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SOME PARALLELS BETWEEN ANIMISTIC AND CATHOLIC BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

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“HE mixed the salt and the water, and prayed that, through the divine help, all persons and things to which the Holy Water is applied may be preserved from all evil and enjoy heavenly protection.”

Several months have elapsed since the above words appeared in print. They form part of a newspaper report of the foundation stone-laying ceremony of a Roman Catholic Church. Concerning that ceremony, *per se*, I have no more to say, but the phrase “all persons and things to which the Holy Water is applied may be preserved” stimulated into activity impressions and experiences of African belief and practice.

In the country where I was resident for many years, just inside the entrance to the compound of any man who had respect for himself, his household and his friends, there stands a pot containing liquid. This consists of water and a small collection of roots. This, in due course, had been made “holy”; it has but one use, namely, to give protection from evil. The method is by sprinkling. On entry and, more particularly, on departure, the person lifts the bunch of twigs from the pot and splashes the “holy water” across his feet. By this means, he assures himself of safe keeping. On certain occasions, the walls on either side of the entrance door are also dowsed in order to secure protection of the house and compound.

One asks the involuntary question, “What is the essential difference between salt and water and herbs (called “medicine”) and water?” In both cases they seem to be used for the same purpose and, presumably, are equally effective, at least, both parties are satisfied with the alleged benefits conferred.

Other comparisons naturally arise though, as the proverb states, “comparisons are odious.” In the pioneer days of missionary work, the converts were not numerous while the number of communicants was very small. As it happened, the people of the country were addicted to cannibalism and were also acquainted with the custom of human and other forms of bloody sacrifice. Hence, it was so, that, when they observed a small company of men and women withdrawing themselves in private session, and overheard the words “body” and “blood,” they were dubious as to what was being enacted behind the

closed doors. They, at first, naturally concluded that these strange people were celebrating a feast, but of what sort? Were they following the age-long custom of partaking of flesh and blood under special privileges?

Nor did the idea come strangely to many of the communicants themselves. Some of them, indeed a good proportion of their number in those early days, had participated in cannibal feasts and they held a fervent belief that, in the eating of flesh and blood they, thereby, imbibed additional strength and courage. This was especially the case when the victim happened to be of outstanding personality, most probably a soldier killed or taken captive in battle. By eating the smallest particle, they asserted that, in some mysterious manner, they would be strengthened in spirit. Is there any fundamental difference in theory between this and the Sacrifice of the Mass?

The African Animist, with his inveterate belief in the realm of the spirit, maintains emphatically that the priest has a delegated faculty of being able to induce a spirit to enter material substance. This is the important factor to remember when contemplating animistic worship. Whatever figure is used, it, in itself, is of no religious value; it is not even a symbol until a spirit has been invoked to take up its residence within it. Until this is done, the fetish is nothing more than a piece of carved wood, a stone or, possibly, a lump of unformed clay. The bringing in of spirit is the essential feature and this can be achieved only by an act of consecration; it cannot be accomplished by any other means whatsoever. Moreover, the ceremony must be performed by a duly qualified priest and by no other. After appropriate sacrifices have been offered for cleansing and atonement, supplications follow and then, suddenly, an exclamation is heard declaring that the spirit has entered the wood or stone symbol. From that moment, the piece of wood or other material is different from all others, different even from similar examples produced by the same craftsman from the same material. It is, henceforth, sacrosanct; a god dwells within it and it, forthwith, becomes the owner's most treasured possession. Are we reminded of a similar belief nearer home of being able to bring spirit into material substance by an act of consecration? It is not without significance to note that, in the animistic version, the spirit enters at a specific moment in the service of consecration.

And this is not the end. It is not good enough that a man should be blessed with spasmodic visitations of his god; he desires his presence and protection continuously. How can this be arranged? The obvious thing is to devise a means whereby he can be assured of the abiding presence of his guardian spirit. For this purpose, a small medium is required which, while always available, will not be obtrusive. A piece of bone, a cowrie shell or a similar small object is chosen. A service of consecration is celebrated as described above. At the precise moment that the spirit enters the piece of bone or the shell, it is deposited into a small receptacle (tabernacle) provided for the purpose, the cover is fixed and the box placed upon a shelf in the private inner room of its owner. From that hour he has his guardian spirit ever at hand to help him in all times of adversity and to prosper him in his

enterprises. Daily, he pays due veneration to this spirit and duly acknowledges benefits received.

Is this practice and belief much, if in any way, inferior to some found in civilized countries? Is it a subject for debate among theologians or does common sense supply an answer? Must it be admitted that many of us are animistic in practice and belief with the qualification that ours have been christianized? If christianized, is the resulting Christianity according to the New Testament? or shall we be honest and admit that we have absorbed animistic ideas pretty freely?

In one respect the animist has an advantage. From the moment the consecrated symbol is deposited in his room, he has it permanently in his possession. It is his own; he has no need to visit any particular building, nor is he dependent upon the services of any other man; he is in direct contact with his guardian spirit; there is no further call for the ministrations of a priest.

Other practices might be exemplified, but sufficient have been related to set us thinking whether the Church has gathered to herself animistic beliefs and practices and christianized them into acceptable forms and, if so, to what extent? On the other hand, the missionary who studies the religious conceptions of such people, and probes deeply into their real beliefs, will find much upon which to build and will be in a more favourable position for teaching his converts a "more excellent way."

THEY THAT ARE LEFT! By B. M. W. Grautoff. *Thynne & Co.*
2s. 6d.

Following upon her previous stories with a Christian background, Miss Grautoff has now published an interesting imaginary story of what may take place in the coming days. As a background she uses two passages from the Thessalonian epistles and two chapters from the Revelation. The scene of the story is somewhere on the continent of Europe, and centres around Bertha Bergmann, the daughter of a pious home, whose parents and brother are taken away at the period of the Rapture. She is among those that are left, and the authoress pictures her movements under the Tribulation, showing how she found faith and stood firmly for the Lord. In an "Author's Afterword," Miss Grautoff states that she has written the story in the hope that it may serve as a call to Christians to "think, study for themselves, prepare and watch for that which shall come."

WITH ALL OUR STRENGTH. Prayers for the Kingdom. *C.M.S.*
Paper, 6d.

This is a very helpful book of devotions, a companion volume to *All our Days*. It follows the cycle of the Church's year in praise and prayer for the Kingdom of God, drawing out the special lessons of each season and giving new meaning to several familiar texts. Though primarily intended for senior scholars it will enrich and enlarge the prayer life of all who use it.