

# Christianity: the Mystery Religion *par Excellence*?

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The endeavour to compare the pagan mystery religions with Christianity is, to quote a notable authority, “a task so arduous that something like downright rashness might well be imputed to anyone that attempts it”.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding the scarcity of information pertaining to the mystery cults themselves, the attempt to discern the nature and extent of their influence upon the nascent Christian religion is fraught with difficulty. In what follows, I intend to examine some of these difficulties, propose a tentative way forward, and, in the spirit of rashness, conclude with a reflection upon Christianity as the “mystery religion *par excellence*”.

## Drudgery Divine<sup>2</sup>

The vexing question as to the nature and extent of the influence of the pagan mystery religions upon Christianity has received numerous conflicting answers over the course of the past centuries. While renewed interest in the mysteries emerged as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the publication of Isaac Casaubon’s *Exercitationes de Rebus Sacris*, it is only with the emergence of the science of comparative religion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that work began in earnest. Notable pioneers in this field include, among others, Cumont, Frazer, Angus, and Rahner.<sup>3</sup> Within this emerging discipline, Rahner points to the progressive development of three distinct approaches to the question of the relation of pagan mysteries to Christianity – two of which are of primary interest for the history of this ongoing endeavour.

The first approach is one that lays a heavy emphasis upon historical causation, and could best be labelled ‘historicism’. This approach is marked by a zealous attempt to establish a direct causal connection between the pagan mysteries and Christianity, thereby exposing the *fundamental* dependence of the latter upon the former. Drawing upon the myth of the dying god, this approach seeks to establish this well-known pagan motif as a precedent for the Christian narrative of Christ’s death and resurrection. From this point of view, as Rahner puts it, “the ‘myth’ of Christianity is the great drama of world redemption through Christ, which Paul, under the influence of the god-man myths of his time, read into the simple story of Jesus”.<sup>4</sup> The only original truth Christianity may lay claim to is an insignificant historical event – the life and death of a charismatic faith-healer, upon which is projected the Hellenistic myth of the dying god. By the same token, this school regards the sharing in Christ’s resurrection through baptism as derived from

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<sup>1</sup> Hugo Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery* (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1971), 5.

<sup>2</sup> The title of an important work by Jonathan Z. Smith devoted to a detailed treatment of this problem.

<sup>3</sup> Rahner, 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Rahner, 9.

pagan rituals of regeneration as found in the Eleusinian mysteries, or that of Isis and Osiris. This school's basic approach is therefore one of strict linear causation. As a result, they regard Christianity as nothing more than a generic derivative of the mystery cults, understood solely in terms of its causal-historical relation to them.<sup>5</sup>

The main problem with the historicist approach is that it is overwhelmingly a discourse of 'sameness'. Based upon a wilful suppression of difference, its methodology inevitably produces a levelling effect, in which the distinctions crucial to any comparative enterprise are lost. An extreme example of this may be found in Alfred Loisy's *The Christian Mystery*. He writes:

[Jesus] was a saviour-god, after the manner of an Osiris, an Attis, a Mithra. Like them, he belonged by his origin to the celestial world; like them, he had made his appearance on the earth; like them, he had accomplished a work of universal redemption, efficacious and typical; like Adonis, Osiris, and Attis he died a violent death, and like them he had returned to life...<sup>6</sup>

Jonathan Z. Smith points out that from such a rhetoric of 'sameness' little of value can be learned; the constant reiteration of the word 'like' obliterates the very distinctions that would render such a comparative enterprise worthwhile. Instead, what is required is a discourse of 'difference', a "complex term which invites negotiation, classification, and comparison" while avoiding an overly facile discourse of 'sameness'.<sup>7</sup>

Not surprisingly, the second approach to the question of Christianity and the mystery religions exists in deliberate opposition to the first. This approach, as pervasive as it is pernicious, clings overwhelmingly to a discourse of 'difference' and could be best described as 'apologetic'. Rahner, an ardent apostle of this school, proclaims in his study, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, that "methodologically speaking its work is unimpeachable".<sup>8</sup> The apologist school, while presenting itself as taking an unbiased, clear-headed approach to the problem, inevitably seeks to downplay the influence of the mystery religions upon the formation of Christianity. Whatever resemblances there are, from this point of view, are both superficial and expedient. Rahner encapsulates this view in the words of Clement of Alexandria: "I will give you understanding of the mysteries of the Logos by means of images with which you are familiar".<sup>9</sup> That is to say, whatever words and images the apostle Paul and later church fathers appropriated from their pagan co-religionists, were merely concessions made for the sake of pedagogy. While this group is willing to acknowledge evidence of pagan influence, it does so with extreme guardedness. Rahner revealingly tells us: "they do not hesitate to declare that in certain *unessential* matters Christianity and the cults may quite *possibly* have exercised a

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> A. Loisy, 'The Christian Mystery,' in *The Hibbert Journal*, 10 (1911-12): 51.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathon Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine* (London: University of London, 1990), 42-43.

