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The Mysteries of Christianity

Mysterien des Christentums (1865) · Trans. Cyril Vollert, S.J. (1946)

CHAPTER I

The Mystery of Christianity in General

1. Interest of the Subject

Christianity entered the world as a religion replete with mysteries. It was proclaimed as the mystery of Christ,¹ as the “mystery of the kingdom of God.”² Its ideas and doctrines were unknown, unprecedented; and they were to remain inscrutable and unfathomable.

The mysterious character of Christianity, which was sufficiently intelligible in its simplest fundamentals, was foolishness to the Gentiles and a stumbling block to the Jews; and since Christianity in the course of time never relinquished and could never relinquish this character of mystery without belying its nature, it remained ever a foolishness, a stumbling block to all those who, like the Gentiles, looked upon it with unconsecrated eyes or, like the Jews, encountered it with uncircumcised hearts. With bitter scorn they would ever scoff at its mysterious nature as obscurantism, superstition, fanaticism, and absurdity.

After the mystery of Christianity had, in spite of all this, succeeded in making its way and became firmly entrenched in the belief of the nations, it found other and less malevolent adversaries. Many souls were too noble to disdain the lofty and beneficent force of Christianity, or too respectful of the faith of their childhood and the heritage of their fathers to turn from it in arrogance, but still not humble enough to surrender themselves to it with childlike trust. They sought to snatch the veil from the sanctuary of Christianity, to cleave the mystery so as to liberate the kernel of truth from the dark prison of its shell and bring it to light.

Even friends and zealous defenders of Christianity could not always suppress a certain dread when they stood in the obscurity of its mysteries. To buttress belief in Christian truth and to defend it, they desired to resolve it into a rational science,³ to demonstrate articles of faith by

arguments drawn from reason, and so to reshape them that nothing would remain of the obscure, the incomprehensible, the impenetrable. They did not realize that by such a procedure they were betraying Christianity into the hands of her enemies and wresting the fairest jewel from her crown.

The greater, the more sublime, and the more divine Christianity is, the more inexhaustible, inscrutable, unfathomable, and mysterious its subject matter must be. If its teaching is worthy of the only-begotten Son of God, if the Son of God had to descend from the bosom of His Father to initiate us into this teaching, could we expect anything else than the revelation of the deepest mysteries locked up in God's heart? Could we expect anything else than disclosures concerning a higher, invisible world, about divine and heavenly things, which "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard," and which could not enter into the heart of any man?⁴ And if God has sent us His own Spirit to teach us all truth, the Spirit of His truth, who dwells in God and there searches the deep things of God,⁵ should this Spirit reveal nothing new, great, and wondrous, should He teach us no sublime secrets?

Far from repudiating Christianity or regarding it with suspicious eyes because of its mysteries, we ought to recognize its divine grandeur in these very mysteries. So essential to Christianity are its mysteries that in its character of truth revealed by the Son of God and the Holy Spirit it would stand convicted of intrinsic contradiction if it brought forward no mysteries. Its Author would carry with Him a poor recommendation for His divinity if He taught us only such truths as in the last analysis we could have learned from a mere man, or could have perceived and adequately grasped by our own unaided powers.

I would go even further: the truths of Christianity would not stir us as they do, nor would they draw us or hearten us, and they would not be embraced by us with such love and joy, if they contained no mysteries. What makes many a man recoil from the Christian mysteries as from sinister specters is neither the voice of nature nor the inner impulse of the heart nor the yearning for light and truth, but the arrogance of a wanton and overweening pride. When the heart thirsts after truth, when the knowledge of the truth is its purest delight and highest joy, the sublime, the exalted, the extraordinary, the incomprehensible all exercise an especial attraction. A truth that is easily discovered and quickly grasped can neither enchant nor hold. To enchant and hold us it must surprise us by its novelty, it must overpower us with its magnificence; its wealth and profundity must exhibit ever new splendors, ever deeper abysses to the exploring eye. We find but slight stimulation and pleasure in studies whose subject matter is soon exhausted and so leaves nothing further for our wonderment. But how powerfully sciences enthrall us when every glance into them suggests new marvels to divine, and every facet of the object imprisons new and greater splendors!

