

The Moon and the Mystery:

Expanding Our Horizons

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Easter arrived early this year. Only rarely does the festival come on its earliest possible date, March 22. (It last did so in 1818 and will not do so again until 2285.) But not uncommonly Easter comes toward the end of March; it was March 26 this year as it was in 1978 and 1967. It fell on March 25 in 1951.

Such an early arrival is an inconvenience to some--merchants mostly--and the inconvenience is unnecessary if we would adopt the proposal advanced by a committee of the League of Nations in 1926 that each year Easter be celebrated on the Sunday following the second Saturday in April. (In the interests of simplicity I don't know why it shouldn't be a straightforward "first Sunday in April" or "second Sunday in April," but we can set that question aside.) The proposal for a fixed date for Easter is a bad idea.

The date of Easter has been a problem for Christianity from the start. At the beginning of the Christian movement, in the Roman province of Asia, the Christians in their own way continued the traditional celebration of the Passover. Easter was celebrated on the fourteenth of the lunar month Nisan, the beginning of Passover, the date of the killing of the Passover lamb. In the gospel of St. John, Jesus, whom John the Baptist called "the Lamb of God," is understood to have been crucified at the same time as the Passover lamb was being killed, namely on Nisan 14 (John 19:31,36). As John understands it, the crucifixion was not a tragedy but was in fact "the hour" of Jesus' glorification (John 12:23-33). Crucifixion and resurrection were originally joined as one event (which for John included also the ascension and the sending of the Spirit.) The one great central festival was the celebration of the redemptive death of Christ.

Polycarp of Smyrna (died ca. 155) followed this tradition. Polycrates of Ephesus (died ca. 200), corroborated by Irenaeus (as reported by Eusebius in his *History of the*

Church [5.23.24] of about 325), traces this tradition of celebrating Easter on Nisan 14 back to Philip the Apostle and to the apostle and evangelist John, who reclined on the Lord's breast at the Last Supper. The Asian Christians who followed John's tradition were called Quartodecimians (fourteenths), observers of the fourteenth of Nisan. Their divergence from the practice of the rest of Christianity was already noted by Pope Xystus I (ca. 115).

The larger part of Christianity, for which Pope Xystus spoke, placed the emphasis on the Synoptic chronology which understood the Last Supper to have occurred on the day of the killing of the Passover lamb. Death and resurrection were separated, and Easter was celebrated on Sunday, "the first day of the week" (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1) following Passover, whatever the date of that Sunday. Already the movement away from Judaism had begun; the thin end of the wedge had been inserted between Passover and Easter.

The council of Nicaea in 325 settled the Easter question against the Quartodecimians and in favor of Roman practice. But the calculation of what Sunday was to be regarded as Easter continued to vary. At first Christianity simply followed the Jewish calculation of Passover, but growing hostility between the two groups led Christians to make their own calculations independently. Easter Day is always the Sunday after the full moon that occurs on or after the spring equinox on March 21. This full moon may happen on any date between March 21 and April 18 inclusive. If the full moon occurs on a Sunday, Easter Day is the Sunday following. Thus Easter Day cannot be earlier than March 22 or later than April 25. But it is to be noted that this full moon is not the astronomical full moon but a liturgical construct and approximation, an "ecclesiastical full moon."

The *computus*, as the calculation of the date of Easter is called, for most of Christian history was part of the training of the priest, and directions regarding the computation were included in the missal. The *Book of Common Prayer* retains the section (pp. 880-883), but *Lutheran Book of Worship* has omitted even the Easter Table that had been a part of predecessor books.

The earliest known Easter table is by Hippolytus, made in 222 and based on a sixteen-year lunar cycle; it is inscribed on the throne on which his statue sits in the Lateran museum. The next is *De pascha computus* of 243 by an unknown African scholar to correct a three-day error in Hippolytus' table. Anatolius, bishop of Laodicea, introduced a nineteen-year cycle about 258, which was adopted by Cyril of Alexandria about 450 and through the translation by Dionysius "the little" (*Exiguus*) became the church's standard ca. 525. Nevertheless, there were other tables by the Venerable Bede in 731, Helperic of Auxerre in the ninth century, John of Sacrobosco, Robert Grosseteste, and Roger Bacon. There was also the Celtic calculation based on an eighty-four year cycle.

Clearly Christianity was going its own way, independent of Judaism. But certain ties remained. In the Eastern churches, which in many ways still retain a strikingly Judaic character, Easter must follow Passover. (And so this year Easter is celebrated on April 30 by the Orthodox churches.) Maintaining the connection between Passover, the central festival of Judaism, and Easter, the central festival of Christianity, is one reason why a fixed date is a bad idea. It would sever that faint but still remaining relationship.