<sup>8</sup> Rahner, 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

*reciprocal* influence on each other”<sup>10</sup> (emphasis added). Whatever influence the pagan mysteries may have had upon Christianity is strictly limited to “unessential” matters and, as the tentative language makes clear, even this remains a mere possibility. There is even the face-saving suggestion that this influence could have gone both ways, with Christianity in fact influencing paganism.

An important critique of the apologetic approach is found in Smith’s devastating and delightfully named book, *Drudgery Divine*. Given the pervasiveness of apologetics in this field of study, it is worthwhile to avail ourselves of some of Smith’s key insights concerning this matter. In his book, Smith bluntly states that “the pursuit of the origins of the question of Christian origins takes us back, persistently, to the same point: *Protestant anti-Catholic apologetics*”.<sup>11</sup> The apologetic approach, he maintains, permeates this field from the earliest research to the scholarship of the present-day. The only difference between past and present studies being that “the characteristics attributed to ‘Popery’, by the Reformation and post-Reformation controversialists, have been transferred, wholesale, to the religions of Late Antiquity”.<sup>12</sup>

At the very heart of this apologetic approach lies the idea of the “uniqueness” of Christianity – a notion that develops largely as a reaction to the levelling effects of the historicist school. According to this view, Christianity is *sui generis*, a wholly original religious phenomenon which emerged phoenix-like, suddenly and unexpectedly, without historical precedent. As a radically unique phenomenon, it harbours no comparison to other religious systems – any attempt at comparison is as impossible as it is impious.<sup>13</sup> Further, Christianity’s radical incomparability inevitably takes on an intra-religious dimension. Thus, as Smith puts it, “if Christianity is ‘unique’ with respect to other religions, then apostolic, or Pauline, Christianity is ‘unique’ with respect to other (especially later) modes of Christianity”.<sup>14</sup> In this way, we arrive at the all too familiar Protestant myth of “a ‘uniquely’ pristine ‘original’ Christianity, which suffered later corruptions”.<sup>15</sup> The aim of this intra-religious distinction is to enable the apologist to maintain the ‘uniqueness’ of apostolic (Protestant) Christianity while disavowing any evidence of pagan influence as subsequent (Catholic) corruptions. Smith maintains that for much contemporary discourse, the terms ‘mystery religions’ or ‘religions of Late Antiquity’ have merely become code-words for Catholicism. Thus, what presents itself as a comparative study of Christianity and the religions of Late Antiquity is in reality a Protestant polemic against Catholicism in scholarly disguise.<sup>16</sup>

Whether or not one fully accepts Smith’s devastating exposé of scholarship in this field, one thing is unmistakably clear: the apologetic approach is exclusively a discourse

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, 35.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

of ‘difference’. Regarded as utterly ‘unique’, Christianity is quite literally incomparable, as any comparative enterprise relies upon a certain measure of sameness. The radical otherness of Christianity makes any comparison with other religious systems superfluous – and this is precisely the point of the apologist approach. The only conclusion that the apologist school can ever arrive at in its “comparative” work is that Christianity is incomparable. Whatever similarities it does find are rejected as “unessential”; they are either superficial concessions made for the sake of pedagogy, or later corruptions that do not belong to the original, apostolic Christianity. Rahner’s “unimpeachable methodology” has a decidedly devious character.

Ultimately, the historicist and the apologist schools exist together in a kind of hostile symbiosis; both positions are polarizing in their extreme one-sidedness. While the former emphasises a discourse of ‘sameness’ to the exclusion of ‘difference’, the latter clings to a discourse of ‘difference’ to the exclusion of ‘sameness’. As such, both inevitably undermine the comparative enterprise, as any meaningful comparison depends upon varying degrees of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, a more balanced approach is required. In what follows, I shall attempt to negotiate such a middle course. Drawing upon the insights of both of the above positions, I hope to show how the connection between the pagan mysteries and Christianity is one of both similarity *and* distinction, and that the latter is, in a sense, both derivative *and* original. I shall conclude with a brief reflection of Christianity as the “mystery religion *par excellence*.”

