

# The Concept of *Ex-Opere-Operato* Efficacy in the Fathers as an Evidence of Magic in Early Christianity

*E. G. Welton*

**I**N ITS SEARCH for meaning and security in the vast new Hellenistic environment, the ancient world turned in a versatile way to many different panaceas: learned scientific investigation, deep religious inspiration, lofty philosophical speculation, and grossest magical hocus-pocus. Young Christianity growing up in these surroundings found it difficult to avoid some surface infection from the magic in the air. A general probe into all the areas of the Christian body susceptible to this cancerous growth would be exhaustive; for the present we shall localize our exploratory investigation mainly in the third and fourth centuries, restrict it to very definite symptoms of magical contagion and support it only in Patristic literature.

On the whole, apostolic and second-century Christianity breathed a rather mild atmosphere of magic because the great front of Oriental occultism had not yet moved into the West.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, classical paganism, traditionally a strong counter-current to magic, was still relatively influential.<sup>2</sup> Ever since the issuance of the Twelve Tables,

<sup>1</sup>However, the writings of Lucretius, Lucian, and Plutarch attest to the prevalence of superstition. Pliny (*Hist. Nat.* 28.4) says everyone is in fear of being bewitched.

<sup>2</sup>It is possibly too often and too definitely assumed that late classical paganism was a completely hollow shell. One might label the Augustan religious revival antiquarian and academic, and the erection of great temples like Baalbek anachronous and superficial, but one can not so easily dismiss the abundant evidence for the virility of official paganism in the writings of the Christian Fathers. Judging from the Apologists,

its official priesthood had consistently indicted this "bastard sister of religion" and banned it from the *jus divinum*. The five chief outlets of classical religious expression: the *sacrificio*, *lustratio*, *piaculum*, *votum*, and *divinatio*, while carrying vestigial traces of probable early magical origins, had eventually found ways to be of service to a true religious spirit. Despite the fact that in later classical religion antiquarian formalistic prayers and rituals remained prescribed, airs of *ex-opere-operato* efficacy still seemed to surround lustrations, and tight legalistic contractual relationships appeared to bind gods and men, there exists surprisingly disappointing evidence that the gods could be constrained by any magical gnosis to respond to human rituals<sup>3</sup> and that they were, therefore, begrudgingly eager to escape this compulsion by taking advantage of every faulty ceremonial. Nor is there any evidence that they had ever made a voluntary solemn contract with men pledging themselves to render their worshippers' rituals efficacious upon demand. Prayers had long substituted the subjunctive for the imperative. The worshipper merely rationally expected that if honored with proper rites, the gods, as the traditional benefactors of Rome, would be pleased to respond.<sup>4</sup> The chief, or even a major, indictment of classical paganism by the Christian apologist is not for magic.

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the Christians saw the old paganism together with Greek philosophy rather than the mysteries as the great rivals of Christianity. Why should the Fathers, unless they are hopelessly naive, point out consistently the impiety and foolishness of the classical gods if no one took these old worthies seriously? Or why trouble to convert them into daemons if they were already dead? For classical paganism and magic see in general: C. Bailey, *Phases in the Religion of Ancient Rome* (Berkeley 1932) 14f; W. Fowler, *Religious Experience of the Roman People* (London 1911) 57, 105-7, 224.

<sup>3</sup>See Bailey 37-39, 73-96 and Fowler 181-189. Cicero reports the view (*De Div.* 1.81-3) that the gods ought to feel constrained by their nature to predict the future to man. But besides this remark he has nothing to say about a contract. Nor Plutarch. Pliny in his *Natural History* seems to suggest that man can compel the gods to act. The fact that priests can evoke and suppress thunder storms (*fulmina elici*, 28.2[3].13) and their supposed intimate connection with Jupiter Elicius seem to imply that the priests are compelling the will of Jupiter. Also the phrase *quod numini imperet* (28.2[4].20) seems to support the idea. But on the other hand he says "imperare naturae sacra audacis credere, nec minus hebetis beneficiis abrogare vires . . ." (2.53[54].140-1) and in 28.2(4).17 the efficacy of certain formulae of the augurs is taken as an example of divine indulgence. One line in Virgil (*Ec.* 8.70) "numero deus impare gaudet" suggests that the gods are pleased with pure "magical" hocus-pocus.

<sup>4</sup>The gods, mythologically conceived, are motivated by anger and favor. It is these two motives that Epicurus specifically denies them in the first of his *Principal Doc-*

Despite consistent accusations of *superstitio* by the pagans, early Christianity seems, on the whole, quite anxious to avoid the bizarre. Even the "mystic" St. Paul mistrusted the decidedly un-Roman flavor of glossolalia and rampant prophecy; soon the display of these charismata threatened to single one out as a Montanist. Peter's magical contests in the *Acts of Peter and Paul* with the precocious aviator Simon Magus are fabrications of a later and more credulous and romantic age. Early Christian rituals were too fluid to invite *ex-opere-operato* interpretations: Paul baptized and laid hands on the same persons on the same occasion,<sup>5</sup> leaving no sharp indication which ceremony conferred the gifts of the Spirit. Romans 6:3 rather than implying a strong *ex-opere-operato* concept of baptism, pictures it as an incentive to some sustained cooperation on our part.<sup>6</sup> Diverse sacramental formulae preclude an ascription of self-virtuous powers to any magical set of words. Along with the Trinitarian formula, the *Didache* speaks of baptism into the "name

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*trines*: "The blessed and immortal nature . . . is never constrained by anger or favor." Any act of worship, if properly performed, pleases the gods; if not, it angers them. For example, the cutting up of the sacrificial victim by Prometheus in Hesiod (*Theog.* 554) displeased Zeus. This explanation might also account for failures; the god, even though pleased by the immediate act, might be angry for some other reason so that the pleasing act might have to be repeated several times before the god is won over. There is a passage in Eunapius (7.3.12) where Maximus tells Chrysanthius that an expert in religion need never accept unfavorable omens but can compel the nature of the divine to incline toward the worshipper. But on the basis of the pleasure and anger explanation this merely could mean than an expert knows so well how to please the deity that by persisting he can at last win over the divine good will. This theory suggests a possible explanation for the apparently mechanical procedures in Roman religion without resorting to any "magical" explanation. I owe most of these ideas and references to the interest of a colleague.

<sup>5</sup>Acts 19:5-6.

<sup>6</sup>The interesting problem of what Paul meant in this passage is a puzzle in itself and fortunately outside the scope of this study. But for a consideration of the relationship of Paul's baptismal views to the mystery cults in connection with other relevant materials, see Per Lundberg, "La Typologie Baptismale dans L'Ancienne Eglise," *Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Upsaliensis* X (Uppsala 1942) 215f. O. Casel, "Neue Zeugnisse für das Kultmysterium," *Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft* XIII (Munster in Westf. 1933) 111, records Theodore of Mopsuestia's views on this Pauline passage as: "Er [Paul, Röm. 6.3f] lehrte damit klar, dass wir getauft worden sind, damit wir an uns selbst den Tod und die Auferstehung des Herrn nachahmen sollten und damit wir aus unserem Gedächtnis der Ereignisse, die stattgefunden haben, die Festigung unseres Glaubens an die zukünftigen Dinge erhalten sollten . . . Und wir vollziehen in sakramentaler Weise die Ereignisse, die sich in bezug auf Christus unserem Herrn vollzogen, zu dem Zweck, dass, wie es uns durch diese Dinge gezeigt worden ist, unsere Gemeinschaft mit ihm unsere Hoffnung stärken möge."

of the Lord"; Acts, too, has Paul baptizing in "the name of the Lord Jesus." The Eucharistic formula differs in all the primary sources and the normal sequence of the bread and the cup is reversed by Luke as well as by the *Didache*.<sup>7</sup> The early Apologists rely upon reason and common sense more than on miracles to provide them with persuasive arguments, and the potency of relics and all the other wonders of vulgar Catholicism were yet to be discovered.