The greatest charm in knowledge is astonishment, surprise, wonderment. The less we previously knew of a thing, especially the less we dared hope to learn about it by ourselves and the more we marvel at its existence, the more fortunate we regard ourselves when at length we come to know it. The more exalted an object is, the more its beauty and greatness impress us and the more it compels our admiration, the more even the slightest glance that we dare fix on it captivates us. In a word, the charm of truth is proportionate to its abstruseness and mystery. Must not Christianity, too, be especially valuable and dear to us because of the mysteries it involves? And indeed is it not all the more precious the greater are the mysteries which it harbors within itself? Does not Christianity impress us so powerfully just because it is one vast mystery, because it is the greatest of mysteries, the mystery of God?

Fundamentally, of course, it is not exactly the obscurity engulfing an object that makes the mystery so highly prized and attractive for us. Our souls, born of Light and destined for Light, flee darkness and long for light; darkness as such has no enticement for them. Why does the dawn exercise so enchanting an influence over us, why does it charm us more than the full light of day? Not because the light is mixed with darkness, but rather because it disperses the darkness that surrounded us, and brings in its train the light we have yearned for so long and so earnestly, and because our anxious hearts are cheered by the ever-growing glories of the sun.

What captivates us is the emergence of a light that had been hidden from us. Mysteries must in themselves be lucid, glorious truths. The darkness can be only on our side, so far as our eyes are turned away from the mysteries, or at any rate are not keen enough to confront them and see through them. There must be truths that baffle our scrutiny not because of their intrinsic darkness and confusion, but because of their excessive brilliance, sublimity, and beauty, which not even the sturdiest human eye can encounter without going blind.

When truths which had been entirely inaccessible to us become manifest, when God by His grace makes it possible for us, if only from afar, to cast a timid glance into their depths, a wondrous light dawns in us and the rosy morning glow of a heavenly world breaks over us; and although the darkness that surrounded us and still surrounds us strikes our consciousness only when we have such an experience, a single ray of the higher light that shines upon us is powerful enough to fill us with unutterable rapture.

The fascination of mystery is so strong that almost all religious and social organizations that exercise or have exercised an inspiring and lasting influence on mankind have wrapped themselves up in the obscurity of mystery, and have even gloried in the mysteries which they were aware of, although they disdained Christianity because of its mysteries. Their mysteries, products of human invention, are of course mere caricatures of the divine mysteries. Either they are plain mystifications with which to dupe the uninitiate, or they are in part genuine, in part spurious truths which lose the noble character of mystery by the very fact that they are proposed

to the initiate as evident. The Christian, on the other hand, is really initiated into the mysteries of God. He rightly regards this initiation as an illumination replete with wonder and grace; but for this very reason he is filled with the deepest reverence for the sublimity of his mysteries. He acknowledges the grace of God with holy gratitude, but without despising the uninitiated. He earnestly desires that they too may participate in this same tremendous grace; and if in former ages Christians kept their mysteries hidden from unbelievers, it was only because of their solicitude that what was sacred should not be profaned and defiled in the eyes and hands of the unclean.

But when the Christian humbly receives the revelation of God's mysteries as a great grace, he is entitled to a holy pride. With holy pride he can and ought to glory in the exalted mysteries that he possesses by the grace of God; he can and should regard himself as the object of an extraordinary illumination, as an initiate into the great mysteries, which are hidden from the mighty and wise of this world. Today especially, when a superficial enlightenment with its deceptive glimmer is intent on supplanting the mysteries of our faith, the Christian must be conscious of his sublime illumination and proud of the dawn of a higher, fairer, supernatural world that has risen over him in the faith. How can we call forth and strengthen this lofty consciousness, this holy pride? Not by denying the darkness which still shrouds the mysteries from the eyes of the initiate, but by pointing out that even the feeble ray gleaming forth from the darkness is strong enough at least to herald the incredible magnificence of the mysteries. Such demonstration is what we have desired to furnish in the present work, and thus we hope to make a contribution to the advancement of Christian knowledge and Christian life.