There is a second reason why a fixed date for Easter is a bad idea. Both Passover and Easter are related to the moon. Their earliest origins lie in this relationship of the two festivals to the moon. The roots of the common celebration disappear into the clouds of the very distant past, but can be traced back to Neolithic times and indeed come near the beginning of the human race. The moon, the first of the creatures to die but also the first to live again, is close to the source of human religious impulse and thought, and for millennia the lunar perspective has shaped human response to existence.¹ The phases of the moon--appearance, increase, wane, disappearance, and re-appearance after three nights of darkness--gave a rhythm

1. Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History. The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959) 86.

governing short intervals of the week, the month, and also more extended durations. The moon told of what Eliade calls a "universal becoming,"² which gave optimism and hope, because the disappearance of the moon is never final. The light of the moon partakes of darkness and thus is at once mortal and immortal.³ One sees in individuals as in the moon birth, growth, aging, and disappearance. One sees in humanity as in the moon, according to many and widespread myths, appearance, growth, decay, and disappearance in a deluge or cataclysm. But the message of the moon is that the disappearance is never permanent. In fact, a periodic death seems necessary for regeneration of the moon, the individual, the race, the cosmos. The moon is the celestial sign of the mystery of rebirth,⁴ self-consuming and self-renewing, "reborn of its own substance."⁵ So the universe has a cyclical structure of "eternal return," but it is no mere repetition for the cycles and interlocking structures proclaim an unfinished task, a universal becoming, always drawing us on beyond the horizon to something more. Philip Wheelwright has observed that humanity

lives always on the verge, always on the borderland of a something more. . . . Even when--perhaps especially when--we succeed in allaying the grosser form of uneasiness, the sense of a beyond and the urge to wonder about it remain.

Indeed, the intimation of a something more, a beyond the horizon, belongs to the very nature of consciousness. . . . To be conscious is not just to

2. Eliade, *Cosmos and History* 86.

3. Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God* vol. 2, *Oriental Mythology* (New York: Viking, 1962) 225.

4. Campbell, *The Masks of God* vol. 3. *Occidental Mythology* (New York: Viking, 1964) 9.

5. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1963) 154.

be; it is to mean, to intend, to point beyond oneself, to testify that some kind of beyond exists and to be ever on the verge of entering into it.⁶

Symbol, myth, ritual, liturgy encourage and enable us to find suggestive patterns in the world in which and by which we live and also to see through the cracks of the visible universe to find a deeper harmony.

Time governed and measured by the phases of the moon is bound up with the reality of life and nature, rain and the tides, the time of sowing, and the menstrual cycle in such an intimate way that Eliade calls it "living time."⁷ A whole series of phenomena belonging to totally different "cosmic levels" are ordered according to the rhythms of the moon or are under their influence. Since at least the Neolithic age, and the discovery of agriculture, the same symbolism has linked together the moon, the sea and the waters, rain and dew, the fertility of women and of animals, plant life, human destiny after death, and the rituals of initiation. The moon measures but it also unifies.

We need to note carefully here, lest we fear a lapse into paganism and idolatry, that, whether for Stone Age people or twentieth century Lutherans, a sacred object is not honored or adored in itself but in what it reveals of the sacred--because it reveals and participates in ultimate reality.⁸ Think of the crucifix, think of the bread and wine of the Holy Communion, and maybe you can think of the moon too.

Eliade, following many other students of the history of religion, identifies several areas connected with, indeed

6. Philip Wheelwright, *The Burning Fountain. A Study in the Language of Symbolism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954) 8.

7. Eliade, *Patterns* 155.

8. *Ibid.* 158.

governed by the moon. Keep Passover and Easter in mind as we consider these areas.

1) The moon governs the waters because rain and tides and dew are subject to its rhythms and because waters foster the growth of living things. Floods may be understood to correspond to the three days of darkness or "death" of the moon, but, like the moon, their destruction is never final for it takes place "under the seal of the moon and the waters"⁹ which are preeminently the sign of growth and regeneration. A flood destroys old and worn out forms and clears them away, making room for a new humanity and a new history.

2) The moon is connected with vegetation. It is the dispenser of the night dews by which the world of vegetation is refreshed.¹⁰ Vegetation is subject to the same recurring cycles governed by the moon's movements. Both moon and plants undergo death, but they do so as rest and regeneration, never as a conclusion.¹¹ French peasants, even today, sow at the time of the new moon; but they prune their trees and pick their vegetables when the moon is on the wane, presumably in order not to go against the rhythm of nature by damaging a living organism when nature's forces are on the upward swing.¹² I have seen rural farmers' calendars in this country that give similar advice.