But discovered they were, especially when fourth-century converts, often more politically prudent than theologically enlightened, brought with them a more virile magical orientation. In a world being both Orientalized and Germanized at once, it was natural that "isms" should arise to stabilize emotional security. Gnosticism grew to new proportions. The vulgar relished tips on the peculiar virtue of each new homely charm and spell. The sophisticated, trusting in a kind of inverted sympathetic magic, sought knowledge of correct astrological correspondences or spheres of influence between the movements of the heavenly bodies and the course of human events. Mystics craved esoteric gnosis of the psychology — or theology — of the gods and of their history — or mythology — so that by imitating actions or episodes in their divine careers they might, in turn, be "saved" vicariously through sympathetic magic. Such, becoming converts to the well-known "mystery" religions, were automatically equipped with a built-in gnosis for salvation. Even the learned succumbed. Neo-Platonists, like Iamblichus, made philosophy an occult art of theurgy with *ex-opere-operato* efficiency to compel divine attention through the secret rite and the cabalistic word. Gnosticism threatened to turn even Christianity into a science of magic. Apocryphal gnostic literature whetted Christian appetites, too, for the secret logia of Jesus like that revealed in the *Gospel of Thomas* — words too scandalous for even restricted circles but promising to reward their interpreters with a guarantee of eternal

<sup>7</sup>Acts 19:5-6; *Didache* 9.5, 7.1. For the Eucharist formulae: I Cor. 11:23; Mark 14:22; Matt. 26:26; Luke 22:15. See Luke and the *Didache* (9.1-4) for a reversal of the bread and cup sequence.

life.<sup>8</sup> Apparently all, from the simpleton to the seer, sought the Gnosis to force the hands of the gods.<sup>9</sup>

Since it is unlikely that rank-and-file converts to Christianity were able, or anxious for that matter, to discern and act upon the subtle distinction that separated the "magical" efficacy of their former invocations and cult rituals from the true "miraculous" power of words and signs in their new Christian dispensation, one can to some extent appreciate the quasi-magical flavor of third and fourth century Christianity. While this flavor is abundantly evidenced in the pseudo-magical quality of the formulas and liturgies of different sacramental rites, in the mysterious vagaries of gnostic, apocryphal, and heretical literature, and in the strange practices of vulgar Christianity imported from the pagan background, we wish to restrict ourselves to the literary evidence of the Fathers who, it appears, were themselves not entirely immune to the impact of magic about them. Their general orthodox outlook which naturally demands a sustained intolerance of the magical, admittedly makes scattered, oblique, or inconsistent remarks inviting a magical interpretation very difficult to interpret and assess. But some passages seem sufficiently clear to rule out the possibility that they are meant merely as symbolical, metaphorical, or rhetorical devices. These passages range from Jerome's display of harmless naive credulity when he vouches for the preservation at Antioch in salt of a bizarre mannikin with a hooked snout, horned forehead, and goat feet,<sup>10</sup> to Augustine's pseudo-magical theological speculations on the *ex-opere-operato* virtue of the sacraments. As of old, we find dreams and omens revealing impending events and confirming theological verities; even Cyprian, the hard-headed champion of hierarchical institutionalism, feels moved occasionally to share with his readers particularly convincing nightmares and to declare mistrust of them

<sup>8</sup>Eva Meyerovitch, "The Gnostic Manuscripts of Upper Egypt," *Diogenes* (Spring 1959) 103-4.

<sup>9</sup>See for example W. W. Tarn, *Hellenistic Civilization*<sup>2</sup> (London 1930) 316; F. Legge, *Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass. 1915) I 104-5; H. O. Taylor, *The Medieval Mind*<sup>4</sup> (Cambridge, Mass. 1949) I 47.

<sup>10</sup>Jerome, *Vita Pauli* 8. All references and translations of the Fathers are taken, when available, from the *Ante and Post Nicene Fathers* series, ed. Roberts and Donaldson, Schaff and Wace.

a badge of anti-clericalism.<sup>11</sup> Irenaeus, Cyprian, Ambrose, Sulpicius Severus, Cassian, Socrates, and Sozomen all abundantly and tire-somely attest to fantastic and often puerile miracles; Augustine approves of them as distinct confirmations of truth.<sup>12</sup> Even the normally sober Gregory of Nyssa records wonders performed by the great thaumaturgist Gregory which would baffle not only the most versatile pagan magician — and old Moses, too — but would make even Pliny suspicious. John Chrysostom seemingly senses an uncomfortable similarity between Christian and pagan wonderworkings, for he warns that miracles “often carry with them either a notion of mere fancy, or another evil suspicion, although ours be not such.”<sup>13</sup> Miraculous relics and tombs have the Fathers’ blessings; they deplore only that bogus monks were hawking out a doubtful line of these martyrs’ limbs.<sup>14</sup> The Sign of the Cross, properly capitalized as almost a cosmic reality, opens doors, quenches poisonous drugs and bites, drives out demons, hexes pagan sacrifices and oracles, foils all sorts of real magic and witchcraft,<sup>15</sup> and even keeps tools sharp. Gregory of Nyssa believes the actual wood of the cross has power in itself to produce wonderous cures; Ambrose suspects that the number 318 has a holy power, and Sozomen records that the power of a word has proved equally efficacious in silencing philosophers and cleaving stone walls.<sup>16</sup> Origen reputedly objects to the casting of a person’s horoscope because it destroys the subject’s free will,<sup>17</sup> and it is well known that Constantine thinks it enlightened to make an official legal distinction between “black” and “white” magic. The end the perpetrator has in mind determines the color.

However, a recital of mere instances of personal credulities, or of isolated evidences of an eccentric faith in the potency of some peripheral act in vulgar Catholicism, is scarcely representa-

<sup>11</sup>See Lactant. *De Opif. Dei* 18; August. *Ep.* 159.34; Cyprian, *Ep.* 68.10.

<sup>12</sup>August. *c. Faustum* 13.5, *De Util. Credendi* 35.

<sup>13</sup>John Chrys. *Hom.* 32.11 (on Matt.).

<sup>14</sup>August. *De Opere Monach.* 36.

<sup>15</sup>John Chrys. *Hom.* 54.7 (on Matt.); Greg. Nyss. *In Bapt. Christi*; Lactant. *Div. Inst.* 4.27; Athanasius, *De Incar. Verbi Dei* 48.

<sup>16</sup>Greg. Nyss. *In Bapt. Christi*; Ambr. *De Fide* (Prologue) 3; Sozomen, *H. E.* 1.18.

<sup>17</sup>George B. Vetter, *Magic and Religion* (New York 1958) 150. Unfortunately I have been unable to find the statement in Origen himself.

tive of the quality of the Father's thinking. Far more just to them, and enlightening to us, is an examination of their views on the possibility that an *ex-opere-operato* efficacy attaches itself to Christian ceremonials. In investigating this thesis, it seems well to be alert to: 1) evidences of faith in the inherent power of words and signs both in themselves and as imitative operations, 2) signs of efficaciousness in important ceremonies regardless of the subjective intention or character of the ministrant or recipient, 3) indications that God's attention, response, and even presence can be compelled by the ministrant whenever he speaks the required words and makes the prescribed esoteric signs.

