ Himself had lived a perfect life among men and taught them the Wisdom of which He was the embodiment; but He never taught a system or a theology. His teaching was not dogmatic; what He said could naturally be interpreted in many different ways, and so it was. His vital message was grafted on to the different religions and philosophies of His day, and naturally varied accordingly.

Amongst the orthodox Jews who had accepted Christ, His coming was looked upon as the fulfilment of the Law. Their expectation of a Messiah had been that of an earthly king who was to make Israel great among the nations, and the coming of Christ as a spiritual Teacher, willing to suffer defeat at the hands of earthly enemies so that He might show forth the invincible power of the spirit, had been a disillusionment to many. Thus even after His departure they looked forward to His coming back as an earthly king; they could not abandon their original expectation nor see the limitations of it, and the first century of Jewish Christianity is one of Chiliastic expectations - at any time the long-desired millennium might break and Christ return in all the triumph of earthly power. In this Jewish Christianity, too, we can find the origin of the idea that Christ the Son of God had been offered as a sacrifice to appease the wrath of God and to reconcile Him to humanity.

The Christianity of St. Paul grafted the message of Christ on to the old Mystery teaching, thus raising it above Jewish national limitations and opening the way for Christianity as a universal religion. This Pauline Christianity, centred as it was round the figure of the mystic Christ rather than round the figure of the historical Jesus was naturally very different from the Jewish Christianity with its narrow nationalism.

Again a different branch of Christianity was the Alexandrian Church, where that wonderful blend of Christian ideals with Greek philosophy, Egyptian wisdom and Asiatic traditions was made which later was on to culminate in the greatness of the Alexandrian School.

Finally, we find scattered here and there in Asia-Minor and Egypt a strange mixture of the doctrines of Christ with Persian and Indian Esoteric traditions known in later ages as Gnosticism.¹ Much that was fantastic and offered little value masqueraded as Gnostic teaching, but even in the very imperfect and mutilated fragments of real Gnosticism which have come down to us we can recognize a most important though little-recognized aspect of Christ's teaching.

Well may we ask ourselves which of these was Christianity, what was the true teaching or orthodoxy. In the great struggle of Christianity with the Roman world, the early Fathers had found themselves obliged again and again to define the Christian tradition and expound the Christian teachings in their apologies written to deny the different accusations levelled against the new religion. It is one of the main results of attacks from without that they force any movement to define its position; and in the case of Christianity the work of the apologists had brought about a crystallization of doctrine which was the beginning of an orthodoxy.

THE DEEPER WISDOM

¹ The word Gnostic is derived from the Greek *gnosis*, knowledge, in this case denoting an inner knowledge given to those ready to receive it.
S. von Krusenstierna

Jewish Christianity was ethical and democratic; it maintained that Christ had given but a lofty ethical doctrine which was available to all and could be understood by all. The Gnostic claim that there was a Christianity for the few as well as the Christianity for the many, that Christ had taught a deeper wisdom, the *Gnosis*, to the more advanced of His disciples and that this inner doctrine could only be obtained by those who were spiritually ready to receive it, was a thing abhorrent to Jewish and orthodox Christianity. The struggle became one between democratic Christianity which looked upon all men as equal in the sight of God, and aristocratic Christianity which, though recognizing that all were sons of one Father, maintained that some of these sons were younger in the spirit and less capable of understanding the inner things than others who were more advanced in the school of life. Christ Himself made this distinction; we read how He taught in secret to His disciples the things about which He could but speak in parables to the multitude. He thus recognized what we might term the aristocracy of the spirit, which does but mean that some souls are more capable of receiving wisdom than others, and thus more fitted to be leaders amongst men. The inner things of the Kingdom, which would have been as pearls cast before swine if given to the multitude, were thus given by Christ and His successors to the chosen few who by rigid self-control and spiritual training had made themselves ready to receive them.

Some of the early Fathers themselves recognized the existence of a hidden doctrine and were far from claiming that they knew all there was to be known in the Christian teaching. Thus St. Polycarp, the Martyr Bishop of Smyrna, writes a letter expressing the hope that his correspondents are *well versed in the sacred Scriptures and that nothing is hid from them; but, he writes, to me this privilege is not yet granted*, acknowledging thereby that he is not yet ready to receive full Initiation into the final Mysteries. St. Ignatius of Antioch writes in a similar vein and speaks of himself as *not yet perfect in Jesus Christ*. Addressing his correspondents as fellow-disciples, he says: *for even I, though I am able to understand heavenly things, the Angelic orders, the distinction between powers and dominions, and the diversities between thrones and authorities, the mightiness of the aeons...though I am acquainted with these things, yet am I not therefore by any means perfect, nor am I such a disciple as Paul or Peter*. This last passage shows that the teachings with regard to the Angelic Hierarchies, which are certainly not to be found in the Gospels, were part of a hidden tradition given to the few in terms that strongly remind us of Gnostic teachings. All this shows that the claim of the Gnostics that Christ gave a teaching for the few as well as a teaching for the many was quite justified, though we may well doubt whether some of the Gnostic systems were really a fair presentation of this teaching for the few. That there was a secret school, however, the so-called Mysteries of Jesus, in which the deeper truths were taught, is certain; and also that some of the greater Gnostic teachers must have been Initiates in these Mysteries.²

THE GNOSTIC SYSTEMS

The different Gnostic systems differ a good deal amongst themselves, but there are some teachings common to all which certainly form a valuable element of Christian doctrine. The Gnostics made a clear distinction between Jehovah, the tribal deity of the Jews, the God of wrath and of jealousy, who was the central figure of the Jewish scriptures, and the one God, Father of all and Fount of all love, beyond human conception and yet the indwelling life in man himself. This was the God of love of Whom Christ taught, and was not to be confused with the man-made God of the Jews. With this different conception of God the Gnostics combined a somewhat different conception of creation. Instead of the creation of the world in six days by Jehovah they recognized great creative Beings, the so-called Aeons, through whom God realizes His plan of creation. The teaching about the real nature of these aeons, as also of the different orders of Angelic Beings, who were the ministers of this creative activity, was one of the elements of the Mystery-teaching, as we have already seen in the above-mentioned statement of St. Ignatius.