### **Sameness and Difference in the Pagan and Christian Mysteries**

Perhaps the most striking comparison between the pagan mysteries and Christianity exists within their common initiatory structures. Central to both religious systems is the spiritual regeneration or rebirth of the initiand, modeled upon the myth of a dying god. While the term ‘mystery religions’ encompasses a wide spectrum of diverse cults ranging from the Eleusinian mysteries to those of the Orphic-Dionysiac cult, the worship of Mithras, and the mysteries of Isis and Osiris, they are united by a common initiatory motif. As Eliade tells us, the various mysteries are alike in that their “initiatory rites reactivate an origin myth, which relates the adventures, death, and resurrection of a Divinity.”<sup>18</sup> While the esoteric character of the mysteries limits our knowledge of their rites, we do know that the central action of the mysteries involved the mourning of a dying divinity, followed by the ecstatic celebration of his resurrection.<sup>19</sup> In the rites of Attis or Adonis, anguished lamentation gave way to ecstatic celebration upon the news of the risen deity: “Be of good cheer, ye initiates,” we are told, “for the god is saved. For he

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<sup>17</sup> cf. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, Ch.2 ‘On Comparison.’

<sup>18</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), 112.

<sup>19</sup> W.R. Halliday, *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity* (Liverpool: The University Press of Liverpool, 1925), 240.

shall be to you a Salvation from ills.”<sup>20</sup> At the culmination of the mystery rites of Osiris the elated initiates cried out: “We have found him! We rejoice together!”<sup>21</sup> Similar patterns of mourning, seeking, and rejoicing with respect to the crucified and risen Christ may be found in the Gospel accounts of the Passion.<sup>22</sup>

As in the Christian narrative, the resurrection of Attis or Osiris symbolized the spiritual and ontological transformation of the initiate. Through identification with, and ritual participation in, the dying and resurrected divinity, the initiate experienced a spiritual regeneration and gained the assurance of immortality.<sup>23</sup> In the Orphic rite, this spiritual death and rebirth was dramatically represented by a symbolic burial of the initiate in earth up to the neck, while a portion of the mysteries of Cybele makes reference to the *katabasis*, a ritual descent into the underworld.<sup>24</sup> The ritual death of the initiate, or *mystes*, was followed by a symbolic rebirth. Sallustius records that the new initiates “received nourishment of milk as if they were being reborn”, while a Mithraic text reads: “Today having been born again by thee, out of so many myriads rendered immortal...”<sup>25</sup> A Christian parallel may be found in the rite of baptism. In the words of St Paul: “therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”<sup>26</sup> Commenting upon this passage, the Orthodox Study Bible states that: “baptism is our death, burial, and resurrection in union with Jesus Christ. It is a *rite of passage*, given by Christ to the Church as an entrance into the Kingdom of God and eternal life.”<sup>27</sup> As in the initiatory rites of the pagan mysteries, Christian baptism marks the death of the profane self, followed by rebirth into a life of heightened spiritual significance, accompanied by the promise of immortality.

This quest for spiritual regeneration, leading to a radical change in the existential status of the initiate, is characteristic of the Hellenistic period. “By virtue of his initiation,” says Eliade, “the neophyte attained to another mode of being; he became equal to the Gods, was one with the Gods.”<sup>28</sup> The notions of deification, demortalization, or apotheosis are concepts familiar to the pagan mysteries and Christianity alike. Clement of Alexandria, in language intelligible to both pagans and Christians, writes: “if anyone knows himself he shall know God, and by knowing God shall be made like unto Him.” The true Christian Gnostic, he declares, “has already become God”.<sup>29</sup> This is closely paralleled by a Hermetic text in which we read: “I know thee, Hermes, and thou knowest

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> cf. Matthew 28:1-8; Mark 16:1-10; Luke 24:1-35; John 20:1-18.

<sup>23</sup> Halliday, 242.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Quoted by Eliade in *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*.

<sup>26</sup> Romans 6:4.