### *The Power of Words and Signs*

Belief in the intrinsic power of words among Christians is not a Gnostic monopoly.<sup>18</sup> Origen professes that names, when translated into foreign languages, lose their natural powers and are no longer able to accomplish what they did before when uttered in their native tongue. When the name of a person, for instance, is translated into a different language "we could not make him do or suffer the same things which he would have done or suffered under the appellation originally bestowed on him."<sup>19</sup> If one changes the name of a deity in an invocation or oath he naturally gets no results because names only when properly used "produce certain effects, owing either to the nature of those names or to their powers."<sup>20</sup> The names of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when coupled with the name of God, Origen admonishes us, possess such intrinsic efficacy that not only the Jews themselves employed these words in exorcising demons "but so also do almost all those who occupy themselves with incantations and magical rites" and have recourse to the best standard international handbooks on magic. These words have mysterious powers and marvelous qualities "patent to those who are qualified to use them"; Genesis itself establishes "in the clearest manner that effects not to be lightly regarded are produced by the invocation" of these names;

<sup>18</sup>See Eva Meyerovitch, *op.cit.* 84-117.

<sup>19</sup>Origen, *c. Cels.* 5.45. ". . . τὸν δεῖνα οὐκ ἂν . . . ποιῆσαι μὲν παθεῖν ἢ δράσαι ἄπερ πάθοι ἢ δράσαι ἂν καλούμενος τῇ πρώτῃ θέσει τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ." (Migne)

<sup>20</sup>Origen, *ibid.*

their precise meaning and interpretation, however, can be gleaned only through the original Hebrew.<sup>21</sup> Apparently when one pronounces certain names he unleashes, as it were, a power into the air so that the world is never quite the same again. Hilary, too, believes that names are somehow inseparably connected to, and inherent in, the things which they signify.<sup>22</sup> The names of Christian churches: Holy Wisdom in Constantinople, or Holy Cross in Rome, are eloquent witnesses that not only heretical Christian gnostics pictured God's attributes as practically independent self-virtuous hypostases or personified material instruments as transcendental efficacious realities.

The holy Name of Jesus — again properly capitalized — is often spoken of as virtually a substantial manifestation of the Godhead. The step from this position to the point where the Fathers attest to the “marvelous efficacy of the Name” of Jesus in performing sundry miracles is, of course, an easy and legitimate one. Athanasius apparently was worried about possible misinterpretations of the efficacy of the Name for, while telling how all demoniac frenzy dissipates when His Name is uttered, he assuringly and somewhat circuitously argues that this marvel is accomplished not through magic since it is obvious Christ is no magician in as much as His Name destroys “magic” rather than confirms it. Results of the invocation, at any rate, if not magical, are equally surprising. In Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, where there is a plethora of demons, a big one was shriveled up by the Name of Jesus while another was scorched a bit.<sup>23</sup> Cyril agrees that the invocation of the Name chars evil spirits like the fiercest flame, and Tertullian, who specializes in demons, early confessed that “all the authority and power we have over them is from naming the Name of Christ.”<sup>24</sup>

To the more sublime. In baptism words are very significant. They seem to be so in two ways: 1) as framing typological ref-

<sup>21</sup>Origen, *c. Cels.* 5.33-35, Justin, *Dial. c. Tryph.* 85 also vouches for the effectiveness of this invocation but doesn't think it is quite as dependable in exorcisms as the use of the name Jesus.

<sup>22</sup>Hilary, *De Trin.* 7.31.

<sup>23</sup>See Jerome, *Vita S. Hilar.* 14; Athanasius, *De Incar. Verbi Dei* 48, *Vita Anton.* 40-1.

<sup>24</sup>Cyril, *Cat.* 20.3; Tert. *Apol.* 23.

erences to baptism to be used in the instructions and prayers attendant upon that sacrament, and 2) as constituting specific consecration formulae which operate directly, automatically, and instantaneously upon the initiate. As tempting as the former be,<sup>25</sup> we must not be led astray from our self-imposed Patristic limitation. Besides, it is highly doubtful if typology, which is fundamentally a form of exegesis, stands in any direct connection with magic other than furnishing us a feeling for the general atmosphere in which magic worked. Typology stands to magic in the same proportion as a passive reminiscence which encourages our expectations can be said to stand to a real imitative action efficacious in itself. The typological references to former miracles of transformation and deliverance merely create a background atmosphere in reminding the initiate that events of similar kinds can be expected to repeat themselves in divine history. Words of consecration, which have a direct action, are of a different stripe.

Pagans apparently thought Christians overestimated the potency of such words in baptism; they are wont, says Rufinus, to deride us for deceiving ourselves in thinking "that crimes committed in deed could be washed away by words," and Porphyry brands adult baptism as presumptuous in that many sins are forgiven by a simple invocation of Christ's name.<sup>26</sup> Cyril, while speaking of the power of words over the baptismal waters, draws an interesting comparison which seems not entirely free from magical implications:

<sup>25</sup>Per Lundberg's study "La Typologie Baptismale dans L' Ancienne Eglise" (*supra* n. 6) points out that the prayers of different baptismal rites, Greek, Syrian, Copt, Ethiopian, Armenian, all tend to use biblical texts reminiscent of miracles of change, transformation, or deliverance (pp. 19-23). Favorite typological references are to the passing through the Red Sea, crossing the Jordan, Jonah and the whale, etc. Such past miracles of deliverance guarantee to the baptismal initiate that he too can expect a miraculous response from God in his like situation (p. 27). The Fathers, too, use these same favorite typological references: Tert. (*De Bapt.* 9), Origen (*Hom. in Num.* 26.4) Ambr. (*Hex.* 1.4), Greg. Nyss. (*In Bapt. Christi*). The latter, for example, points out how the Jews passing through the Red Sea proclaim the good tidings of salvation by water because through it they abandoned Egypt, representative of the burden of sin, and delivered themselves from the Egyptian tyrant, symbolical of the devil and his hosts and material existence in general. Crossing the Jordan is even a more elaborate figure with Gregory of Nyssa. In passing through this river the Jews arrived in the promised land. Besides, the Jordan was consecrated in a special way by the later presence of Jesus. See Per Lundberg, especially pp. 116ff, 146, 163.

<sup>26</sup>Rufinus, *Comm. in Sym. Apos. (de Remis. Pec.)*; Porph. Frag. 88.

