

4726
JACSSON, KNIGHT, W.F.
1970

7 *Mystery Religions*

All these ancient Greek notions were part of a general belief based on the experience of individuals. People listened to poets, and heard the versions of those who were thought to have penetrated the veil. Meanwhile, with this background and out of this soil, there grew associations for the right religious behaviour towards the other world in view of the soul's believed destiny. A considerable knowledge—some would say a supposed knowledge—existed. Some people decided to act carefully upon it.

It has been said that all religions are principally concerned with death.¹ It has also been observed that fertility cults and the worship or tendance of the dead always go together. Such generalisations are hard to prove but they may still be useful. They are a warning against the assumption that a rite, which appears to be intelligible as a fertility-rite, designed to secure the growth of animal and vegetable life, cannot therefore also be a death-rite, a form of attention given to dead parents and ancestors.

During this same period, several forms of personal and mystical religion either started or became prominent. Classical Greece had four very notable mystery religions, the Eleusinian Mysteries, Orphism, Pythagoreanism and the cult of Dionysus. A Mystery, *mysterion*, is concerned with secrets. To those who are initiated, secrets are opened, or revealed.

At the Eleusinian Mysteries, the Mysteries at Eleusis, a small town fourteen miles from Athens to the west, the culminating

revelation is thought to have been an ear of corn. The myth belonging to the cult concerns the corn-goddess Demeter. But the life of dying mankind was concerned too. The Mysteries were universally revered. Initiates had to be not only ritually but to some extent also morally pure. The culminating ceremony was a sacred drama, perhaps enacting a marriage followed by the birth of a son, Brimos, from a mother, Brimo. Brimo was a goddess of death. The site belonged principally to Demeter, Persephone and Triptolemos. Of them Persephone was also a death goddess. But the first object seems to have been the productivity of the earth, especially in corn. This is no great incompatibility. Indeed it begins to appear, as Charles Autran said, that fertility-cults and death-cults not only tend to go together but are rather two sides of the same thing.² Independently A. Körte argued³ that at Eleusis both the fertility of the earth and also the happiness after death of individual souls were sought. Certainly the ceremonies imparted to those present a feeling of bliss. They are not, however, known to have revealed anything about a future state. But, since they were kept very secret, that is no proof that they did not.

These Mysteries were certainly very old. The Hall of Initiation, called the *telesterion*, has been excavated. It goes back before 700 B.C.

Whether Orphism was as old is uncertain. Orphism was not an organised religion. There was no sort of Orphic church. But people known as Orphics believed and communicated a fluid but recognisable scheme of doctrine. It was said to have been founded by the mythical Orpheus, a famous lyre-player of Thrace who went down to Hades to bring back his dead wife Eurydice, but lost her again because he turned round to look at her on the way, and she vanished. Orphism had other myths, including one about the original creation of the world from a 'world egg'. Those who accepted Orphism joined together in local societies or lodges, and learnt the Orphic doctrines. They were directed how to live in moral purity, and what to do and say after death—reminding us of the Egyptian

'negative confession'. Again ritual, and to some extent moral, purity was required. The soul of an initiate would undergo reincarnations and in the end emerge as a pure spirit, living in a heaven among the stars. This belief among Greeks is sudden and new. Certainly their gods had been at home in the sky before. The Homeric Olympus itself is sometimes a sky-heaven and no longer a mountain. But hitherto the stars had not been in this context an urgent Greek interest. Eastern astrology reached Greece later. But Eastern astronomy or astral religion may have contributed to Orphic belief. The idea of reincarnation may also have come from the East; it is best known in India.

Orphism was to some extent a learned religion or faith. Poets and perhaps other thinkers worked out its implications. There were Orphic priests, and even magicians, who went round selling information, and spells also, a practice of which Plato disapproved (see p. 93 below). It is human to contaminate a life-giving idea or a great truth. Much Orphism was certainly respectable, especially in its earlier history.

