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Goodwin, J.
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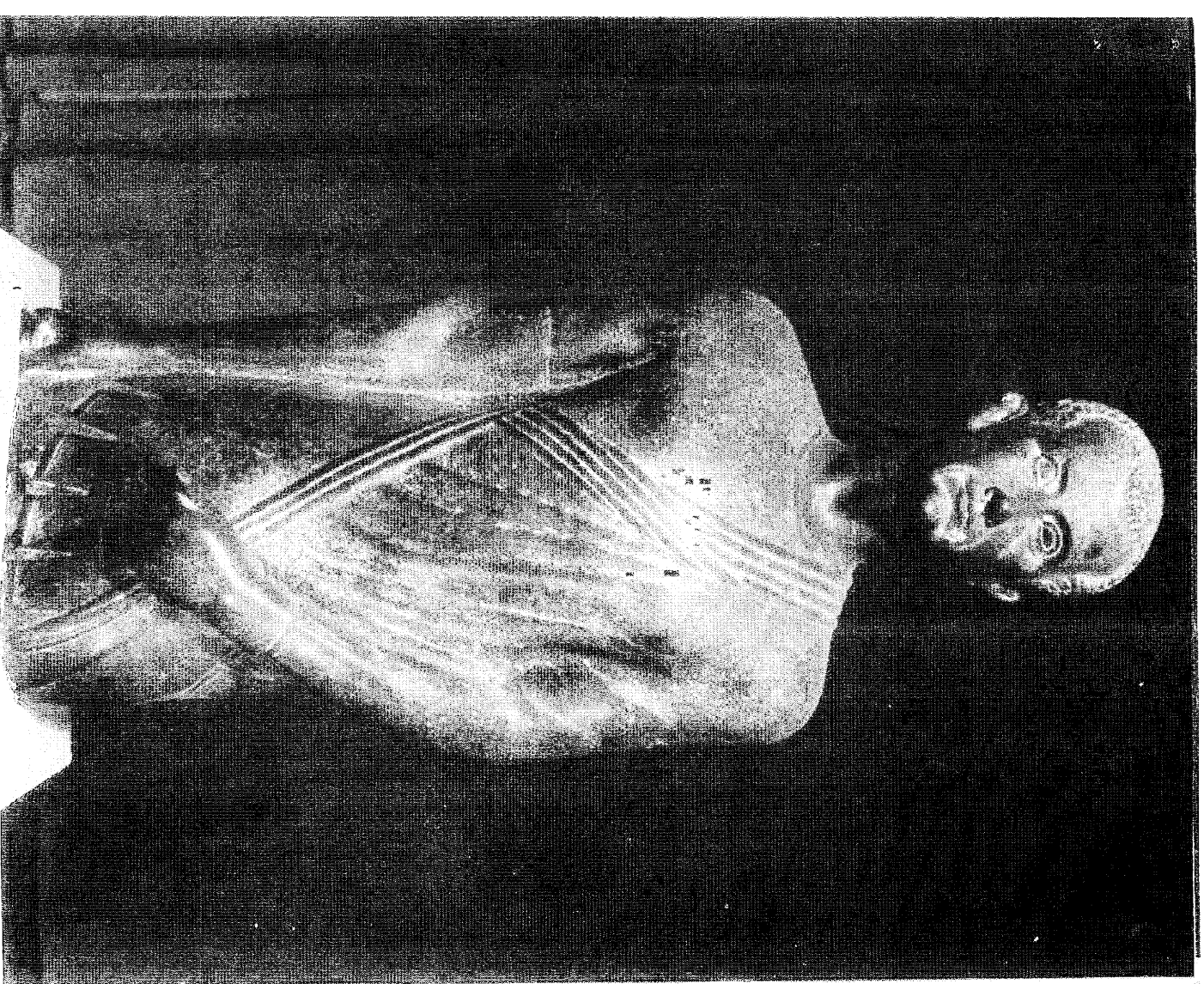
The Path of the Monk

The monk's path, like the warrior's, is based on a dualistic vision of the cosmos. The essential difference lies in this: while the warrior's enemy is without, the monk's lies within himself. Of course this does not prevent an ascetic (like the Ayatollah Khomeini) from seeing Satan incarnate in his fellow men, any more than it prevents a warrior (like T. E. Lawrence or the ideal Mithraist) from being a master of self-denial. All these 'paths' are extremes, and most people's aspirations lie along more than one of them.

