

**The Pagan Saviours:  
Pagan Elements in Christian  
Ritual and Doctrine**

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# THE PAGAN SAVIOURS

## Pagan Elements in Christian Ritual and doctrine

### Introduction

This paper will examine similarities between pagan mystery cults current in Greece and Rome in the centuries before and after the birth of Christ. It will look at the undoubted similarities between them and the developing Christian ritual.

It will be noted that many of the concepts and rituals familiar to us today through Christianity have in their pagan context coherence and rationale – or some form of added dimension – which is not present in their Christian counterpart. A further monograph<sup>1</sup> will examine more deeply the historical context of early Christianity – to ask whether, why and how cross-fertilization may have flourished.

The extraordinary similarity has, of course, been observed before. It is greatly to be regretted that many commentators brought baggage of their own to the debate. Hence, early Christian fathers believed that the devil had imitated Christian ritual to lead people astray. During the Reformation, the existence of Pagan ritual in the Catholic Church was one of the central complaints of Protestants – although this paper will seek to show that a fundamental similarity of doctrine with Paganism still exists in both Churches. Later Christian commentators suggested – more convincingly – that perhaps there is a very narrow range of ritual to which human beings cleave. Or else they admitted there must have been cross-contamination, but that the essentials of Christianity were untouched. Around the turn of the twentieth century, a school of ‘debunkers’ seized upon the same similarities to try to demonstrate that Jesus was a mere allegory and never existed, and that Christianity was, in fact, nothing more than a pagan sect itself. Their determination to fit this quart into a pint pot gave rise to tortuous arguments – such as attempts to equate the term ‘the Lamb of God’ with the ‘age of Aries’, and the later Christian fish symbol with the ‘age of Pisces’. With the decline of traditional Christian worship – just as the required objectivity became possible – interest has waned, and little study on the subject has been done at all in recent times.

In this monograph, therefore, the facts are allowed to speak for themselves. The parallels between pagan and Christian ritual are obvious,

and intrinsically interesting. What they do demonstrate is the durability of ritual, long after the original rationale behind it has disappeared. They also tell us something about the nature of human belief, and the elements (raised emotion, distinctive costume, the reassuringly familiar combined with the striking and unusual), which, apparently, help to support and maintain it.

Whether you believe they occurred as historical events at the time of Jesus or not, it is striking that certain concepts fundamental to Christianity today predate him by thousands of years. For example, the sacrificed, resurrected and redeeming god – whose origins go back into the pantheons of dimmest antiquity – is alive and well in one of the world's major monotheistic religions.

### **The Mystery Religions**

The city is Rome. It is the first century after Christ, at midnight, the first moment of December 25<sup>th</sup>. The temples are lit up. Priests in white robes stand at the altar. Boys burn incense. The congregation is here to celebrate the birth of their Lord God. But Jesus Christ is not the name on their lips – when he was born this was already an ancient ceremony. It commemorates the sun god Mithras. As R.J. Condon puts it:

‘His worshippers believed he had come from heaven to be born as a man in order to redeem men from their sins, and he was born of a virgin on December 25th. Shepherds were the first to learn of his birth ....’<sup>2</sup>

This picture contrasts with the accounts we have of Christian ceremony during the same period – if ceremony is not too grand a name for the informal gatherings of Christians in the home of one of their members. There they would study the sayings and teachings of Jesus – a teacher from an entirely different tradition: the Jewish monotheistic one. Here is a typical account, by the Roman governor Pliny, written in AD 112:

‘They were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn, to sing antiphonally a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and to bind themselves by an oath, not to some wickedness, but not to commit acts of fraud, theft or adultery, not to falsify their word, not to refuse to return a deposit of called upon to do so. When they had done these things they used to depart and then come together again to take food – but food of an ordinary and harmless kind.’<sup>3</sup>

To understand the contrast between the ritual (or lack of it) known to the earliest Christians and the importance of both Catholic and Protestant ritual today we have to look at the historical context of the early church.

There is a Persian proverb ‘everything that goes into a salt mine becomes salt’. Nothing, including Christianity, occurs in a vacuum. It seems highly likely that the cultural and religious climate of the times, in which the early followers of Christ lived, and from which they drew their converts, would have coloured the way the religion was interpreted and understood by successive generations. More importantly, ritual and doctrine are to some extent inseparable. We must examine the preoccupations of the early pagan cults and try to assess whether some of those too may have rubbed off on early Christian belief.