For just as the sacrifices on pagan altars are in themselves indifferent matter and yet have become defiled by reason of the invocation made over them to the idols, so, but in the opposite sense, the ordinary water in the font acquires sanctifying power when it receives the invocation of the Holy Spirit, of Christ, and of the Father.<sup>27</sup>

The baptismal formula grew to be considered particularly fool-proof; early divergencies in the form gave way to a universal use of the Trinitarian invocation. Gregory of Nyssa reminds us that we do not receive the sacrament in silence but that the names of the three sacred Persons are spoken over us and that the formula must include all Three because "the perfect boon of life" is not imparted by baptism if the name of the Spirit or of the Son be omitted.<sup>28</sup> Optatus declares that while some features of the rite may be altered with impunity, the Trinitarian invocation must remain inviolate at all costs.<sup>29</sup> In fact, the entire controversy over the necessity of repeating baptism conferred by heretics hinged on the question whether the sacrament solemnized by the sacred words is by that fact alone valid. The Council of Arles, in deciding it was, made the use of the Trinitarian formula the sole criterion of validity.<sup>30</sup>

Many of the Fathers ascribe to the words of the Eucharistic rite a special virtue since they cause a simultaneous change of some sort to accompany their utterance. Justin, an early witness of the sacramental character of the Eucharist, attests to the fact that Christians were early taught that it is by pronouncing "the word that came from Him" that the food is blessed and changed into the flesh and blood of Christ.<sup>31</sup> Gregory of Nyssa pointedly asserts that it is not the act of eating that gradually alters the bread but that "it is at once changed into the Body by means of the word (*i.e.* the sacred benediction) as the Word Himself said: 'This is My Body'." In another passage he declares: "The bread again is,

<sup>27</sup>Cyril, *Cat.* 3.3.

<sup>28</sup>Greg. Nyss. *In Bapt. Christi; Ep.* 2.

<sup>29</sup>Optatus, *De Schis. Donat.* 5.7.

<sup>30</sup>Canon 7: ". . . ut si ad ecclesiam aliquis de haeresi venerit, interrogent eum symbolum; et si perviderint eum in Patre, et Filio, et Spiritu Sancto esse baptizatum, manus in tantum imponantur ut accipiat Spiritum Sanctum. Quod si interrogatus non responderit hanc Trinitatem — baptizetur."

<sup>31</sup>Justin, *Apol.* 1.66.

up to a certain point of time, common bread, but when the sacramental action consecrates it, it is called and becomes the Body of Christ."<sup>32</sup> Ambrose likewise holds that "the very words of the Lord and Savior operate" to change the elements in the Eucharist.<sup>33</sup>

It is the same power of the word that operates in ordination to transform by some unseen power and grace the soul of the priest and to render him venerable and honorable apart from other men as an instructor in hidden mysteries. In like manner, a benediction of words imparts to oil and wine its own particular sacred significance and operation, and transforms an altar from a common stone into a holy table — a transformation not unlike that experienced by the common hazel wand of Moses into a rod of miracles.<sup>34</sup>

It is surprising that in exorcism, where offhand one would somehow naturally expect "magical" doings to be at a premium, there appears to be no independent virtue attached to any distinct verbal formula or particular rite. They are too diversified. Some practitioners attempted results in the Name of Christ and by warning the recalcitrant demon of the woes in store for him. Others preferred to invoke "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"<sup>35</sup> or "the God of Israel" or the more typological formula "God who drowned the king of Egypt and the Egyptians in the Red Sea." Even later, when exorcists were formally ordained,<sup>36</sup> the bishop gave them a book containing diverse standard exorcisms with the injunction: "Receive thou these and commit them to memory."<sup>37</sup> An interesting attempt to formalize a stubborn diversity. This informality to which no magical efficacy could adhere is probably explained by the fact that in exorcism the effect sought

<sup>32</sup>Greg. Nyss. *Orat. Cat. Magna* 37; *In Bapt. Christi*.

<sup>33</sup>Ambr. *De Myster.* 9.

<sup>34</sup>Greg. Nyss. *In Bapt. Christi*.

<sup>35</sup>This expression appears to be a distinct magical formula. See Origen's view above, also Justin's (n. 21) and the article by M. Rist, "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, A Liturgical Magical Formula" *JBL* 57 (1938) 289-303.

<sup>36</sup>Ordination of exorcists is first mentioned probably by Euseb. *H. E.* 6.43.

<sup>37</sup>For different forms of exorcisms see Justin, *Apol.* 2.6, *Dial. c. Tryph.* 85; Iren. *c. Haer.* 2.43.4; Tert. *Apol.* 23, Origen, *c. Cels.* 4.34. See also *Post-Nicene Fathers* (Second Series) VII, p. xix, and Per Lundberg, *op.cit.* 42-46.

<sup>38</sup>*Constit. Apost.* 7.42.

is sensible; obvious failures of exorcists to produce immediate or even eventual results conclusively demonstrated that no *ex-opere-operato* power resided in any particular "magical" formula. The fact that sensible observation compelled a more rational approach to exorcism, serves to highlight the general "naive" faith of Christians in believing that a self-virtuous efficacy attached to their other ceremonials.

Not only were the words of the sacramental action regarded as virtuous but the visible signs were as well. The words, as it were, passed on their efficacy to the object spoken over. The *Apostolic Constitutions* vouch for the fact that "sanctification" in the Name of the Lord Jesus, of the "exorcised oil" used at baptism, imparted to it spiritual grace and efficacious strength.<sup>38</sup> We read abundantly of sacred oils curing people of diseases.<sup>39</sup> Cyril thinks that "the ordinary water in the font acquires sanctifying power when it receives the invocation" and he seems to attribute to the "exorcised oil" the same power as to the exorcism itself, that of dispelling all the invisible powers of the evil one. Gregory of Nyssa seems to imply that ordinary water has an efficacious baptismal potency. Apparently deceived by the mystical geographical misconception that all waters of the earth were in direct communication, he felt that the Jordan, once sanctified by Jesus' baptism and having received thereby the first fruits of sanctification and benediction into its channel, could convey this consecration to all the waters of the world.<sup>40</sup> He would naturally think baptismal waters entirely efficacious after they had been themselves transformed by a direct sanctification.<sup>41</sup> Tertullian reiterates essentially the same idea: the waters, being themselves sanctified by invocation of the Holy Spirit, acquire a sacramental power of sanctification themselves. However, he appends an interesting "scientific" explanation of the sanctification process diffusing its power into the water:

<sup>38</sup>John Chrys. *Hom.* 32.9 (on Matt.); Tert. *Ad. Scap.* 4; Jerome, *Vita S. Hilar.* 32; Euseb. *H. E.* 6.9.

<sup>40</sup>Cyril, *Cat.* 3.3, 20.3; Greg. Nyss. *In Bapt. Christi.* See Per Lundberg, *op.cit.* 163 and also the eulogy on water in Tert. *De Bapt.* 9.

<sup>41</sup>Greg. Nyss. *De Spiritu San.* (*Post-Nicene*, Second Series, V 332).

. . . from that which hovered over (*i.e.* the spiritual force), that which was hovered over (*i.e.* the water) borrowed a holiness since it is necessary that in every case an underlying material substance should catch the quality of that which overhangs it, most of all a corporeal of a spiritual, adapted (as the spiritual is) through the subtleness of its substance both for penetrating and insinuating.<sup>42</sup>

In one passage Gregory of Nyssa rhetorically asks how the hallowed water cleanses and illuminates a man. His answer, that this happens “by the incomprehensible operation of God” not entirely dissimilar to the phenomenon of a man developing from a seed, might be interpreted as implying that baptism operates through the regular processes of nature under God. This interpretation is not too much weakened by another instance where Gregory assumes a basic similarity but difference in degree between baptism, where God is invoked, and the *ex-opere-operato* act of procreation, where He is not invoked.<sup>43</sup>

Occasionally the sign seems interpreted as slightly more than simply a symbolic representation; sometimes it appears to carry a lingering flavor of an efficacious act in imitative magic. In one case Gregory of Nyssa apparently pictures the triple immersion of an initiate in the water as purely a symbolic triple burial merely representing for ourselves that grace of the resurrection which was wrought in three days. Still the rite seems more than just a commemorative affair. Rather it establishes some sort of imitative affinity between the initiate and the Master. Even though our nature does not admit an exact and entire imitation [*μίμησις*] of our Leader — since a complete imitation would mean identity— still it is necessary that some means be devised in the baptismal process to establish “a kind of affinity and likeness between him who follows and Him who leads the way.” Just as we must imitate experts to become experts ourselves, so we must travel the same imitative paths with Christ and copy His “three days’ state of death by burying ourselves in that element (water) which has

<sup>42</sup>Tert. *De Bapt.* 4. This explanation seems quite opposed to the general Stoic notion that the lighter substance tends to rise, not hover over and descend upon the lower. On the other hand it is somewhat suggestive of the permeation of Lucretius’ “mind atoms”.