Fundamental to the monk's attitude is a duality of spirit and matter, which is manifested in the human being as a gulf between soul and body. It is the ascetic's view that the spirit or soul has become entangled in the material world, or in the human body, and that it is the purpose of religion to free it. For the Orphics and Pythagoreans, our existence on earth is forced upon us as expiation of our sins. It is a terrible thing for one's soul to be imprisoned in the physical body: no wonder new-born babies cry. When the disciples of the great Indian sage, Ramana Maharshi, wanted to celebrate his birthday, the master said: 'On one's birthday one should mourn one's entry into this world' (*Collected Works*, p. 137).

For all the philosophers of the Pythagorean-Platonic-Hermetic tradition, the situation is the same. The universe is a hierarchy of different states of being, of which the very lowest is our tangle world and the things made of its four elements: earth, water, air and fire. Everything in this region, the sphere beneath the Moon, is imperfect and subject to pain, suffering, decay and death. Beyond, in the ethereal spheres of the planets, we would find progressively purer states, and above the fixed stars is the realm of the gods where perfection reigns – at least from our point of view. The higher or Rational Soul in man belongs to that realm and knows it as its home; but here on earth it is stifled, sunk in the intractable clay of our physical frame. The ascetic's task is to release it, and he does this by wearing away, by one means or another, the prison of flesh and blood.

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Profane people mistakenly love their bodies, ignorant of the divine spark that lies captive therein. They delight in pampering their bodies with food and drink, and in clothing them with cosmetics and raiment. They take pride in that of which they ought to be most ashamed. Thus the monk thinks as he watches worldly folk. He, on the other hand, has made a commitment to release himself from these vanities. His road is asceticism, and it differs little whether he be an Egyptian priest (see illustration, p. 16), a Christian nun or monk, a Jewish Essene or a member of the Pythagorean brotherhood.

Asceticism consists in the relinquishing of one pleasure in the hope of gaining a greater one. The weight-watcher renounces certain foods for the greater delight of being slim. The vegetarian does so for the higher ideal of humanitarianism. And the monk fasts for the joy of release from bondage to the stomach's demands – and, no doubt, for the pleasant 'high' that prolonged abstinence brings. Fasting strengthens the will and purifies the body. Like all asceticisms, it may be taken to extremes. The medieval Cathars of Montailou, when they felt death approaching, would sometimes start the *emenda*, the fast unto death, refusing all nourishment. To maintain such a vow to the end was a highly respected achievement, and deemed a great benefit to the soul. In the more sophisticated environment of the ancient Essenes, a similar practice was usual among the very old who no longer desired life. After bidding farewell to the community they would go alone into a deserted place where there was water, carrying with them a bunch of grapes. Each day they would eat a few grapes, and when those were gone they would drink only water, spending their time in spiritual exercises until a peaceful death supervened. What a contrast to the struggles of modern medicine to keep us alive at any price!

The Essenes and the Pythagoreans were supposed to be vegetarians, though in the case of the latter it is doubtful that all schools followed the master's example. Apart from the obvious motive of compassion towards one's fellow creatures, vegetarianism has also the purpose of purifying the body from the contaminations of flesh foods. Purification, however, could incur dietary rules of a quite different sort. The Neoplatonic Emperor Julian was not a vegetarian, but he refrained from root vegetables because they bring into the body a downward tendency [Rudolf Steiner would have said the opposite]; from apples for they are too holy; from the pomegranate because it belongs to the Underworld; from dates because they are too solar; from fish because they are not usually sacrificed to the gods, and anyway come from too deep down; and from pigs because they

are coarse, earthly, vile creatures, only offered to the chthonic gods (*Orations* v, 175-7).