The Roman Empire in the centuries before the birth of Christ was a cosmopolitan melting pot of ancient civilisation. Each great tradition poured its own cultural treasure – its own pantheon of gods, its own heritage of myth and legend – into an alchemic brew already seething with the riches of Greek and Roman civilisation.

Three or four hundred years before Christ, the ‘mystery religions’ penetrated Roman and even Greek society from the East, and gained huge popularity. From Egypt, where the splendours of the Pharaonic tradition stretched back thousands of years, came the cults of Isis and Osiris; while out of Persia came the cult of the sun god Mithras. They existed happily cheek by jowl with cults such as those of Attis and Adonis and a host of others, observed in Pagan Rome.

Although frowned upon by the state, the foreign cults were tolerated. Their popularity with ordinary people was not surprising. They had a complex and compelling mythology, which not only entertained and impressed, but which sought to explain Creation and the order of the world. They had secretive and emotionally-charged ritual – initiates could progress through successive stages and at each one further mysteries were revealed. They had an imposing priesthood, which dressed in special garb and was held in awe by the congregation. They had hymns and prayers, festivals and celebrations. Although revealing the secrets of the various stages of initiation was strictly forbidden, the cults were not exclusive – and many people belonged to more than one.

There were notable similarities between the Pagan cults – from both the Eastern and the Graeco-Roman traditions. There has been much speculation as to the reasons. It could have been that they stemmed from the same ancient root in myths and ceremonies intended to produce success in hunting and early agriculture. It seems beyond doubt that syncretism between the cults was commonplace as well – and there are many examples of depictions of gods and goddesses where the imagery has become so blurred that it is difficult to tell who is who and where often a hybrid is inferred. It has often been pointed out that stories, myths and legends are the

common heritage of mankind – perhaps the only possession that has been freely shared among us from the dawn of human culture. Central to the myths and rituals of these cults were:

- Striking nativity legends and celebrations
- Initiation rites – including ritual and spiritual purification such as baptism
- Mourning of the dying god followed by the ecstatic celebration of his resurrection (e.g. Adonis, Attis or Osiris)
- Propitiatory sacrifice – or self-sacrifice – of the god in order to redeem humanity

### **Origins of Pagan Belief**

Some of these myths and rituals will be dealt with in much more detail under separate sections later in this paper. In more general terms, we can say that their content reflects their ancient roots. It has been pointed out by scholars that the birth and resurrection of the (sun) god, combined with the use of the spring equinox and the winter solstice probably had its origins in the ceremonies which sought to explain the disappearance or ‘death’ of the sun every winter – and to ensure its triumphant reappearance the following spring.

Furthermore, the concept of a sacrifice – to ensure a desired result (usually success in hunting or in crops) is an ancient one – stretching back to the dim and much debated crossover between magical and religious belief. In previous monographs<sup>4</sup> we have discussed the principles of magic and ritual as human problem-solving strategies. Without presuming to plunge into what is at the current time a scholarly altercation about whether religion evolved out of magic or whether they developed side by side, we may suggest that the principle of sacrifice to a higher power evolved for very similar *reasons* as magical practice: that is to obtain a desired effect. It is, therefore, a problem-solving strategy.

It differs fundamentally from the monotheistic concept of the god as law-giver – binding his followers to a complete set of moral values. The pantheistic gods did not teach, they were. They carried no particular moral code in the way the Jewish tradition, for example, centred upon the Ten Commandments and the Law.

Jesus proved himself willing to accept certain practices common to various cults. For example, baptism was widely used in the ancient cults, and probably originated with early water worship. Indeed Ovid sang:

‘From Greece the custom came, for Greece esteems  
Those free from guilt who bathe in sacred streams’<sup>5</sup>

Bathing in the god, as it were, had regenerative properties. As even church officers have allowed:

‘John the Baptist simply adopted and practised the universal custom of sacred bathing for the remission of sins. Christ sanctioned it, the church inherited it.’<sup>6</sup>

But there are indications that early Christianity viewed baptism rather differently to Paganism. It saw it as a rite that signified the beginning of a new spiritual life. Contrast with that the Pagan belief that the water itself would be instrumental in washing away sin – which is shown very clearly in a jibe by Diogenes at a case of baptism through sprinkling (also widely practised):

‘Poor wretch! Do you not see that, since these sprinklings cannot repair your grammatical errors, they cannot repair either the faults of your life?’

