THE MYSTERY OF OUR RELIGION

By ANTHONY O'LEARY

'GREAT is the mystery of our religion' cries the author of the first letter to Timothy (1 Tim 3,16). It is an expression of wonder at the mighty works of God in the world. Having dealt with the pastoral problems of choosing suitable ministers for the growing community, he reflects on the nature of the Church and uses eloquent images, such as the household of God, with its resonances of a large group sharing the one roof and in close daily contact with the householder, a favourite symbol for the Father in the matthean parables (cf Mt 13,27.52;20,1.11;21,33;24,43). In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul reminds the new Christians of their freshly acquired freedom as fellow citizens with the saints. But it seems that the picture of a city state was too remote, so he immediately changes to the more homely intimate unit of the household, in which he sees the prophets and apostles as foundations, together with the corner-stone Christ Jesus. However, the static image of the house is not adequate for the reality. The stone-wall structure grows into a living temple, where the Holy Spirit dwells as animator (cf 1 Cor 3,16;2 Cor 6,16;1 Pet 2,5). This dynamic picture of the Universal Church is not, however, that of the author of the First Letter to Timothy. His concern is rather with the local congregation, which nevertheless is to be the pillar and buttress of the truth. He betrays this embattled attitude by his choice of words. Yet the orthodox belief which he is defending is so dear to him, so wondrous that one can almost hear him crying out: 'Great is the mystery of our religion'.

The mystery, which he has denoted a 'mystery of faith', is the great plan of God revealed to man. This evokes a corresponding reverence, which can only be expressed in the living of it. The words 'religion' (*eusebeia*) and 'earnestness' (*semnotēs*) which occur only in the pastoral letters, express some of the many facets of christian life. They imply that true respect for God which comes from the

acceptance of revelation. Involved in these characteristics are both doctrine and a whole way of life. *Eusebeia* is the response of faith. The changing environment of the churches of the pastoral letters required a change in vocabulary; the authentic response, which, in his letter to the Romans (16,26) Paul calls 'the obedience of faith', is in these later documents given the title *eusebeia*. The Revised Standard Version renders it here (3,16) as 'religion' but in other instances later on in the same letter (6,3.5.6.11) it offers the translation 'godliness': one indication that *eusebeia* embraces several aspects of christian existence.

The Hymn in 1 Timothy 3,16

The richness of this existence moves the author to wonder and awe. The christian way of life is guided by that mystery which is Christ in the Christian (cf Col 1,27). The ministry, as Paul explains in this passage in Colossians, is to make known the designs of God, which, having been hidden for many generations, are revealed in the proclamation of Christ Jesus. The mystery is not an inanimate object to be gazed at; rather it is the living Lord himself. The author of the first letter to Timothy has drunk deeply at the well of Paul. For him also the mystery of our religion is Christ. To express this wonderful truth of his faith, he turns to an already well-known hymn which confesses Jesus as Lord. The hymnological citation begins with the relative pronoun 'who' (a point not immediately obvious in the best modern translations). This mode of speech is one of the criteria for isolating a quotation of a hymn or other liturgical expression. The antecedent is not mentioned in the immediate context; it is presumed that it is well known from the original setting of the hymn in the common prayer-life of the community.

The modern translations, including the Revised Standard Version, the Jerusalem Bible, the New English Bible and the New American Bible all agree that this piece is hymnological, indicating this by the way in which they print the text. The RSV does not divide it into strophes, whereas the others do. The NEB and the JB opt for two strophes of three lines each, an arrangement claiming the authority of Joachim Jeremias in his commentary on the Pastorals in the *Neue Testament Deutsch* series. The NEB and the Divine Office opt for three two-line strophes. This arrangement of the text seems more convincing to the present writer, preserving as it does a clearly visible antithetic parallelism. Therefore I suggest that the hymn be set out as follows:

Who was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated in the Spirit,
Seen by the angels,
preached among the nations,
Believed on in the world,
taken up in to glory.