The idea of contamination also extends to the company of other humans. Any sensitive person who does not habitually live in a large modern city knows what psychic contamination is, and feels it when in such a hive of humanity. The Desert Fathers put not only the temptations of the city but all human contact behind them as they went off to face themselves and their God. Their physical courage in a wilderness full of dangers was only exceeded by the mental and emotional stamina with which they encountered what they knew as demonic forces – no matter that we might call them projections from the darker realms of the psyche. St Anthony emerged from his ordeal 'as one initiated into sacred Mysteries', with knowledge of the unseen world and power over it (Athanasius, *Vita S. Antonii* 14). Such men did not need the formal initiations of the Mystery cults: they had passed the same gates on their own.

Many of the cults made use of mild asceticism for the benefit of those who were content to live, for the most part, a worldly life. Lucius had to abstain from meat, wine and sexual intercourse for the ten days preceding his initiation into the Mysteries of Osiris (*Metamorphoses* xi, 28), and Propertius complains that his Cynthia is observing a similar period of chastity in preparation for the rites of Isis (*Elegy* 3.3). Traditional Catholicism continued in this practice with the regular fasts throughout the Church's year, and restrictions on the timing and nature of sexual activity, while the making of retreats is a universal religious observance, giving the advantages of a temporary monasticism.

It is chastity above all that distinguishes the monk's life from that of lay people. If he considers birth a tragedy, then the logical response is to avoid causing the fall of other human souls into bodies. Some later Gnostics renounced reproduction altogether, as did the American Shakers in the nineteenth century – and quickly became extinct. But there is another, personal side to chastity. The power to reproduce one's kind is a marvellous and magical power, and it can be harnessed to other ends. Sexual energy, as the Indian yogis know, is one manifestation of that greater creative energy which can bring about a spiritual birth in higher worlds if it is not used up for pleasure and reproduction in this world. It is this knowledge, generalized and wrongly applied, that has given many un-ascetic religious people their sheepish attitude towards sex. St Paul tells the Corinthians (1: 7, 9) that 'it is better to marry than to burn' – better still not to need to marry. The sublimated urges of fanatical monks have been spent in

tyranny of their fellows as often as they have lifted them above earthly desires.

The belief that sex is a hindrance to spiritual achievement, taken naively, led in ancient times to the grotesque extreme of voluntary castration. The enlightened Christian Father Origen tried this in his youth in the hope of escaping from his desires, and lived to see that it was not the way: indeed, it is specifically forbidden to Christians. Not so to the followers of Cybele and Attis, whose eunuch priests, the Galli, were the most notorious practitioners of this parody of continence (see illustration). Perhaps today's 'transsexuals' are reincarnations of these fanatics, who after their castration would adopt feminine costume and extravagant adornments. The Emperor Domitian in the first century AD made castration a capital crime, but did not succeed in preventing the practice any more than Hadrian, who tried to prohibit circumcision: a symbolic substitute used by ancient Egyptians and Arabs as well as Jews. The Emperor Elagabalus, keen to embrace every cult, is said to have circumcised himself and refrained from eating pork; he further planned to honour the Great Mother by having himself castrated, but either did not live long enough, or changed his mind when he decided to violate a Vestal Virgin. Some of his followers went to the uttermost extreme of renunciation in hurling their most beautiful children to the wild beasts in his temple.

It is sometimes difficult, in the world of ascetics, to distinguish sober purification from wilful self-punishment. Juvenal mocks the women devotees of Isis who stand in the icy Tiber or crawl on bleeding knees to her temple (*Satire* 6, 522-6). Herodotus, at the Isis festival in Busris, witnessed myriads of people in orgiastic flagellation (*History* ii, 61). The Galli in the plate holds a fierce-looking whip in his left hand. The theme of mortification of the flesh runs throughout Christian monasticism: from St Jerome in the desert, beating his breast with a stone, through Savonarola's hair-shirt, to the little scourges issued to modern nuns. And were not the tortures of the Inquisition a forced asceticism, a monstrous perversion of the theme that the body must suffer if the soul is to go free?