In the preoccupations and outlook of the pagan cults, therefore, we see the concept of automatic cleansing and redemption through quasi-magical ritual – at the expense of an individual responsibility to uphold moral standards. Yet it is exactly this kind of individual responsibility which comes through very clearly in the actual teachings of Jesus preserved, for example, in the Gospels – as will be discussed in a further paper.

Christianity, to some extent, contains both traditions. Yet to this day emphasis is placed upon the doctrine of a divine Christ, whose single act of sacrifice has expiated the sins of humanity. Could Christianity have absorbed this doctrine along with the compelling ritual of paganism to which it was so central? Let us look now in detail at the cult of Mithras, and those of Isis and Osiris.

### **Mithras, the Sun God**

‘Among the scores of religious sects that offered eternal hope or present ecstasy to the diverse peoples of the Roman Empire in the middle of the first century, Christianity was not conspicuous. An impartial observer, asked which of these cults might someday become the official religion of the Empire, even a world religion, would perhaps have chosen Mithraism. He certainly would not have named the inconspicuous followers of a crucified Jew.’<sup>7</sup>

Who has heard of Mithraism today? Yet, in its day, the cult enjoyed spectacular success. As the early Christians struggled with severe persecution, followers flocked to this mysterious, ancient and beautiful religion. What we know of Mithraic ritual is strikingly similar to Christian ritual today. Sadly, detail from the very earliest days of Mithraism is scanty. By far the majority of sources (such as stone reliefs and contemporary references) date from after the Christian era, when the cult arrived in Rome. There is, therefore, the theoretical possibility that some ritual detail may have moved from Christianity into Mithraism. On the whole, however, even Christian scholars agree that the drift was the other way. Mithraic ritual predated Christianity by some centuries, and by the time it reached Rome was already elaborate at a time when the early Christians' observance was simplicity itself. Moreover, as we shall see, Mithraic doctrines make sense of ritual and terminology which raise questions within the context of a monotheistic faith. Looking at the very familiar ritual in a less familiar context, one has the feeling of rites which have 'come home'.

The roots of Mithraism stretched back into forgotten antiquity. The first reference to Mithras is in a Hittite inscription dating to the fourteenth century before Christ. His first home was India. He is mentioned in the Rigveda, where he appears to be a god of light. From India, he passed to Persia, where his association with light fitted him for a place in Zoroastrianism. In Zoroastrianism, the world is seen as a battleground between evil (darkness) and good (light). Mithras, as a spirit of light and truth, became a celestial warrior on the side of good. He later became associated with the sun, and from his contact with Babylonian society picked up astrological aspects. About two hundred years before Christ, in Asia Minor, he became the focal point for a mystery cult, run by hellenized Magi priests.

By the first century after Christ, he had made it to Rome. Unsurprisingly, in the Roman world, Mithras's clientele was mainly military. It was known as the 'soldier's cult' – his followers were considered warriors for good.

### **Nativity Legends**

The god – who wears a conical hat and is sometimes distinct from, sometimes identified with the sun – is often depicted emerging from a rock at his birth. This is believed to be the expression of a very ancient tradition dating from the time when mankind first realised that both light and fire could be created by striking a flint. By some (later) accounts there are indications that he may have been considered born of a virgin. His birthday was December 25<sup>th</sup>, mistakenly considered to be the winter solstice in

ancient times. Stone reliefs show shepherds attending his birth. While there is no archaeological evidence of the myth of the star, it would fit well with the astrological tradition of the Magi associated with Mithraism. (The wise men who attended Christ's birth were Magi, Persian priests who placed Mithras at the forefront of their theology in his role as sun god).

### **Creation/Redeemer**

In the ancient Persian Avesta, Mithras is the main adversary of evil whose ultimate victory is inevitable. The Avesta speaks of a Messiah, the *Saushyant*, who will appear at the end of time. With his aid, Truth and Good will triumph over evil.

‘When the dead rise again, when the living have become immortal [he] will make life glorious’.<sup>8</sup>

Many centuries later, by the time the cult had reached the West, the Messiah was represented by Mithras himself. While he is undoubtedly divine, Mithras is ‘between gods and men – an intermediary’. As *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* puts it:

‘As evil spirits ever lie in wait for hapless man he needs a friend and saviour. Who is Mithras? Mithras is the mediator between god and man.’<sup>9</sup>

Mithras is certainly a redeeming god – another common feature of Pagan belief. On the rear wall of every temple devoted to his worship was a dramatic scene of Mithras slaying a bull – his most notable feat, since it was done to benefit humankind.