Pythagoreanism was founded by Pythagoras, a historical character of about 570 to 500 B.C. who lived in Samos and then Croton, migrating from the coast of Asia Minor to the toe of Italy. Very little is known about him, but more about his followers and their interests and beliefs. Pythagoras kept a kind of advanced school, especially for music and mathematics, which was also a religious society, living according to strict beliefs, such as the belief in reincarnation and the transmigration of souls, and in ascetic practices. Towards the end of the pagan era Orphism and Pythagoreanism tended to coalesce, and turn into the notable system known as Neopythagoreanism.

The fourth mystery religion was the religion of Dionysus, who came also to be called Bacchus.⁴ Dionysus was a strange god, perhaps primarily a god of moist vegetation such as fruit and the wine which came from it, whereas Demeter was Goddess of Corn, the dry crop. Dionysus was worshipped from an early date. Homer refers to him four times (*Iliad* VI, 132, 135 and XIV, 325; *Odyssey* XI, 325 and XXIV, 74). And his name is read by

some on one of the Pylian Tablets in Linear B Mycenaean script, dated about 1220 B.C. Dionysus was a God of Ecstasy, whether due to wine or not. He freed his worshippers from restraints and inhibitions, so that they ran madly over the mountains, killing animals and eating them raw. The information about Dionysus is enormous, and much of it confirms his worship as a fertility-cult, but not only that. Dionysus was called 'lord of souls'.⁵ He was said in antiquity to have come to Greece from abroad, some tracing him to Asia and some to Thrace. Probably enough his cult only became highly popular after 700 B.C. He may even have been introduced about this time from Thrace. In Thrace there was certainly among the Getae a strong cult of the dead centred on the Dionysian god Zalmoxis. The Getae were remarkable for their psychic sensitivity. Like the Bornese Bushmen, and some of the ancient Egyptians, they were in close and frequent contact with their dead relatives and friends, and enjoyed converse with them, in such a situation as is implied by Hesiod's record of the Golden Age, when men freely conversed with gods, and by other reports from other lands. These Getae lamented at a birth and rejoiced at a death, firmly believing that their lives would be far happier after death than before. They tended to asceticism, and some lived in strict celibacy, which probably helped their psychic power.⁶ Lucan's description of Celts in the time of Nero (A.D. 54-68) closely agrees (*Pharsalia* I, 452-62): they are primarily concerned with the after-life.

Dionysus may well have occasioned at least some impression of such a style of living when his cult first came to Greece. He had many attributes and, as the cult spread and developed, the orgiastic side of it won especial attention. In Thrace he was a god of the dead, or rather of the living in the world beyond. He was always and everywhere a god of life and vitality. His similarity to Osiris in Egypt, which Herodotus (II, 42, 144, 156) stresses, makes him easier to understand. Both gods died and rose again. Both were gods of the living dead. Both fructified nature by a liquid of life. And the passion of both was celebrated in drama.

In Greece Dionysus' fertility-cult is much more noticeable than his death-cult. This is, however, there. He was the god in whose honour Athenian drama was performed. Comedy emphasises fertility. Tragedy, though this is much disputed, belongs, in part, to a death-cult.⁷ The characters are normally the illustrious dead. They wear masks, which elsewhere denote a man representing a spirit; this being the origin of our white-faced clowns. There was in front of the Greek stage, in the middle of the orchestra or dancing-floor, a small altar called by a special name, a *thymele*, which has been supposed suitable for offerings to the dead. Many tragedies included as an incident the appearance of a great character's spirit. Parallels point the same way. Chinese and Japanese plays are clearly based on the dead: in China actors come on by a door called 'the door of the spirits'. An apparently remote parallel is nevertheless very persuasive. All over Africa Africans practise a kind of spiritualism. It is normal for African mediums to dress in imitation of some respected former chief, and to let what purports to be his spirit speak through them. Obviously this practice approximates to a drama in which the actors deliver wisdom from the past, and from the other world.

Dionysiac religion in Greece asserted the strength of life, here and hereafter, for Dionysus always rose again. But, like most of the other early evidence which exists, it does not communicate information concerning the life expected by the Greeks after death. We have various reports (pp. 63, 73 above) of astral travel, or projection, and it would seem that some of those who experienced it must have brought back information about the exact nature of the planes which they had visited; but we are not told what the information was.