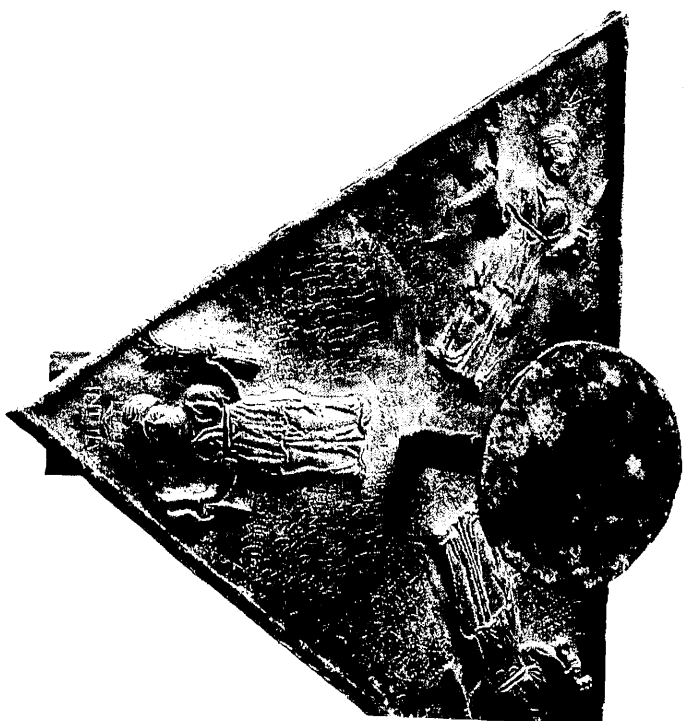
v A 'Galli', Eunuch Priest of the Great Mother. Relief from the Appian Way, mid-second century AD. Rome, Capitoline Museum.

The Path of the Magician

The magician's attitude to the gulf between body and spirit is to unite them. A believer, like the monk, in a hierarchical universe of which our earth is the lowest level, he does not try to abandon or deny the physical world and body: he uses them. Mindful of the axiom of Hermes Trismegistus, patron of magical arts: 'Whatever is above is like to that below: and whatever is below is like to that above', he respects the correspondences and similarities between all levels of the universe. He knows that man is a microcosm, and that even his physical frame is made, in some sense, in God's image. All the levels of existence mirror one another in structure. When the structures are set in motion, a similar movement is felt throughout the hierarchy.

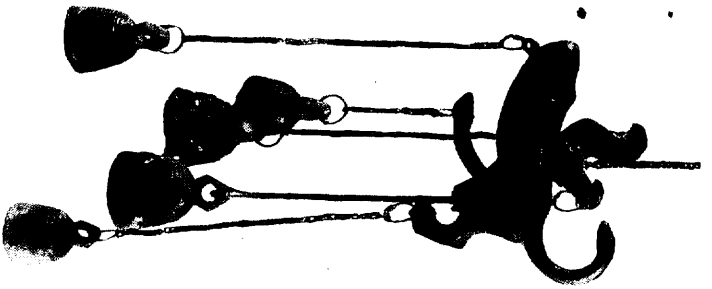
The most obvious example of this world-view is astrology, which assumes that the movements of the planets are reflected in world events and in the human psyche. A fatalistic believer in astrology resigns himself to an ineluctable destiny, deeming himself no more capable of opposition to the planets than the magnetic needle is able to point away from the North Pole. But the magician, by contrast, exploits the system of correspondences, knowing that their 'causality', if such it be, works in both directions. Whatever is done on earth is mirrored in the heavens; and who can say which is cause, and which effect? Magic is the science of affecting the unseen worlds through operations conducted on this one.