<sup>43</sup>Greg. Nyss. *In Bapt. Christi, Orat. Cat. Magna* 34.

a mutual affinity to earth" in which Christ was buried. This imperfect imitation carried out by having water poured on us three times and ascending again out of the water to enact Christ's saving burial and resurrection, removes sin and suppresses our congenital tendencies to evil because once having been conformed to His death, the initiate's sin is henceforth surely a corpse itself.<sup>44</sup> Basil also interprets baptism somewhat in the light of an imitative action [*μίμησις*]. True, he pictures the burial of the candidate in water as only a figure of death; still it is by imitating the burial of Christ and being received by the water as into a tomb, that we achieve our descent into Hell, a sort of no-man's land in our about-face from our old works of the flesh to our regeneration or second life. At the same time this "burial" insures a simultaneous pouring-in of a quickening power by the Spirit.<sup>45</sup> Cyril, in speaking of an imitation of the crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection in baptism, reminds us that Christ was actually crucified, buried, and arose again so that we, sharing His sufferings by imitation [*μίμησις*], might gain salvation in reality. For if one has been united with the likeness of the Savior's death he shall be deemed worthy of His resurrection. Or again: ". . . now ye have been made Christs by receiving the antitype of the Holy Ghost (the chrism), and all things have been wrought in you by imitation [*εἰκονικῶς*] because ye are images [*εἰκόνας*] of Christ."<sup>46</sup>

References to imitation of Christ at the Eucharistic service by reliving His passion and death are less in evidence than those concerning baptism. Ignatius, however, seems to imply that the Christian dies at each Eucharistic celebration. Unless our will is ready to die "into His passion," His life will not be in us.<sup>47</sup> Such expressions of the imitative nature of the Eucharist will become more and more common as we approach the days of Gregory the Great.

In the case of exorcism, the visible signs, like the verbal formulae, are too diverse to carry connotations of self-virtue. Some exorcists — and they can be laymen or even women — put con-

<sup>44</sup>Greg. Nyss. *In Bapt. Christi, Orat. Cat. Magna* 35.

<sup>45</sup>Basil, *De Spiritu San.* 15.35.

<sup>46</sup>Cyril, *Cat.* 20.5, 21.1, 3.12.

<sup>47</sup>Ignatius, *Ad Magn.* 5.2.

confidence in touching and breathing to overwhelm the demon, while others prefer to lay on hands and so on. It is interesting to note in passing that the exorcised are even dressed differently: in Constantinople they appear barefoot clothed only in a tunic, while at Jerusalem they come with a veil on their faces.<sup>48</sup>

### *Independence of Ritual Efficacy*

The second part of our study investigates the extent to which sacramental acts are considered effective irrespective of the intentions and character of the principals. Pressure to consider rites self-virtuous was exerted upon Christianity from many sides. In addition to the influence of contemporary magic already spoken of, there was the powerful sanction of the Roman legal mind which gloried in conservative forms and precedents which had an objective effectiveness regardless of time or the person of the lawyer and judge. Moreover, Roman practicality demanded that the common man in a universal religion be given concrete assurances of spiritual workings by attaching these elusive benefits to something tangible in time and space. Lastly, there is the heavy hand of time; mere routine repetition of any studied and rehearsed formula unconsciously encourages an idea that results are guaranteed automatically by some inherent force in the rite itself.

In the case of baptism probably two persons, Stephen of Rome and Augustine of Hippo, did most to focus attention on the sacrament's possible natural effectiveness independent of the influence of the minister and recipient.<sup>49</sup> The view, however, is a common one in the Fathers: Ambrose advises one not to consider the person of His ministers but the office of the priest; Gregory Nazianzus curtly instructs one not to "ask for credentials of the preacher or the baptizer";<sup>50</sup> and Optatus sums up his strong sacra-

<sup>48</sup>See Tert. *Apol.* 23; Pseudo-Clement, Ep. 1 (*de Virginitate*) 12; John Chrys. *Ad Illumin. Cat.* 1.2; Cyril, *Procat.* 9.

<sup>49</sup>For Augustine see e.g. *De Bapt. c. Donat.* 4.11 (18ff), *Ep.* 89.5, 98.2, *Sermo* 49.8, *c. Litt. Petil.* 2.30, 3.40, *Tract.* 12.4 (on John). Cyprian's extensive correspondence gives Stephen's view.

<sup>50</sup>Ambr. *De Myster.* 5; Greg. Naz. *Orat.* 40.26.

mentalist views by saying "sacramenta per se esse sancta non per homines."<sup>51</sup>

The issue was raised originally c. 255 over the validity of schismatic Novatian ministrations. In general, Eastern bishops and Eastern synods upheld the principle that a heretic could not truly baptize. Probably the strongest advocate in the West of this more subjective view of the efficacy of the sacrament was Cyprian. Apparently assuming that the minister was required to be somewhat of a repository or host of the sacramental gifts he dispensed, he felt that a heretic could not impart the Holy Spirit when he, being appointed outside of the church, obviously could not possess the Spirit himself; none of those, Cyprian asserts, who oppose Christ can profit by the grace of Christ. Moreover, he thought he saw a contradiction and an impiety arising out of valid heretical baptisms where a heretic remitted sins and sanctified a person as a temple of God since the temple would of necessity be that of an heretical god or at least of a nontrinitarian one.<sup>52</sup> But Cyprian's conviction of the importance of personal forces lying outside the intrinsic essence of the sacrament itself was not to prevail. The church of Rome took a firm liberal and more legal view that baptism administered in the Name of the Trinity with the intent of incorporating a man into the church was valid even if administered by heretics and schismatics.<sup>53</sup> Stephen's insistence that a sacrament was valid outside of orthodox circles unwittingly did much to encourage the growth of an *ex-opere-operato* interpretation of the whole matter.

Augustine consistently and vigorously supported Stephen's view of the validity of heretical baptism.<sup>54</sup> But his philosophical

<sup>51</sup>Optatus, *De Schis. Donat.* 5.4. See Harnack, *Dogmengeschichte*<sup>3</sup> (Berlin 1893) III 42.

<sup>52</sup>Cyprian, *Ep.* 69.3, 71.1, 72.12.

<sup>53</sup>Cyprian, *Ep.* 67-80.

