

The Priest of Spring¹

by G.K. Chesterton

THE SUN HAS STRENGTHENED and the air softened just before Easter Day. But it is a troubled brightness which has a breath not only of novelty but of revolution. There are two great armies of the human intellect who will fight till the end on this vital point, whether Easter is to be congratulated on fitting in with the Spring—or the Spring on fitting in with Easter.

The only two things that can satisfy the soul are a person and a story; and even a story must be about a person. There are indeed very voluptuous appetites and enjoyments in mere abstractions like mathematics, logic, or chess. But these mere pleasures of the mind are like mere pleasures of the body. That is, they are mere pleasures, though they may be gigantic pleasures; they can never by a mere increase of themselves amount to happiness. A man just about to be hanged may enjoy his breakfast; especially if it be his favourite breakfast; and in the same way he may enjoy an argument with the chaplain about heresy, especially if it is his favourite heresy. But whether he can enjoy either of them does not depend on either of them; it depends upon his spiritual attitude towards a subsequent event. And that event is really interesting to the soul; because it is the end of a story and (as some hold) the end of a person.

Now it is this simple truth which, like many others, is too simple for our □scientists to see. This is where they go wrong, not only about true religion, but about false religions too; so that their account of mythology is more mythical than the myth itself. I do not confine myself to saying that they are quite incorrect when they state (for instance) □that Christ was a legend of dying and reviving vegetation, like Adonis or Persephone. I say that even if Adonis was a god of vegetation, they have got the whole notion of him wrong. Nobody, to begin with, is sufficiently interested in decaying vegetables, as such, to make any particular mystery or disguise about them; and certainly not enough to disguise them under the image of a very handsome young man, which is a vastly more interesting thing. If Adonis was connected with the fall of leaves in autumn and the return of flowers in spring, the process of thought was quite different. It is a process of thought

¹ This is one of the essays in *A Miscellany of Men* (London, 1912).

which springs up spontaneously in all children and young artists; it springs up spontaneously in all healthy societies. It is very difficult to explain in a diseased society.

The brain of man is subject to short and strange snatches of sleep. A cloud seals the city of reason or rests upon the sea of imagination; a dream that darkens as much, whether it is a nightmare of atheism or a daydream of idolatry. And just as we have all sprung from sleep with a start and found ourselves saying some sentence that has no meaning, save in the mad tongues of the midnight; so the human mind starts from its trances of stupidity with some complete phrase upon its lips; a complete phrase which is a complete folly. Unfortunately it is not like the dream sentence, generally forgotten in the putting on of boots or the putting in of breakfast. This senseless aphorism, invented when man's mind was asleep, still hangs on his tongue and entangles all his relations to rational and daylight things. All our controversies are confused by certain kinds of phrases which are not merely untrue, but were always unmeaning; which are not merely inapplicable, but were always intrinsically useless. We recognise them wherever a man talks of "the survival of the fittest," meaning only the survival of the survivors; or wherever a man says that the rich "have a stake in the country," as if the poor could not suffer from misgovernment or military defeat; or where a man talks about "going on towards Progress," which only means going on towards going on; or when a man talks about "government by the wise few," as if they could be picked out by their pantaloons. "The wise few" must mean either the few whom the foolish think wise or the very foolish who think themselves wise.

There is one piece of nonsense that modern people still find themselves saying, even after they are more or less awake, by which I am particularly irritated. It arose in the popularised science of the nineteenth century, especially in connection with the study of myths and religions. The fragment of gibberish to which I refer generally takes the form of saying this god or hero really represents the sun." Or "Apollo killing the Python *means* that the summer drives out the winter." Or "The King dying in a western battle is a *symbol* of the sun setting in the west." Now I should really have thought that even the skeptical professors, whose skulls are as shallow as frying-pans, might have reflected that human beings never think or feel like this. Consider what is involved in this supposition. It presumes that primitive man went out for a walk and saw with great interest a big burning spot on the sky. He then said to primitive woman, "My dear, we had better keep this quiet. We mustn't let it get about. The children and the slaves are so very sharp. They might discover the sun any day, unless we are very careful. So

we won't call it 'the sun,' but I will draw a picture of a man killing a snake; and whenever I do that you will know what I mean. The sun doesn't look at all like a man killing a snake; so nobody can possibly know. It will be a little secret between us; and while the slaves and the children fancy I am quite excited with a grand tale of a writhing dragon and a wrestling demigod, I shall really MEAN this delicious little discovery, that there is a round yellow disc up in the air." One does not need to know much mythology to know that this is a myth. It is commonly called the Solar Myth.

Quite plainly, of course, the case was just the other way. The god was never a symbol or hieroglyph representing the sun. The sun was a hieroglyph representing the god. Primitive man (with whom my friend Dumber is no doubt well acquainted) went out with his head full of gods and heroes, because that is the chief use of having a head. Then he saw the sun in some glorious crisis of the dominance of noon on the distress of nightfall, and he said, "That is how the face of the god would shine when he had slain the dragon," or "That is how the whole world would bleed to westward, if the god were slain at last."

No human being was ever really so unnatural as to worship Nature. No man, however indulgent (as I am) to corpulence, ever worshipped a man as round as the sun or a woman as round as the moon. No man, however attracted to an artistic attenuation, ever really believed that the Dryad was as lean and stiff as the tree. We human beings have never worshipped Nature; and indeed, the reason is very simple. It is that all human beings are superhuman beings. We have printed our own image upon Nature, as God has printed His image upon us. We have told the enormous sun to stand still; we have fixed him on our shields, caring no more for a star than for a starfish. And when there were powers of Nature we could not for the time control, we have conceived great beings in human shape controlling them. Jupiter does not mean thunder. Thunder means the March and victory of Jupiter. Neptune does not mean the sea; the sea is his, and he made it. In other words, what the savage really said about the sea was, "Only my fetish Mumbo could raise such mountains out of mere water." What the savage really said about the sun was, "Only my great great-grandfather Jumbo could deserve such a blazing crown."

About all these myths my own position is utterly and even sadly simple. I say you cannot really understand any myths till you have found that one of them is not a myth. Turnip ghosts mean nothing if there are no real ghosts. Forged bank-notes mean nothing if there are no real bank notes. Heathen gods mean nothing, and must always mean nothing, to those of us that deny the Christian God. When once a god is admitted, even a false god,

the Cosmos begins to know its place: which is the second place. When once it is the real God the Cosmos falls down before Him, offering flowers in spring as flames in winter. “My love is like a red, red rose” does not mean that the poet is praising roses under the allegory of a young lady. My love is an arbutus” does not mean that the author was a botanist so pleased with a particular arbutus tree that he said he loved it. “Who art the moon and regent of my sky” does not mean that Juliet invented Romeo to account for the roundness of the moon. “Christ is the Sun of Easter” does not mean that the worshipper is praising the sun under the emblem of Christ. Goddess or god can clothe himself or herself with the spring or summer; but the body is more than raiment. Religion takes almost disdainfully the dress of Nature; and indeed Christianity has done as well with the snows of Christmas as with the snowdrops of spring. And when I look across the sun-struck fields, I know in my inmost bones that my joy is not solely in the spring, for spring alone, being always returning, would be always sad. There is somebody or something walking there, to be crowned with flowers: and my pleasure is in some promise yet possible and in the resurrection of the dead. ❧