<sup>27</sup> St. Athanasius Academy of Orthodox Theology, *The Orthodox Study Bible*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 1532; my emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> Eliade, 112.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in S. Angus, *The Mystery Religions and Christianity* (London: St. Andrew’s College, 1925) 106.

me: I am thou and thou art I”, and further, “this is the good end for those who have attained knowledge, namely, Deification.”<sup>30</sup> It is important for our comparison to point out that the notion of deification is not limited to later Christian interpreters such as Clement; instead it is already present in the Scriptures themselves. Paul’s declaration that “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” is well known, as is Peter’s reference to our being “partakers of the divine nature”.<sup>31</sup> The sheer familiarity of these verses, joined with a general Protestant distaste for the concept of deification, tends to blind us to the actual profundity of these and similar Biblical passages.

Finally, it is worth noting the close connection between the notion of deification and the concept of the God-Man – the latter consisting of the apotheosis of a mythical hero or an exceptional historical individual. The rise to prominence of the divine-human Saviour figure occurs within the context of a pre-Christian world marked, as Angus puts it, by a “craving for a *praesens deus*, a visible manifestation of deity”, a Saviour figure capable of righting wrongs, healing wounds, and establishing peace and economic security.<sup>32</sup> While this idea is commonly associated with the messianic expectations of the Jewish people, it was equally present within Greco-Roman society. Evidence for this may be found in an inscription to Julius Caesar which hails him as “God manifest and universal Saviour of human life”, while Augustus is referred to as “Ancestral God and Saviour of the whole human race.”<sup>33</sup> Whether or not this pagan motif, in conjunction with that of the dying god, contributed to the Christian understanding Of Christ, one thing is clear: the age was both amply prepared for, and highly receptive to, the appearance of the Christian Saviour. Nor is it necessary to insist upon a causal relation between paganism and Christianity in order to see the absurdity of the apologist view of Christianity as wholly *sui generis*. Like most things in the ancient world, it was precisely insofar as it was *not* original that Christianity would have been regarded as legitimate and worthy of serious consideration. The emphasis upon originality among apologist scholars is a purely modern phenomenon – one that would have been greeted with the greatest incomprehension and suspicion by the inhabitants of the ancient world.

Having touched upon some important similarities between the pagan mysteries and Christianity, it is necessary to return to the vexed question concerning the influence of the former upon the latter. As we noted at the beginning of our discussion, the historicist approach to the field of comparative religion emphasised the similarities between the pagan mysteries and Christianity in order to explain the one by means of the other. This, in turn, provoked a reaction from the apologists who argued instead for the radical otherness of the Christian narrative. Although the latter position, largely the product of Protestant polemic, is an extreme one, it nonetheless serves a valuable purpose. By opposing a discourse of difference to that of sameness, it inspires a more

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>31</sup> Gal. 2:20; 2 Peter 1:4.

<sup>32</sup> Angus, 109.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

cautious approach to the comparison of the pagan mysteries and Christianity. Thus, while we have examined some of the striking resemblances between the two within the context of initiation, Eliade reminds us that “the presence of one or another initiatory theme in primitive Christianity does not necessarily imply the influence of the mystery religions.”<sup>34</sup> Such a theme, he points out, could just as easily have been derived from one of the esoteric Jewish sects such as the Essenes who, like the Christian cult, practiced initiatory baptism. Nor does the mere presence of such similarities necessarily imply historical borrowing. The theme of initiation, as Eliade points out, “is coexistent with any new revaluation of spiritual life”.<sup>35</sup> As such, it is a timeless and universal phenomenon, an archetypal motif recognizable within a great diversity of religious narratives.

Whether Christianity derived its initiatory rites centred upon a dying divinity from the pagan mysteries, or whether it arrived at this archetypal pattern independently, there are crucial differences between Christianity and its predecessors that must not be ignored. Chief among these is the novel emphasis upon the historicity of Christ. The introduction of the historical into the sphere of religion is in itself not unique; it belongs to Christianity’s Jewish heritage. What *is* original is the fusion of the dying god motif, so familiar to paganism, with the historical perspective of Judaism. Anyone, ~~therefore~~, who insists upon the derivative nature of primitive Christianity, must, at the very least, acknowledge a twofold derivation. As we shall see, the fusion of myth and history within the Christian narrative leads to a fundamental alteration in the concept of the dying god.