<sup>54</sup>Augustine draws a distinction in the case of heretical baptism between validity and profitableness. Heretical baptism is true baptism but it is unlawfully used and its benefits are in some sort of way suspended. Baptism can, he says, "indeed be received elsewhere (*i.e.* outside the Catholic pale) but it cannot profit elsewhere" (*De Bapt. c. Donat.* 1.2, *c. Litt. Petil.* 3.40, *De Bapt. c. Donat.* 7.53 [102], 5.23 [33]). See also *De Bapt. c. Donat.* 3.10 (13), where he seems less clear on the matter of profit. He is, of course, unhappy about the concessions made to heretical baptism: "Nor do we hold that those who baptize, although they confer the real true sacrament of baptism, are yet acting rightly

mind drove him further than the pope in speculating upon the role of intentions and dispositions in the sacrament. Consequently, he discusses the efficacy of baptisms given under varied circumstances: that conferred by the unbaptized, that administered in the spirit of insincerity and mockery with a distinction drawn between that given in mockery deceitfully within the church or in what was thought to be the church, and that given in mockery as in jest or in a play. He accepts baptism given deceitfully in the church as valid assuming, of course, that the ministrant used the correct "words of the gospel." While he admits indecision about that conferred in jest, he is not definitely opposed to accepting it:

. . . if I were asked whether the baptism which was thus conferred [that done as a farce or a comedy or a jest] should be approved, I should declare my opinion that we ought to pray for the declaration of God's judgment through the medium of some revelation . . . deferring all the time to the decision of those who were to give their judgment after me in case they should set forth anything as already known and determined [in the matter] . . .<sup>55</sup>

Sozomen records a case where baptism given by boys in play was recognized; it was deemed "unnecessary to rebaptize those who in their simplicity had been judged worthy of divine grace."<sup>56</sup>

Not only can the ministrant of baptism be evil and heretical but the recipient apparently can be indifferent to its reception as well. An obvious example is infant baptism which seems to have been practiced from the early church and to have remained the normal procedure despite a more obvious tendency, especially in the fourth century, to delay the sacrament until the strain and stress of youth is past.<sup>57</sup> Irenaeus is an early advocate of infant

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in gathering adherents outside the church . . ." (*De Bapt. c. Donat.* 3.10 [13]). Cyril says: "If thy body be here but not thy mind, it profit thee nothing. Even Simon Magus once came to the laver. He was baptized but he was not enlightened . . ." Does he, too, accept the baptism as valid but merely unprofitable? (*Procat.* 2).

<sup>55</sup> August. *De Bapt. c. Donat.* 7.53 (101).

<sup>56</sup> Sozomen, *H. E.* 2.17.

<sup>57</sup> One of the latest monographs on infant baptism is by Joachim Jeremias, *Die Kindertaufe in den Ersten Vier Jahrhunderten* (Göttingen 1958). Jeremias feels that a distinction must be drawn between the early practice of baptizing children born of later-converted parents and that of baptizing Christian-born infants. The latter practice, he feels, goes back to the first half of the first century (pp. 48-60). Even though the evidence for the

baptism; Cyprian likewise felt that infants should be baptized as early as possible to benefit from the grace involved, and Gregory Nazianzus thought it preferable to be "unconsciously sanctified" than to depart "uninitiated." The *Apostolic Constitutions* while enjoining infant baptism, at the same time deplores the policy of delaying baptism lest one should sin and later defile it.<sup>58</sup> Augustine is, of course, much involved in the whole question because of its close relationship to the problem of original sin. In a somewhat backhanded way he actually cites, as a convincing argument that man inherits the sin of Adam, the fact that the Church had so long advocated infant baptism!<sup>59</sup> Among other things, he apparently felt called upon to justify the strange vicarious validity of the intention of the sponsors in this *ex-opere-operato* rite. The quotation of the entire passage will reveal that the explanation labors with some difficulty:

Now the regenerating Spirit is possessed in common both by the parents who present the child and by the infant that is presented and is born again; wherefore, in virtue of this participation in the same Spirit, the will of those who present the infant is useful to the child. But when the parents sin against the child by presenting him to the false gods of the heathen, and attempt to bring him under impious bonds unto those false gods, there is not such community of souls subsisting between the parents to the child that the guilt of one party can be common to both alike. For we are not made partakers of guilt along with others through their will in the same way as we are made partakers of grace along with others through the unity of the Holy Spirit because the one Holy Spirit can be in two different persons without their knowing in respect to each other that by Him grace is the common possession of both.<sup>60</sup>

On the whole, the sacrament of baptism seems, at least in certain situations, quite operative in its own right. It might be helpful

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continued practice of child baptism tends to grow less and less until in the fourth century late baptisms seem the most conspicuous, child baptism still apparently remains the normal (p. 110). The popularity of Hippolytus' *Apostolical Constitutions*, for example, argues strongly for the continued approval of early baptism through the third and fourth centuries.

<sup>58</sup>Iren. *c. Haer.* 2.22.4; Cyprian, *Ep.* 58; Greg. Naz. *Orat.* 40.17, 28; *Constit. Apost.* 6.15. See Jeremias, *op.cit.* 115.

<sup>59</sup>August. *Sermo* 174.8; See also *De Peccat. Meritis et Remis, et de Bapt. Parvul.* 1.21-70 and *Sermo* 293.10.

<sup>60</sup>August. *Ep.* 98.2. See also Jeremias, *op.cit.* 86.

here to recall that Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, "on finding that the exact routine of the church had been accurately observed," recognized the validity of a mock baptism in play and that the Council of Arles made the efficacy of the sacrament depend solely upon the form and not the personalities involved.

Strangely enough, the tendency to delay baptism until one's adult years has been cited as evidence that the sacrament is taking on more and more an *ex-opere-operato* connotation. Late baptism, supposedly justified by no theological warrant, is supported by a magical misunderstanding of the nature of the sacrament. As a blanket, *ex-opere-operato* erasure of all one's past offenses and proclivities it was supposedly being interpreted more as a magical panacea than as a Christian rite advancing grace.<sup>61</sup>

Ordination is another example where the *ex-opere-operato* efficiency of a sacrament can exclude the intention and disposition of the candidate. Forced ordinations, which seem quite relevant as evidence here, are not at all uncommon in the early post-Nicene church. Basil was tricked into an unwilling ordination by John Chrysostom. He defended his deceit — to the humorous discomfiture of later puritanical Christian editors — on the grounds that an occasional duplicity in arranging for the means to suit the ends is quite justifiable. One Dracontius swore he would run away if he were ordained; Athanasius had to persuade him to return and perform his duties. A certain Nilammon died rather than accept a bishopric; and a monk, Ammon by name, after vainly cutting off his ear to forestall ordination, threatened to cut out his tongue as well to foil his persistent nominators; one Ephraim acted like a madman so his abductors would turn him loose. Epiphanius ordained Jerome's brother against his will after a little roughing-up and gagging helped soften him. Gregory Nazianzus grieved over his ordination and referred to it as an act of tyranny.<sup>62</sup> Augustine promised not to ordain a certain person

<sup>61</sup>So says Jeremias, *op.cit.* 115. That late baptism was thought of as a quasi-magical panacea demands further evidence than Jeremias affords, especially in view of the fact that repeated forgiveness of all sins committed after baptism was an accepted development in the penitential system since the third century.