3) The moon governs fertility in animals as well as in plants. The unalterable character of the moon is "the prerogative of fertility, of recurring creation, of inexhaustible life."¹³ Wherever the horns of oxen are found

9. *Ibid.* 160.

10. Campbell, *Oriental Mythology* 91.

11. Eliade, *Patterns* 162.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.* 163.

in Neolithic cultures, they denote the presence of the Great Goddess of fertility. The horn is the image of the new moon: it brings to mind a crescent, and both horns together (moon and ox) represent two crescents or the complete career of the moon.¹⁴ Certain animals become symbols or even "presences" of the moon because their shape or their behavior is reminiscent of that of the moon. Among them is the snake because, according to Aristotle and Pliny, it has as many coils as the moon has days, because it sloughs off its skin and is reborn.¹⁵ There are, Fraser and Eliade tell us, innumerable myths telling the disastrous story of how the serpent stole the immortality given to humans by a god.¹⁶

Because the moon is the source of fertility and also governs the menstrual cycle it has been personified as the "master of women." The snake as a lunar animal and as an epiphany of the moon shares this character with the moon and is called "the husband of all women." So a great many peoples have thought that the moon in the form of a man or a serpent copulates with their women. In a great number of traditions the moon, women, and snakes are joined in the large pattern of moon-rain-fertility-women-serpent-death-periodic regeneration.¹⁷

4) The moon is the first of the dead, dark for three nights, but its death is not an extinction but a change to a new level of existence.¹⁸ What happens to the moon and to the earth, as agricultural peoples came to know it, must happen to individuals as well, for there is life in

14. *Ibid.* 164.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.* 171.

death. Widespread traditional ideas see the moon as the land of the dead and the receiver and regenerator of souls.¹⁹

5) So the moon is prominent in initiation rituals, for they consist of a ritual death followed by the rebirth of a new person. Moreover, if initiation can be looked upon as a death, death can be looked upon as an initiation. This "becoming" is the lunar order of things, and the moon, a living creature, is not just the measure but the measurer who feeds, blesses, and makes fruitful, who receives the dead, who initiates and purifies--itself, like all life, in a perpetual state of rhythmic becoming.²⁰ The moon weaves all life²¹ into a wonderful web of intimacy and joined meanings²² in which every piece fits and nothing is isolated from the rest. Everything hangs together,²³ everything is connected and makes up a cosmic whole.²³

The sun in the early mythologies of the moon-bull was conceived of as a blazing, destructive deity, a terrible force as indeed it is in the tropics.²⁴ The moon, on the other hand, represents the principle of life in the broadest and most inclusive sense. The moon is the governor and measure of the life-creating rhythm of the womb and thereby of time through which beings come and go.²⁵ The moon is the ruler of the mystery of birth and death, for

19. *Ibid.* 172.

20. *Ibid.* 176.

21. *Ibid.* 181.

22. *Ibid.* 157.

23. *Ibid.* 156.

24. Campbell, *Oriental Mythology* 91.

25. *Ibid.* 9.

both are aspects of one state of being. It is the controller of the tides and of the dew that falls at night to refresh the grass on which the cattle graze, the source of the waters of life, the ruler of the oceans surrounding this island earth.²⁶

Images of Easter

Now, with those lunar ideas in mind, think about the images of Easter (and Passover, for Christians should not think about our Passover without recalling the original feast). Eliade calls the time governed by the moon "living time." So is Easter, for this festival is the center of the Christian year and gives Paschal character to days and observances and times throughout the year.

1) The moon governs the waters. The principal image of Passover-Easter is the passage of the Red Sea, which the church understands to be a type of Baptism. The water of the Sea, like the water of Baptism, destroys the old and opens the way to a new people who have a new history before them. At Creation, at the Flood, at the Exodus, and at Baptism life comes from the water. A new people is born.

2) The moon is connected with vegetation. An image of Israel--old and new--is the vineyard described in Isaiah 5, the canticle following the eighth lesson in the Easter Vigil. Moreover, Jesus refers to himself as the Vine and his followers as the branches (John 15:1-8), the Gospel for the Fifth Sunday of Easter in Year B. Passover and Easter both have their focus in a meal as the celebrants feast on the fruits of the earth, grain and grapes.

3) The moon governs fertility. A central image of Christian Baptism describes the font as a womb, fruitful and bearing a great number of new Christians. Moreover, the association of moon and woman and serpent and death surely reminds Christians of the story of creation in the second chapter of Genesis, the first reading at the Easter

26. *Ibid.* 10.