What we know of the myth behind this striking scene goes thus: Mithras was responsible for the fertility – and thus the salvation – of the world. He achieved this by slaying a bull. When he plunged his dagger into it, from its blood came corn and animals. Mithras often looks sad to be killing the bull – but he has been ordered to do so by the Sun, who sent the raven as his messenger. The power of evil may have also sent his emissaries (the ant, scorpion and serpent) to lap up the blood. But they failed, and the spilt blood spread over the earth and caused plants and animals to appear. As M. Vermaseren says:

‘What is certain is that the bull-slaying was regarded as a beneficial and creative act; out of death arose fresh life – a concept which lies at the root of all the ancient mystery religions, for all concentrate on the same question of life, death and rebirth as observed in the annual cycle of

nature. Mother Earth is entrusted with seed of corn and soon the golden harvest is reaped. Persephone, Attis, Adonis all perish to rise anew.<sup>10</sup>

Reliefs in temples show the bull's blood becoming corn. Interestingly, there is some evidence that Mithras himself was personified in the bull – he is occasionally referred to as such. This hints that Mithras, in the guise of the bull, was seen as actually sacrificing himself for the benefit of mankind, in order to be resurrected. Ancient Persian texts say that the supreme god created a bull even before Gayomart, the first superman. The powers of evil attacked the bull, seeking to destroy creation – but grain and plants sprang from it.

‘The evil which Ahriman desired to achieve became in Mithras’s hands man’s salvation, and he himself became the saviour.’<sup>11</sup>

Not surprisingly, the bull was supposed to have been slain – and the earth thus rendered fecund – at the threshold of spring. In this respect, Mithraism resembles a myriad of pagan cults celebrating the renewal of life.

### **Eucharist**

Before end of his work on earth, Mithras had a banquet in which he took leave of his friend the Sun, before ascending to heaven. His worshippers celebrated a sacramental meal in commemoration of this. This meal inspired the greatest imaginable loathing in the eyes of the early Christians.

Tertullian, an early Christian father, called the Mithraist meal ‘a devilish imitation of the Eucharist’. He added that the Mithraic initiates also enacted the resurrection of their god. R. J Condon, in *Our Pagan Christmas*, pieces together the fragments of this ritual:

‘At sunrise the priests would announce “the god is born” then would come rejoicing, followed by a meal representing the last supper which Mithras ate with his disciples before his ascension into heaven.’

The initiates believed that they would be born again by eating the flesh of a bull and drinking its blood – in the same way that life had sprung from the blood of the bull.

It seems conclusive that on many occasions bread was substituted for the flesh of the sacred bull. Another early Church father, Justin, says that bread and water were used. But there is also evidence that wine replaced blood in some cases – for instance, a list of community expenses scratched on the walls of one temple include charges for meat and wine.

A medieval Persian text published by Franz Cumont compares the words of Christ with the sayings of Zarathustra, the Zoroastrian prophet who lived about a thousand years before Christ. First Zarathustra:

‘He who will not eat of my body and drink of my blood, so that he will be made one with me and I with him, the same shall not know salvation.’<sup>12</sup>

The equivalent in the Christian tradition is:

‘This [bread] is my body which is given for you .... This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.’<sup>13</sup>

Some form of baptism with bull’s blood also probably took place in Mithraism. In its most extreme form, the initiate would be placed in a pit over which a bull was slaughtered. He would be quite literally showered with the cleansing blood of the bull-god. It reminds one irresistibly of the quite peculiar Christian terminology ‘with his blood, he has washed us clean of sin.’

### **Ascent to Heaven**

After his last meal, Mithras ascended to heaven in a chariot. Sometimes he is seen running behind the sun god’s horse-drawn chariot. The sun, Sol, is shown with a halo round his head. The scene is eerily familiar, and no wonder. Early Christian artists used the Mithraic carvings as a model to represent the soul’s ascent to heaven, along the lines of Elijah’s ascent in a chariot of fire. Sol’s resemblance to Jesus is quite arresting too: golden hair, an elevated but sad expression and a halo.