In order at the very outset to disclose the plan that we are following in this book, and the principles that guide us, we must first of all, by a careful analysis, come to an understanding about the notion of mystery.

2. The Notion of Mystery in General and of Christian Mystery in Particular

What do we mean by mystery in general? We mean all that is secret, hidden from us; consequently everything that is not seen or known by us, and that cannot be either seen or known by us.

But if this is the case, does it not follow that as soon as a thing comes to our actual knowledge, as soon as it becomes manifest to us, it ceases to be a mystery? To be sure, so far as it becomes really known by us and becomes really manifest to us, it can no longer remain hidden from us, can no longer be a secret, and hence can no longer be a mystery. But cannot a thing which is manifest to us still present obscurity in some respects, and thus remain hidden from us? In fact, is it not usually the case that we know things only according to some aspect, or in general

have only a superficial acquaintance with them, without comprehending them from all angles or penetrating into their innermost nature? Indeed, is it not usually true that even what we know of a thing remains obscure and perplexing for the very reason that we cannot reach down into its innermost depths and hence cannot conceive and explain it in terms of its ultimate essence? And in particular, when we have to sketch a composite picture of a thing's nature from the various properties which it displays, is not this picture ordinarily as dark and enigmatic as a silhouette, because we lack an intimate and thorough understanding of the relationships among its various properties?

Nearly all the objects of our knowledge, even the simplest, the most natural, and the most familiar, continue to remain mysteries for us in some respect. The light that falls upon them cannot dispel all darkness from them. Everything remains to some extent inconceivable to us, because our concepts and representations do not embrace all the knowable details of an object; likewise, everything is unfathomable, because the more deeply our gaze penetrates into an object the weaker and less certain it becomes. Further, an essential characteristic of the knowledge we have of a thing is an awareness of the imperfection, deficiency, and obscurity of that knowledge; we do not deceive ourselves that the little we perceive is all that can be perceived. If we were thus to deceive ourselves, we should be regarding darkness itself as light, and we should betray the fact that the light does not shine for us even where its rays actually fall. All true philosophers have quite rightly considered the consciousness of lack of knowledge as an essential factor of true knowledge. Conscious lack of knowledge was for them a "learned ignorance" and enabled them to mark off light from shadow, and thus to bring out in sharper prominence the clear lines of their system of philosophy.⁶

But the basic reason why our cognition does not perfectly and thoroughly illuminate its objects is the feebleness and limitation of the inner light from which it proceeds. Only God's cognition excludes all mysteries, because it springs from an infinite Light which with infinite power penetrates and illuminates the innermost depths of everything that exists. But the created intellect, no matter how pure and perfect it may be, will never with its finite power comprehend and conceive everything that is; its eye is impeded by its very nature from reaching into the deepest foundations of things, and so it cannot perfectly fathom all objects. Much less can the human intellect do so, because it is not a pure spirit but is shackled to matter. Angels have an immediate perception at least of themselves. But man, whether we consider him in himself or with regard to objects outside of himself, has an immediate perception only of the phenomena, the external appearances, the accidents proper to things, from which he may grope toward some knowledge of essences. His reason makes it possible for him, even demands of him, that he pass beyond the phenomenon so that he may perceive not only the phenomenon itself, but also the essence which externalizes and expresses itself in the phenomenon, and thereby to some extent explain and understand the phenomena themselves. His intelligence not only perceives the signs

and manifestations that strike the eye, but from them reasons to the cause without which they cannot exist and endure. He reads beneath the surface into the essence which the external appearances disclose to him, and into the cause which confronts him in its effects and which lies concealed behind the effects. But since no essence is entirely revealed in its phenomena, and no cause in its effect, the ray of light with which we penetrate the shell cannot expose the kernel. Knowledge of an essence gained from its phenomena will never equal knowledge gained from immediate intuition, and therefore even the understanding of the phenomena will never be perfect. The former as well as the latter will always remain obscure and full of mystery.