This gives three couplets in which the contrasting elements, flesh — Spirit, angels — nations, world — glory appear. Each strophe contains a divine — human contrast; the heavenly sphere in comparison with the earthly. The form of the verbs in the original gives a type of assonance, with six occurrences of the third person singular of the aorist passive. These are followed in five out of six cases by the preposition 'in'. The rhythmic diction is clear, even in translation. This poetic piece was known to the author of the pastorals from its use in christian worship; and it is used by him to express his own wonder and praise at the work of God, which he had previously explained.

The content of the hymn is very densely packed. The main articles of christological faith are celebrated with an admirable economy. 'Manifestation' implies pre-existence. 'Flesh' shows the earthly human nature in which the pre-existent One revealed himself. In this context, we might be tempted to attribute to the preposition 'in', the semitic equivalent 'through'. Such a hypothesis hardly recommends itself in the pastoral letters at hand, since their language is of a type closer to the common hellenistic Greek than that of many of the other writings of the New Testament. The verb 'vindicated' (literally, 'justified') is admittedly obscure. However, since we find a similar causality attributed to the Spirit in Romans — 'the gospel of God . . . concerning his Son who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead' (2-4, RSV) — it seems safe to assume that we have here also a reference to the Resurrection of Jesus.

The second stophe deals with the announcement of the risen Lord in both spheres of a two-tier universe. As is stated, for example in Philippians (2,10) and Ephesians (1,20-21), the angels see the Lord. He is also proclaimed among the peoples of this world. His dominion is cosmic, with nothing excluded from his power. Also in this second strophe, there is a dramatic shift of emphasis. The first strophe, along with the first member of the second, has the person

of Jesus as subject: the events portrayed are those of his life, resurrection and exaltation. With the second member of the second strophe, however, the scene suddenly changes to the response which he evokes in the earthly sphere: he is announced to the nations. This kerygma is a response to the glorification of Jesus, in the same way as is the belief that comes (in the first member of the third strophe) in answer to the preaching. Clearly, the event which is achieved in the Redeemer himself is not yet accomplished for the nations and for the world; it is still an object of faith and hope for them. It is equally significant that the preaching and faith form part of the divine plan whose revelation begins with the Incarnation. In fact the worshippers who sang this hymn were proclaiming, though in a different fashion, what we find written in the risen Gospel of Luke: that, according to God's design, it was necessary that the Christ should suffer, and on the third day rise from the dead; and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem (Lk 24,46-47). Preaching and belief are integral parts of God's work of salvation which is not yet finally unfolded. The action of God has not been exhausted in the glory of Jesus; it is still touching heaven and earth — the entire cosmos.

In the final verse, Jesus is acclaimed as taken up into glory, the field of vision in which God's power is completely manifest and totally effective. The Redeemer is all in all; he is constituted as our hope (cf 1 Thess 1,1). Such an overwhelming truth commands worship; and it is in this realization that this hymn was first written. The solemn poetic form provides an adequate vehicle for the soaring mystery of faith. The mood is one of joyful celebration and praise, with that poetic dynamism of adoration that outstrips any etymological analysis of the words used to express it. Faith in Jesus as the Lord of heaven and earth burns brightly in the heart of the poet, who is sufficiently gifted to find a simple yet exalted rhythmic form to express the inexpressible truths imprinted on his heart and spirit. Only adoring praise is capable of releasing the surge of insight and power which the poems strives both to contain and to manifest. The content of a man's faith forged a form of prayer that has survived across time and space, to communicate the same spiritual sense to generation after generation: due, of course, to the impact made by the hymn on the anonymous church leader who addressed himself to 'Timothy' in the early part of the second century. The author of the first letter to Timothy was already imbued with the

principle that the prayer expresses belief, and his inclusion of this hymn serves to remind us that it constituted one of the first rules of orthodoxy from the initial stages in the growth of Christianity.