Sunday was Mithras’s special day (it was, as the name suggests, the day of the sun, and was also dedicated to Apollo). Mithraic worship was always described as taking place in caves, as befitted a god ‘born of a rock’. The later Christian symbolism of the birth of Christ in a cave is an obvious match. (the Christians later went to the trouble of locating a cave in which Jesus was said to have been born. There was a fracas when St Jerome discovered to his horror that it had originally been a shrine of another pagan god, Adonis.<sup>14</sup>

Reconstructions of the Mithraic temples (actually often built of brick or stone) also show extraordinary similarities to Christian churches. A long nave would run the length of the building, with benches on either side, probably for the lower grades of initiates. A raised altar stood at the far end of the room, furthest from the entrance. Dominating that wall was the

imposing depiction of Mithras slaying the bull. The roof was generally vaulted, to represent the sky – and it was often decorated with stars.

Initiates, who were divided into seven ranks and who wore distinctive clothing corresponding to their level, would swear an oath not to sin or steal – and particularly not to reveal the secrets of the religious mysteries. So effective was that oath that little is really known of their initiation practices.

If there are striking similarities with Christianity, there are also notable differences. The secrecy and mystery is one. Another is that Mithraism excluded women – a perhaps fatal weakness in the battle for followers with a host of cults, including early Christianity.

Two quotations from a Victorian defender of Christian belief who was, nonetheless, struck by the unmistakable parallels between the two sets of rituals will wind up this section.

In *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity* W Halliday admits:

‘At the zenith of its fortunes it was a serious rival [to Christianity]. In some respects it was no unworthy opponent of Christianity. Strongly ethical in character, it inculcated the exercise of the manly virtue in the unending struggle on behalf of righteousness against the powers of evil ....’

And, from the same author:

‘What struck the Fathers about Mithraic practice was the close and obvious similarity of many of its rites to those practised by Christianity. The sacramental meal of bread and water (or wine), the use of baptism, the sealing of initiates, the promise of resurrection, such features as they could account for only by supposing that the devil had inspired a deliberate parody of divine ordinances.’

## **The Cults of Isis and Osiris**

We will now proceed to an examination of another pagan mystery religion which also predates Christianity, and which was current in the Roman Empire before the time of Christ. The cults of Isis, Osiris and Horus came from Egypt. They feature, in slightly jumbled order, many of the elements with which we are familiar from Christianity. Horus, the saviour of mankind, was born miraculously of Isis (his ‘father’ Osiris being dead at the time of his conception). A central feature of the cult was the depiction of the goddess Isis holding the baby Horus – which certainly formed the model for later portraits of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus.

Those who wished to mythologize Jesus were swift to pick up the resemblances:

‘In the Egyptian temple would be found a crib or manger, with a figure of the infant Horus lying in it and a statue of his mother nearby, for the ancient Egyptians, centuries before the gospel Jesus, had set aside December 25th as the birthday of their gods.’<sup>15</sup>

Osiris, the third god of this holy trinity, was murdered and later resurrected – after which he did not ascend, but descended to become god of the Underworld.

There is, moreover, a mystical identity between the father and son figures – they are two gods, but in some way one. This identity was crucial to the succession of the living king in the Egyptian tradition, where the ruler was, until his death, seen as the embodiment of Horus on earth. As Angela Thomas says:

‘by the end of the old kingdom, with the development of the worship of Osiris, the Horus king became identified with Horus, the son of Osiris. Hence when he died, he became Osiris, the archetypal dead ruler, and his successor was the next Horus. The successor, therefore, acted as the son Horus in the rites of burying the Osiris as in the legend and was thus recognised as legitimate king.’<sup>16</sup>

The most complete account of the legend of Isis and Osiris is found in the Roman historian Plutarch, who lived in the first century AD. Osiris is the great grandson of the sun god Re. He was early on associated with the Nile. He married his sister Isis and became king of Egypt. He ruled well and justly, but his jealous younger brother Seth wanted to kill him and engineered his death through a cunning stratagem. He had a casket made of exactly Osiris’s dimensions and promised to make a gift of it to whomever it should fit. Of course, the gullible Osiris clambered in and Seth shut the casket and threw it into the Nile. Osiris died – but the casket, washed ashore, grew inside a tamarind tree. It was made into a wooden column for a palace of the king of Byblos, leading some commentators to remark that, like Jesus, Osiris was hung from a tree (a phrase often used in Greek to describe Jesus’s death by crucifixion).

