# THE DRAGON THAT SWALLOWED ST. GEORGE

*Whitall N. Perry*

Whosoever implores my aid shall receive it.—St. George

In a remarkable study, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*,[1] Mircea Eliade traces the shift in humanity's orientation across the centuries from a cyclical or atemporal perspective to one that is linear or historical.

Archaic and traditional man both East and West lived out a rhythmic perpetuity of recurring events that referred always to an archetypal Source—mythical prototypes "repeated because they were consecrated in the beginning ('in those days,' *in illo tempore, ab origine*) by gods, ancestors, or heroes." As Ananda Coomaraswamy says in his *Hinduism and Buddhism*, "'In the beginning' (*agre*), or rather 'at the summit,' means 'in the first cause': just as in our still told myths, 'once upon a time' does not mean 'once' alone but 'once for all.'" And Eliade's use of the word Myth (from the root MU, "Mystery") must be understood the way Coomaraswamy defines it, as "the penultimate truth, of which all experience is the temporal reflection." Likewise, in speaking of archetypes, it is Platonic Ideas or Essences that are intended.

Contemporary or secular man by contrast lives in a linear flow of history conceived as commencing one single time at some undetermined point in the past and progressing towards an indeterminate temporal future.

The first perspective could be considered "spatially" as vertical and static, the second "temporally" as horizontal and dynamic.

It is "the idea of Center and the idea of Origin" that dominates all early and traditional cultures, writes Frithjof Schuon in his *Light on the Ancient Worlds*. Spatially,

> every value is related back in one way or another to a sacred Center, to the place where Heaven has touched the earth; in every human

[1] Princeton University Press, 1971.

> world there is a place where God has manifested Himself to spread His grace therein. Similarly for the Origin, the quasi-timeless moment when Heaven was near and when terrestrial things were still half-celestial; but the Origin is also, in the case of civilizations having a historical founder, the time when God spoke, thereby renewing the primordial alliance for the branch of humanity concerned. To conform to tradition is to keep faith with the Origin, and for that very reason it is also to be situated at the Center; it is to dwell in the primordial Purity and in the universal Norm. Everything in the behavior of ancient and traditional peoples can be explained, directly or indirectly, by reference to these two ideas, which are like landmarks in the measureless and perilous world of forms and of change.
>
> It is a "mythological subjectivity" of this kind that makes understandable . . . the fact that each ancient civilization can be said to live on a remembrance of the lost Paradise, and that it believes itself—in so far as it is the vehicle of an immemorial tradition or of a Revelation that restores the "lost word"—to be the most direct branch of the "age of the Gods".

And Eliade cautions against confusing this exemplary Paradise—the paradigm of Reality—with some fictional "lost paradise of animality": primeval man had a "thirst for the 'ontic,'" for the real, and "everything that we know about the mythical memories of 'paradise' confronts us, on the contrary, with the image of an ideal humanity enjoying a beatitude and spiritual plenitude forever unrealizable in the present state of 'fallen man.'" If, then, archaic man rejected history in the degree possible, which for him was equatable with "the measureless and perilous world of forms and of change," that is, with accident, incongruity, misfortune, sin, suffering, and punishment—and confined himself "to an indefinite repetition of archetypes, . . . this behavior corresponds to a desperate effort not to lose contact with *being*." The only qualification to be made here is that the expression "desperate" should be changed to some other word such as "intense" or "cognizant," since the very rhythm itself of the "eternal return" is characterized by a serenity that in its nature excludes any suggestion of *angst*.

The purpose of this paper will be to examine the pattern of the eternal return (*anakuklêsis*) in relation to a particular archetypal entity—in the present case, St. George; and then to see, both how it happens that, and what the consequences are when, "myth" declines into desuetude.

**Mythology**

The St. George chronicle comprises two poles: that of martyrdom, and that of Solar Hero or Dragon-Slayer. Starting with the first pole, such were the ordeals endured by this celebrated Christian knight that if St. Stephen can be called the proto-martyr, then certainly next to Christ St. George can be considered the prototype of martyr, or "Great Martyr," as he is known to the Greeks. The earliest acts in the Bollandist archives on this subject are in Greek and belong to the sixth century; there are also some eighth century Latin acts considered to be translations of a work antedating the Greek ones just mentioned and attributed to Pasikrâs, the servant of the hero. Erudite research, it hardly needs adding, now takes all this literature for apocryphal. Pope Gelasius (494) says that George is of those "whose names are justly reverenced among men, but whose acts are known only to God." The thirteenth century account of Jacobus de Voragine (1230?-?1298) will mainly suffice our purposes—particularly as his *Golden Legend* did most to familiarize Western tradition with the dragon.

George, then, was a native of Cappadocia who served in the Roman army in Palestine with the rank of tribune during the reign of Diocletian and Maximian. When he witnessed the persecutions the Christians were suffering under the proconsul Dacian (in the Greek acts it is Diocletian, and in the Latin, the Emperor of the Persians), he changed his soldier's garb for the robes of a Christian and denounced Dacian's gods in public as mere demons. This daring earned him dismemberment by iron hooks, while stretched across a rack with torches setting fire to his body and salt poured over his exposed entrails, but he was healed the following night through a vision of the Lord. The next day a magician poisoned his wine, but by making the sign of the cross over it George both saved himself and converted the magician, who for his failure was beheaded. The saint was then thrust upon a wheel bristling with double-edged swords, but the wheel snapped at the first movement. After this Dacian plunged him into a cauldron of molten lead; George made the sign of the cross and experienced pure refreshment.

"Look here, my dear George," said Dacian, forcing a smile, "see with what indulgence our gods treat you: be persuaded of their good intentions. Sacrifice unto them, and behold what honors you shall reap!"

"Is this the brunt of your purpose? With pleasure, then," replied St. George. "I only fail to understand why you did not invite me civilly

in the first place instead of resorting to all these torments." Dacian, overjoyed, ordered with flourish of trumpets the whole city to assemble at the great temple for George's conversion. Here the saint fell on his knees and prayed that the temple with all its idols be straightway destroyed, whereupon fire flashed down from heaven and consumed everything, while the earth in turn yawned open, swallowing up the priests. George then proposed further "sacrifice to idols" in another temple, telling the infuriated proconsul, "If your gods cannot help themselves, how can they be of help to you?"

At this point Dacian's wife (who in the Greek and Latin acts is the Empress Alexandra) converted to Christianity, for which deed he had her suspended by the hair and beaten with staves. The effusion of blood in these circumstances, St. George reassured her, answered for baptism, and she rendered up her soul. On the following day, Dacian ordered St. George to be dragged through the town and then beheaded. The martyr had a prayer granted that *whosoever implored his aid would have his petition answered*, after which he was decapitated. A bolt of lightning forthwith struck down Dacian and his ministers.

Since the Christian persecutions under Diocletian began in the year 303, St. George's death is associated with this date. The scene of his martyrdom is variously given as Diospolis (Lydda) in Palestine, or Nicomedia in Asia Minor. His name is from the Greek *georgos*, "a tiller of the earth," and his feast is 23 April (when the sun has entered Taurus). Apart from his extensive cult in the East, he has been chosen as patron in the West by England, Portugal, Aragon, Valencia, Barcelona, Malta, and Genoa; he is likewise the patron of prisoners, soldiers, and shepherds. The martyr's banner consists of a red cross on a white background.

*
*  *

It is clear from the foregoing passages that we have to do with events of a cosmic magnitude. Veneration for St. George enjoyed a popularity in the Middle Ages only surpassed perhaps by that for the Blessed Virgin, countless churches and religious and military orders being dedicated to him; and although he miraculously intervened to aid the Crusaders in their capture of Jerusalem (which had to be preserved as a sanctuary for all Monotheism), he was nevertheless revered by the Saracens as the "White-horsed Knight." Nay, they went even fur-

ther, claiming according to the Arab historian Mas'ûdî that Jirjîs—as Muslims call the saint—was sent by God during the Prophet's reign to the king of Mosul with the command that he embrace the new faith. The king proved intractable and had Jirjîs slain. God, however, revived him and again sent him to the king, resulting in the same slaying and resurrection as before. When the martyr performed this mission a third time, his persecutor ordered him burned, with his ashes scattered on the Tigris. But God once more miraculously restored the saint to life, this time destroying the king and all his subjects. The Swiss traveler Johann Ludwig Burckhardt noted that "the Turks pay great veneration to St. George."