The saying is sure

The phenomenon of the mutual interaction of faith and worship is witnessed also in the frequent use of this phrase (cf 1 Tim 1,15;3,1;4,9;2 Tim 2,11; Tit 3,8). Twice the author adds another phrase, 'and worthy of acceptance', to indicate that the maxim about to be expressed is one deserving of faith. The formula is introduced to help to elucidate an argument or to convince the readers of an opinion. Traditional catechetical material provides the quarry from which these sayings are hewn and placed in the new structure of the letter. There is an existing store of precisely worded units, coming from preaching, liturgy, catechesis or other areas of Church life, which are accepted widely as carrying an inner authority. In a situation of challenge such as that reflected in the Pastoral Letters, the Church is able to draw on a solid tradition, whenever it experiences the need to gird its loins in the presence of conflicting views.

One of the maxims introduced by the formula mentioned above is also rhythmic in structure. It consists of four verses, repeating the same rhetorical pattern, which can be set out as follows:

If we have died with him	we shall also live with him,
if we endure with him	we shall also reign with him,
if we deny him	he also shall deny us,
if we are faithless	he remains faithful,

for he cannot deny himself (2 Tim 2,11).

The two opening lines represent the positive christian attitudes and their consequent rewards. The first verse recalls the statement of the letter to the Romans. 'If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his' (Rom 6,5), referring to the 'death' in union with Christ through baptism. Here, however, it is no longer a question of the mystical death of the sacramental immersion, but of the all too real prospect of martyrdom. Thus the traditional pauline teaching is given a new depth of meaning. Similarly in the second line the quality of perseverance, a necessary characteristic of christian life

from the earliest times (cf Col 1,1), is elevated to the status of 'heroic virtue' in the face of violent opposition and persecution.

In the third and fourth verses the author unhesitatingly faces the possibility that a Christian might deny his Lord. The original speaks of being ashamed of the Risen Jesus (Cf 2 Tim 2,15). Further, it is clear that the third verse is based on the saying of Jesus, 'Whoever denies me before man, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven' (Mt 10,33; cf Mk 8,38). The boldness necessary for bearing witness to Jesus has already been commended by the author earlier in the letter (cf Tim 1,8.12). The clinching argument for remaining faithful lies in the fourth verse, which hymns the conviction that our faithlessness can never alter the fidelity of God. He offers his goodness to man always. There is no question of our God adopting a menacing or threatening attitude. It is simply a reminder that the Christian should be what his lips profess, a true son or daughter of one's Father in heaven. God's loving-kindness never encourages a fatalistic stance. It is always a compelling invitation to reciprocate his steadfast love. So the author of second Timothy fortifies his exhortation 'to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus' (2,1), by using a saying redolent of traditional formulations which crop up in different contexts and various strata of new testament tradition, first enunciated in widely scattered regions of the world of early Christianity.

The sections of the pastoral letters containing hymnological material are relatively late in the composition of the NT. At the same time, the practice of citing formulae from Church life and liturgy in the face of new crises affecting christian faith and morals was already traditional. The most widely known hymns of the New Testament are preserved in the pauline letters; and these are of greater length than the material examined above. The earliest text is the magnificent hymn in praise of Christ in the letter to the Philippians, Paul's first converts in his missionary journeyings.

The Christ hymn of Philippians (2,6-11)

The Philippians hymn has been the topic of much scholarly discussion. Its form, language, possible background, together with its authorship and position in the letter have been the object of many articles and monographs. This is hardly the place to discuss the minutiae of exegetical scholarship. I shall content myself with a brief consideration of how we today can best pray the hymn, with a faith that seeks understanding.

The structure of the composition chosen for the 'Prayer of the Church' is as follows:

1. Though he was in the form of God,
   Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.
2. He emptied himself,
   taking the form of a servant;
   being born in the likeness of man,
3. and being found in human form,
   he humbled himself and became obedient unto death,
   even death on a cross.
4. Therefore God has exalted him
   and bestowed on him the name which is above every name,
5. that, at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow
   in heaven and on earth and under the earth;
6. and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord
   to the glory of God the Father.