Isis searched for Osiris, retrieved the casket and, although Seth discovered the body and cut it into 14 pieces, she patiently collected them up and magically restored Osiris to life. Perhaps somewhat ungratefully, the resurrected Osiris made for the Underworld, where he ruled over the dead. W. R. Halliday, in *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity* remarks:

‘The death and resurrection of Osiris as a very early nature god were celebrated each year in simple popular ceremonies at the time of the

Nile flood, when the seed crop was sown and when the harvest was gathered.’

The festivals included ‘mysteries’, dramatic performances of episodes relating to the life, death and resurrection of Osiris, who appears pretty conclusively to be linked to attempts to ensure the smooth-running of the annual Nile flood and harvest. The celebrations often involved the planting of seed in Osiris-shaped moulds to germinate and grow by the end of the festival. They were symbols of the fact that Osiris, the Nile, brought life by growing food. ‘The body of the god on whom one feeds’ thus providing eternal sustenance and the hope of eternal life. Halliday goes on to add:

‘As in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox celebrations of the Passion and Easter, the dying god was often represented in effigy. The scene must indeed have been extraordinarily like that to be witnessed today in any church in Greece at Easter. The crowd of worshippers joined with passionate emotion in the lamentations over the death of their god, and burst into no less ecstatic joy, when the still small voice (*lentu susurru*) of the officiating priest announced the glad tidings of his resurrection: “Be ye of good cheer, ye initiates, for the god is saved. For he shall be to you a Salvation from ills.” “We have found him! We rejoice together!” was the jubilant cry which was raised at the culminating point of the ritual of the mysteries of Osiris.’<sup>17</sup>

This doctrine was strongly reflected in the ritual of the cult of Osiris and other mystery religions, most of which included an initiation – regarded as a death to sin and a rebirth. The process could be traumatic – there are accounts, for example of some people being buried up to their neck in earth as a symbol of the grave. The concept of being ‘born again’ is very strong.

In the cult of Isis which was tremendously popular among women, there are suggestions of a strong element of penitence and a sense of personal sin requiring expiation. Juvenal famously mocks a devotee of Isis, who crawls in mid-winter on bleeding knees to break the ice and then to immerse herself three times in the Tiber. This attitude would not have gone down badly with the Medieval Christian penitents who, believing themselves born with a burden of sin, performed similarly uncomfortable feats.

Horus, who is sometimes depicted as being conceived as a ray of light through the ear of Isis, was born secretly in the delta where she was hiding out from the evil Seth – a parallel with Herod. Horus was a falcon-headed god and, as befits the god of the horizon, he was shown with a sun disk on top of his head. When he grew up he set out to triumph over his evil uncle Seth, in a battle between good (light) and evil (darkness). He eventually succeeded to his father’s throne – and thus saved the world from evil. As

has been noted before, this succession also contained an element of identification between Horus and Osiris.

One liturgical fragment found in Hippolytus seems to suggest that an actual ceremony of rebirth may have involved Horus – it contains an announcement that the goddess has borne a holy son.

Thus we have the trinity of gods, the mother-child cult, the death and resurrection, the saving of the world. The details are, of course, in a somewhat different order, but the separate elements make at least as much mythological sense as their Christian counterparts. They were disturbing enough to Christian apologists to provoke some, like Sir J.G. Wilkinson to suggest that the Truth of Christ was of such importance that it had been divinely revealed to primitive peoples centuries before his birth:

‘The sufferings and death of Osiris were the great mystery of the Egyptian religion and some traces of it are perceptible among other peoples of antiquity. His being the divine goodness, and the abstract idea of ‘good’, his manifestation upon earth, his resurrection and his office as judge of the dead in a future state look like the early revelation of a future manifestation of the deity, converted into a mythological fable.’<sup>18</sup>

Nor, as the reader may by now begin to suspect, were these themes by any means unique to the Egyptian mysteries. If God had given a preview, He did it with remarkable efficacy. H.W. Smith, says in *Man and His Gods*:

‘For centuries the people of the Mediterranean had annually observed the death and resurrection of their gods. The Osirian drama, so beloved by the Egyptians, dated back certainly 25 and perhaps 35 centuries. Tammuz too, had died a violent death, to be brought back to life with the sprouting of the grain. So had Adonis been buried in a rocky tomb, mourned and declared resurrected and ascended unto heaven. So had Hercules died and been resurrected at Paul’s home.’