<sup>62</sup>John Chrys. *De Sacer.* 1.6-7; Basil, *Ep.* 188.10; Sozomen *H. E.* 8.19, 6.30, 3.16; Jerome, *Ep.* 51.1; Greg. Naz. *Car. de Vita Sua* 345.

against his will despite any clamor from the people, remembering, no doubt, how he was dragged weeping before the bishop when his own ordination was demanded. Martin of Tours was torn from his cell and conducted to ordination under guard. While some of these episodes may involve nothing more than feigned reluctance for the sake of the record, it is clear in others that the sincerely averse disposition of the victim could not block the valid operation of the sacrament.<sup>63</sup>

We need not recall here at length the fruitless Donatist attempt to discredit ordinations which were performed by "traditores". Like heretical baptism, where the spiritual condition of the administrator is irrelevant, ordination administered by "traitors" likewise was judged efficacious.

In general it is well to remember that the action or effect produced by baptism and ordination is claimed to be so objective and permanent that it cannot be affected or effaced by any possible later change in the recipient's disposition. Nor can these sacraments be repeated, because they confer an indelible seal. Among others, Cyril speaks of this indissoluble seal and Gregory Nazianzus advises that infants be "sealed unto God" and "initiated" early "for a sheep that is sealed is not easily snared but that which is unmarked is an easy prey to thieves." In another passage he assures us that different baptizers may use, as it were, various metaled rings to imprint the seal but that the seal is the same.<sup>64</sup>

The Eucharist, too, is quite independent in its own right. Some Fathers maintain, as we have noted, that the change in the elements, whatever it may be, is a not a gradual one dependent upon the eating by the communicant but a sudden one thanks to the *ex-opere-operato* force of the sacrament itself released by the words of the celebrant. Once these words are spoken, the effect is permanent and the "new" substance exists quite objectively or independently of the persons involved. The reserved Eucharist is a case in point: it is transported as viaticum to the sick, carried

<sup>63</sup>One set of circumstances which seems to be able to annul an ordination otherwise properly given is a legal one. The sixteenth canon of Nicaea, for instance, declares that an ordination is void if one bishop ordains a person from another's diocese without the second bishop's permission.

<sup>64</sup>Cyril, *Procat.* 17; *Constit. Apos.* 3.16; Greg. Naz. *Orat.* 40.17, 28, 15, 26.

in wicker baskets and vessels of glass, kept at home, paraded about the streets, and the like. One woman was prevented by fire issuing from the box in which she kept the sacred elements from opening it with unworthy hands.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, the Eucharist is conceived of as a foreign element entering, mingling with, and affecting the recipient's body. Gregory of Nyssa informs us that Christ's immortal Body, by being within a communicant, changes his body "to its very nature by being transfused through the vitals by eating and drinking."<sup>66</sup> By union with the immortal Man, man becomes a sharer in His incorruption. To Cyril of Jerusalem's belief that the body and blood of Christ physically enter our members Angus compares that of the author of the *Clementine Homilies*, who explains how extraneous evil spirits, having gained entrance to our bodies through food, hide themselves a long time before uniting themselves with our soul.<sup>67</sup> John Chrysostom emphasizes the realism in the Eucharist by resorting to language which to the uninitiated would sound like cannibalism.<sup>68</sup> As a matter of fact, the Eucharist is so entirely independent of the spirit of the communicant that it can work to even his undeserved discomfiture—to say nothing of any discomfiture deserved by an unworthy reception. Augustine records, as a case of divine intervention, the episode of a girl spitting out the Eucharist as a warning to older people of their wrong-doing; and Cyprian relates the deadly results the elements of the Supper visited upon a young girl who had not yet reached the years of discretion.<sup>69</sup> Apparently the Eucharist worked independently of dispositions — whether adversely or profitably we shall never know — also in the case of an eighteen-month old dying infant in Sicily.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>65</sup>On reserved Eucharist: Euseb. *H. E.* 6.46; Dionysius of Alexandria, *Ep. ad Fab.* 11; Justin, *Apol.* 1.65; Basil, *Ep.* 93; Jerome, *Ep.* 125.20; Athanasius, *Apol. c. Arian.* 11; Cyprian, *De Lapsis* 25, 26.

<sup>66</sup>Greg. Nyss. *Orat. Cat. Magna* 37.

<sup>67</sup>Angus, *op.cit.* 132.

<sup>68</sup>John Chrys. *Hom. in Joh.* 46.3.

<sup>69</sup>August. *Ep.* 98.4; Cyprian, *De Lapsis* 25.

<sup>70</sup>Jeremias, *op.cit.* 106.

*Compulsion of Divine Response*

Having dealt with the *ex-opere-operato* virtue of certain rites in so far as they operate at least to some degree independently of the persons involved, we turn now to the third and last part of our study, investigating the proposition that God is compelled to act at the bidding of the ritualistic word and act.

At first thought there might appear to be an inconsistency in associating the third proposition of this study with the first; if a word or sign is self-virtuous, it should not need to acquire its efficaciousness by any operation of a deity. But the Fathers are not necessarily contradictory in maintaining both positions. The paradox is solved if one recalls that magic is an art which claims to produce effects both by mastering secret forces in nature and by compelling the assistance of supernatural beings.

The importance of gnosis calculated to control the deity is, as we have seen, not a pervading concept in classical paganism; certainly it is not so in Judaism. Such a concept is rather the hallmark of the mysteries. Evidence for the presence of this idea in Christianity is quite abundant and convincing even if it be at times somewhat oblique and hidden. Strangely, pagan critics of Christianity are not as helpful in the case as one might hope for; they do not seem to have sensed fully the vulnerability of Christianity as a system which freely supplied "magical" tricks to compel the divine.<sup>71</sup> In the surroundings of the new pagan theurgy probably the idea did not strike them as particularly strange. On the whole, the Fathers, too, are disappointing if one expects them to write any sustained logical treatise on the kinds of problems involved in a study of comparative religion. Had they been so oriented they would surely have taken great pains to point out that Christianity was unique by furnishing a thorough analysis of the differences between the kind of compulsive magic associated with the mysteries and that involved in the religion of Christ.

<sup>71</sup>There are only two great sustained criticisms of Christianity by pagans. Porphyry is, of course, largely lost. As a late Neo-Platonist he would probably have seen nothing too unusual or criminal in any attempt of man to compel the action of deity. The identification of Celsus, the other great critic of Christianity, might be helpful in explaining his relative silence. But the stripe of his thought was a tantalizing puzzle already to Origen.

There is throughout the Fathers a consistent and necessary assumption that the sign of a sacrament is initiated and completed at the bidding of the officiant and that God responds simultaneously with this sign, provided, of course, that the proper form is employed. The very use of the word "sign" indicates that they understood that "aliud est sacramentum, aliud virtus sacramenti; aliud videtur, aliud intelligitur."<sup>72</sup> Cyril, in making a clear distinction between the outward sign and the inward grace of baptism, says: "when you are about to go down into the water, do not pay attention to the mere nature of the water but expect salvation by the operation of the Holy Ghost."<sup>73</sup> Ambrose as well as other Fathers stoutly maintains that it is not the water but the grace of God which cleanses.<sup>74</sup> Gregory of Nyssa explains the regenerative power of the water and the sacramental act by the incomprehensible operation of God and exclaims in mystic exaltation: "how great and wonderful it is that it (faith and water) should imply relationship with Deity itself." He further assures those who demand proof of the presence of God when He is invoked for the sanctification of the baptismal process, that Christians know He is "present in that process as often as He is invoked."<sup>75</sup> Augustine marvels at God's cooperation with even a murderer by sanctifying the oil in answer to the words which proceed out of his mouth as a priest.<sup>76</sup> In exorcism the power of casting out demons is always pictured as a direct gift of the benevolence and grace of God indiscriminately and spontaneously bestowed when needed upon clergy, laymen, soldiers, and even women.<sup>77</sup>

That it is God Himself who operates in conjunction with Christian rituals was one of the main arguments used consistently to justify the efficacy of religious functions performed by unworthy ministers. Augustine in supporting this thesis insisted that it is not the celebrant who actually baptizes but Christ Himself: "Therefore whoever

<sup>72</sup>August. *Hom.* 26.11 (on John), *Hom.* 3.12 (on John).