Reading the passage aloud, one can perceive the rhythmic movement even in translation. However, the adapted version of the RSV as used in the breviary necessarily alters some points of literary form of the original. In the Greek, the first, second and third strophes form one long sentence; and the various statements are articulated by using the conjunctions 'but' and 'and'. Thus the contrast between the initial state of divine pre-existence and the taking of the form of a servant occurs within the first main section, and gives an even sharper focus to the depths of Christ's humiliation. Indeed, this aspect of humiliation is unrelieved in the first sentence. Its starkness thus gives full weight to the aspect of universal exaltation which is the burden of the second main sentence. The pivot of the whole composition is expressed at the beginning of the fourth strophe, using the emphatic conjunction 'therefore (*dio*) God has exalted him'. Thus the exaltation follows the humiliation as effect to cause. It is significant that the word 'exalted' is used in the Septuagint version of Isaiah 53,12 (cf RSV 53,13) to express the exaltation of the servant by God because of his suffering. In Wisdom, the same conjunction *dio* is used in a similar context of a marked reversal of fortunes: 'His soul was pleasing to the Lord, *therefore* he took him quickly' (4,14).

This arrangement of the text was first put forward in 1928. The greek original is divided into six strophes, each of three lines or verses, with an extra line in the third strophe — 'even death on a

cross'. When each strophe is thus set out, the parallelism with its artistic variations is clearly discernible. In the second and third strophes, we find a similar idea thrice repeated: 'taking the form of a servant' is parallel to 'emptying himself', and to 'being born in the likeness of man'. Likewise in the third strophe, if we divide the second line set out as one verse in the breviary text — 'he humbled himself and became obedient unto death', we have three parallels which take up the same theme in three different ways. Again, in the fourth strophe, if we divide the second verse, 'and bestowed on him the name which is above every name', and treat the first verse of the fifth strophe in the same way — 'that, at the name of Jesus' — we can hardly miss the dynamic movement picked out by the repetition of the word 'name'. Our poet is not constrained by the metrical conventions of the current latin lyric following the older greek models; rather he allows his inspiration to determine the metrical shape. Poetic technique follows rather than shapes the content.

The main verbs he chooses are equally enlightening. In the first three strophes we find imaged that powerful descending movement describing the mystery of incarnation, which western theologians were later to call 'the divine condescension' in the 'emptying' and the 'humbling'. Their subject is the pre-existing One, who is 'in the form of God'; and there is no antagonist in the face of whom he is humbled or emptied. It is the subject himself who freely chooses to 'sit lightly' to his equality, to be 'emptied' and 'humbled'. He freely assumes human nature, and the death which inevitably accompanies it; but he is also free in choosing the particularly humiliating form of it.

In the second sentence, God is the subject of two verbs, 'exalt' and 'bestow'. The second is particularly significant, since the original (*charizein*) expresses the theological notion of 'being graced'. God is pictured as giving this gift to Jesus. Thus the 'almighty power' which energizes the ascending movement in the second section brilliantly heightens the contrast with the freely-chosen spontaneous descending movement described in the first section. If we were to use the terminology of draughtsmanship and painting, we might say that we have a parabola which represents the mysterious trajectory of the co-ordinating providential design observable in the sweep of a majestic ikon. Lyrically, we notice another wonderful contrast: the downward, outward journey is hidden — there is no audience: whilst the ascent to glory is acclaimed by all beings. The emptying, which took place in

loneliness and in solitude, achieves, through the intervention of God, a state of being commanding the adoration and praise of all the spiritual creatures of a three-tiered universe. Every knee must bend at the very mention of the person-name of Jesus, and every tongue must proclaim the Lordship of Christ to the glory of God the Father. The diapason, the harmonic swell of this solemn poem is perhaps the most successful human attempt to depict the sublimity of 'the mystery of faith': the incarnation, death and resurrection of this Jesus who is Son in Spirit; and, because he died on the Cross, is Lord and Saviour of our Universe.