Now this Jirjîs is identified by Muslims with Elias and al-Khidr (lit. "The Green One"), a mysterious personage or prophet, who like Melchizedek ("King of Righteousness") seems to have "neither beginning of days, nor end of life" (Hebrews 7:3). S. Baring-Gould, for one, has researched the St. George annals from the viewpoint of comparative mythology, and he cites from an *Essay on the Age and Antiquity of the Book of Nabathaean Agriculture*, by Ernest Renan.[2] The book in question is an ancient Nabathaean text by Kûthâmî the Babylonian, which was translated into Arabic around the year 900 by the Chaldaean Muslim, Ibn Wahshîya al-Kasdani. Kûthâmî tells of a divinity named Yanbûshâdh over whose death the gods lamented, "just as all the angels and *sekâ'in* lamented over Tammûzî." This latter event took place at Babylon in the temple of the Sun, whose great golden image was suspended "between heaven and earth," surrounded by images of all the planets. The Babylonian author related how he would weep along with the people when present in the temple during the feast of Tammuz, which was in the month (July) named after the divinity, but that he wept with far greater fervor when it came to the turn of Yanbûshâdh. "The reason is this, that the time of Yanbûshâdh is nearer to our own than the time of Tammuz, and his story is, therefore, more certain and worthy of belief."

Al-Kasdani, the translator, intervenes at this point, saying that in his efforts to ascertain the identity of Tammuz, he came upon full details of the legend in another Nabathaean book: "How he summoned a king to worship the seven (planets) and the twelve (signs), and how the king put him to death several times in a cruel manner, Tammuz coming to life again after each time, until at last he died;

[2] London, 1862.

and behold! it was identical with the legend of St. George that is current among the Christians." Apparently al-Kasdani was unaware of the Islamic Jirjîs, who is given moreover the surname Bâqiyâ[3] ("Surviving") because of his being raised from the dead.

This Tammuz—in the oldest texts (c. 3200 B.C.) *Dumu-zi*, "the son who rises, goes forth (from the nether world)"—was a Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian divinity associated with annual vegetation cycles, and a cosmogonic paradigm of suffering, death, and resurrection. He was humiliated, flogged, imprisoned, drowned in the Euphrates and mourned by the Great Goddess, his sister-mother-lover Innini or Ishtar, by whom he was yearly accompanied into Aralû (the lower regions) and as often revived. Ezekiel (8:14) tells how the women of Jerusalem used to weep at the north gate of the temple for Tammuz, whom St. Jerome in the Vulgate renders as Adonis (*plangentes Adonidem*). J. G. Frazer writes[4] that "some of the old Canaanite kings of Jerusalem appear to have played the part of Adonis in their lifetime, if we may judge from their names, Adoni-bezek and Adonizedek,[5] which are divine rather than human titles. Adonizedek means 'lord of righteousness,' and is therefore equivalent to Melchizedek, that is, 'king of righteousness'. . . . Thus if the old priestly kings of Jerusalem regularly played the part of Adonis, we need not wonder that in later times the women of Jerusalem used to weep for Tammuz, that is, for Adonis."

Indeed, the Phoenician Adonis which entered into Greek mythology reveals essentially the same story. It is the identical myth, according to Lucian[6] and others, that carries back to Osiris, the Egyptian god of Judgment, Resurrection, and Immortality: of divine descent in a human body, he was a benevolent king treacherously murdered and dismembered, whereupon his sister-consort Isis and her sister Nephthys uttered a lament until out of pity Ra sent down from heaven

[3] Hughes, *Dictionary of Islam*; this form of the word is not given in Arabic dictionaries; it might be a Coptic variant of *bâqî*. In Syria near the Lebanese border is a Greek Orthodox monastery named Mâr Georgos where a three-day festival is annually held for St. George, and which is attended by numbers of both Christian and Muslim faithful, the latter sometimes invoking Jirjîs by the name al-Khidr and sometimes the name Abu 'l-'Abbâs.

[4] *Adonis Attis Osiris*, London, 1909.

[5] Judges 1:4-7; Joshua 10:1 sqq.

[6] *De dea Syria*, n. 7.

Anubis, who with the aid of Horus, Thoth, and the two stricken goddesses managed to piece together the broken body and restore Osiris to life.

"Under the names of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis [the Phrygian counterpart of Adonis]," writes Frazer, "the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life, especially of vegetable life, which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead." But Eliade justly observes that "agriculture is only one of the planes upon which the symbolism of periodic regeneration applies. . . . What is primordial and essential is the idea of regeneration, that is, of repetition of the Creation." We have nonetheless noted that the name George etymologically derives from agriculture, and that the saint's feast comes when the sun has entered Taurus, the season of the earth's greatest fecundity.

"As a plant or tree," says Coomaraswamy, "Soma must have been green," a fact he equates with Khwâjâ Khidr ("the Green One"), under whose feet at every step the earth grows green.[7] And this in turn irresistibly conjures up the image of the uncouth warrior-stranger all green, and dressed in green, astride a green horse—in the Arthurian romance of Celtic descent, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* It is the "custom" at Arthur's court on New Year's Day not to serve the banquet until some prodigy has been performed or recounted.

George Lyman Kittredge in a brilliant study on Gawain[8] assembled a large body of parallels, including ones drawn from North American Indian mythology, about heroes "who play fast and loose with their heads"; but it took Coomaraswamy in his "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Indra and Numaci,"[9] to demonstrate through Vedic sources the cosmological principle at stake: we are witnessing the drama of World Creation where the Primordial One, the Supreme Person (*Purusha*) has voluntarily to be dismembered through a Sacrifice *in divinis* so that a predestined portion of Infinity's fathomless bounty may be released for manifestation by this beheading, this diremption of Heaven and Earth. "The decapitation is a disenchantment

[7] Cf. *Ars Islamica*, I (1934), 174, 175 [Editor's Note: This same article also appears in Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *What is Civilization? And Other Essays* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1989)].

[8] *Gawain and the Green Knight*, 1916.

[9] *Speculum*, Cambridge, Mass., January 1944.

of the victim," writes Coomaraswamy, "a liberation of the Sun from the darkness by which he had been obscured and eclipsed. But the Sacrificial death is also a making many from one, in which sense the dismemberment is a consummation desired by the victim himself; and that is the release of all the imprisoned principles, 'All this' (universe) that was contained in 'That One' by whom all beings and all things are breathed out or poured forth at his 'death' and whom . . . 'they could not overcome so long as he was one' (*Taittiriya Aranyaka* V. 1. 3)." Here, says Coomaraswamy, is the key to why "Arthur and his knights—Gods and men—may not *eat* until the champion feat has been performed." "It should be clearly understood," he adds, "and from a Christian point of view will be perfectly intelligible, that the Sacrifice is always a willing victim and the passion self-imposed [the reader may recall that this is invariably the case with George the martyr], at the same time that he is the innocent victim of a passion unjustly imposed upon him; these are only two different ways of regarding one and the same 'event.'"