These four movements or mystery religions amounted to secret societies concerned with a life after death. They have been investigated separately. But they do not merely touch one another here and there by chance. It is now realised that they all grow out of a similar layer of belief and practice. They are all variations of fertility-cult and death-cult occurring as usual,

or as always, together. They were started by people to whom the other world was known and was important. It has been said that all religions begin with an in-break of the world of spirit into the world of matter.

It is at least clear that during the sixth century B.C. many Greeks had come to disagree with the simple Homeric theory that the dead all lived, strengthless, in an underworld, to which all went automatically except a few whose divine connexions earned them happiness in an earthly heaven, and to believe instead that they could all earn for themselves an airy life of happiness after due reincarnations.

The Dionysiac religion was based on direct experience and at least in the beginning some of it was psychic experience. Whether Orphic doctrines came directly is more uncertain. They may have been excogitated on a basis of imported opinions. But a number of Greeks were at least conscious, or said that they were conscious, of former existences on earth. Pythagoras was, or did. There are also plenty of examples elsewhere. In fact, it has been said that reincarnation is the universal belief of the human race except for a few centuries in Western Europe, and even here the poets have generally believed in it. The belief, then, among the Greeks may have originated, as it originated among many or most other peoples, by direct experience. To credit diffusion from some single source with the widespread occurrence of this notion would be placing a heavy load on diffusion.

tion mediums'; that is, mediums who take on facially the appearance of the communicating personality.

5. (p. 67) The danger of too suddenly awaking a medium *out of* trance is well known, and there may have been a similar danger in forcing a medium *into* trance. Either way a tampering with the same delicate and mysterious mechanism of *transition* (as the word 'trance' denotes) is involved.
6. (p. 72) 'A sibyl of Phrygia, called by some Sarbis (*or* Sarysis) and by some Cassandra, and by others Taraxandra' (Suidas, under 'Sibyl').
7. (p. 73) For discussions of the various exemplars of astral travel, or projection, named below (Aristeas, Abaris, Hermotimus, Epimenides), see Rohde (above, iv, note 11), 300 f.; and, especially, E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1951), 140 ff. J. D. P. Bolton in *Aristeas of Proconnesus* (Oxford 1962) notes many similarities between shamanism and Herodotus' account of Aristeas, but he himself favours a more normal explanation of the events recorded. His book contains an extended list of comparable examples.

Important insights into the nature of projected phantasms are given by Edward Carpenter in *The Drama of Love and Death* (London 1912), 91-2, 128, 148, 164, 182, 265. Carpenter refers us to the standard accounts in *Phantasms of the Living* by E. Gurney, F. W. H. Myers and F. Podmore (London 1886) and *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* by F. W. H. Myers (London 1903). See also above, II, note 6, on R. Crookall.

For accounts of the projection of the phantasms of Byron and John Cowper Powys during their lives, see G. Wilson Knight, *Byron and Shakespeare* (London 1966), 312-3, 316, and *The Saturnian Quest* (London 1964), 128-9.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 7

1. (p. 74) Cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 64A: 'All those who pursue philosophy aright study nothing but dying and being dead.'
2. (p. 75) Cf. above, II, note 2, on Osiris. In 'The After-Life . . .' (above, iv, note 6), 220, Jackson Knight attributed the statement that 'generally a death-cult and a fertility cult belong together in a single complex' to

'the late and immensely learned Charles Autran'. In his review of Autran's *Homère et les origines sacerdotales de l'épopée grecque* (3 vols., Paris 1938-44) and *L'épopée indoue, étude de l'arrière-fonds ethnographique et religieux* (Paris 1946), he wrote, following Autran: 'At the other end of the span of time, and in, or near, the beginning, the respect for liquid as the source of life, and its pervasive symbolisation in ideogram and cult, help in showing how the tendance of the great dead and fertility ritual belong together.' (*The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 72 (1952), 128).

The specific references to Autran were made to indicate that on this central matter of life-death identification (so crucial to our understanding of tragic ritual), we have the support of his abnormally wide range of ethnological learning.