The vocabulary of the poem includes many rare words which are characteristically non-Pauline: 'empty', 'thing to be grasped' (*harpagmon* — the hunter's prey), 'highly exalt', 'form', 'estate' (*schēma*), 'equal to God'. This alone would, of course, be sufficient to establish that Paul is not the author of the hymn; but there are also theological differences in idea and expression. Paul generally reserves the initiative in the work of salvation to the Father, whereas here the pre-existent One is the free agent of the actions depicted in the opening section. While Paul speaks of the role of Christ's obedience, he never describes Jesus as as a slave (*doulos*). The theme of exaltation, so dear to John, is not so prominent in Paul; but in our hymn it is the key-note of the triumphant melody of the final movement. Likewise, the Apostle never speaks of God's 'gracing' Jesus (as, for example the synoptics do at the Baptism in the Jordan, following Isaiah), as we observe in the fourth strophe. The typically pauline reference to the death on a cross stands outside the structure of the original as proposed by Lohmeyer, and so is thought to be an addition by Paul. Thus we have here a literary work that existed prior to Paul's adaptation of it, as part of the christian repertoire of 'psalms, hymns and spiritual songs' (Col 3,16).

Granted that the hymn is of pre-pauline composition, what first strikes us is the advanced theological quality of its content. The One whose pre-existence and exaltation are celebrated in a lyric of such quality is also an historical figure, who suffered a criminal's death in a troublesome outlying part of the roman dominions, only thirty years previously. This particular historical focus of the hymn is blurred in the RSV translation of the third strophe. Strophe two speaks in general terms of Jesus being in the likeness of man and taking the form of a servant; but the first verse of strophe three should read, 'being found in appearance as *a* man'. As Joachim Gnilka rightly notes in his commentary, there is a movement from

the general 'humanity' to the particular historical individual. The one who is exalted above all spirits is not some superhuman being in the guise of humanity; he is really and truly a man. His assumption of the form of a slave knew no limitations as he died the form of death particularly associated with slaves, *mors turpidissima crucis*. There is no attempt to detach the exalted One from Jesus, who suffered. Quite the contrary. The exaltation is the effect of his humiliation; and it is only in the second section that we hear the historical name mentioned. The worship of all the spirits is owed to the man Jesus. The cosmic Lord is none other than the Jesus of history.

Paul himself has adopted this confession of the early Christians; and he includes it in his letter to the Philippians to exhort them to unity and harmony. He does not add any note of explanation; he simply takes it for granted that the Philippians will understand clearly this dense and highly theological hymn. He presumes that they are familiar with the text and, good teacher that he is, he moves from the known to the unknown. The pattern of christian life is to be moulded on the values so marvellously hymned in this liturgical song. It is not that Christians are merely to be deferential to one another. Their whole behaviour and, more important, their attitudes which root that behaviour, are to be modelled on the attitude of Christ Jesus. Thus Paul's moral exhortation is grounded in his quotation from a text widely known in the Church's liturgical life. 'Being in Christ Jesus' demands a congruity between thought and word. So the attitudes of the Christian are to be rooted in the values embodied in this hymn.

Other hymns in the Pauline Letters

It is not only in the hortatory sections of the letters that Paul calls upon well-known literary and liturgical texts. At the beginning of his letter to the Colossians, he prays for the Christians of that city in Asia Minor (Col 1,9ff). After mentioning the beloved Son, in whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins, Paul quotes a lofty christological hymn (1,15-20). Its theme is very apposite in a letter addressed to a community in danger of reducing Christ to the status of one of the elemental spirits of the universe.

This passage also has two main sections (15-17 and 18-20). Again in reading the passage aloud, one is struck by the rhythmic flow of language. Between the two main sections there are many connections. Christ is called the first-born, both of creation and of

the dead. Through him all things are both created and restored to harmony with God. He is the Image of the invisible God and the Head of the Church. The poetic diction and balance points to a gifted author who, having contemplated the mystery of Christ, was able to express his faith in this splendid hymn.

