

CURRENT THEOLOGY

STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ANTIQUITY

Under the direction of Professor Johannes Quasten, a series of monographs is issuing from the Catholic University Press entitled Studies in Christian Antiquity. Because the Studies mark a milestone in American scholarship, it will be of interest to sketch the problem, the sources, and the importance of the undertaking.

The general title contains a program: the concrete life of the early Christians—their attitude of mind and their practical conduct. The stress of the Studies, however, is on a conflict. For, once Christianity overleaped the bounds of its birthplace, it came face to face with a deeply rooted pagan culture, a habit of thought and a way of life that clung to the neophyte even after his purifying bath. The impact of environment on Christianity, the reaction of Christianity to its environment, the concordat between Christianity and ancient culture: herein lies the emphasis of the Studies.

But the Studies have a history behind them. For the problem of the relationship between the early Church and classical culture preoccupied the younger generation of European scholars in recent times. Moreover, it was especially the initiative of Dr. Quasten's master at Münster, Franz Josef Dölger (1879–1940), that first gave scholarly sanctuary in the Catholic Church to the pagan-Christian controversy.

For, at the turn of the century, the question of the origins of Christianity began to dominate the thought and activity of the rationalist and liberal historians of religion. There was a strong tendency among them to see in Christianity the syncretistic offshoot of the different religious systems of East and West that were streaming to Rome before, during, and after the life span of Christ.

A typical example of such a tendency is the half century of controversy which opened in 1883 with Ramsay's discovery of the Inscription of Abercius, so important for the history of Christian dogma, liturgy, and life. Whereas Ficker,¹ Dieterich,² and others tried to prove Abercius a devotee of Cybele and Attis, Harnack³ insisted he was a pagan syncretist. Dölger entered the lists in 1910 with a monumental volume, IXΘC.⁴ Using all available

¹ G. Ficker, "Der heidnische Charakter der Abercius-Inschrift," *Sitzungsberichte der königlich-preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin, 1894), pp. 187–212.

² A. Dieterich, *Die Grabschrift des Aberkios* (Leipzig, 1896).

³ A. Harnack, *Zur Abercius-Inschrift* (Texte und Untersuchungen, XII, 4 b; Leipzig, 1895).

⁴ F. Dölger, IXΘC, I: *Das Fischesymbol in frühchristlicher Zeit* (Rome, 1910; 2d ed., Münster, 1928).

material, archaeological and literary, pagan and Christian, he established the Christian origin and character of the inscription. Three more volumes appeared later,⁵ and a fifth was in process of publication when death intervened in 1940. Today no reputable scholar challenges the conclusions of Dölger: the oldest archaeological monument we possess on the Eucharist, dating from the end of the second century and preserved in the Lateran Museum in Rome, has been vindicated as thoroughly Christian.

The history of the Abercius controversy shows that it is high time a new generation of Catholic scholars dedicated its resources and energies to the study of early Christianity and pagan culture. At the same time the history of the controversy shows that this new generation must be utterly realistic: armed with weapons that have lain too long in the arsenal of the adversary. It is true, the modern historian of religion deserves to be indicted for contenting himself with similarities in religious phenomena, and failing to realize that "every practical application of religious life acquires its proper significance only in connection with the principal individuality of the religion in question."⁶ On the other hand the errant scholar has the merit of having revealed that Christianity, especially in the exterior garb it donned in its infancy, cannot be correctly evaluated if detached from ancient culture. The crying need is for theologians with a feeling for philology, and philologists deeply rooted in theology.⁷

In such perspective the Studies are an extremely timely enterprise. They are frankly pledged to carry on the magnificent work of Dölger,⁸ and to develop in America a circle of Catholic scholars permeated with his mentality and equipped with tested tools of research. Moreover, this new company of scholars will take advantage of the results achieved by the Benedictine

⁵ F. Dölger, IXΘC, II: *Der heilige Fisch in den antiken Religionen und im Christentum*, Textband (Münster, 1922); III: *Der heilige Fisch in den antiken Religionen und im Christentum*, Tafeln (Münster, 1922); IV: *Die Fisch-Denkmal in der frühchristlichen Plastik, Malerei und Kleinkunst*, Tafeln (Münster, 1927).

⁶ F. Dölger, *Der Exorzismus im altchristlichen Taufritual. Eine religionsgeschichtliche Studie* (Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Altertums, III, 1-2; Paderborn, 1909), p. vi.

⁷ Only thus will scholarly refutation ever be offered scientific liberal works such as W. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos. Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus* (Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments, XXI, Neue Folge IV; Göttingen, 1913).

