SOL INVICTUS: ENCOUNTERSBETWEEN EAST &WEST IN THE ANCIENTWORLD

Franz Altheim’s recently published book, Der unbesiegte Gott: Heidentum

und Christentum (The Unconquered God: Heathenism and Christianity;

Hamburg: Rohwolts Deutsche Enzyklopädie, 1957), should be of special interest

to the readers of this journal, for it deals with a significant encounter between the

ancient civilizations of East and West.

Altheim’s book is a study of the political and religious conditions in the late

period of the Roman Empire, a period which has not yet been thoroughly

studied. It is usually slurred over as the time of Roman decadence, but it was

really one of the most interesting periods of ancient history, with its violent

contrasts of light and shadow. There was something demonic about it; passions

and ideas were driven to extremes, exceeding human limits, while every now

and again flashes of religious radiance illuminating the most turbid, tragic, and

problematic situations.

In his new book, which is lucid, acute, and brimming with information,

Altheim explores this world, following the clue offered by sun worship and its

fortunes. The starting point is in the East, but this book deals not with the ancient

Egyptian and Iranian forms of the solar cult but those of a later period which had

its center in Syria (the Land of the Sun according to an ancient conventional

etymology), that is to say, with the cult of Helios of Emesus.

Another of the misused formulas that we find in the historiographers of late

classic antiquity would have us believe that Rome had been “Asianized,” had

given up her most genuine traditions, and had gone over to foreign cults,

customs, and deities, most particularly Asian and Afro-Asian. That a foreign

element had penetrated into Rome certainly cannot be denied; the penetration

had indeed begun in the 3rd century BC.

However, one of the main theses that Altheim repeatedly asserts in his work

on the history of Roman religion is that we should not seek for the specifically

Roman element in the particular and narrow native traditions of the early days,

but rather in the specific and original character that Rome stamped on all that she

gradually took over, thus conferring on it a higher significance. Often, indeed,

the encounter with an exotic element served Rome as an incentive to revivify her

own forms.

This is also noted by Altheim in the case of the solar cult. It was no mere

nature cult, as was supposed by a history of religions that has now been to a

great extent surpassed and which we need not discuss. The ancients did not

adore the stars as such, i.e., as physical realities, but as symbols of sacred,

spiritual powers. Though mingled with spurious elements, the Sun God, thus

understood, had been the object of widespread worship among the peoples of the

Eastern Mediterranean, and in the late period of the Empire this cult had

gradually penetrated the world of Roman civilization. Septimus Severus had

already begun to raise such figures as Serapedes, Heracles, Dionysus (the two

latter in their non-classical form) to the rank of gods of the Roman State,

identifying them by analogy with traditional Roman deities. After him, Caracalla

was the first to style the Sun God as invictus. Ten years later this god was to

become the chief divinity of the Empire.

The first phase of this penetration was, however, characterized by violent and

turbid incidents connected to the Emperor Heliogabalus, whose very name was

that of a Syrian solar deity. He tried to introduce the cult into Rome in its more

spurious and aberrant Oriental forms, and appointed himself as the high priest of

the cult, officiating in ways that could not but give rise to violent reactions

among Roman traditionalists. With the downfall of Heliogabalus this first phase

came to an end, and would seem to have been nothing but an extravagant

interlude.

However, Rome of that age felt more and more keenly the need for

strengthening and defending herself on the spiritual, intellectual, and religious

plane, just as she had done on the political and military one. This was also

connected with the struggle against the advance of Christianity. Hence

the sacrum studium litterarum, of which Macrobius speaks, understood as a

return to the classics to ensure the spiritual renewal of the Empire. This was the

path by which, after the first reaction had died down, the solar god was to

reappear and become the center of a new kind of theology of the Empire, the

spiritual environment being, moreover, prepared by Neoplatonic speculations

and by writings that had spread far and wide, such as the Aithiopica of

Heliodaurus of Emesus.

