CHRISTIANITY’S WILDNESS

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“Cult” is a pejorative term. It has been used to refer to branches of the historical Christian tree that deny either the Trinity, the incarnation, or both. These include Quakers (1648), Unitarian-Universalists (1796, 1778, respectively; merger, 1961), Mormons (1830), Spiritualists (1848), Jehovah’s Witnesses (1872), Christian Science (1879), Unity (1889), Church of Scientology (1953), Unification Church (1954), etc.

But cults also have grown out of popular culture. These include groups focused around psychedelics, shamanism, native American religions, voodoo, neo-paganism (including wicca), the occult (Satanism, goth culture), New Age, self-improvement (est, Silva Mind Control), holistic health practices, extraterrestrials, and various esotericisms (Swedenborgianism, Theosophy, Carlos Castañeda).

Why are cults popular, while Christianity is losing popularity?

I think, perhaps, that too often Christianity has become insipid: It has lost its wildness. Religion should reach into our subconscious depths and pull forth images that speak to our existence at more than the rational level. For we do exist below our necks; and down there, we are animals—wild animals. The essential realities of existence are (as the poet William Butler Yeats once put it in a letter to Olivia Shakespear, Oct. 1927) sex and death. (Sex is not just the cut and thrust of intercourse but also romance, reproduction, and family.)

For example: has it ever occurred to you how the iconography of the Virgin Mary seems unconsciously to allude to female genitalia? In statues of Mary, the hands are to the side; sometimes they are open, a gesture of largesse; sometimes they hold the edges of her robe. Either way, the resulting oval shape suggests labia pulled aside, with Mary’s head where the clitoris would be. In the Virgin of Guadalupe (depicting Juan Diego’s vision of 1531), the frame around Mary is not angular (a rectangle) but a soft oval, again like a vaginal opening.

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Two phrases by Yeats have come to mind that I think illustrate the wildness that Christianity dare not lose touch with.

In one of his poems (“Two Songs from a Play”), Yeats refers to the incarnation as the time “when that fierce virgin and her star / Out of the fabulous darkness came.”

In one of his plays (*Resurrection*), Yeats has a character reach into Christ’s side. (In John 20:24, Jesus directs the apostle Thomas to “Reach out your hand and put it in my side.” In the play, the character is not named “Thomas,” though clearly the allusion is to him.) When the character reaches in, he recoils as if shocked by electricity: “The heart of a phantom is beating! The heart of a phantom is beating!”

One final thought. I grew up attending Protestant services. A few hymns; a polite sermon; socializing afterward. Then I became Catholic. A principal reason was that Catholicism has better retained Christianity’s wildness. I don’t want to socialize on Sunday; I don’t want to nod at God in passing. I want to touch the Being behind all appearances. I want His blood on my teeth.