11/21/81 Courant

On Mixing Rock 'n' Roll With Religion

Only Half the Truth

■ The Rev. Michael Shaw's thoughtful op-ed page celebration (article, Nov. 13, "Religion and the Rolling Stones") of Mick Jagger as a contemporary saint has its point. Our world and the church within it do need, today as perhaps never before, a "Dionysian release of Christ." But that is only half the truth, or less, and that is what troubles me about Shaw's article. I have the same trouble with the religious flip-side of Shaw's worldly spirtuality — the "Born Again Movement."

Early Christianity did, indeed, begin with an experience of release — "deliverance" from the powers of darkness. And that experience was spirit-filled, as at Pentecost. It was "enthusiastic" in the root sense of that word: it was a totally new life in God. But the integrating New Testament metaphor for Christian existence was "the Way," in Hebraic fashion, rather than the metaphor of "rebirth," characteristic of the Greek mystery religions.

Christianity began with baptism. But it came to rest in the eucharist. It started with a rebirth experience. But it was enlivened and sustained by the spirit of self-giving love. This is why St. Paul highlighted the sacrifice of the cross for the enthusiastic Christians at Corinth. All they had was their enthusiasm. So he said, "In the night in which He was betrayed, He took bread . . . " Paul was telling those new-born Christians that their enthusiasm was not enough, by any means.

The problem of the "Born Again Movement," whether it's Mick Jagger or Billy Graham, is that one doesn't quite know what to do with the morning after the night before. The "Born Again Movement" threatens to keep the church in captivity to a perpetual childhood, while apostolic Christianity calls us to grow up into full maturity in Christ.

This means that we have to find ways to envision the Christian life as incorporating mundane realities such as daily work and play, and all the painful highways and biways of personal relationships, poverty, loneliness, and ill-health, which we all have to deal with upon our everyday rising.

It takes a lifetime of walking "the Way" with Christ, sometimes, to know how to face up to the loss of a spouse, the loss of a job or a dwelling place, or, horrible to say, the threatened thermonuclear loss of the whole world. That's why some apparently mundane, and sometimes admittedly unenthusiastic, rituals such as the weekly eucharist mean so much to enthusiastic "Once Born" Christians such as myself.

That's also why, among other reasons, Mick Jagger leaves so much to be desired.

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