Vigil, setting the celebration of Easter in the context of the history of the world.

4) The moon dies, is dark for three nights, and is reborn. It anticipates and shares in the message of Passover-Easter of death and life, the dearly bought victory of resurrection and life.

5) The moon is prominent in initiation rituals, and Easter, the festival of deliverance and life, is the premier occasion for Baptism in the Christian Church as individuals pass through the waters, drowning the old nature, and emerge as new-born Christians.

The moon, Eliade says, shows us our true human condition, for in its rhythmic pattern is both *pathos* and consolation.²⁷ The pattern is one of change and is at the same time disturbing and consoling. Individual manifestations of life are so frail that they can disappear altogether (the Ash Wednesday theme); they can nonetheless be restored. The message is "harsh and merciful,"²⁸ that is, in Lutheran terminology, composed of Law and Gospel.

Maintaining the Association of Easter and the Moon

So now to come to the point of all this accumulated association. The suggestion that we fix a date for Easter, such as the second Sunday in April, is too facile. In view of the enormous symbolic tradition that is joined by the figure of the moon, such an invariable celebration is unwise, indeed unwelcome to those who cherish the long memory of the human race.

Who would have thought that the ancient association of moon and Passover and Easter, apparently obsolete and expendable, would yield such a wealth of rich and suggestive insight, joining what we know as Christians to what humankind has recognized for much of the millennia of our

27. Eliade, *Patterns* 184.

28. *Ibid.*

history. Maintaining the association of Easter and the moon is healthful, answering deep primordial impulses and giving a satisfaction even more profoundly satisfying than the intellect can provide.

The point to be made is the value of what we do not understand. Tertullian, early in the third century, understood that when he spoke of "faith seeking understanding." In our century Paul Ricoeur has taken that ancient phrase and has given it a double force: "We must understand in order to believe, but we must believe in order to understand."²⁹ He speaks to the modern mind. We assume we must understand in order to believe, that we must clear away obscurity and clutter and magic and myth so modern people can come to faith without hindrance, moving by a direct and unobstructed path. To some degree this is so. (Ricoeur allows that "we must understand in order to believe.") Unnecessary obscurity, that which is clearly obsolete (the Tudor language of "thee" and "thou" for example) may well be expendable. But we tend to go further and seek to make our worship say what we think it ought to say, so it will speak to modern people. And that is a dangerous thing to do, for in so doing we often lose the voice of the Gospel which is over against us, confronting us from another place, a different perspective, calling into question our easy assumptions and favorite ideas. The point is not to have a Bible and a liturgy that say what we mean, but to have a Bible and liturgy that require us to mean what they say. So Ricoeur with Tertullian insists that "We must believe in order to understand."

In the Eighty-fifth of the "Tracts for the Times" John Henry Newman wrote, "Let us maintain, before we have proved. This seeming paradox is the secret of happiness." Thomas Henry Huxley dismissed Newman's insight as "ecclesiasticism, the championship of a foregone conclusion." But Huxley did not understand the important point Newman was getting at. For Newman, and for all of us who share

29. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) 351.

his approach, we first of all maintain, that is, preserve, tend the tradition. Newman does not say that settles the matter, as if there was nothing more to be said. He does not say that we should not or need not prove. (I think he means "prove" in the sense of probe, test, or examine critically.) He says we ought to begin by maintaining, keeping the tradition we have received, and then probe, test, prove. It is not unlike marriage. We make the marriage vow first, and then we grow into an ever-deeper understanding of what that solemn promise means. Thus, in marriage and in religion, happiness, blessedness, and contentment is achieved. "This seeming paradox is the secret of happiness."

The liturgy of the Church, attentively heard, enlarges our perception and understanding. As a work of human imagination it accomplishes what Shelly ascribed to poetry:

Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight. . . .³⁰

Liturgy too "enlarges the circumference of the imagination," filling the new space thus created with challenging and disturbing ideas, insights, and images like the full moon at Easter.

The American Roman Catholic theologian John S. Dunne speaks of the Christian religion as a mystery, not because it is bewildering and incomprehensible but because it is an inexhaustible source of answerable questions, a mine of discovery. "Mystery" for him means not "unintelligibility but inexhaustible intelligibility."³¹ Early in this century G. K. Chesterton declared his delight in the Creed, for despite its (to some) forbidding complexity and

30. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry* (1821).

31. John S. Dunne, *A Search for God in Time and Memory* (New York: Macmillan, 1969) 7.

theological precision, it showed that the Christian faith was "rich in discoveries."³²

When once one believes in a creed, one is proud of its complexity, as scientists are proud of the complexity of science. It shows how rich it is in discoveries. If it is right at all, it is a compliment to say that it's elaborately right.³³

There is in Christianity, as in all religions worthy of attention, a willing acceptance of that which lies beyond rational understanding. For the human mind, for all of its wonderful power, is not the measure of all things.