To begin with, it must be pointed out that the question concerning the historical validity of the Christian account is not relevant to our discussion. The main point is that this account was portrayed *as if* it were historical, and that it was accepted as such by Christians such as Paul and the writers of the Gospels.<sup>36</sup> From an agnostic perspective, one might say that Christianity presents itself as a kind of “historical myth”. Consequently, “however many features we may find in the accounts of the Passion and Resurrection which resemble those of ritual and mythology, those features are embedded in matter-of-fact historical narrative”.<sup>37</sup> The death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph and Mary occurs in history, “in the days of Pontius Pilate”, as the Nicene Creed proclaims. Victor White sums up the unique historicity of the Christian narrative admirably:

If there is a sacrifice, it is now a sordid and secular execution; if there is a labyrinth, it is now the actual winding streets used by the man-in-the-street in a provincial capital; if there is a search, the searcher is now no goddess, but a very human woman called Mary Magdala, setting about the very human task of embalming a dead human body.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Eliade, 115.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>36</sup> Victor O.P. White, *God and the Unconscious* (London: The Harvill Press, 1952), 226.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

One of the consequences of the historicity of the Christian *mythos*, which most distinguishes it from its pagan counterpart, is its startling character of *finality*. Anthropologists such as Frazer and Eliade have drawn much attention to the necessity of pagan rites to endlessly repeat the ritual enactment of the dying and rising god. In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer describes in detail the narrative of the forest priest who murders his predecessor and is in turn slain by his successor in an endless cycle of death and regeneration.<sup>39</sup> The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, in contrast, was experienced as a unique and irreversible event which fundamentally altered the existential status, not only of individuals, but of the entire cosmos. In the words of St Paul: “Christ, rising from the dead, dieth now *no more*. Death shall *no more* have dominion over him. For in that he died to sin, he died *once*; but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God.” (Rom. 6:9-10)<sup>40</sup> For the earliest Christians, the resurrection of Christ “established a new era of history – the validation of Jesus as Messiah, and hence the spiritual transmutation of man and the total renewal of the world.”<sup>41</sup>

It is this cosmic transformation brought about by a divine-human Saviour in history that constitutes the Christian mysteries. While the language of the mysteries that permeates the New Testament offers compelling evidence of pagan influence, the meaning has been entirely transformed. The term *mysterion* no longer refers to a cultic ritual as in the pagan religions, but rather to the mystery of redemption.<sup>42</sup> For St Paul, Christ himself is the divine *mysterion*, who reveals the mystery of redemption hidden in God. In the words of the Apostle: “We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory.”<sup>43</sup> This mystery “which has been hidden from ages and from generations”, he declares, is “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”<sup>44</sup> The use of the term *mysterion* therefore appears to refer primarily to the secret of God’s redemptive plan “hiddenly revealed” in Christ. The Christian mystery is one that, though openly declared, nonetheless remains secret on account of its incomprehensibility; the mystery of the Gospel is the hidden meaning of the Scriptures. According to Louth, it is “the true meaning that is revealed in Christ, a meaning that remains mysterious, for it is no simple message, but the life in Christ that is endless in its implications.”<sup>45</sup>

The profound alteration in the meaning of mystery terminology in the Scriptures has led many scholars to conclude that whatever pagan influence this signifies is

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<sup>39</sup> White, 215, 228; cf. James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Gremercy Books, 1993), vol.1, 213-239.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in White, 228.

<sup>41</sup> Eliade, 118.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> 1 Cor 2:7.

<sup>44</sup> Col. 1:26-27.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 205.

superficial and purely linguistic. While this verdict is not wholly unreasonable, it overlooks a very basic question: why is this mystery language present in the Gospels at all? Why is it that Paul makes such explicit use of mystery terminology in order to convey the message of Christianity? Nor is it a matter of an obscure term applied to some peripheral doctrine; instead, it is a prominent pagan term applied to a central Christian doctrine. While the apologists make much of the fact that *mysterion* may also be understood in the simple sense of “secret”, a sense that is clearly applicable to its use in the Gospels, they conveniently ignore the fact that it is nonetheless a term laden with pagan religious implications. Within the Hellenistic milieu, the general term *mysterion* acquires a specific meaning. Increasingly, it comes to be used in a limited way to designate those religious cults which, in addition to being secret, are initiatory in nature. The prestigious religious festivals of Eleusis, for example, were referred to simply as *ta mysteria*, The Mysteries.<sup>46</sup> Thus, while the explicit meaning of *mysterion* in the Epistles tends towards that of “secret”, i.e. the mystery of redemption hidden in God, the complex web of pagan associations bound up with this term are also implicitly present. For pagan converts, the language of *mysterion* would undoubtedly have invoked the sacred aura of initiation. The fact that St Paul employs such a paradigmatically pagan term to designate the central message of the emerging Christian cult cannot possibly have been a casual, unconscious decision. Instead, I would argue that Paul, as a Hellenized Jew, understood the emerging Christian cult as a kind of mystery religion. As we noted earlier, originality was not a virtue in the ancient world. By adopting the language of *mysterion*, St Paul emphasises the continuity between the pagan and Christian mysteries, simultaneously infusing the latter with new meaning and significance. As such, Pauline Christianity could be said to be both derivative *and* original.