<sup>73</sup>Cyril, *Cat.* 3.4.

<sup>74</sup>Ambr. *De Myster.* 3-4.

<sup>75</sup>Greg. Nyss. *In Bapt. Christi; Orat. Cat. Magna* 36, 34.

<sup>76</sup>August. *De Bapt. c. Donat.* 5.20 (28).

<sup>77</sup>See *Constit. Apost.* 8.26; Justin, *Apol.* 1.68, *Dial. c. Tryph.* 85; Tert. *De Idol.* 111, *De Cor. Milit.* 11, *De Anima* 47, *De Spect.* 26, *De Prae. adv. Haer.* 40; Origen, *c. Cels.* 7.57.

the man be and whatever office he bear who administers the ordinance, it is not he who baptizes; that is the work of Him upon whom the Dove descended." He upholds an ordination as valid even if the candidate be unworthy since he can, as a priest, impart what is true even if he be not himself truthful because he does not give what is his but what is God's.<sup>78</sup> Chrysostom, speaking to the same point, instructs us that it is not man who introduces anything into the sacred elements but God, and it is He "who initiates you into the mysteries."<sup>79</sup> In the Eucharist even a greater demand is made upon the Deity since God's immediate presence, in some form or other, can be demanded by the words of consecration. Apparently, God has little choice but to respond. To any pagan convert from the mysteries it doubtless appeared quite in order that the Christian priest, too, should be able to conjure up the attention and response of deity when he employed the proper "magical" incantation.

Indeed all around, our pagan would feel comfortably at home in his new religious surroundings; in a familiar way he seemingly saw efficacy attaching to names, set words, and prescribed signs all used in a rehearsed way by the priest; he apparently witnessed sacramental rituals often blindly operating with a minimal part played at times by the intent of the officiant or the inner condition of the recipient; and he again revered a God who was constrained to act and dispense His grace and presence at the order of man. Undoubtedly his ingenuity was taxed to discover any objective differences between the good old pagan magic in the mystery religions and the new mystic efficacy in the Christian dispensation. Like his old magic, the new processes, too, seemed automatically to realize the effect which they signified.<sup>80</sup> It is not strange that Christianity should be taken for a mystery religion.<sup>81</sup> But if Angus is correct in assigning the decay of the mystery religions — and their consequent inability to compete with Christianity — to their lethal alliance with magic and astronomy, we are at some sort of an impasse unless we can discover some saving

<sup>78</sup>August. *Ep.* 89.5, *c. Litt. Petil.* 3.35.

<sup>79</sup>John Chrys. *Hom.* 8.2 (on I Corinthians).

<sup>80</sup>See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York 1959) 426; Angus, *op.cit.* 254.

<sup>81</sup>See O. Casel, *op.cit.* (*supra* n. 6) 127 f.

difference between Christian wonder-working and pagan hocus-pocus.

The difference is really a fundamental one, even if our pagan friend did not discover it nor the Christian Fathers, for that matter, exploit it to their full advantage. Had the latter done so there would have been no need to resort to some of the dangerous and inane explanations they used in explaining away similarities between the mysteries and Christianity.<sup>82</sup> It would have been far more convincing for Justin, for example, rather than explaining that demons copied the Christian Eucharistic mysteries — quibusdam verbis additis — and betrayed them to Mithra, simply to point out the fundamental difference in the “magic” between the two. Christianity remains unique, with the exception of Judaism, in having a truly historical revelation featuring a distinct standing legal contract with its Deity — a contract which not only guarantees divine cooperation but actually enjoins a command to presume upon it and, at the same time, thoughtfully furnishes evidence through miracles that the Deity is able to honor his agreement. Magic is occult and knows no divine contract; it is unilateral and arises from man’s ingenuity.

Despite the fact that they do not use the contract theory effectively in rebuttal against pagans, the Fathers call attention to it consistently throughout their pages. The *Apostolic Constitutions* remind us that baptism is given at the command of Christ and that the oil sanctified in the name of the Lord makes the candidate worthy of baptism by freeing him from all ungodliness according to the command of the Only Begotten.<sup>83</sup> Cyprian is clearly aware that Christians act through an injunction. In deploring the use of only water in the Eucharist, he reminds the offenders that if they are obligated to keep even the least of the Lord’s commandments, certainly they are forbidden to infringe upon such an important one as that involved in the very sacrament of the Lord’s passion by changing the tradition of the sacrament

<sup>82</sup>See “Quid Athenae Hierosolymis?” *CJ* 51 (1956) 153-161.

<sup>83</sup>*Constit. Apost.* 7.42,43.

<sup>84</sup>Cyprian, *Ep.* 62.14.

into anything other than what was divinely appointed.<sup>84</sup> Basil actually speaks of baptism as a covenant given by the Lord for our resurrection from the dead.<sup>85</sup>

The clever Gregory of Nyssa reminds us that because the prayer of invocation anticipates the divine intention, it is proof enough that what is done is effected by God because God has promised to be present in the rite of baptism. In fact, he has promised always to be present with those who call upon Him. He has, as Christians believe, endowed the baptismal act with His power, and therefore one should not "remain incredulous and have an eye only for the outward and visible as if that which is operated corporeally concurred not with the fulfillment of God's promise." To attest the truthfulness of His promise to cooperate by being present in all the baptismal processes and by making them effective, He has worked miracles.<sup>86</sup> Cyril, likewise, interprets miracles as conclusive evidence that God is able to cooperate when called upon.<sup>87</sup> In fine, the idea of a divine contract with man in Christianity is an obvious one and need not be labored.

If, then, Christians attribute efficacy to words and signs and if *ex-opere-operato* rites seem to command God's response, it is because the Deity of His own volition has commanded man to presume upon His cooperation and omnipotence. The virtue necessary to make baptism and the Eucharist effective is guaranteed in distinct New Testament injunctions. In the case of penance a covenant and command is enjoined in the power of the keys; the right and force to cast out devils is abundantly promised.<sup>88</sup> Any misinterpretations, abuses, or overextensions of this delegated power are attributable more to the influence of contemporary magical paganism and to the influence of time, which has a way of overrefining legal matters into minutiae or of reducing the sublime to the humdrum, than they are to the introduction of a basic magical element into Christianity. It is clearly not magical hocus-pocus or even presumptuous effrontery to draw payment on

<sup>85</sup>Basil, *De Spiritu San.* 15.35.

<sup>86</sup>Greg. Nyss. *Orat. Cat. Magna* 34, 33.

<sup>87</sup>Cyril, *Cat.* 22.1; Per Lundberg, *op.cit.* 20f.

<sup>88</sup>Among many such citations: Mark 16:15-18; Luke 9:1, 10:17.

a permanent blank check at the express command of your Father. No classical god, as we have seen,<sup>89</sup> or mystery deity that we know of, has been so lavish in his concern and so legal-minded as to have his contracts put in writing.

WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY  
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<sup>89</sup>See *supra* notes 2 and 3 .