⁸ A typical example of Dölger's many monographs is: *Sphragis. Eine altchristliche Taufbezeichnung in ihren Beziehungen zur profanen und religiösen Kultur des Altertums* (Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Altertums, V, 3-4; Paderborn, 1911).

school in the realm of the liturgy,⁹ by the Jesuits Prümm¹⁰ and Rahner,¹¹ and by conservative scholars of divergent beliefs who, in the tradition of Festugière¹² and Cumont,¹³ of Halliday,¹⁴ Bonner,¹⁵ and Nock,¹⁶ have emphasized the pagan milieu of early Christianity rather than the clash as such.

It was indicated above that, once Christianity passed beyond Palestine, it found everywhere facts of profane and religious life with which it had to come to an understanding. This understanding could, broadly speaking, take the form either of abrupt rejection, as when there was question of the object of religious worship, or of accommodation, involuntary or deliberate, as in the case of many religious ceremonies, deeply rooted national customs, casts of thought and molds of expression, artistic representations, and the like.¹⁷ As though to exemplify every phase of this understanding, the *Studies in Christian Antiquity* open with an acute problem of everyday life: the policy to be adopted by the Church towards the ancient pagan cult of the dead.¹⁸

⁹ Cf. O. Casel's *Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft* (1921 ff.), the fifteen volumes of which are consistently marked by the editor's own contributions; also the publications, almost two score in number, edited by K. Mohlberg and A. Rucker in the *Liturgiegeschichtliche Quellen und Forschungen*.

¹⁰ Cf. K. Prümm, *Der christliche Glaube und die altheidnische Welt* (2 vols.; Leipzig, 1935).

¹¹ Cf. H. Rahner, "*Pompa diaboli*. Ein Beitrag zur Bedeutungsgeschichte des Wortes *πομπή-pompa* in der urchristlichen Taufiturgie," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*, LV (1931), 239-73.

¹² Cf. A. Festugière, *L'Idéal religieux des Grecs et l'Évangile* (Paris, 1932); the author discusses to what extent the religious spirit of the Greeks prepared them for the Gospel or estranged them from it. The same author's *Le monde gréco-romain au temps de notre-Seigneur* (2 vols.; Paris, 1935) investigates the Greco-Roman world not for its own sake, but as the milieu of Christianity.

¹³ Cf. F. Cumont, *Les mystères de Mithra* (3d ed.; Brussels, 1913).

¹⁴ Cf. W. Halliday, *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity* (Liverpool and London, 1925), the avowed purpose of which is "to give a picture, necessarily impressionistic, of the general character of pagan society and pagan thought during the early centuries of the Christian era" (p. xii).

¹⁵ Cf. C. Bonner, "Desired Haven," *Harvard Theological Review*, XXXIV (1941), 49-67.

¹⁶ Cf. A. Nock, "The Development of Paganism in the Roman Empire," *Cambridge Ancient History*, XII, 409-49.

¹⁷ Cf. F. Dölger, *Antike und Christentum*, I (1929), vi. It is noteworthy that Dölger not only edited the five volumes of *Antike und Christentum* (1929-1936), but wrote every article himself. A sixth volume was about to appear at the time of his death.

¹⁸ A. Rush, *Death and Burial in Christian Antiquity* (*Studies in Christian Antiquity*, I; Washington, D. C., 1941, pp. xxviii + 282, 8 plates).

For Christianity proposed to her Greco-Roman converts a novel concept of death and a definite set of practical rites to accord with that concept. Over against a widespread gloom in the face of an eternal sleep, Christianity set forth a concept glowing with consolation, because death is but a temporary rest; pregnant with hope, because of the resurrection to come (pp. 1-22). Death is no longer the cruel snatching of an angry god, but the sweet summons of Christ and of the angels, who become the Christian *psychopompoi*, carrying the soul to heaven (pp. 23-43). The popular belief that the dead voyage to the after-life becomes a *migratio ad Dominum* (pp. 44-71). Influenced by the fact of original sin, the Christian begins to frown on the celebration of a temporal birth: the true *dies natalis* is the day of death, the birth to eternal life (pp. 72-87).

