

The Origin of Paul's Religion

The Hellenistic Age (Part 2)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

The worship of Dionysus supplied, to some extent at least, those elements which were lacking in the religion of the Greek city-state. In the first place, there was direct contact with the god. The worshipers of Dionysus sought to attain contact with the god partly by a divine frenzy, which was induced by wild music and dancing, and partly by the crass method of eating the raw flesh of the sacred animal, the bull. No doubt these savage practices were often modified when they that the frenzied dances and nightly excursions to the wild of the mountains, which originally had been carried on in true self-forgetfulness, became in Greece rather parts of an established cult. But on the whole, the influence of Dionysus-worship must be regarded as very great. An element of true mysticism or enthusiasm was introduced into the Greek world.

In the second place, the worship of Dionysus stimulated interest in a future life. The Homeric poems had represented the existence of the soul after death - at least the soul of an ordinary mortal - as being a mere shadow-existence which could not be called life at all. It is indeed questionable whether at this point Homer truly represented the original Hellenic belief, or the popular belief even of the time when the poems were written. Modern scholars have detected in the Iliad and the Odyssey here and there remnants of a more positive doctrine of a future life. But at any rate, the worship of Dionysus brought such positive beliefs - if they existed in Greece before more to the surface. Thracian religion, apparently, had concerned itself to a very considerable extent with the future condition of the soul; the introduction of the Thracian Dionysus, therefore, stimulated a similar interest in Greece.

Finally, the worship of Dionysus tended to separate religion from the state and make it partly at least an affair of the individual man. Such individualism is connected of course with the enthusiastic character of the worship; a state religion as such is not likely to be enthusiastic. The whole body of citizens cannot be possessed of a divine frenzy, and if not, then those who have the experience are likely to separate themselves to some extent from their countrymen. It is not surprising, therefore, that the worshipers of Dionysus, here and there, were inclined to unite themselves in sects or brotherhoods.

The most important of these brotherhoods were connected with the name of Orpheus, the mythical musician and seer. The origin of the Orphic sects is

indeed very obscure. indeed very obscure. Apparently, however, they sprang up or became influential in the sixth century before Christ, and were connected in some way with Dionysus. They seem to have represented a reform of Dionysiac practice. At any rate, they continued that interest in the future life which the worship of Dionysus had already cultivated. Orphism is especially important because it taught men to expect in the future life not only rewards but also punishments. The soul after death, according to Orphic doctrine, was subject to an indefinite succession of reincarnations, not only in the bodies of men, but also in those of animals. These reincarnations were regarded as an evil, because the body was thought of as a prison-house of the soul. At last, however, the righteous soul attains purification, and, escaping from the succession of births, enters into a blessed existence.

Related in some way to the Orphic sects were the brotherhoods that owned Pythagoras as their master. But the relation between the two movements is not perfectly plain.

At any rate, both Orphism and Pythagoreanism stand apart from the official cults of the Greek states. Even within those cults, however, there were not wanting some elements which satisfied more fully than the ordinary worship of the Olympic gods the longing of individual men for contact with the higher powers and for a blessed immortality. Such elements were found in the "mysteries," of which far the most important were the mysteries of Eleusis.¹ The Eleusinian Mysteries originated in the worship of Demeter that was carried on at Eleusis, a town in Attica some fifteen miles from Athens. When Eleusis was conquered by Athens, the Eleusinian cult of Demeter, far from suffering eclipse, was adopted by the conquerors and so attained unparalleled influence. Characteristic of the cult as so developed was the secrecy of its central rites; the Eleusinian cult of Demeter became (if it was not one already) a mystery-cult, whose secrets were divulged only to the initiates. The terms of admission, however, were very broad. All persons of Greek race, even slaves-except those persons who were stained with bloodguiltiness or the like could be admitted. As so constituted, the Eleusinian Mysteries were active for some ten centuries; they continued until the very end of pagan antiquity.