One is tempted to regard at least some of the similarities between the cults themselves as provoked by what must have been an intense rivalry. All of them were proselytising individually, and competing for the same clientele. As in other aspects of life, there were fads and fashions in which gods to worship. This must surely have contributed to the pressure on the mystery cults to ‘put on a good show’. As it was, the average person was eclectic in belief, and could be initiated into the lower orders of several cults in infancy. The temptation must have been severe for at least some Christians of pagan origin to ‘mix and match’, or at least to adhere to some

of the dramatic ritual they held so dear, and whose own gods and goddesses had no objection to their taking on a new god, Jesus, provided they kept up their other devotional commitments.

Before we conclude, let us examine some of the common factors across a huge number of pagan religions.

## **Nativity**

The richness of shared mythology has been several times referred to in this paper. Wonderful stories and legends were property common to all; plagiarism bore no stigma. Once a good tale was in circulation it was apt to be pressed into service whenever the occasion demanded. Heroes, prophets and gods were unlikely to be taken seriously unless equipped with a wonderful life. Unsurprisingly, virgin birth was a common theme. Plato, who died 347 BC, was believed, very soon after he died, to have been born of a virgin. His own nephew Speusippus told the story in somewhat similar terms to those found in the gospel of Matthew. Julius Caesar and the emperor Alexander share the same distinction of conception by a virgin. Early Christian apologists bolstered their claims for the reality of Christ's virgin birth by referring to the widespread belief that animals could conceive from air, like the mares in Virgil's *Georgics* who:

‘When in springtime the warmth returns in their bones, stand all on the top of the rocks, turning their mouths to the Zephyr, and gulp down the light airs, and oft-times, without marriage union – marvellous to relate – they are made pregnant by the wind.’

Justin Martyr, the early Christian apologist, rather indignantly asks:

‘Why are we Christians alone of men hated for Christ's name, when we do but relate of him stories similar to what the Greeks relate of Hermes and Perseus?’<sup>19</sup>

Although Justin could be quite acerbic about poor Perseus as well:

‘When I am told that Perseus was born of a virgin, I realise that here again is a case in which the serpent and deceiver has imitated our religion.’

Nonetheless, time and again, Justin argues that it is unfair that Christians are stigmatised for claiming for Jesus the same sorts of distinctions enjoyed by the pagan gods:

‘When we tell you that Jesus healed the halt and paralytic and the maimed from birth, and that he raised the dead, you will see that here too we merely repeat things said to have been done by Asclepius.’<sup>20</sup>

F.C. Conybeare remarks in *Myth, Magic and Morals*:

‘Such passages aid us to understand the rapid spread of the belief in the Virgin-Birth and Resurrection. Men’s minds were already full of similar beliefs, and the ground prepared for their reception. The Christians claimed acceptance of their myths because the pagan religion was already full of similar ones.’

## **Resurrection/Crucifixion**

The great Victorian founder of comparative religion, Sir James Frazer, propounded the theory of the divine scapegoat. Briefly, he suggested that in early agricultural religion, the death of the god represented the death in autumn of vegetation, ahead of its triumphant rebirth in the spring – and that this rite was played out with a human or animal acting the part of the dying god; in effect a propitiatory sacrifice. At the same time, he argues, onto the shoulders of the god/sacrifice was laid the collective burden of sin of the entire populace.

Whether or not this theory entirely stands up to the rigours of modern research, overtones of the propitiatory sacrifice in the Christian crucifixion story do seem to resonate in phrases such as ‘he died to atone for our sins’. What we can confidently state is that the theme of the sacrificed or self-sacrificing god is a pervasive one in pagan mythology.

Mention may be made here of Attis – the saviour god born of the virgin Nana (she conceived miraculously by putting a ripe pomegranate into her bosom). His legends predate Christianity by some centuries. There are two versions of his death: in one Attis was killed by a boar, the symbol of winter. In the other, he castrated himself under a pine-tree and bled to death. After his death he was said to have turned into a pine tree. In this version, of course, the elements of self-sacrifice and the tree (cross) resemble the Christ story. Frazer says the emperor Claudius, who reigned between 41 and 54 AD, incorporated the already ancient worship of Attis into the official state religion. In Rome, a great festival was held on March 22<sup>nd</sup> for Attis and Cybele, his lover who was also said by some to be his mother. She was the goddess of fertility. A pine tree was cut down and treated as a great divinity. It was swathed like a corpse and the effigy of a young man tied to the trunk. There were three days of orgiastic rites, after which, on March 25<sup>th</sup>, the resurrection of the god was celebrated with wild joy. His story and rites

were so similar to that of Adonis, that the two were sometimes associated, even in the ancient world. In *The Golden Bough* Sir James Frazer argues that Adonis was, in fact, the spirit of the corn and these rites reflected the death and resurrection of the harvest every year.