3. (p. 75) *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 18 (1915), 116-26.
4. (p. 76) See Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus* 211, 1105; Euripides, *Bacchae*, *passim*.
5. (p. 77) Cf. Heraclitus, 'Hades and Dionysus . . . are the same', Fragment 15, Diels-Kranz. This with other such references to Dionysus as lord of souls is discussed by Rohde in *Psyche* (above, iv, note 11), 168, 271, ix. 11; cf. also John Pollard, *Seers, Shrines and Sirens* (London 1965), 86, 89. For Osiris as god both of fertility and of Hades see above, II, note 2.
- Ibsen was aware of the identification, regarding Dionysus as the god of spirit-communion and spiritualistic practices in *Emperor and Galilean* (*The Emperor Julian* 1, i; ed. William Archer, v, 239). Nietzsche's reading of Dionysus as the god of tragic mysticism is a central contribution (*The Birth of Tragedy*, *passim*).
6. (p. 77) For the religious cults of the Getae, see Rohde (above, iv, note 11), 263-5.
7. (p. 78) The thesis was powerfully argued by Sir William Ridgeway in *The Origin of Tragedy* (Cambridge 1910) and *Dramas and Dramatic Dances* (Cambridge 1915).

IN ELYSION

NOTES TO CHAPTER 8

1. (p. 80) Thales' belief in the individual soul has been disputed on the grounds that soul, *psyche*, for Thales refers simply to hylozoistic matter:

4727
KNIGHT, W.F.J.
1970

I7 *Apollonius of Tyana*

What can surely be accepted is the fact that both Christians and Pagans were fully accustomed to paranormal phenomena; indeed the interventions from the other world were almost normal to many individuals and to some groups. Among the groups were the Pythagoreans and the Christians: among the individuals were Apollonius and St. Paul.

It has been said that the survival of the soul was just as well known before the Resurrection as after it, so that the great effect of Christianity cannot have been due merely to its promise of survival: Cicero in particular proving that this knowledge existed already. It is certainly true that the survival of the soul had been well known to very many people in many places for thousands of years before Christianity, and this is important. But the knowledge had mostly been either narrow and sometimes erroneous, or, as in Cicero, full of doubts and mystification. Cicero sometimes writes as if he is quite convinced and has a reasonable, if limited, system of knowledge, but at other times he will not go so far. Perhaps few went as far as Cicero at his time and place. There were, of course, different places: the ancient world was quite large. Perhaps a small, or even quite a large, minority of educated Romans believed in a future life. Perhaps, also, of the Jews in Palestine, only a few, and they perhaps on account of Greek influence, had any firm or coherent belief in it. The Sadducees said that there was no resurrection. This is, of course, before the first Easter Resurrection, so that, clearly, some did not believe in survival, and some did, before the evidence in which the New Testament culminates. That the

soul survives was certainly not news to everyone either in the east or in the west of the ancient world in the years before the events of the Gospel narrative. But these events may still have corrected this knowledge, spread it, and made it valuable as never before.

There was, in the period covered by the New Testament, new and more plentiful evidence. And it was not confined to Christianity. Plutarch (c. A.D. 46-120), without saying much that is startling, shews a continuous interest in the probability or certainty that the soul survives. Apollonius of Tyana, who lived from about 4 B.C. to at least A.D. 100, and so exactly covers the New Testament period, was a famous Pythagorean philosopher who specialised in the psychic side of 'philosophy'. The long biography of him by Philostratus (c. A.D. 170-c. 244) is strung along a rich sequence of psychic events.¹ Apollonius was certainly a medium. He is reported to have achieved a number of exorcisms. That is, he cast out evil spirits. It might even appear, though any hasty comparison would be dangerous, that he cast them out exactly as they are cast out in the Gospels. Nor is it implied in the Gospels that exorcism there is new or different from what had been done before: 'If I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your sons cast them out?' (Matthew xii, 27).² There are plenty of parallels for exorcism in various parts of the world. But not much is heard of it in Greek and Roman antiquity till the first century A.D. Before then, the great healers and prophets certainly performed this service, but it may often be concealed by the verb *kathairein*, 'to purify', which is very widely used. Exorcism, both in the Gospels and the *Life of Apollonius*, is performed by rebuking the possessing (permanently) or obsessing (in attempted permanence) spirit. Normally, Apollonius speaks to them threateningly. Once he shewed a written document. The spirit always left the person afflicted, immediately, or soon. Ecclesiastical exorcism seems still to work in this way. But another kind is also in use at the present time. A medium reasons with the spirit, who is normally a former human being who is earth-bound and in need of enlightenment. The medium persuades him to recognise his condition and accept