The commonest form of magic practised in the ancient world was animal sacrifice. Regarded from the point of view of a simple-minded worshipper, the victim's life-force is offered as a kind of food to the god. (Usually the body would be divided between donor and clergy, and eaten: complete incineration was exceptional.) Such a gift incurred an obligation on the god's part, or at least encouraged reciprocal favours. As Porphyry categorizes it, sacrifice can be made for three purposes: homage, necessity or gratitude, and none are really disinterested. Regarded esoterically, however, the picture is a little different. Animal sacrifice affects not the true gods, but the subliminary elementals: invisible spirits who throng the earth's atmosphere and live on matter of an ethereal kind. They may, under



certain circumstances, render services to men, but they are tricky characters, at best indifferent to humans, and not to be relied upon. Hence Christians shunned them, and refused any part in the animal slaughter which attracts them. Constantine offered God only flowers and incense, and Theodosius, in his edicts of AD 391, made sacrifice illegal throughout the Empire. Some contemporary pagan philosophers, notably Porphyry (*De Abstinencia* ii, 12), also renounced animal killing, thinking that it cannot possibly affect the gods, that its consequences are not favourable to humans.

A special case of sacrifice, and one that belongs to another category of magic, was the *taurobolium*, already mentioned above. In this ritual bull-slaughter, the vital forces of the bull are poured out with the blood over the devotee. Extraordinary power was attributed to this act, and those who had undergone the experience were celebrated as 'eternally reborn'. The *taurobolium* began as an ordinary bull-sacrifice, common in the ancient world (cf. Homer's 'hecatombs of



vii Phallic Tumbulum.
Bronze from Pompeii, c. first
century A.D. London, British
Museum.

oxen'), but took on a more religious slant in the second century AD when the bull's blood was distributed in a kind of communion to the faithful. At the same time the genitals were removed and specially buried, and this connects with the rites of the Great Mother Cybele, recalling and perhaps re-enacting the castration of Attis (see Chapter X). The full ritual, established c. AD 300, was intended to transmute the physical strength of the bull into psychic energy for the benefit of the participant or for another assigned by him. Here are two of the fundamental aspects of later magic: the harnessing of the energy inherent in blood, and of sexual energy, for defensive, offensive or sublimatory purposes. The phallic form of many ancient charms (see illustration) is similarly a means of bringing the creative and essentially positive power of Nature to aid against the entropic and destructive designs of 'evil' forces.

The last tumbulum in Rome was celebrated in the late fourth century AD, on the site now occupied by St Peter's. But ritual bull-sacrifice was a regular practice in the more remote areas of Thrace, in northern Greece, well on into the twentieth century. Kakouri (see Bibliography) tells of the nominally Christian body of initiates who, under the patronage of Saints Helena and Constantine still preside there over fire-walking and phallic fertility dramas. In their bull-sacrifice, the unblemished victim had to come of his own free will, and after the slaughter his flesh was partly consumed raw. In a poor society such as existed in Thrace and much of the ancient world, most of the meat ever eaten must have been butchered at sacrifices: Homer's heroes only enjoy it on such occasions. The modern person who reacts with distaste to the idea of animal sacrifice might reflect on the dignity and respect paid to the victim, and to the spiritual intentions surrounding the ceremony, in contrast to the degrading and godless slaughtering practised today.

Some pagans defended sacrifice, while recognizing that it cannot possibly affect the eternal gods. Sallust admitted that they gain nothing from it, but that we gain everything (*On the Gods* 15). Julian encouraged it in his pagan revival, along with the reverence of statues of the gods, as conducive to piety, considering the subjective state of the worshipper to be its justification. One should be eager to offer up one's best to the gods, he said, just as one should delight in seeing their images (*Against the Galileans* 347C; *Letters* 293C-D). But representations of the gods are not mere reminders: like the relics of saints and heroes, they have as their purpose the drawing down of celestial influences. The magical charm shown here (see illustration) was worn for protection against the Evil Eye, just like the blue glass charms and

medals of saints sold around the Mediterranean today. And the Hecate plaque (see illustration, p. 23) served like a modern radionic device to direct invisible influences on to whatever was placed on the little table in the middle – perhaps a lock of hair, or fingernail, as in witchcraft. The magic used here was probably 'grey', if not actually black.