² *The School of Basilides (first half of 2nd century) claimed to teach the esoteric tradition given by Christ to His disciples after the Resurrection, which had been conveyed to them through the Apostle Matthias and others. S von Krusenstierna.*

The Gnostics distinguished between the world of the Real, the *Pleroma* or Fullness, and the world of illusion, the *Kenoma* or Emptiness. The worlds of our daily existence belong to the *Kenoma*; they are illusionary in character; it is only by retreating within himself that man can come to know the *Pleroma* or Fullness of things. The myth of *Sophia*, the Divine Soul in man, who has become a prisoner in the world of illusion and has to be redeemed by Christ, was representative of man's existence in this world of every-day life, from which those who desired initiation into the Mysteries of Jesus had to pass into that inner world where the kingdom of heaven was to be gained. The Gnostics taught that this pilgrimage of the human soul through matter took place through repeated lives on earth, in which man gradually drew nearer to his final redemption. They also claimed to be able to control the hidden forces in Nature and in man, and many of the Gnostic remains are of a magical character. Much of this Gnostic magical teaching, as found in the *Pistis Sophia* and the *Books of Jeu* is unintelligible to us; but it is not altogether fair to blame the Gnostic teachers for that, since none of their works have reached us in a pure version, and the few fragments which are trustworthy are not only intelligible but give evidence of a lofty and profound doctrine.

Too little has come down to us from the great Gnostic doctors like Basilides, Valentinus and Bardesanes to allow for any connected statement of their doctrines. The few excerpts which we find, often in a sadly mutilated form, in the writings of their adversaries give us a glimpse of a profound and lofty philosophy which we can well believe to have formed part of the teaching which our Lord Christ gave to the few. And reading them we wonder whether much that was condemned as heresy by the Church which called itself the orthodox church had not as much claim to be called orthodoxy or true doctrine as that for which it was rejected. When we remember in how many different forms Christianity appears to us in the first century, according to the beliefs of the nation or race by which it was taken up, we may well question the right of any of these forms to call itself orthodox to the exclusion of all others; and in the original teaching of our Lord Christ much may have found a place which afterwards was rejected as heretical. However this may be ethical, Christianity won the day, and, by its fight against heresies lost the inner doctrine of Christ which was His teaching given to the few.

MARCION

It was one of the main arguments of the Gnostics that a clear distinction should be made between Jewish orthodoxy centred around an angry and revengeful tribal deity and Christianity with its God of Love, Who was a Father to all men, to whatsoever race or nation they belonged.

The main exponent of this antithesis between the Jewish faith and the teaching of Christ was a certain Marcion, son of a rich ship owner in Pontus. He is usually counted amongst the Gnostics though his only connection with them seems to be this distinction between the God of Jews and the God of Christ.

Marcion may well be called the first Church-reformer. He came to Rome about the middle of the second century and interested himself in the Church there, to which he is said to have made a large donation. When however he began to ask questions which were thought to be lacking in faith he was excommunicated from the Church and with his many followers formed a new church which soon became very strong and was the most serious rival the orthodox communion knew. Marcion, besides being a man with a very clear insight into the true values of Christianity, was a very able organizer, and if his successors had been men as able as he the Marcionite Church might have lived and flourished. He himself wrote a book called *Antitheses* in which he compared the God of the Jews, who was merely a just God, to the God of Christ who was not only just but loving. Many of his comparisons are very well made and certainly characteristic of the difference he wished to emphasize. Thus he compared the story of Elisha - who when mocked by children cursed them in the name of Jehovah, and found his prayer promptly answered when Jehovah sent two she-bears who devoured the children - to the saying of Christ: *Suffer the little children to come unto Me* and the love

which our Lord ever showed to children all through His wonderful life. Again he showed how Jehovah cast forth the lepers whereas Christ cured them.

In the Gospel which the Marcionite church used there was no reference whatever to the Old Testament; Marcion left out all passages which might possibly link Christianity up with the religion of the Jews. It is interesting to compare the Gospel-criticism of Marcion with modern movements which claim that Christianity should be clearly distinguished from the religion of the Jews and that the new Testament alone should be the Christian Scripture. It is certain that if Marcion's Christianity had prevailed, the Church would have suffered less from the intolerance and hardness which the Jewish element brought with it.



The student should at this point read Bishop Charles Wicks' short but informative study *The Christian Gnostics and Their Teachings*, on pp. 199-227 in *The Liberal Catholic Church & Some Facets of Its Doctrine*.

The discovery of a number of Gnostic codices at Nag Hamadi in Egypt in 1945 has considerably widened our knowledge of Gnosticism. One of the most interesting of the books found is *The Gospel of Thomas*. This work, containing 114 sayings of Jesus, is included in *The Secret Sayings of Jesus* by R. M. Grant and D. N. Freedman (Fontana paperback).

Though somewhat dated, one of the best books for further study of Gnosticism is still G. R. S. Mead's *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*, University Books, N.Y.