If by mystery we mean nothing more than an object which is not entirely conceivable and unfathomable in its innermost essence, we need not seek very far to find mysteries. Such mysteries are found not only above us, but all around us, in us, under us. The real essence of all things is concealed from our eyes. The physicist will never fully plumb the laws of forces in the physico-chemical world and perfectly comprehend their effects; and the same is true of the physiologist with regard to the laws of organic nature, of the psychologist with regard to the soul, of the metaphysician with regard to the ultimate basis of all being.

Christianity is not alone in exhibiting mysteries in the above-mentioned sense. If its truths are inconceivable and unfathomable, so in greater part are the truths of reason. This by itself does not imply anything against Christianity, nor does it imply much in its favor. As will be shown, however, the truths that are specifically proper to Christianity are inconceivable and unfathomable in an exclusively special sense. To appreciate this fact, we must go on to consider another aspect of the notion of mystery.

When a person understands a truth, it is no longer a mystery for him but is clear to him, to the extent that he understands it. But do we not ordinarily say that he who understands a truth which he had not previously been aware of and did not suspect, or which others are not yet aware of, knows a secret or mystery? That is so; still, the truth is no longer a mystery for him. Well then, what if he were of himself utterly incapable of discovering the truth which he now knows, and which even now, after it has become manifest to him, is known only because another to whom he lends credence has communicated it to him, and which, finally, even now he does not grasp by the light of his own intellect but only by faith? In this case the truth, in spite of such revelation, still remains hidden, because it does not lie open to our scrutiny and is not perceived in itself. If, in addition, the truth which has been revealed by another has absolutely no similarity, or but very slight similarity, with anything which we ourselves have ever seen or experienced, then naturally we are much less capable of forming a clear idea of it than we are of other things which do not extend beyond our experience. Thus in a double respect it will be obscure in its own way even after it has been revealed, and accordingly will be and will remain a mystery in a quite special sense.

Mysteries of this sort are, to some extent, found even in the natural order. Let us suppose, for instance, that a traveler from a foreign country, to which we cannot go, gives us an account of a plant whose color, blossom, and fragrance have practically no similarity with any we have seen; or that someone should discourse on light and its effects to a man born blind. In such cases, of course, the mystery is not absolute, and does not obtain for all men, since it is not at all obscure for some, or even for a large number. But let us take a truth to which no men, no creatures at all can attain by the natural means of cognition at their disposal, which they can perceive only by a supernatural illumination, which can be grasped only by belief in God's word, and which is remote from everything that the creature naturally knows, as remote as heaven is from earth. Then we have a mystery in its absolute form as a truth whose existence the creature cannot ascertain without belief in God's word, and whose subject matter he cannot represent and conceive directly, but only indirectly by comparison with dissimilar things.

Mystery in its absolute form, as we have just described it, is Christian mystery, that is, mystery which divine revelation in the person of the incarnate Word proposes to the world for belief.

In accordance with our description, two elements are essential to a mystery: first, that the existence of the proposed truth is attainable by no natural means of cognition, that it lies beyond the range of the created intellect; secondly, that its content is capable of apprehension only by analogous concepts. If either one of these two elements is lacking, a truth cannot be called a mystery of Christianity in the strict sense, even if it has actually been proposed by Christian revelation. Owing to the absence of the first element, the doctrine of the existence of God and His essential attributes, for example, is not a mystery in this sense. For, although we apprehend all this only by analogous concepts, so that our notion must always remain obscure, reason can know that the objects apprehended really exist.

NOTES

1. Eph. 3:4; Col. 4:3.
2. Mk. 4:11.
3. Cf. *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* on the rationalist reduction of faith.
4. 1 Cor. 2:9.
5. 1 Cor. 2:10–11.
6. Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia*.