

The Rites of Eleusis: Their Meaning and Origin

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The Rights of Eleusis

Among the various accounts that have appeared of the character of the Rites of Eleusis, so-called, I find that very few people seem to understand intellectually what they were all about. It will be as well, therefore, if I make here a plain statement as to the exact nature of the rites. The ceremonies developed from very rude beginnings. The first one was in this wise. I happened to have a few friends in my room in the evening, among them the celebrated Australian violinist, Miss Leila Waddell. It struck me that we might pass the time by a sort of artistic dialogue; I read a piece of poetry from one of the great classics, and she replied with a piece of music suggested by my reading. I retorted with another poem; and the evening developed into a regular controversy. The others were intensely interested in this strange conflict, and in the silence of the room spiritual enthusiasm took hold of us; so acutely that we were all intensely uplifted, to the point in some cases of actual ecstasy, an intoxication of the same kind as that experienced by an assistant at the celebration of the Mass or the performance of Parsifal, but stronger because of its naturalness and primitiveness.

It was subsequently decided to try and tune everybody up to some definite, prearranged emotion, and we strung together a rough ceremony in honor of Artemis. This was so successful that it even impressed persons who had always been complete sceptics and scoffers. Having been of help in private, we endeavoured to reproduce the effects in public with greater elaboration.

How to Write Rites Right

With regard to the genesis of the Rites of Eleusis I must explain that they did not spring fully armed from my brain, Minerva-like. The actual form which my ideas took was simply a question of convenience and compromise. It was necessary to have a series of some sort, and seven seemed to be about the right number, if we were going to get them done before people went away for Christmas. I might have chosen another sort of deities; but I thought that those associated with the days of the week would make it easier for everybody, and it certainly made it very much easier for me, because the correspondences of colour, form, idea, number, and so on of the planets had been so very well worked out. Of the way in which the rituals were constructed, I must say a few words. Let us put ourselves in the position of the dramatist. Take, for example, the first ritual, that of Saturn. Working on tradition, just as Wagner did when he took the old Norse Saga for his world drama, we find Saturn as a black, melancholy God, the devourer of his children. Ideas of Night, Death, Black hellebore, Lead, Cypress, Tombs, Deadly Nightshade. All these things have a necessary connection with Saturn in the mind of anyone who has read the classics. The first condition of this rite is, then, to make the temple a kind of symbolic representation of the sphere of Saturn. So the representative of Saturn wears the Black Robe. The time is declared to be midnight (though, as a matter of fact, it is only twenty minutes past eight—this is an ordinary theatrical convention; and masons will think of certain analogies in their own "Orgies"). If the brethren are fed, it is "on the corpses of their children" as Saturn fed on his. If they drink, it is "Poppyheads infused in blood"—symbols of sleep and death. Saturn further represents the earth, the plane of matter, humanity bounded by old age and death, hu-

manity blindly groping after illumination and failing to get it.

The Truth Behind the Veil

It is, then, the primitive darkness of humanity that is represented in this ritual. Therefore, we have the despairing cry, "There is no God"; and as a logical result the suicide of the high priest, for there cannot be a priest without a God. It is the blackness of uttermost despair; and so the ritual ends. It is only in the second rite, the rite of Jupiter, who is etymologically and actually identical with the Hebrew Jehovah, that light breaks. But even in that rite, when the Supreme Power is declared, He is too exalted for anyone to approach Him; it is only by the work of the Divine Spirit that He is made manifest; and this manifestation only takes place in the God-man whom some call Iacchus and others Jesus—again an etymological and mystical identity! This doctrine appears to me to differ from the orthodox doctrine of Christianity in one point only; it is not sectarian. I do not require Mr. John M. Robertson to tell me that the story of the crucifixion is merely a mystery play adapted from the rites of Mithras; the rite being symbolical of a spiritual truth, all nations that possess knowledge of spiritual things will have incorporated it in their rites under some name or other.

The Deadness of Dogma

If my interpretation has been erroneous, let me be shown my error, and I will repent; but no sensible person can maintain for a moment that my interpretation is un-serious or irreverent. And my chief defense—my counter-attack—is that the orthodox methods of inculcating the doctrine in question have been so purely dogmatic and dull, that they have lost all vital force. Without art, truth becomes falsehood. Imagine anyone

taking the teachings of the "Blue Bird," and pounding them into a creed, and writing dull sermons about them! The unfortunate children who had to learn them would begin to hate Maeterlinck bitterly. But let the sublime truths of Christianity be once again "clothed round by sweet art, with the spacious warm heaven of her imminent wings," and there will be that true revival of religious life that everyone is blindly seeking.