At the beginning of the sixth chapter of Genesis there is preserved for us a most peculiar story. It has to do with the "sons of the gods" (who can't here be angels as they can be elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible because angels are sexless beings) having children by certain human women who took their fancy and producing thereby a race of giants. The Jewish scholar E. A. Speiser comments,

The undisguised mythology of this isolated fragment makes it not only atypical of the Bible as a whole but also puzzling and controversial in the extreme.³⁴

The peculiar passage is unlike anything else in the entire Bible, and from the biblical perspective makes no sense at all. It seems to have floated in here from ancient Greece where such stories were common. And yet, somehow it was preserved for us. Those nameless (although not letterless--the passage is by J) editors of Genesis did not discard from their treasure of stories this one even

32. C. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: John Lane, 1908) 151.

33. *Ibid.* 151.

34. E. A. Speiser tr. and ed., *Genesis* (Garden City: Double day, 1964) 45.

though it simply did not fit. Because of their reverence for the tradition this bit of mythology was saved despite its anomalous character.

Speiser makes convincing sense out of the inclusion of this odd passage. It seems to have been included here just before the account of the flood as the product of human morbid imagination. The editor, and presumably his readers, would be filled with horror at the depravity of such a story. It is "a moral indictment" and "a compelling motive for the forthcoming disaster." "A world that could entertain such notions deserved to be wiped out."³⁵ Thus some aspects of this puzzling story can be understood and its position as prelude to the deluge seems clear. Had the ancient biblical editors discarded what they might have considered obsolete, outmoded, or even false we would be the poorer.

So too with the ancient association of Passover, Easter, and the moon. There are riches here to be pondered with profit. The value of what we do not understand speaks to a time yearning for mystery and wonder, an age that swallows stories of ancient astronauts building the pyramids, that clutches astrology to its heart, that listens to what claim to be ancient voices speaking through modern Californians. We laugh at these examples, as well we should, for they are of no social or religious use.

Listen to Chesterton again:

The real trouble with this world of ours is not that it is an unreasonable world, nor even that it is a reasonable one. The commonest kind of trouble is that it is nearly reasonable, but not quite. Life is not an illogicality; yet it is a trap for logicians. It looks just a little more mathematical and regular than it really is; its exactitude is obvious, but its inexactitude is hidden; its wildness lies in wait.

35. *Ibid.* 46.

It is this silent swerving from accuracy by an inch that is the uncanny element in everything. It seems a sort of secret treason in the universe. An apple or an orange is round enough to get itself called round, and yet is not round after all. The earth itself is shaped like an orange in order to lure some simple astronomer into calling it a globe. A blade of grass is called after the blade of a sword, because it comes to a point; but it doesn't. Everywhere in things there is this element of the quiet and incalculable. It escapes the rationalists, but it never escapes till the last moment:³⁶

whenever we feel there is something odd in Christian theology, we shall generally find that there is something odd in the truth.³⁷

If then one listens attentively to the liturgy with ears and heart and mind, and indeed even with the eyes, one can learn new exciting things. Doors open on new questions, new ideas, new insights. What seemed hopelessly obsolete becomes suddenly contemporary. What was dull and familiar may one day, as you go through it one more time mechanically and unfeelingly by rote, suddenly open before your eyes to reveal an unsuspected layer of meaning for you at that moment in your life. A liturgy so charged with potential can open for scholars and for others as well, intellectuals and ordinary people, the wise and the simple alike.

Indeed there are explosives hidden in the liturgy as in the Bible, because liturgy is so filled with the language, spirit, and message of the Bible, and they may go off when we least expect. If we do not hold on to what we have inherited from the past we would deprive ourselves of the wisdom of those who have gone before us and who arrived at their knowledge and their formulations after great struggle and after great cost.

36. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 148-149.

37. Chesterton, 150.

That may not boost your attendance; it may not spread harmony in a divisive congregation or bring vigor to a moribund parish. But it will make the Christian community in our time more faithful to its past and more open to the promise of the future. The mark of an authentic Church is that it is respectful of the accumulated treasure of the church's long experience, for there in those images and symbols, many of which are older than we know, lie as yet undiscovered riches to be tended until we are ready to understand them. The preservation and employment of that life-giving treasure is what liturgy is all about.

The preservation and employment of that life-giving treasure is what Pastor Lindemann's long ministry has been all about too, and for that we are in his debt. To him we say, Thank you.