Moreover, the dismembered deity has in its turn to be reconstructed by a corresponding expiatory Sacrifice here below, in this head-for-a-head requital: the many has now to "offer its neck" in the interests of restoring Unity once again. "There is thus an incessant multiplication of the inexhaustible One and unification of the indefinitely Many."[10] "It cannot be too clearly realized," continues Coomaraswamy in his Gawain article, "that we are dealing with a recurring cycle of events; in this connection it is not at all insignificant that in so many cases the story begins and ends with the 'Year.'" Although mythology is what presently concerns us, it must be stressed that the microcosmic implications in all this are paramount. Still quoting the same author: "It is . . . well known that the express purpose of the Sacrifice, as a rite enacted and to be comprehended, is to build up again, at one and the same time the sacrificer's and the deity's Self, 'whole and complete,'" and that "whoever, like Gawain, searches for the Master Surgeon, to pay his debt, and submits to *this* Headman's axe, will find himself, not without a head, but with another head on his shoulders; just as Gawain, having lain down to die, assuredly stood up again a new man."

These accumulated references, while in no way exhaustive, supply all the evidence needed to identify St. George as the embodiment

[10] Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, New York, 1943.

in Christian terms of the Universal Principle of cyclical Cosmogonic Regeneration; and homage for his person is based on the fact that Man as Heaven's Vicegerant on earth (Koran *passim*), thanks to his total intelligence and volitional liberty, is obliged on pain of forfeiting this birthright to participate actively in the "ecological" maintenance of creation in its entirety—Noumenal, animic, and phenomenal. Not that every Christian who venerates the saint is asked to understand his motives in this light, but these explanations are given to show wherein the spiritual efficacy of the worship lies.

If the reader seems to find here an indiscriminate overlapping of myths, this is because with these central solar themes we are at the very heart of the eternal return. The fact remains that all these heroes, gods, and demigods are distinct and separate entities: "Many are his forms and many his existences," says an Egyptian Hymn to Osiris,[11] who is no more Adonis than the latter is Tammuz, it only being at the timeless and omnipresent point of the eternal return that their identities converge.

*
*  *

The Church today considers St. George an atavistic carrier of pagan rubbish, and there have not lacked those Christian apologists[12] who wonder in print how such an undisguised heathen could ever have found his way into the Roman Martyrology. But the question can be reversed, to ask how it is conceivable that so universal an archetypal reality could fail to enter the Christian sphere. In any case, enter it did, with the modifications entailed by the nature of the times and peoples and religion to which it was addressed. Gone is the stress on nuptial rites and fecundity, although the feminine counterparts remain, metamorphosed befitting a now chivalric context. Thus we see associated with the saint the Empress Alexandra, sharing in his martyrdom, while the other lady will prove to be the princess in the dragon story, whose chaste girdle serves George as the artifice indis-

[11] Margaret A. Murray, *Egyptian Religious Poetry*, London, 1949. The affinity alluded to is what the Hindus call *bhedâbheda* ("distinction without difference") or as Eckhart says, "fused but not confused." St. George and his predecessors all belong to the same spiritual family.

[12] Calvin, Gibbon, and a host of lesser luminaries.

pensable for charming the monster into docility. This theme even turns up in the Green Knight, whose lady's green silken girdle, worn at her conniving by Gawain—who as will be shown is none other than the fearsome knight's alter-ego—saves him from her husband's death-blow. The second lady in this Arthurian romance is Morgan le Fay, on whose magical powers, acquired from Merlin, the whole tale hinges.

Incidentally, the heathenish wailings for Tammuz will seem less outlandish if one remembers the central role the Passion plays in the Latin Rite. And certainly the analogies between Osiris and Christ have not been overlooked by scholars in comparative religion: both figures are celebrated for a Passion and a Resurrection, Osiris as Judge and King of the Dead corresponds to Christ the Pantocrator, and without undue speculation the two Gospel Marys might in some way be identified with Isis and Nephthys; at least it is well established that the cult of Isis passed across into that of the Blessed Virgin, as attested by the number of Marian shrines in the Middle Ages erected on temple sites formerly dedicated to pagan deities.

But why now this apparent divagation concerning Christ? The reason is that St. George was lauded in mediaeval times as though a prolongation of the Savior, and as the Virgin's right arm, or what in Buddhist terms would be called a Christian Bodhisattva: his *whosoever implores my aid shall receive it* is a direct echo of the Gospel's "whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do" (John 14:13). His is likewise the theme of martyrdom and revival; he too has the cross for emblem; they both are celebrated at Eastertide, when the Year is reborn; and just as St. Michael is the celestial champion of the Redeemer, and of her who shall crush the serpent's head, so is St. George the terrestrial counterpart, and in this Messianic context the patron of those soldiers who battle for the Heavenly Jerusalem, since "this generation [the final Year of our cosmic cycle] shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled" (Matthew 24:34).

The same context also brings in the dragon, whose history did not just appear as a pious afterthought belatedly tacked onto the *Golden Legend*, and in fact it can be traced as far back as the sixth century. Voragine himself refers to variants in the story recounted by "other authors"; therefore apart from oral traditions there must have been written documents known at his time. The monster's credibility was doomed to expire with the close of the Middle Ages, for early in the sixteenth century Pope Clement VII boldly managed to dispatch the beast through the facile expedient of cutting out his mention upon

reformation of the Missals and Breviaries. This now left the Roman Church (for the Orthodox is not partner to the act) with one problem in place of two, and it would only be a matter of time before George himself disappeared—so closely are his and the dragon's destinies intertwined. But first let us recall the version given by the Italian Dominican chronicler.

The young Cappadocian knight on his travels chanced to pass near a pagan city in Libya called Silene, bordering which lay a vast swamp infested by an insatiable dragon that repeatedly put to flight an armed host intending its destruction. In his forays against the city his pestilential breath even killed those just within the walls. To fend off the monster the citizens finally offered him two sheep a day, but the supply soon ran short, so that they had no expedient save to furnish each time along with a sheep one of their children, a boy or a girl, drawn by lots. The town was practically emptied of youths when it fell the turn of the king's only daughter to be sacrificed. The grief-stricken monarch proposed his gold and silver and half his realm in her stead—anything that could spare the maiden this horrible fate, all of which merely served to heighten the anger of his bereaved subjects, who reminded him that he it was who had issued the edict, consequently his duty now lay in abiding by it, at the risk of being put to the torch, along with his palace. Thereupon, summoning the princess, he adorned her in royal robes, lamenting the fate that was to banish evermore his dreams for her of a princely marriage.

The princess (who in old ballads is named Sabra) then fell at her father's feet to receive his benediction, after which she departed for the swamp. At this moment St. George appeared, who asked the cause of her weeping. "Good youth," she replied, "quickly mount your horse and fly, lest you perish with me!" "Have no fear of that, my child," he answered, "but tell me why are you in tears, before this crowd standing on the walls?" Finding her entreaties for his departure of no avail, she recounted the whole dismal story. Even while she spoke, the monster raised his scaly head above the marshes. All trembling, the virgin cried, "Fly, fly, sir knight!"

By way of response, George mounted his steed, and, recommending himself to God with the sign of the cross, brandished his lance and charged the dragon, now advancing upon him. With a single stroke the beast was transfixed and overthrown. George then bade the princess pass her girdle round the neck of the monster, who rose and followed her like a little dog on a leash.

When they reached the town, the people fled in terror; but St. George summoned them back, explaining that he had been sent by the Lord to deliver them of their affliction, and inviting them to join the Christian faith. On that day the king and all his people were baptized. Then the saint drew his sword and killed the dragon, whose carcass was carted away by four pairs of oxen. The king had an immense church constructed in honor of the Blessed Virgin and St. George, and from it issued a fountain whose waters cured all wasting diseases. After distributing to the poor the largesse he had received from the king, George instructed the monarch on the rules of religion, embraced him, and departed.

Some authors recount that George killed the dragon outright; while other stories tell of the princess shut up in a castle whose subjects are perishing for lack of water, the only source, at the base of a hill, being guarded by the "laidly worm," from which George duly delivers them.