Thus, we find solar symbols appearing more and more frequently on Roman

coins and ensigns. Deus Sol Invictus are the words that always recur. The radial

crown of the Emperors is a solar symbol. At last, with the Emperor Aurelian, the

cult of the Sun God takes its place in Roman public worship, though purified in a

way that reveals the original formative power of Roman civilization, of which

we have already spoken.

Under this influence, the solar divinity loses those spurious and equivocal

Syrian features and is invested with a Roman and Olympian form, that of the

deity most characteristic of the pure Roman tradition, Capitoline Jove, Jupiter

optimus maximus. Unlike his Asian antecedent, this divinity is no longer

surrounded by goddesses, no longer copulates, has no offspring, and has less of a

relation to the physical symbol of the sun as an entity that rises and sets.

Above all, it is a luminous, spiritual, abstract symbol of power at the center of

the universal Empire of Rome, whose leaders it consecrates and invests. The

priests of this cult are no longer strangers brought over from Syria (as

Heliogabalus attempted) with their unseemly, even orgiastic ceremonies: Roman

Senators form its college, which is placed on the same footing as the austere one

of the Pontifices. Finally, the symbolic birth of the God at the winter solstice,

characteristic of all the oriental solar divinities, becomes the official Roman

festival of the 25th of December (the Natalis Solis Invicti, the Roman precursor

of what was to become Christmas). It was decided that every four years, on that

day, a great and brilliant gathering was to be held in honor of the Invincible God,

the god both of the Empire and of the Imperial Armies.

While Altheim has duly followed all these developments, there are perhaps

two points that deserve special attention.

The first is the connection that existed between the solar theology of the

Empire and the Mysteries of Mithra. The epithet Invictus was also applied to the

symbolic figure of Mithra, whose cult spread widely in the Roman Legions. This

reference is important as it enables us to penetrate into the deeper, inner meaning

of that attribute. Invictus is the sun understood as the light which each morning

triumphs over darkness. In the realm of the mysteries this was transferred

directly on the spiritual plane to the ceremonies through which the initiates

participate in the nature of Mithra as expressed by this symbol. Thus the outer

cult of the Emperor, and the solar attributes ascribed to him, in principle

acquired an inner counterpart which in its higher sense was spiritual, related as it

was to the world of the Mysteries and to the experiences proper to that world.

The second point has a more general bearing. In his previous works on the

history of the Roman religion Altheim has called attention to the error

committed by those who would oversimplify talking of the “Hellenization” of

the Roman religion after its Italic origins. He has shown that “Hellenization” in

its more important aspects, more particularly those connected with the reception

of the great Olympian divinities, was more a revival or reintegration of a very

ancient common inheritance which, among the Italic peoples, had often been

obscured and debased by the influence of the cults prevailing in the pre-Indo European Mediterranean world.

In the case of Rome, instead of referring to Hellenization as a mere passive

estrangement, one should rather speak of a return to original

sources through Greece, following a line of continuity, and in many cases of a

passage from potentiality to actuality, from germinal and inchoate forms to fully

developed ones. Rome received and took to herself Greek divinities because she

found in them more perfect expressions of religious intuitions that already

formed part of her inheritance, although in more confused, incomplete, and, we

might almost say, mute forms. These are Altheim’s original views of

Hellenization, which seem to us largely correct.

Now, something similar may be noted in the case of the solar cult of late

Roman antiquity. We find, moreover, valuable material in support of this

assumption already in Altheim’s book. The special references to the Sun God of

Emesus should not make us forget that, on the one hand, the Syrian cult was

only one particular expression—a particular Erscheinungsform—of a spiritual

orientation that took many other shapes, all of which lead us back—some in

metahistorical and morphological, others, however, in historical terms—to one

primordial Tradition, from which they originate. This is why, as has been noted

and is well known, the ritual date of the winter solstice, as the birth of light or of

the new light, belongs to a vast and widely ramified cultural cycle, carrying us

back even to Hyperborean prehistory.