Tammuz, the Syrian sun god dating to a thousand years BC was also a saviour who rose from the dead. In around 400 BC Ctesias records in his *Persika* a poem concerning Tammuz which sounds uncannily like a Christian hymn:

‘Trust, ye saints, your lord restored,  
Trust ye in your risen lord;  
For the pains which Tammuz endured  
Our salvation have procured’<sup>21</sup>

Prometheus, who dates to the sixth century BC made men out of clay and quickened them to life with fire stolen from heaven. He was chained by Zeus to Mount Caucasus in punishment. Every day his liver was pecked out by an eagle, and every day it regenerated, so he could suffer his punishment over again. *The World’s Sixteen Crucified Saviours* states that his burial and resurrection was acted in pantomime in Athens five hundred years before the birth of Jesus.

## **Miracles**

Likewise, it is easy to infer that early Christianity found itself facing stiff competition where miracles were concerned. In order to impress in the pagan world, a saviour had to contend with a host of gods and goddesses who made the miraculous ‘par for the course’. Healing was a particular attribute of divinity. Isis, Imhotep and Serapis of the Nile were all efficacious healers – as were Ishtar and Marduk of Babylonia and Astarte, the Phoenician moon-goddess. Thoth restored the eye of Horus with his spittle. Aesculapius the Greek god of medicine and son of Apollo, healed the leper, the insane and the deaf and dumb. Horus performed great miracles, including raising the dead to life.

## **Conclusion**

The similarity between Christian ritual and the rich and varied pagan mythology, much of which predates Jesus by hundreds of years, has led scholars to a fairly unanimous conclusion that borrowing of ritual took place to some degree. As W. Halliday says:

‘We admit, as indeed we must, something more than coincidence, in the sense of purely fortuitous accident. There is, in some degree, a fundamental similarity of idea in the celebration of a commemorative sacramental meal, whether it be performed by Mithraic initiates or by Christians.’<sup>22</sup>

Later Christian commentators argue that this ritual is not central to the Christian belief and often proclaim that the difference between pagan and Christian systems was in the personality and teaching of Jesus. The preaching of Jesus, runs the argument, had no relation whatever to Hellenism. But ask Christians today to name, say, the four or five central aspects of their faith and how many will talk about the Resurrection, the Holy Trinity, Jesus as the son of God, his glorious Nativity, his dying for our sins, how many will discuss his actual teachings? Yet the former are exactly the aspects which we have seen fit rather more comfortably into a pantheistic context than into a monotheistic one.

More importantly from the point of view of this document, the exercise provides a kind of dynamic snapshot of the tenacity of ritual belief. It underscores, in the most dramatic way possible, that once given life, no form of human idea ever seems to die out completely, but merely takes on new form within the most unexpected hosts.

## Notes

1. *The Marketing of Christianity: The Evolution of Early Christian Doctrine*, Institute for Cultural Research, London, 2000.
2. Condon, R.J. *Our Pagan Christmas*.
3. *Letters*, 10.96.7
4. *The Role of Primitive People in Identifying and Approaching Human Problems; The Use of Omens, Magic and Sorcery for Power and Hunting; Ritual from the Stone Age to the Present Day*. All Institute for Cultural Research, London 1998.
5. *Fasti*, Book ii, lines 58–9.
6. Lundy, the Rev J.P., quoted in *Bible Myths*.
7. Meeks, W. *The Writings of St. Paul*.
8. *Zamyad yasht*, 19,89 quoted in Vermaseren, *Mithras, the Secret God*.
9. Quoted in Wheless, *Forgery in Christianity*.
10. Vermaseren, M. *Op. cit.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. St Luke, 22:19–20
14. Jerome, Epistle 58, *Ad Paulinum*.
15. Wright, L. *Jesus, the Pagan Sungod*.
16. Thomas, A. *Egyptian gods and myths*.
17. Diodorus, iii, 59, 7. Firmicus Maternus, quoted in Halliday, *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity*.
18. Quoted in *Jesus the Pagan Sungod*.
19. *First Apology*, chapter 24, quoted in Conybeare, *Myth, Magic and Morals*.
20. *First Apology*, chapter 22, quoted as above.
21. Quoted in Graves, *The World's 16 Crucified Saviours*.
22. Halliday, W. *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity*.

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