

Pyre and Barrow

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

THE COMMON ATTITUDE towards immortality provides another instance of the axiom that religious belief does not disappear in a secular society; it merely assumes a new form. The memorial service that replaces a funeral nowadays is designed to keep the person alive, at least in the memories and affection of the circle of friends who come together to honour the dead person. Such services, however, are pallid shadows of the fabulous ceremonies that marked the entrance into the world beyond of a notable Egyptian, Greek, or Roman, a ruler of China or an Indian rajah: the dangerous journey no one can avoid, but that can be prepared for by providing the corpse with an obolus for Charon or a boat for the Nile or weapons for hunting.

Morality is essential to this scheme of things, for justice will be done in that future realm where secondary things such as rank and wealth give place to heroism and honour. Virtue is rewarded and vice is punished. Sisyphus rolls his boulder endlessly, Tantalus forever starves, Prometheus loses his liver each day, while the heroes eat with the gods or, sometimes, like Hercules, become themselves divine.

This rich vein of human experience has been little attended to of late in Catholic thinking. Funerals have become almost trivial as we offer the mourners a facile canonization of the deceased by treating him with a sentimentality that robs his life its drama. Inculturation surely cannot mean substituting Whispering Glades Memorial Park for the heroics of the Viking pyre and barrow. The moral responsibility recognized by paganism should be—as it has been—confirmed and extended by Christianity in that the sacramental realization of redemption through the merits of Jesus Christ intensifies rather than weakens the accountability of man as a mature moral agent. Hence the impressive demands implied in non-Christian myths about the underworld should prepare the ground for the seed of the Gospel. Like its privileges, its moral requirements, almost inhuman in their range and depth, extend those of other religions. This is why paganism should find a vision of man in Christianity that makes it immediately credible, fitting into the human psyche like a dislocated shoulder returning to its socket.

This fit is particularly evident with regard to purgatory, a doctrine that

is essential to Catholicism. Both purgatory and hell witness to the Catholic view of man as free and therefore responsible. It is permissible to describe the effects of the fall of Adam and Eve using the vehement language of Saint Augustine, but only if one continues on to the principle found in the liturgy: "God wonderfully created man and more wonderfully restored him." Christ's triumph over sin is complete, and the baptized man or woman is given all that Adam enjoyed and more. What is therefore denied is the notion that God would not risk having his rational creatures abuse such freedom. God shows his confidence in the power of grace by expecting man to attain greatness. But success is meaningful only when it is possible to fail. No one would attempt Mount Everest if everyone made it to the summit. Hell is defiance pushed to the limit, where the denial of God brings the sinner to the brink of annihilation. Purgatory, on the other hand, is the return of the fountain of life by the eager accomplishment of the suffering that God allows in order fully to restore the image of Christ crucified in the damaged soul. Our true business at funerals, therefore, is to join, by our presence at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, in the great work of redemption, which will be completed only when the soul of our departed brother or sister enters heaven completely purified of sin and its effects. ❧