It is really just this last point which has been treated by Altheim when dealing

with the Illyrian Emperors, and above all with Aurelian. Referring to the

Imperial solar cult, he shows that this Emperor selected many symbols formerly

pertaining to all the most ancient Nordic traditions: symbols found also in pre Roman Italy (those found in the Val Camonica are of special importance) and

which Altheim in other works has been able to connect with the migratory waves

of those who were the distant progenitors of the Latins, i.e., of the future

founders of Rome.

Following the threads of these virtual and real convergences, we are led to a

truly significant hypothesis. May it not be that the Imperial solar cult, instead of

being an imported Asianized phenomenon, represents the revival of a primordial

Tradition? And just as it affirmed itself in Rome at that period as a State cult,

this worship possessed an Olympian purity and dignity of its own, no longer to

be found in the residual local cults scattered over the Near East and elsewhere.

No one will fail to grasp the importance that such an interpretation would have

for the universal significance of ancient Rome. It is one, moreover, which we

have had occasion to suggest, in a wider context, in one of our books.

Another point that Altheim takes into direct consideration is no less

interesting. It is the relation of the Romanized solar cult with the earliest forms

of Christianity, to which the subtitle of his book refers.

It is a fact that the image of a divine solar sovereign had a decisive influence

on Constantine himself, the Christian Emperor. On this matter Altheim has

brought together documentation that is little known. Constantine preserved in

large measure the symbols of the previous solar cult. Until 317, the Sol

Invictus appears on the imperial coins of Constantine, even though we see on

them also the image of the Sovereign bearing the labarum with the Cross.

The Sol Invictus and Victoria are also represented on the labari carved on the

Arch of Constantine itself in Rome. It is as if the last of the great pagan

conceptions were carried on into Christianity, says Altheim.

For our part we would recall that, apart from Constantine, images of the

Roman period exist in which the Crucifix itself is surmounted by solar symbols.

Altheim notes, however, that a change in outlook was taking place. Now the

solar symbol occupies only a subordinate position. The Sun God is no longer the

supreme, sovereign God of the Universe, whose reflection is the Imperial

universality of Rome. He has become subject and servant to a loftier divinity, the

God of the Christians. Altheim thinks, however, that he can point to a pagan

antecedent of this new presentation, for in the speculations of the Neoplatonists,

and most especially Porphyry, the sun no longer represented the supreme

principle. The sun is indeed dominant and a celestial hypostasis, but subordinate

to the One; it is the mediator between the One and the manifest world.

To us, however, it seems that we are justified in speaking neither of a real

antecedent of the concept adopted by the Christian Emperor, nor of decisive

influences exercised by Neoplatonism (Porphyry and Plotinus were among the

declared and conscious adversaries of Christianity). A clear distinction should,

indeed, be drawn between the point of view of ritual symbolism and that of

metaphysical speculation. Only from the first of these points of view could the

sun take its place in worship as the supreme principle, for it was considered only

as a symbol, and the real reference was to the sovereign and abstract principle of

pure light. Very different is the situation with respect to speculations that

develop into a cosmology, as with Neoplatonism, in which the matter at issue is

a world system, and the sun takes its place in a cosmic hierarchy under symbolic

aspects different from those relating to its cult as real celestial Being.

Thus, if relics—one might say echoes—of the “solar spirituality” existed in

primitive Christianity (just as the first Patristic writings, more especially the

Greek, preserved many notions proper to pagan mysteriosophy) one cannot

speak of continuity. Rather, a contrast was to grow between two worlds, two

visions of life and of religion. As the final manifestation of that power Rome had

of stamping her own shape on what was foreign to her—the power of which

Altheim speaks—one may, at most, point to the phenomenon of the

Romanization of early Christianity in several aspects of Catholicism. It was thus

that Dante was able to speak of the Rome for which “Christ is a Roman.” But

even so the antithesis, more or less latent, still existed. It was to make itself

clearly manifest in the Middle Ages of the Ghibellines, in which, among other

things, it is interesting to note the reappearance, here and there, of “solar”

symbols in the attributes and emblems of the Imperial Party.

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