It was rather the rites centering about death and burial that occasioned conflict. *Viaticum*, so often applied to the coin given Charon for the voyage after death, and placed in the mouth of the deceased, found a deeper meaning when adapted to the Eucharist which the Christians insisted be in the mouth at the moment of death as the surest pledge of safety on the journey to eternity (pp. 92-99). True to her outlook on death, the Church substituted hymns and psalms of praise and thanksgiving for the pagan *planctus* and *nenia* at wakes and funerals (pp. 163-74, 235). Fearing idolatry, she forbade the crowning of the lifeless head, but wisely substituted the Creator Himself as the crown of the Christian (pp. 133-48). Christianity rejected cremation, to follow "the old and better practice" of interment,¹⁹ not merely from the example of Christ's burial, nor merely because the body had been sanctified as the dwelling of the graced soul, but mainly in token of respect for a body destined to rise from the tomb (pp. 236-53). "Sacrifice to the dead as to gods was abolished and in its stead Christianity offered the Sacrifice of the Eucharist for the dead" (p. viii).

Practices dictated by natural instinct, however, and folk or popular customs without peculiar religious significance, such as the washing (pp. 112-17), embalming (pp. 117-25), and clothing (pp. 125-33) of the corpse, could be incorporated into Christianity without change. The persistence of undesirable customs manifested itself in the popular mourning garments of black and the association of red (its origin in blood sacrifices) with the cult of the dead, despite the insistence of Christian leaders that white, the color of life and immortality, was alone in keeping with the occasion. To this day the liturgical color for requiem Masses in the Roman rite is black, in the Eastern churches red (pp. 208-20).

Such is the method of approach. Against an analogous cultural back-

¹⁹ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 38, 10 (Florilegium Patristicum VIII, 77 Martin).

ground the Studies present a theological problem in the angelology and demonology of Lactantius, treating the existence, nature, and activity of the creatures involved.²⁰ The influence of philosophical schools stands out in bold relief in a study of divine anger, where pupil and professor part company through their different response to the stimuli of Stoicism and Epicureanism.²¹ A penetrating inquiry into Basil's conflict with the ancient concept of emperor, and his views on the relation of the imperial office to ecclesiastical authority,²² fills an obvious lacuna in the political field.²³ The social sphere is represented in the outlook of early Christianity and ancient paganism on labor and its concomitant institutions, like slavery.²⁴ An exacting historical method characterizes the volume on the genesis and development of the concept of the Church as Mother down to 311,²⁵ in the course of which the author sounds the keynote for a sane approach to the history of religions: "Doctrinally there certainly can be no reason against assuming that the concept and veneration of the Church as a mother may have been inspired even in goodly part by the cult of the mother goddesses wherever Christianity took root; or that the Aeon mothers may have lent some contribution to the same. Why should not these figments of an errant religious world have fitted into the schemes of Divine Providence?"²⁶

If any one imperishable benefit emerges from the Studies, it is surely this, that such a realistic method, ". . . without denying influences and borrowings at times real, liberates with serenity the Christian principles of selection, transcendent, irreducible to pagan morality as well as to pagan theologies."²⁷

The stress on pagan-Christian conflict, however, does not imply the exclusion from the Studies of the purely domestic development in the bosom of

²⁰ E. Schneewis, *Angels and Demons according to Lactantius* (Studies in Christian Antiquity, III; Washington, D. C., 1943, pp. xix + 168).

²¹ E. Micka, *The Problem of Divine Anger in Arnobius and Lactantius* (Studies in Christian Antiquity, IV; Washington, D. C., 1943, pp. xxii + 187).

²² G. Reilly, *Imperium and Sacerdotium according to St. Basil*. (In preparation.)

²³ Even so valuable a contribution to the investigation of the conflict between Church and Empire as K. Setton, *Christian Attitude towards the Emperor in the Fourth Century, Especially as Shown in Addresses to the Emperor* (New York, 1941), misses the importance of Basil. Cf. the review by J. Quasten, *Catholic Historical Review*, XXIX (1943-44), 78-80.

²⁴ A. Geoghehan, *The Attitude towards Labor in Early Christianity and Ancient Culture*. (In preparation.)

²⁵ J. Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia. An Inquiry into the Concept of the Church as Mother in Early Christianity* (Studies in Christian Antiquity, V; Washington, D. C., 1943, pp. xxi + 149, 4 plates). Cf. the reviews in THEOLOGICAL STUDIES, V (1944), 227-29, and *Anglican Theological Review*, XXVI (1944), 128.

²⁶ J. Plumpe, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.