*
*  *

Of greater importance is the motif's universality. Perseus and Andromeda have already been mentioned. "Similar stories were prevalent in Greece. In the isle of Salamis, Cenchrius, a son of Poseidon, relieved the inhabitants from the scourge of a similar monster, who devastated the island. At Thespia, a dragon ravaged the country round the city; Zeus ordered the inhabitants to give the monster their children by lot. One year it fell on Cleostratus. Menestratus determined to save him, he armed himself with a suit covered with hooks, and was devoured by the dragon, which perished in killing him."[13]

The Aryan prototype for all this is in the Vedic encounter of Indra with the great serpent Ahi—alternatively known as Vritra, "Drought," or Namuci, "Holdfast"—who has confiscated the waters, which are only to be released when Indra dismembers the Titan with his thunderbolt. The corresponding Persian myth concerns the overthrowing of Ahriman by Mithra; there is also the Iranian hero Thraetona who slew Dahak, a three-headed dragon. For European counterparts, we have the Teutonic myth of Siegfried, who overcomes a mighty dragon and despoils him of the Rheingold belonging to the river nymphs,

[13] Baring-Gould, *op. cit.*

and which finds its Scandinavian parallel in the story of Sigurd. The Anglo-Saxon Beowulf is likewise a dragon-slayer.

Further instances outside the Aryan sphere could be gathered from the shamanistic and animistic traditions of North America and Africa; but we shall limit ourselves to one Asiatic parallel because of its pertinence here, namely, an episode recounted in that inimitable Chinese blend of wit-with-wisdom, Wu Ch'êng-ên's sixteenth-century spiritual allegory, *Monkey* (*Hsi Yu Ki*), based on the travels to India of the renowned Chinese Buddhist pilgrim and scholar, Hsüan Tsang (600?-664 A.D.).

Tripitaka—as the Buddhist saint is by-named in the tale for the scriptures he is seeking—with Monkey (the Great Ego) and two other uncouth traveling companions, all pledging his protection in return for their salvation, has reached a place bordering on a great body of water presided over by a monster deity who, in exchange for bringing the local inhabitants rain in due season and fertility, demands the yearly sacrifice of a boy or girl. This time he is after Tripitaka; and it is only through Monkey's final recourse to the Bodhisattva in the Southern Ocean, the goddess Kuan-yin (Avalokitesvara), the "Regarder of the Cries of the World" (*Whosoever implores my aid shall receive it*), that the monster king is dispatched—and this by the divinity's expedient of tying to her sash (here we have again the girdle talisman) a bamboo basket in which the fiend is retrieved from the waters, and who now turns out to be nothing but a golden fish. "It is a goldfish that I reared in my lotus pond," she explains. "Every day it used to put its head out and listen to the scriptures, thus acquiring great magical powers." But one day a flood came, washing it out to sea, whence began all the mischief. The citizens gather in gratitude to do obeisance to the Bodhisattva while a skilled painter makes her portrait; "and this was the beginning of the form of Kuan-yin known as 'Kuan-yin with the Fish-basket.'"[14]

**History**

Our task is now to determine in the measure possible where mythology contemporizes with history. There are two historical moments in the life of every person on earth which are inexorably real and yet totally outside the reach of empirical consciousness: the moment

[14] *Monkey*, Arthur Waley's translation, New York, 1943, p. 253 ff.

of birth, and the moment of death. These two decisive events occur moreover exactly once, over the entire lifespan of the individual, and scarcely enter into his reflections at all—everything else considered.

*The transition of timelessness into time*: Ancient man, it was indicated, existed in a spatial, atemporal world, not that he lacked the notion of time—one has only to regard his astronomy—but it was less *time* as we know it than movement and rhythm, a set of recurring events perpetually related back to a static Center, the way in Hindu music that the mode or *râga* while developing never ceases weaving around the basic tonic. Schuon writes that "traditions having a prehistoric origin are, symbolically speaking, made for 'space' and not for 'time'; that is to say, they saw the light in a primordial epoch when time was still but a rhythm in a spatial and static beatitude, and when space or simultaneity still predominated over the experience of duration and change. The historical traditions on the other hand must take the experience of 'time' into account and must foresee instability and decadence, since they were born in periods when time had become like a fast-flowing river and ever more devouring, and when the spiritual outlook had to be centered on the end of the world."[15]

Eliade regards Messianism as constituting a major shift into the historical perspective, where *in illo tempore* is now projected from the Center out to the Future, thus necessitating faith in a promised Good which is yet to come. Still, even here history is rejected in the sense of something positive, and is only tolerated as the "world in travail" while awaiting its consummation in the apocatastasis, that final Event which shall definitively deliver it from time. It must of course be stressed, in keeping with what Schuon says above, that there was nothing arbitrary in this transition to a historical or Messianic view taken by the later religions, that the adaptation was cosmologically forced on them with time more and more devouring space in a world cycle now rushing towards its expiration. Even Hinduism and its emphasis on the "eternal law" or *sanâtana dharma*—the same as the eternal return—has its place for the *Kalki avatâra*, the Solar Hero who awaits the moment when the Dragon *Mâyâ* in the form of time (*kâla*) is about to swallow space (simultaneity, "staticity," Eternal Present, Supreme Center), to strike his decisive blow that will reverse all inverted values, and usher in a new cycle (Age, Year).

[15] *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 14. As an example of how the present with traditional peoples predominated over time, the Mayans would graphically represent through a single composite image the birth, lifespan, and death of an individual.

This Event, as Eliade shows, is prefigured in the New Year ceremonies and rites that have prevailed in varying forms the world over, typically characterized on the one hand by the abolition of past time, the abolition of order, a flouting of normal values in favor of general permissiveness—by Saturnalian orgies, universal confusion, the extinction of the sacred fire, and chaos, namely, the "descent into hell"; and on the other hand, by confession of sins, expulsion of the scapegoat, the rekindling of the sacred fire, the return of the dead, regeneration, initiation, and consecration of the new harvest. Sometimes a combat is enacted between a divinity and the primordial dragon (the serpent often symbolizing preformal chaos). Also, the twelve days of midwinter were held in Vedic times to foretoken the twelve months of the coming year (*Rg Veda* IV. 33. 7), a belief likewise maintained in Europe concerning the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany.

But with Christianity the Year becomes unique, macrocosmic, and historically "once for all" (Hebrews 10:10) of "this generation," although microcosmically recurrence or periodicity is still retained, as in the liturgical calendar. Whereas formerly the high priest carried out the sacrifice following "the patterns of things in the heavens" and entered "into the holy place each year with blood of others," Christ now "by his own blood . . . entered in once into the holy place," for it was not meet "that he should offer himself often. . . . For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Hebrews 9).

Christianity's conflict with the various paganisms it encountered can thus in part at least be explained as a rivalry between the classic spatial or periodic perspective and the newly revealed temporal or historical one, which—independently of other considerations—being more "timely" was precisely bound to prevail. Yet the bane of historicity is secularization, and man being what he is, it suffices but a subtle shift in focus for "the measureless and perilous world of forms and of change," hitherto regarded as something negative to be rejected, now to be seen as something positive to be espoused. The outer world becomes reality, matter assumes an increased importance, and man experiences a Renaissance marked by humanism with its concept of indefinite progress and human or worldly perfectibility. This entails in consequence a loss of contact with higher states of being, mythol-

ogy is relegated to a realm equatable with the incredible, while sacred history itself in turn becomes "myth."

Islam, the last of the historical religions, actually seizes hold of time itself as a sword with which to destroy all time: the *Shahâdah* or Witness "*Lâ ilâha illa 'Llâh*—There is no divinity if not the Divinity" destroys through a transformation that refers and ultimately renders everything back to its Origin; the Event or Final Day or Judgment is not only ceaselessly proclaimed as immanent, Islam itself is in a way already that Event or Judgment. The past and the future are more geometric than temporal; Allah "is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward";[16] there is purely the desertic fatality of the omnipresent Now, and this Now belongs to God. For the Muslim believer, the world is thus in part illusion and in part theophany, but at all events never more than a veil (*hijâb*) covering Reality.