To distinguish white magic from black, one must ask whether it is the intention of the magical act to elevate the lower towards a higher plane or goal, or else to exploit the higher forces in order to obtain advantages on the lower level. Apuleius started out meddling with the inferior sort, and got into trouble which he describes in his *Apology*, but then rose to the higher magic of theurgy. A theurgist is a magician who seeks through his knowledge to align earthly things with the divine order, so that 'Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.' But he cannot join two things so far apart without an intermediary. The late antique theurgists did not believe that they were actually contacting, much less commanding, the gods themselves. They knew that they were dealing with the good demons who fill the links in the chain of being between gods and men. These daemons partake of the characteristics of the gods to which they themselves are devoted, and hence serve as channels for the different divine forces to descend to earth. They like to be addressed by the names of their archetypal divinities, and they respond only to absolutely correct procedures. As Iamblichus says, to get the slightest detail of an incantation or ceremony wrong can invalidate the entire operation. One might as well try to give a concert with one lyre-string broken (*De Mysteriis* V, 21). The same situation is well known today in the form of 'natural magic' which we prefer to call experimental science.

The Christian magical rites – the seven sacraments – are essentially acts of theurgy, in which something on the physical plane (bread, oil, a ring, etc.) is manipulated with certain spoken formulae in order to make changes occur on an invisible or 'subtle' plane. Clairvoyants say that changes happen there with an ease and a rapidity denied to physical matter. What is affected is primarily the subtle bodies of the participants, with the object in view being ideally not material gain but perfection. Through the subtly transmuted elements of water, bread and wine, the Christian sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist are believed to draw down the forces of Christ into the souls of the participants. This direct contact with the god is something foreign to the magician, but nothing less is attempted by those on the more direct Path of Love.

The Path of Love

Just as the magician sees all the levels of the universe linked by a chain of correspondences, the person of the Path of Love sees them joined by mutual affection. According to his world-view, God so loves the world that he or she sends the divine influences down into its very depths, cherishing every creature with a more than motherly love (see illustration). Conversely, man can so love God that he is raised to divine union. The ultimate object is 'nothing else than existing in God himself' (St Gregory of Nyssa). Like all human beings, the devotee starts out on his path sundered from his object of adoration, and his lifelong aspiration is towards closing the gap. In the end the lover is no longer distinct from the beloved, the two are become one, and the difference in levels is transcended. This is fully as miraculous as the magical joining of heaven and earth: even more so, since the magician has the benefit of a scientific system, while the lover works only with the power within his own soul. He is nothing, God is everything, as he seeks the absorption of the part into the whole, of the human fragment into the One. A Hermetic fragment puts the idea of union very vividly: 'Come into me, Hermes, as children come into women's wombs. I know thee, Hermes, and thou knowest me: I am thou, and thou art I . . .' (Kenyon, *Greek Papyri*, I, p. 116).

But these are the higher flights of advanced mystics who have no need for an anthropomorphic intermediary between themselves and the Divine. Most devotees address an image of the god, made with hands or the inner eye, and conceive him or her as having at least some human traits: hence the many saviours and heroes described in these pages. Unlike the gods of Olympus, the Mystery gods have usually suffered pain, loss or death, and this gives them compassion for our own sufferings and joys. Osiris, Orpheus, Hercules, Christ, Dionysus, Attis and Adonis were all slain and resurrected. But of all the gods of the Mystery religions, perhaps the best-loved was Isis – loved for her warm humanity and for incarnating all the best aspects of woman as lover, wife, mother and widow. Apuleius or his fictional character Lucius, on renouncing his debauched past, recognizes the true consummation of *eros* in mystic union with her, and devotes himself



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to her service much as a medieval knight would swear fealty to the Virgin Mary. In her epiphany to him, she assures him that she is everything and everywhere: 'You will worship me even in Hades' (*Metamorphoses* xi, 6). All the Mystery gods descended to the underworld, too, to redeem those incarcerated there. The same idea occurs in the Buddhist system, where every world, even Hell, contains a Bodhisattva. Nowhere in the universe is love absent from him who truly opens himself to it.