### **The Mystery Religion *par Excellence***

While the extent and nature of pagan influences within Pauline Christianity remains a speculative and divisive issue, such influences become unmistakable as the Church develops and begins to establish itself within Hellenistic society. Increasingly, we encounter the language of the mysteries. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Christian appropriation of the language and imagery of the pagan initiatory cults becomes frequent.<sup>47</sup> Addressing a pagan audience, Clement of Alexandria proclaims: “O truly sacred mysteries! O pure light! In the blaze of the torches I have a vision of heaven and of God. I become holy by initiation.” The phrase “this is known to the initiates” is one that is found with great frequency in the writings of the Greek fathers.<sup>48</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus calls the consummating mystery of baptism the *mysterion tas teleioseos*.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> cf. Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 7-9.

<sup>47</sup> Eliade, 120.

<sup>48</sup> Protrepticus, XII, 119, 3; cited Eliade, 120.

<sup>49</sup> Oratio 40, 28; cited Rahner, 69.

What is striking here is not so much the use of the term *mysterion*, as that of *telete*. Eliade points out that, while St Paul employs the term *mysterion*, he never uses the explicit initiatory language of *telete*.<sup>50</sup> The fact that this technical term becomes common usage among the Greek Fathers provides unmistakable evidence for the conscious and deliberate assimilation of pagan initiatory motifs into Christian worship. If we take Clement (c. 150-c.215) as our starting point, we see that from as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century the understanding of the Christian *mysterion* is no longer confined to the limited sense of “God’s secret”. Instead, it has fully embraced the initiatory character central to the pagan mysteries. It is both the secret of salvation hiddenly revealed in Christ, as well as a cultic secret hidden from the uninitiated.

Without a doubt, the most sublime example of a Christianity thoroughly imbued with the spirit of the pagan mysteries is the writings of the 5<sup>th</sup> century mystic Dionysius the Areopagite. Presenting himself as a disciple of St Paul, Dionysius brings the nascent “mysticism” of his master to its fullest flowering. Only a few among countless examples must suffice for our discussion. In the *Divine Names* Dionysius cautions his disciple Timothy: “you must guard these things in accordance with divine command and you must never divulge divine things to the uninitiated.”<sup>51</sup> In *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* we read: “Let your respect for the things of the hidden God be shown in knowledge that comes from the intellect and is unseen. Keep these things of God unshared and undefiled by the uninitiated.”<sup>52</sup> In addition to the now familiar language of initiation, we discern a further refinement. Dionysius no longer speaks of the mystery of salvation hidden *in* God, but of the hiddenness of God Himself. In *The Mystical Theology* Dionysius advises us to leave behind “everything perceptible and understandable” and to “strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge.”<sup>53</sup> The supreme Christian mystery is now the Unknown God who, hidden in darkness<sup>54</sup>, can only be known by means of “unknowing”. While the pagan mysteries emphasized the need to conceal the cultic secret from the eyes of the uninitiated, in Dionysius the *mysterion* is, so to speak, “self-secret”. The hiddenness of God is due to his radically transcendent character, wholly inaccessible to visual *and* intellectual perception. Veiled by the dark cloud of unknowing<sup>55</sup>, God himself becomes the supreme mystery. In the writings of Dionysius, the pagan *mysteria* are transformed into sublime mystical theology. As such,

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<sup>50</sup> cf. Eliade, 118.

<sup>51</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” in *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 597c5.

<sup>52</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy,” in *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 372a4.

<sup>53</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Mystical Theology,” in *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 997b8.

<sup>54</sup> cf. *Mystical Theology*, 1000a10 & Psalm 18:11.

<sup>55</sup> The 14<sup>th</sup> century anonymous mystical text that bears this title is a testament to the enduring influence of the pagan mysteries within the Christian mystical tradition.

we are confronted with a Christianity that may truly be called “the mystery religion *par excellence*.”