It goes without saying that the Christian believer (wherever he still exists) is likewise no secularist: he is the first to "let the dead bury their dead" and is more predisposed than not to turn his back on the world itself as the personification of evil. He is a man who only endures history while awaiting the glory of the Kingdom to come.

*
*  *

For the needs of this study, history is envisaged in a dual role: microcosmic and macrocosmic—inward and outward. Inward: we all have inside the brief time allotted—at the risk of ruin—to kill the dragon that holds our soul in captivity. This is the history that is transacting incessantly within us. Outward: inevitably, in the nature of things there have been monster-idols that historically more than once have held a human collectivity in thralldom, until dispatched or slain by a solar hero.

Likewise, just as it is incumbent on all men to seek redemption—and there are those who have experienced spiritual rebirth even in this lifetime—so can it be acknowledged on trustworthy religious testi-

[16] Koran LVII. 3. Cf. Schuon, *Forme et Substance dans les Religions*, Paris, 1975 the chapter "La croix 'temps-espace' dans l'onomatologie koranique" [Editor's Note: See Frithjof Schuon, *Form and Substance in the Religions* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2002), the chapter "The Cross of Space and Time in Koranic Onomatology"]

mony that Christ and certain saints of earlier ages have exceptionally raised the dead back to life. Again, as man is intended to be a creature capable of walking on the waters, in the sense of dominating his psychic substance, so indeed must there have been holy men capable upon spiritual occasion of outwardly walking on water, especially given that miracles themselves are none other than inward truths dramatized in outward events. The same with alchemy as an initiatic technique: just as the "artist" strives to transform base substances into "gold," so are there cases on record of alchemists achieving literal transmutations.

Myth is easier to "trace" than exceptional historical events, because the former is perennial, while the latter are "effaced" in the passage of time, with the added difficulty that a historical event which is sacred in character is already partially lifted out of the stream of time—as will be shown in the last section of this article.

In bafflement people face the stark "fact" of Stonehenge, the masonry at Cuzco, the monuments of Easter Island, the Nazca line drawings discernible only at high altitude, or the great menhir of Locmariaquer—possibilities the world today would scoff at, had the evidence not yet vanished. For how to account for a menhir (now lying broken in four pieces) that was originally over twenty-three meters high and weighing three hundred tons, which would have required three thousand men to raise after being transported from a distant quarry on a well-made road (of which no trace exists at Locmariaquer)? One often finds menhirs, moreover, as it were casually set in the earth without apparent regard for engineering or the specifics of gravity, the broad end up and the pointed end down—as though suspended from heaven.

Our modern world as such would have been totally inconceivable—not to say incomprehensible—to the men of these former cultures, yet we blandly assume that anything out of the ordinary reported of their times which cannot be authenticated in a monument, museum, shard, or scientific archive, quite simply never existed. If St. George was a historical personage, then where is a bone to prove it? And the same goes for dragons.

And yet if we are to allow for the hypothesis that the peoples of these former periods might have been something more than mere evolutional monsters groping towards the daylight, we ought at least in the interests of objectivity to credit their traditions with a modicum of good faith. To do the contrary is all the more illogical when our

science itself is continually running up against possibilities which yesterday would scarcely have crossed the imagination.

The fabulous creatures of antiquity can be envisaged in three categories: those which have a purely mythological symbolism, such as the sphinx and the winged lion; those which additionally are materializations of beings from the subtle domain, such as perchance the mermaid or the unicorn; and those which existed physically according to fossil evidence or the accounts of early naturalists and compilations in bestiaries, such as the dinotherium, and possibly the sea serpent, the behemoth, and basilisk. The dragon appears to belong to all three categories, although its historical verification is what most interests us for the moment.

In the great zoological work of Conrad von Gesner, *Historia animalium* (Zurich, 1551-58), dragons figure as part of the fauna known to science. By Solinus' account (3rd century A.D.), the Egyptians kept a species tame in their houses as good geniuses, an observation which brings to mind the thirty-two thousand pottery figurines discovered in the region of Acambaro, some hundred and sixty kilometers northwest of Mexico City, in 1945 by Waldemar Julsrud, and among which is a statuette dating around 2,500 B.C. of a young girl nude playing with a creature about her size, that looks for all the world like a dinosaur? Without attempting to claim a foothold for dinosaurs in the Quaternary period, we can nonetheless propose that there could be a closer parentage between dragons and prehistoric monsters than is known to modern science. In the Pentateuch (Numbers 21:6) we read that "the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died." And Deuteronomy (8:15) speaks about "that great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought."

Whatever the beast St. George encountered, it was clearly more than just a physical monster, otherwise the king's army in Voragine's account would speedily have dispatched it, nor would the citizens in the Eastern version have been provoked into idolatry. No, it had to be a being incarnating a tenacious diabolical force of an intensity such that only an intervention from heaven could dissolve, and this at an age when the cosmos was less "solidified" than now—and thus more accessible to the interpenetration of powers both from above and below.

*
* *

Concerning the "historicity" of St. George, which was first really put in doubt by Calvin,[17] it is at the outset inconceivable that with countless thousands of known Christian martyrs to choose from, the early Church would have singled out for the greatest veneration of all some "unknown soldier": the ancient Church authorities may have been "primitive" by our lights, but they were not imbeciles; and the verbal dueling excelled in by the likes of the Dyophysites, Monophysites, Aphthartodocetaes, Phthartolatraes, Agnoetaes, and Aktistetaes does not betoken a mentality that would let a spurious saint of such magnitude slip through the net were there the slightest doubt of his authenticity.

The Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature[18] refer to a Greek inscription from an ancient church converted out of a heathen temple in Ezra, Syria, dated 346, wherein St. George is named as a holy martyr. Constantine (r. 306-337) dedicated a great church to the saint over his tomb near Lydda, and later according to one tradition the Emperor had the martyr's bones translated to a church in Constantinople that was originally a temple of Juno. A church dating from the fourth century was built to him at Thessalonica, and more inscriptions are found in ruined churches in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Clovis erected the monastery at Baralle in honor of St. George c. 512. Ramula, the ancient Arimathaea, also bore the name of Georgia. It was around the year 1348 that King Edward III made him patron of England.

St. Ambrose (340?-397) within a century of George's day was extolling his virtues in referring to the destruction of Dacian's temple: "George, the faithful soldier of Christ, at a time when Christianity was hidden, alone dared courageously to proclaim his faith in the Son of God. . . . And not only did he never let himself be seduced by temporal power, but, making game of his persecutor, he annihilated the temple with all its idols." Ambrose also signals out the torment of the Empress Alexandra as proof "that martyrdom in the absence of

[17] "*Nil eos Christo reliquum facere qui pro nihilo ducunt ejus intercessionem, nisi accedant Georgius aut Hippolitus, aut similes larvae.*"

[18] Second Series, vol. vii. pt. i.

baptism, makes it possible to possess the kingdom of heaven." Now to convince this learned Church Doctor that he was the victim of a pious hoax would be tantamount to convincing the present-day Sioux that Crazy Horse (killed in 1877) was nothing but a legend.

The sanctity of St. George is likewise attested and conveyed through a vast iconographical tradition ascending the centuries to the earliest times, and it suffices to say that the dulia accorded to icons is under a rigid ecclesiastical control which would far from tolerate the heroes of fairy tales being admitted into the company of the saints. "In the charismatic economy of every intrinsically orthodox religion there is in fact a protective power which keeps a watchful eye on the integrity of the various elements of worship, even if they are no more than secondary, and this power results from the presence of the Holy Spirit, and is thus not unconnected with the mystery of infallibility. . . . When it comes to ancient cults, historically dubious, but deep-rooted and hence efficacious, the Holy Spirit, or what Muslims would call the *barakah*, must be 'given a free hand'. . . ; one must have a feeling for the concrete meaning of sacred phenomena, and trust in the paracletic and charismatic power which animates the body of religion."[19]

These considerations have to do with what theology has always recognized as *the rights of immemorial custom.*

*
* *

One April day in 1961, the late Richard Cardinal Cushing, then Roman Catholic archbishop of Boston, was being chauffeured in his black limousine some seventeen miles southwest of the city through the greening Massachusetts landscape, on route to dedicate the first Catholic church in the little town of Dover—red brick St. Philomena's, which the three-year-old parish had just completed, when suddenly his attention froze on an item in the newspaper he was scanning: the Vatican's Sacred Congregation of Rites had stricken St. Philomena, "the virgin martyr," from the register of saints. Already the cardinal had distributed eight hundred statuettes of St. Philomena to Dover's Catholics, and the stained-glass window to her was in place. Solemnly

[19] Schuon, "On Relics," *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Summer 1975 [Editor's Note: This same article appears in Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (Pates Manor, Bedfont: Perennial Books, 1981)].

before the startled congregation, Cardinal Cushing dedicated their new edifice as the "Church of the Most Precious Blood." "It was a difficult job," he said afterwards. "It was like telling the Irish there was no St. Patrick."