Initiation into the mysteries took place ordinarily in three stages; the candidate was first initiated into the "lesser mysteries" at Agra near Athens in the spring; then into a first stage of the "great mysteries" at Eleusis in the following autumn; then a year later his initiation was completed at Eleusis by the reception of the mystic vision. The mysteries of Eleusis were prepared for by a succession of acts about which some information has been preserved.. These acts were extended over a period of days. First the sacred objects were brought from Eleusis to Athens. Then the candidates for initiation, who had purified themselves by abstinence from certain kinds of food and from sexual intercourse, were called

¹ On the Eleusinian Mysteries and the cult of Demeter and Kore-Persephone, see especially Farnell, *op. cit.*, iii, pp. 29-279

upon to assemble. Then, at the cry, "To the sea, O mysta!" the candidates went to the sea-coast, where they made sacrifice of a pig, and purified themselves by washing in the sea water. Then came the solemn procession from Athens to Eleusis, interrupted by ribald jests at the passage of the river Cephissus. The initiation itself took place in the "telesterion." What happened there is obscure; antiquity has well observed the secrecy which was essential to the mysteries. Certainly, how-ever, the ceremony was accompanied, or rather, perhaps, preceded, by the drinking of the "kykeon," a mixture composed of water and barley-meal and other ingredients. The significance of this act is not really known. It would be very rash, for example, to assert that the partaking of the kykeon was sacramental, or was thought of as imparting a new nature to the recipients. Apparently the kykeon did not have a part in the mysteries themselves, for if it had, it could hardly have been spoken of so openly by pagan writers. The mysteries seem to have consisted in some sort of sacred drama, representing the search of Demeter for her daughter Persephone who had been carried off to the lower world, and in the exhibition of sacred emblems or of images of the gods. Hippolytus scornfully says that the supreme object of mystic awe was a cut corn-stalk.² His testimony is variously estimated. But it is quite possible that he has here given us genuine information. Since Demeter was the goddess of the fertility of the soil, the corn-stalk was not ill fitted to be her sacred emblem.

It has been supposed that the cult of Demeter at Eleusis was originally an agrarian cult, intended to celebrate or to induce the fertility of the soil. But the chief significance of the mysteries was found in another sphere. In the mysteries, the cult goddesses, Demeter and Persephone, were thought of chiefly as goddesses of the nether world, the abode of the dead; and the mysteries were valued chiefly as providing a guarantee of a blessed immortality. How the guarantee was given is quite obscure. But the fact is well attested. Those who had been initiated into the mysteries were able to expect a better lot in the future life than the lot of the generality of men.

The mysteries at Eleusis were not the only mysteries which were practised in the golden age of Greece. There were not only offshoots of the Eleusinian mysteries in various places, but also independent mysteries like those of the Kabeiri on the island of Samothrace. But the mysteries at Eleusis were undoubtedly the most important, and the others are even less fully known. The moral value of the mysteries, including those at Eleusis, should not be exaggerated. Slight allusions in pagan writers seem to point here and there to a purifying moral effect wrought by initiation. But the indications are not very clear. Certainly the secrets of Eleusis did not consist in any body of teaching, either religious or ethical. The effect was produced, not upon the intellect, but upon the emotions and upon the imagination.

Thus the religion of the golden age of Greece was an anthropomorphic polytheism, closely connected with the life of the city-state, but relieved here and

² Hippolytus, *Ref. omn. haer.*, V. vijii, 39 (ed, Wendland, 1916)

there by practices intended to provide more direct contact with the divine or bestow special blessing upon individuals.

The religion of Greece was finally undermined by at least three agencies.

In the first place, philosophy tended to destroy belief in the gods. The philosophic criticism of the existing religion was partly theoretical and partly ethical. The theoretical criticism arose especially through the search for a unifying principle operative in the universe. If the manifold phenomena of the universe were all reduced to a single cause, the gods might indeed still be thought of as existing, but their importance was gone.

There was thus a tendency either toward monotheism or else toward some sort of materialistic monism. But the objections which philosophy raised against the existing polytheism were ethical as well as theoretical. The Homeric myths were rightly felt to be immoral; the imitation of the Homeric gods would result in moral degradation. Thus if the myths were still to be retained they could not be interpreted literally, but had to be given some kind of allegorical interpretation.

This opposition of philosophy to the existing religion was often not explicit, and it did not concern religious practice. Even those philosophers whose theory left no room for the existence or at least the importance of the gods, continued to engage loyally in the established cults. But although the superstructure of religion remained, the foundation, to some extent at least, was undermined.

In the second place, since religion in ancient Greece had been closely connected with the city-states, the destruction of the states brought important changes in religion. The Greek states lost their independence through the conquests of Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great. Those conquests meant, indeed, a wide extension of Greek culture throughout the eastern world. But the religion of Alexander's empire and of the kingdoms into which it was divided after his death was widely different from the religion of Athens in her glory. Cosmopolitanism brought mighty changes in religion, as in the political sphere.

In the third place, the influence of the eastern religions made itself more and more strongly felt. That influence was never indeed dominant in the life of Greece proper so completely as it was in some other parts of the world. But in general it was very important. When the Olympic gods lost their place in the minds and hearts of men, other gods were ready to take their place.

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