In the first section, attention is focused on Christ's role in creation. Using concepts that may stem from hellenistic speculation or jewish Wisdom-circles, the author presents Christ as the Image of God: a phrase reminiscent of some Alexandrian thinkers. This metaphor, along with the depiction of Christ as the first-born of creation, takes up and unfolds the qualities of the 'Son of his love' (Col 1,13). The precise meaning of the 'image' terminology is greatly disputed. The deciding factor seems to be the provenance assigned to the passage. As Paul attributes to Christ the role of the 'new Adam', many scholars take for granted that he alludes to Genesis (1,26), where it is said that Man was made in the image of God. Possibly, also, he has in mind Wisdom (7,25-26), where 'image of God's goodness' is one of the titles of Wisdom, a concept with which Paul was familiar. Whatever types are most apposite, Christ surpasses them completely, because he shares with the Father the sovereignty over all creation. All is created by his agency and has him as its purpose. He is not only first in time; he is the One who, with the Father, gives existence to and preserves everything in being.

The second section presents Christ in his relationship with the company of believers. He who is the origin of all things is also the One who reconciles all to the Father. In him dwells all the fulness of God; and he labours to bring about peace and communion between God and man. But the nobility of the agent is not to be the measure of the loftiness of his instrument. Peace is established by the blood of his cross, and not by any 'supernatural' magic means. As we have seen in the Philippians hymn, these solemn christological statements never make the Lord remote from human existence. He is the Jesus who died, who is Head of the Church and whose presence is celebrated in the liturgical assembly. In virtue of his resurrection, he is present in his Church as the first-born from the dead.

This ecstatic hymn is comparable to John's Prologue (1,1-18). Having contemplated the mystery of Christ, the author of the hymn, in his own series of metaphors, gave to the christian people a moving statement of their faith. Paul, seeing in this composition a perfect answer to the difficulties of the Colossians, presents it to them,

letting it speak for itself. Its rich and ringing tones have reverberated in the Church down the years through its adoption by Paul.

Conclusion

In all these instances, we have seen Paul drawing upon the prayer of the Church to guide his disciples in matters of belief and morals. But it would be false to limit the interaction of worship and doctrine to these few passages. There are other liturgical snippets, such as the baptismal hymn in Ephesians (5,14). That he had at his disposal a rich variety of church literature can be seen from his allusions to 'psalms, hymns and spiritual songs' (cf Eph 5,19; Col 3,16-17). We do not possess clearly isolated hymn units other than those noted above; but we can discern frequent quotations from the Psalms, which were also well known because of their public recitation, first in jewish worship and later in christian celebrations. Apart from phrases like Ps 110,1, which had become the equivalent of sacred slogans in the nascent Church, Paul quotes extensively from the prayers of the Old Testament. Not all the instances are as clear as the catena of citations from the Psalms in Romans (3,10-20); but constant references and allusions are discernible throughout his writings. If his use of the Psalter is any indication, it is highly likely that he also quotes from other hymns which have long disappeared.

The texts of worship have their effect on the formulations of faith. The expression of self-awareness in prayer consistently provides a source on which to draw in seeking answers to questions of belief and behaviour. However, I would like to make a final point: which is that this traffic is not all 'one-way'. The theological explanations of faith often fill the heart of the Apostle with a holy awe that leads him to spontaneous prayer. He frequently expresses his reverence in the short prayer of blessing, 'Blessed be He!' His reflections on the actual life of the churches lead him to thanksgiving and intercession (cf Col 1,3-14; 1 Thess 3,11-13, etc.) The endings of his correspondence should not be mistaken as formal pious platitudes. Paul was not one for decorating himself with wordy piety. Thus it is out of the overflowing abundance of Paul's heart, as it ponders the *mirabilia Dei* of the covenant of God with his own people, that he cries out: 'O, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his way! . . . For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory for ever. Amen' (Rom 11, 33-36).