Little could he suspect that the Church would presently be telling the Irish—or at any rate the non-Irish—just that. But there was nothing to be done. Archaeology was triumphing over credulity, and the faithful could take it or leave it. What after all was Philomena for exact science but the fractured skull of an adolescent girl and a clot of something suggesting blood in a glass phial, discovered on 24 May 1802 in the catacomb of St. Priscilla on Rome's Via Saleria Nova, with fragments of Latin on tiles jumbled over the grave: *Lumena paxte cum fi*, which religious zeal made to read *Pax tecum Filumena*?

However, symbols adjacent to the tomb—two anchors, three arrows, a palm, and a flower or torch—were, including the rest, enough to convince the "credulous" that they had to do with a bona fide martyr; and in 1805 Pope Pius VII allowed a priest, Don Francis di Lucia, to have the bones enshrined in the church of Mugnano del Cardinale near Naples, which inaugurated a flood of miracles. With a Neapolitan nun, Sister Mary Louisa of Jesus, receiving a series of revelations on the saint's life and martyrdom that formed the substance of a biography compiled by Don Francis, Philomena's identity was complete, and in 1837 Pope Gregory XVI authorized her public veneration with 11 August as feast day, for which Pope Pius IX approved a Mass and office in 1855. The churches dedicated to her number in the hundreds upwards. Perhaps the saint's most celebrated triumph was the devotion she showered on St. John Vianney (1786-1859), France's famed Cure d'Ars: "my dear little saint," and "agent in heaven," as he called her.

Given this emotionally charged "cult," the complete success of Philomena's desanctification proved a signal victory for Rome and the spirit of Vatican II, and soon a taste for blood far stronger than that desiccated crumb in a phial was reaching from the Eternal City to Brussels, where the venerable Bollandists labored overtime at the Collège de St. Michel on their *Analecta Bollandiana* and *Acta Sanctorum* carving the Martyrology down to proposed scientific proportion. Hagiology would never be the same again. They hacked away at the Fourteen Holy Helpers until the Vatican decided that this company was to be disbanded if not entirely liquidated, thus removing Sts. Catherine of Alexandria (whose "legend," according to Donald

Attwater's updated version[20] of Alban Butler's eighteenth-century *Lives of the Saints*, is one of the "most preposterous of its kind," there being no "positive evidence that she ever existed outside the mind of some Greek writer who first composed what he intended to be simply an edifying romance"), Barbara (no more than a "spurious legend" for Attwater, and "pious romance"), Christopher, and George (here Attwater, being English, demurs, professing that the endeavors to eliminate him "are more remarkable for their ingenuity than for their cogency"; and in fact the Church has had to let George remain in England, contenting itself with demoting him there to a "second-rank" saint—which is a way of "damning with faint praise").

The wonder is that St. Margaret survived, she whom Attwater dismisses as "a fictitious romance," and among whose unpardonable ordeals was that of being swallowed by a dragon—her emblem to boot. Other saints, of course, not in the aforementioned holy company (which received an enormous veneration, originating in Germanic countries from the time of their intercession during the Black Death of the fourteenth century, and later spreading out to Italy and America) have been given the ax, such as Cecilia ("a fabrication" in Attwater's book), and of all people, Louis of France, who although lauded by Attwater as the epitome of integrity, was demoted to second rank—for being too regal, perchance. Then how did St. Ursula, the subject of "false relics" and "forged epitaphs" . . . "preposterously elaborated through the mistakes of imaginative visionaries" (Attwater), escape—if indeed she has? And why for the rest, may we ask, is the Vatican out to out-martyr the martyrdoms of the ancient pagan Rome—even if it is child's work to massacre what are now held to be no more than names?

Eliade again furnishes the clue: in the "primitive" ontological conception, "an object or an act becomes real only insofar as it imitates or repeats an archetype. Thus, reality is acquired solely through repetition or participation; everything which lacks an exemplary model is 'meaningless,' i.e., it lacks reality. . . . [Hence] the man of a traditional culture sees himself as real only to the extent that he ceases to be himself (for a modern observer) and is satisfied with imitating and repeating the gestures of another. In other words, he sees himself as real, i.e., as 'truly himself,' only, and precisely, insofar as he ceases

[20] *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints.*

to be so. Hence it could be said that this 'primitive' ontology has a Platonic structure."

The second aspect of archaic ontology according to Eliade is "the abolition of time through the imitation of archetypes and the repetition of paradigmatic gestures. . . . All sacrifices are performed at the same mythical instant of the beginning. . . . There is an implicit abolition of profane time, of duration, of 'history'; and he who reproduces the exemplary gesture thus finds himself transported into the mythical epoch in which its revelation took place."

The conclusion is inescapable: a church dedicated to temporizing must of necessity "demythologize"; it is impossible to plunge into the mainstream of history, with all that secularization implies, while pretending that "my kingdom is not of this world"; accordingly it is the "non-historical" saints—that clutter of "dead" hagiographical lumber—which have to go; those fabulous martyrs of the first Christian centuries whose lives are cloaked in the miraculous. These are the great apotropaic and intercessionary saints, the Bodhisattvas of Christianity; they are, citing Schuon, "like the appearance of stars on earth; they reascend after their death to the firmament, to their eternal home; they are almost pure symbols, spiritual signs only provisionally detached from the celestial iconostasis in which they have been enshrined since the creation of the world."[21]

As with St. George, St. Christopher emerges from an interfusion of archetypal entities, he being "successor" to Anubis, Hermes, Atlas, and Herakles; St. Ursula for her part can be traced back to the Swabian goddess Ursel or Hörsel, whose emblem was a ship, and whom Tacitus in his *Germania* (ix) relates to Isis: "A part of the Suevi sacrifice to Isis."[22] If Ursula has been left unmolested by the authorities, it may be that her cult in recent years has had nothing matching the amplitude of that for Christopher, Philomena, and others; besides, those powers committed to the task of "social involvement" are concerned with a work of dismemberment rather than extermination, which would be too transparent and thus self-defeating—almost like trying to eliminate the Blessed Virgin herself, a possibility which if not wholly excluded, has nonetheless yet to see its time.

[21] *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 34.

[22] Baring-Gould, *op. cit.* This hagiographer adduces Ursula's pagan antecedents as "painful" proof of her spuriousness; whereas we take exactly the opposite view, namely, that her filiation in the eternal return attests to her authenticity.