Isis was an indulgent mistress, imposing no particular morality beyond the natural inclinations of good men. 'Love, and do what thou wilt' might have been her motto, for love will turn all to good. But those on the Path of Love often become acutely aware of the impurity and unworthiness of the human state, and are hence drawn also to the path of purification and asceticism. They then manifest a blend of self-denial and adoration such as was later to become so characteristic of Christian saints.

If one had to single out one paramount feature that distinguished all the Mystery cults from other religions of their period, it would be that they sought a personal relationship with their gods. Consequently the attitude of their devotees to the gods was one of love rather than of fear or indifferent manipulation. The motive of much primitive religion seems to be to get rid of the gods, and by fair means or foul to prevent them from troubling mankind. For the Mystery religions the motive is quite the contrary: it is to get closer to them, recognizing them as man's best friends. The Maenads of Dionysus (see illustration) are more than that even: the god is their lover. One of the tasks of Christ was to open this path of direct intimacy with God to

ix Isis nursing Horus.
Terracotta from Herculaneum,
c. first century A.D. Naples,
National Museum.



every person without distinction, cutting through the barriers of race and class like many of the cults contemporary with him.

The path of loving devotion to the gods does not necessarily call for any external ceremonies or human intermediaries, but in actual practice it is usually combined with one or more of the other paths, and rituals and initiations are used to further the progress of the aspirant. One such means, not in any way peculiar to Christianity, is holy communion, in which the goal of assimilation to the god on his level is furthered by assimilation of him on this plane. Dionysus was believed to be present, not merely symbolically but actually, in the wine and raw flesh which his devotees consumed. A Persian Mithraic text, amazingly reminiscent of Jesus's words, states that '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.' The initiates of Cybele and Attis had some form of communion, too, for they declared: 'I have eaten from the tambourine: I have drunk from the cymbal' – the instruments sacred to them – but what they ate or drank we do not know.

Another aspect of communion is that as a sacred meal it prefigures the celestial banquet which the blessed are thought to enjoy in heaven, in the eternal presence of Christ, Serapis, Mithras, or other banqueting saviours. Some of the Mysteries went further to anticipate the ambience of heaven by inducing unworldly states. Wine probably affected the ancients far more powerfully than it does us (they seldom drank it unmixed with water), but even the sober Plato allows intoxication at the Dionysian festivals (*Laws* 775B): 'Rather the madness of the god than the sobriety of men' (*Phaedrus* 244D). In the Mysteries, all five senses might be elevated through wine, music, lights, incense and sexuality, to say nothing of drugs, in order to create an unforgettable experience and encourage hopes of heavenly bliss. According to the Platonic view, the things and people that we love on earth are sent us for the same reason: we love them because they remind our souls of the paradise from which we came, and to which we may eventually return. The Neoplatonists applied this doctrine to mythology in order to justify the love-life of the gods. The abduction of the Leucippid women by the Dioscuri (see illustration), for example, denotes the seizure of the soul by the irresistible forces of divine love, after which its sole joy is to live in the house of the Lord for ever.

When Christ urged his followers to 'hate' their human relations before they could become his disciples (Luke 14, 26), he was likewise demanding that they transfer their earthly affections to a divine



object. Far from inducing hatred, this only serves to make a person more loving in his transactions with mankind, for he now shares in the reciprocal action of the gods' love for all men. So Christ in his Sermon on the Mount (see illustration) could equally well say, 'Love your enemies' (Matthew 5, 44). Nearly all religions admit that there are beings in the universe who have reached a stage of spiritual evolution inconceivable to us, some of whom make it their work to help lower creatures such as mankind. The Christ was one; the Bodhisattvas of Buddhism and the Avatars of the Hindus are others. Out of compassion and truly divine love they may descend to this and other earths and take on the burden of a human body. For such beings, physical incarnation is a veritable crucifixion: a nailing of their divinity to the fourfold cross of the elements. This is the esoteric meaning of Christ's love for us, and of his symbolic death on the cross.

IN MYSTERY RELIGIONS

xi Abduction of a Leucippid.
Stucco decoration, first century
AD. Rome, Porta Maggiore
Basilica.