²⁷ T. Audet, review of Rush, *Revue Dominicaine*, XLVIII (1942), 377.

the Church. For the Quasten program is wider than Dölger's, and, in the best tradition of the Baumstark *Oriens Christianus* school, offers a study of the Eucharistic catecheses of Theodore of Mopsuestia,²⁸ discovered and published little more than a decade ago by Mingana.²⁹ Apparently the first English commentary on the catecheses, this monograph complements its analysis of the theology of Theodore on the Real Presence, the sacrament and the sacrifice, by presenting a survey of the liturgies of Mopsuestia and Jerusalem, the Clementine liturgy and the liturgy of Antioch in a parallel arrangement enhanced by explanatory appendices. In the same broad spirit the much neglected Aphraates is probed for the riches of his baptismal speculations,³⁰ and the very fundamental question of the Church herself is illustrated from the pages of the first Leo.³¹

A primary value of the Studies lies in the wealth of source material harnessed to the harmonious solution of the problems involved. For the investigators run the gamut of ancient literature: classical, biblical, patristic, apocryphal, and heretical. They draw freely on liturgical documents and Acts of the Martyrs. Monuments of archaeology and epigraphy, pagan and Christian, are ever in evidence, and withal the authors indicate treasures hidden under our eyes. Thus, Dr. Rush is indebted to the Metropolitan Museum in New York for a painting of an Egyptian funeral procession from a tomb at Thebes (Plate VIII, 1); Dr. Reine has reproduced a silver chalice used in the Byzantine liturgy of the sixth century and now to be found in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore (Plate II); likewise a liturgical paten from sixth century Syria, preserved in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection in Washington, D.C. (Plate IV).

The importance of a project so comprehensive is difficult to overestimate. The Studies are a storehouse for the theologian, positive or speculative. To cite but one example, failure henceforth to utilize the rich resources of Theodore on the Real Presence and the sacramental and sacrificial aspects of the Eucharist, would be a tragic and inexcusable oversight. Furthermore, though the dogmatic theologian, as Dölger admitted, has not the time required for personal research into the minutiae of Christian origins, he hampers his own progress by failing to incorporate the checked results of such

²⁸ F. Reine, *The Eucharistic Doctrine and Liturgy of the Mystagogical Catecheses of Theodore of Mopsuestia* (Studies in Christian Antiquity, II; Washington, D. C., 1942, pp. xix + 204, 4 plates).

²⁹ A. Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist* (Woodbrooke Studies, VI; Cambridge, 1933).

³⁰ E. Duncan, *Baptism in the Demonstrations of Aphraates, the Persian Sage*. (In preparation.)

³¹ E. Burke, *The Church in the Works of Leo the Great*. (In preparation.)

research into his textbooks and lectures. Unfortunately, Catholic scholarship is still in regrettable arrears in the history of religions and of dogma.

The Studies are obviously of interest to the historian of the early Church, for they react to the reproach, not altogether unjustified, that the ecclesiastical history of antiquity has often degenerated to a mission history, or a history of persecutions and heresies, by presenting all the more strongly the inner, everyday life of Christianity.

The Studies attract the classical scholar, for they proceed from the fundamental assumption, often reiterated by the editor,³² that early Christianity cannot be intelligently understood without a thorough knowledge of ancient classical culture.³³ There is more than a grain of truth in the strong statement of Halliday, "I would even go so far as to believe that no one who is devoid of any sympathetic understanding of pagan thought and literature, can have anything of essential value to tell us about the contemporary Christians."³⁴

In the light they cast on the historical attitude of the Church to a foreign culture, the Studies are important for the missionary method. Bishop Paul Yu-Pin has recently pointed out that, though the seventeenth century saw close to three hundred thousand Catholics in China, Christianity "could not succeed," because the Church, in striking at ancestor worship and reverence for Confucius, was, in the eyes of the people, the cultural invader of China.³⁵ In short, if the nations that sit in darkness are to accept Christ in their corporate fulness, accommodation to culture without compromise of creed is a missiological necessity: "the Church must prove that she can engraft the supernatural upon a naturally good tree and can be a profitable foster mother of any genuine culture, no matter what its origin."³⁶ But the problem is old as Peter,³⁷ and the principles are already incarnate in the practice of the infant Church.

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³² Cf. J. Quasten, "A Pythagorean Idea in Jerome," *American Journal of Philology*, LXIII (1943), 208.

³³ Cf. J. Kleist, "Editorial," *Classical Bulletin*, XX (1943-44), 60.

³⁴ W. Halliday, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

³⁵ P. Yu-Pin, "Christian Influence in Post-War China," *America*, LXXI (April 15, 1944), 34.

³⁶ G. Voss, "Missionary Accommodation and Ancestral Rites in the Far East," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES*, IV (1943), 556.

³⁷ Cf. Acts 10-11.