In "burying" St. George and thereby pretending he who offers perpetual intercession does not even exist, the "official" Church is announcing a truth: namely, that it has become secularized and cut off from the sacred, from its whole *raison d'être*. In its worldly zeal to make—rather than transcend—history, the tables are thus turned, for it now has inescapably taken over the role of "Holdfast," keeping back the Waters of Life. Says Coomaraswamy: "A church or society—the Hindu would make no distinction—that does not provide a way of escape from its own regimen, and will not let its people go, is defeating its own ultimate purpose."[23]

**The Confluence of the Sacred and the Secular**

Myth connotes Mystery: there is a discontinuity and inviolable barrier between each plane of existence as well as in the reversal of values between the sacred and the profane that leaves the former inaccessible to the reaches of purely human calculation and endeavor. This "Cloud of Unknowing" is called in Islam a *barzakh*, separating the higher from the lower, this life from the next; it is the veil (*hijâb*) in Sufic symbolism: "Seventy Thousand Veils separate Allah, the One Reality, from the world of matter and of sense";[24] and but for these "veils," the intensity of the Supernal Sun would consume the whole world in an instant, being why they are only withdrawn at the end of time. Their "weaving" and manipulation so to speak are wrought through *Mâyâ*.

On the other hand, were there no communication whatsoever between different levels of reality, "myth" would forever remain *in potentia*, and "history" would never be transformed by the divine act of Creation from chaos into cosmos.[25] There has accordingly to be some manner of interpenetration, and this is represented symbolically by the double spiral, of which the *yin-yang* is an Eastern variant; or again, by what traditional geometry understands when speaking about "the squaring of the circle," an example of which is offered in Islamic architecture, where the round dome ("heaven") of a mosque is harmoniously blended into the cubic base ("earth") through means of an intermediary octagonal structure. It is to the same liaison that

[23] *Hinduism and Buddhism*, p. 29.

[24] This teaching, cited in Reynold A. Nicholson's *The Mystics of Islam*, London, 1963, p. 15, is based on a saying (*hadîth*) of Muhammad.

[25] Eliade, p. 10.

the "strait gate" in the Gospels refers, and of which the neck in the hourglass affords a symbol.

The passage from time to Eternity is somehow unseizable, like the instant between wakefulness and sleep, life and death; for it involves an inversion of values, a *metanoia* ("intellectual metamorphosis" in Coomaraswamy's rendering). "The road leading to the center," writes Eliade, "is a 'difficult road' (*dûrohana*), and this is verified at every level of reality. . . . The road is arduous, fraught with perils, because it is, in fact, a rite of the passage from the profane to the sacred, from the ephemeral and illusory to reality and eternity, from death to life, from man to the divinity. Attaining the center is equivalent to a consecration, an initiation; yesterday's profane and illusory existence gives place to a new, to a life that is real, enduring, and effective." By the same token, death for archaic man is nothing other than a return to *illud tempus*, since he identifies with the gods (archetypes) and not simply with a higher animal existence (history).

In demonstrating that the eternal archetypes alone are truly real, however, Eliade does not develop the corollary just mentioned that without manifestation (history) they remain for us on our level only *in potentia*, which is to say that if the solar hero and the dragon belong purely to the domain of mythological archetypes, this condemns St. George to a wingless duplication of St. Michael, given that the latter perfectly executes on the supernal plane (Rev. 12:7) all the functions attributed to George in his historical role "down here." Yet even were this the case, which it is not, the fact holds that the veneration offered to a non-historical entity would still carry across to the everlasting archetype, which ultimately belongs to that sphere out of which intercession operates. "In defining myth," writes Schuon, "one should not lay undue stress on this supposed lack of historical basis, for the function of myth is such that once it has been properly understood the question of historicity ceases to have any practical importance. What guarantees the spiritual function of a sacred story is its symbolism, on the one hand, and its traditional character, on the other."[26] Not to mention its proven salvatory efficacity over the centuries.

The Japanese, who manifest a contemplative "plasticity" more pronounced than that shown by most Westerners, have no difficulty

[26] *Logic and Transcendence*, New York, 1975, the chapter "Dharmâkara's Vow." Considerations pertinent to this article are also to be found in the chapter, "Some Observations on the Symbolism of the Hourglass."

accepting the historical existence of the Bodhisattva Dharmâkara, whose cult as the Buddha Amitâbha receives enormous veneration in the different schools of Amidaism—and this without the aid of archaeology or relics, Dharmâkara belonging to a world system antedating ours by ten *Kalpas* (meaning, figuratively, some forty-three billion, two hundred million solar years). There is only the Buddha Shâkya-Muni's word for it, whose own existence has been cast in doubt by certain European orientalists. Now Dharmâkara's Vow not to enter Nirvana except on condition that the invocation of his name be the means for saving myriad souls, finds a resonance in St. George's *Whosoever implores my aid shall receive it*; and the fact that Amitâbha belongs to a category of Buddhas classed as *anupapadaka* "without parentage" relates with what was noted earlier concerning al-Khidr and Melchizedek.

Saying that the essential in mythology is its spiritual symbolism and not its historical substantiation is somewhat the same as proclaiming that *Âtman* alone is real and the world illusory: while this is perfectly true metaphysically, for us on a less exalted plane the world does indeed exist, since we are caught willy-nilly in the teeth of history, or the world of forms, time and space.

Certainly the inward truth takes precedence over its outward expression; but to infer from this that the outward is "merely" symbolical and qua *event* never happened nor need happen, is to "Protestantize" everything and by consequence cut oneself off from very real and *substantial* means of grace. Muhammad said the inner Holy War is greater than the outer; he did not deny the outer, either in his words or actions—to say the least. Were the Logos "purely of the next world," there would be no reason for Jesus and the founders of other religions to manifest in history. Yet for this matter, what is known of the Nazarene in profane documents, apart from incidental references by Josephus, Tacitus, and Suetonius? As for Gautama Buddha, we possess no independently verifiable historical records whatever to authenticate his existence.

The overwhelming evidence of the Incarnation launched the early Church; the dilemma tearing it apart in the Arian and Christological controversies was not a scrupling about *whether* Christ existed—*quod absit*—but about *how* he existed: an excruciating examination of theological conscience bent on reconciling the hypostatic union of incorruptible Essence with limitative form—this confluence between

the Sacred and the temporal, the Infinite and finite, Myth and history, Archetype and image—an interpenetration in Nicaean terminology neither Monophysitic (one nature) nor Monothelitic (one will) nor Homoiousian (the Son essentially like the Father), but rather Homoousian (identical) or "consubstantial," that is, "one person with two natures and wills." In brief, the mystery surrounding the manner of God's confrontation with the world is only resolvable, as Schuon's writings demonstrate, through recourse to the doctrine of *Mâyâ*, a concept missing in Christian theology. No major religion, however, is lacking any of the necessary truths expressed in one form or another, and a fascinating Christian parallel to *Mâyâ* is found in Jacob Boehme's *Sex Puncta Mystica* (V. 1. f.), where as Coomaraswamy says, one has only to substitute "*Mâyâ*" for the author's "Magic" to obtain the Hindu doctrine. Given the considerations on *Mâyâ* brought up in this article, it is worth citing a few extracts from Boehme:

> Magic [*Mâyâ*] is the mother of eternity, of the being of all beings; for it creates itself, and is understood in desire.
>
> It is in itself nothing but a will, and this will is the great mystery of all wonders and secrets, but brings itself by the imagination of the desireful hunger into being.
>
> It is the formative power in the eternal wisdom . . . a mother in all three worlds, and makes each thing after the model of that thing's will . . . and lends itself to good or to evil. . . .
>
> It is without understanding, and yet comprehends all; for it is the comprehension of all things. . . .
>
> In sum: Magic [*Mâyâ*] is the activity in the Will-spirit.

*
*  *

Witnessing the dance-dramas in Bali when the island's traditions were still shielded under a perceptive Dutch rule, this author felt a peculiar incertitude as to whether the dancers were simply enacting sacred history, or whether instead some archetypal cosmic event itself was about to burst through the fragile structure of the dance—so

interpenetrated was ritual with Reality. And these dancers did in their trances pass for the time being into that archetypal world which their dance commemorates.[27]

Obviously, a major "historical" cosmological event cannot take place but exceptionally. It was shown that the New Year ceremonies celebrate the "end of the world" and the beginning of a new one annually; the historical occurrence happens only once in aeons; but like death which strikes exactly once in a lifetime, the point is: it *does* happen. And these primary moments—whether macro- or microcosmic—are fundamentally ungraspable and unimpartible, being situated on the margin of history and time, "as a thief in the night."

Yet this very margin (veil or *barzakh*) borders on the eternal return, for as René Guénon has demonstrated,[28] where time (or history) stops, there is no more succession; everything is accordingly in perfect simultaneity, that is, integrally and undividedly present in an Eternal Now, which will be more or less partial or total depending on the level of reality envisaged. From this Center the archetypal saints, gods, and mythological heroes allied to any particular world-sector radiate outward like multiple sparkles from a same family of gems to various historical "moments"—thus accounting for the ostensible overlapping of spiritual entities, so baffling to proponents of the historical or scientific approach.

The dichotomy between the sacred and the profane—something scarcely existent *in illo tempore* when gods and men still intermingled—makes it, moreover, so that the left hand can never really know the works of the right, even if it would; for citing Hermes: "That which is mortal cannot draw near to that which is immortal, nor that which is for a time [history] to that which is everlasting, nor that which is corruptible to that which is incorruptible."[29] "The things of God," according to St. Paul, "knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:11).

Holy personages pass largely unperceived by the world, being mainly known by the traces they leave, and their reverberations on religion. But history fails to capture the aggregate of factual detail or

[27] True theater is precisely spellbinding through its power momentarily to convert (in differing degrees) accident into essence.

[28] *The Reign of Quantity*, London, 1953, the chapter "Time Changed into Space."

[29] *Hermetica*, Fragments, no. 7; tr. Walter Scott, Oxford, 1924-36.

outward "accident," and their portraits best cohere in sacred myth.[30] A striking exception is the life of Muhammad, which has been scrupulously recorded to the last detail, and this because of Islam's insistence on the Unicity of God: Muhammad had to be "fixed" into history to preclude his being divinized. The Islamic miracle is accordingly not in the Prophet's personage but rather in his religion's global expansion over a few years' time. With the generality of saints, by contrast, their traces when subjected to the searingly erudite scrutiny of such as the Bollandists,[31] melt away like snow in the midday sun.

*
* *

Does this then mean that nothing sacred is finally knowable through other than blind faith? Admitting a certain latitude for hyperbole, embroidering, exaggeration, and credulity—phenomena most frequently associated with popular cults of local saints and folk divinities whether apocryphal or not, there still indelibly remains the perpetual veneration of holy figures central throughout Christendom the same as with all religions, and, *vox populi, vox Dei.* The Church has every reason to regard with the utmost caution claims for isolated apparitions, miracles, visions, or sanctity, and this out of vital concern for safeguarding the priceless spiritual graces accompanying genuine dulia; but what to think when the very sacrament of veneration is endangered through undermining some of its most hallowed pillars? As though, for example, the Psalms were to be deleted from the Bible on grounds of spurious authorship, it being in any case for Christians the Gospels that matter.

Naiveté enters in where competence leaves off; this is a frailty of human nature, or what Schuon calls "the human incapacity to exert the intelligence on all planes at once." Modern man as an instance is extremely sophisticated in the domain of scientific technology, and

[30] Even a Hermetic figure like William Shakespeare eludes the biographer's grasp, since the essential dimension of his function transcends the domain accessible to the historian and literary critic.

[31] Their *Acta* was expressly censured in 1695 by the Spanish Inquisition as heretical when the Bollandists cast doubt on the Carmelites' claim of descent through the Essenes, the Blessed Virgin, and the apostles from the Prophet Elias, whose statue in St. Peter's bears the inscription: *Universus Ordo Carmelitarum Fundatori Suo S Eliae* ("The Entire Order of Carmel to its Founder, St. Elias").

quasi-totally ignorant on the spiritual plane. But he naively projects this unintelligent sector in his perceptive apparatus onto ancient—and even medieval—man, himself naive if one wishes by our standards of analytical enquiry, and presumes that the latter's preoccupation with religion was largely an affair of superstition.

We live on the frontier of two immensities, one inward and one outward; ideally we should be at home in both since true man is the mediator between Heaven and Earth, the measure of all things, and abridgement of the Universe. Now in practice, ancient man directed his energies primarily towards the inner things, whereas modern man due to his centrifugal orientation applies his best energies to the outer world, striving in the degree possible to live by bread alone. He reaches for the stars, which the setting of his inner Sun have made him think are all there is.

The deduction to be drawn from these considerations is that if we find ourselves without competence regarding the spiritual domain, then the "sophisticated" response is to refrain from plunging in where angels fear to tread, and further, to believe with something more than blind faith that in the nature of things, our ancient forebears as human beings could hardly be stupid concerning that realm where they elected to concentrate their highest intellectual powers. A spiritual intelligence confronted with St. Margaret's dragon or St. Ursula's eleven thousand virgin martyrs will defer judgment on the literal and historical plane while searching out the allegorical, tropological, and anagogical factors, wherein with the reverberations of their sanctity, lie the essential graces which these saints have to transmit.

If now it be asked, does not the Church's competence have specifically to do with the things of the spirit? The answer is, those Christians concerned with the spiritual life are jealous for their saints and martyrs; conversely, if those principalities and powers managing ecclesiastical affairs today are not jealous for their saints and martyrs, then their concern is not for the spiritual life.

The following passage, from the work of S. Baring-Gould already cited, was written more than a century ago:

> In the time of Antichrist, the Church will be divided: one portion will hold to the world-power, the other will seek out the old paths, and cling to the only true Guide. The high places will be filled with unbelievers in the Incarnation, and the Church will be in a condition of the utmost spiritual degradation, but enjoying the highest

> State patronage. The religion in favor will be one of morality, but not of dogma; and the Man of Sin will be able to promulgate his doctrine, according to St. Anselm, through his great eloquence and wisdom, his vast learning and mightiness in the Holy Scriptures, which he will wrest to the overthrowing of dogma. He will be liberal in bribes, for he will be of unbounded wealth; and at the last, he will tear the moral veil from his countenance. . . .

It need only be added that since morality is but an appendage of dogma, a church already exercised in destroying liturgy will certainly be capable at the opportune moment of destroying morality also—a maneuver moreover even now visibly in progress, and this quite independently of speculations about when that final day shall fall.[32] Meanwhile, the thinly-disguised Powers manipulating change are simply executing the *mot d'ordre* of their cabal: "The reform must be carried out in the name of obedience."

*
* *

No dragon of course ever has, or will—or could in the end—swallow St. George; but if the menace were not there, the story would carry no suspense.

What has been swallowed is the archaeological "proof" of the non-existence of the hero—the apocryphal Mother Goose that modern

[32] In fairness to Baring-Gould, it should be noted that the material he was documenting went counter to his credence: "How the Abomination of Desolation can be considered as set up in a Church where every sanctuary is adorned with all that can draw the heart to the Crucified, and raise the thoughts to the imposing ritual of heaven, is a puzzle to me. . . . Rome does not fight against the Daily Sacrifice, and endeavor to abolish it. . . . Rome does not deny the power of the godliness of which she makes show, but insists on that power with no broken accents. . . . However, this is not a question into which we care to enter, our province is myth not theology." In other words, how could he possibly be expected to have foreseen Vatican II, which, be it said, expunged St. Michael along with St. George by eliminating the following Prayer after Mass :

> St. Michael, the archangel, defend us in battle, be our protection against the malice and snares of the devil. We humbly beseech God to command him, and do thou, O Prince of the heavenly host, by the divine power thrust into hell Satan and the other evil spirits who roam through the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.

science has fed to ecclesiastical savants. Taking a clue from Diocletian, the antiliturgical and neopagan Church today has seen fit to cast St. George, martyr, into the abyss of oblivion; the Bollandists, however, should not prematurely jubilate, as betwixt the twain, it is George the indestructible.

*Whosoever implores my aid shall receive it.* In history's deepening twilight he still awaits—lance poised, with the hand of God always above, the supplication of his devotees crying out like Sabra for its master stroke.