the new life in the other world which is offered to him if he consents to it (see II, note 2, p. 181 below, on Dowding and Wickland, 'rescue circles'). This method is better, for the spirit then goes off happily and does no more harm. By the ancient, and the ecclesiastical, method he is ousted, but remains earth-bound and will beset someone else, or perhaps an animal, such as the Gadarene swine. Exorcism is an example, one of the rare examples, of modern progress in the approach to the occult. We seem to have useful knowledge not open to the ancients.

Apollonius was credited with immense abilities. He detected and routed a disguised vampire who was planning to marry, and then devour, a young man. He could foretell the future, for example, shipwreck. He knew, though hundreds of miles away, the exact time when the Emperor Domitian was assassinated (Dio Cassius, 67, 18; Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* VIII, 26). He transported himself, instantaneously and invisibly, from Rome to Dicaearchia, the modern Pozzuoli; and once also from Smyrna to Ephesus (*Vita Apollonii* VIII, 10; IV, 10). He controlled spirits, to exorcise them and otherwise: at his command a spirit knocked over a statue. He is credited with a kind of séance almost in a modern style. Being near the grave of Achilles in the Troad, and, unlike those with him, unafraid—he knew Achilles well, he said—Apollonius approached. He summoned the spirit of Achilles, and it arose out of the tomb and talked. Achilles had two complaints. Apollonius had with him a descendant of Achilles' enemy, King Priam of Troy: he must dismiss him—which, afterwards, Apollonius did. The second complaint was against the countrymen of Achilles in Thessaly. They had stopped sacrificing to him. They must start again, or he would make them pay, grievously. Apollonius took the message, and it was obeyed. If Apollonius was, as he has been called, 'the last word that Pagan Antiquity had to offer', he and his associates certainly fall far behind early Christian charity.

But Apollonius was a very strict moralist, and a puritanical religious zealot. He sacrificed at sunrise and midday to the sun. He sacrificed no kind of animal, but only spices, going as far,

once, as a model of a bull made of spice, but no farther (*Vita Apollonii* V, 25). He would not even wear leather: his clothes were of linen and his shoes of biblus-fibre (*Vita Apollonii* VIII, 7). He was fiercely ascetic. He adopted Pythagorean philosophy when fifteen, and, though good-looking and liked by all, he repelled all intimacies, and lived in full austerity. He fits Ovid's description of Pythagoreanism as far as it goes. He knew his own previous incarnations, and sometimes the previous incarnations of others. He was not like a Buddhist: he put no full emphasis on loving kindness to all life. He did believe in gods, apparently the established gods of Greece, but perhaps in purified versions; he reorganised, and simplified, the worship at several temples. He denounced baths; but once he is said to have had one. He knew all languages; but once, in India, he needed an interpreter.

His command of the material world was particularly shewn at his arraignments, first before Tigellinus, the wicked minister of Nero, and later before Domitian, at Rome. He soon forced Tigellinus to dismiss him. His meeting with Domitian is a more elaborate story. He defended himself powerfully, broke the Emperor's confidence, and then vanished, to reappear almost immediately among his friends at Dicaearchia (*Vita Apollonii* VIII, 10). In prison, earlier, he had shewn his friends how he could escape. He simply withdrew a leg from its fetter, and then replaced it (Philostratus, *Treatise of Eusebius* XXXIV-XXXV).

Philostratus has very much more to report of Apollonius. Some of it is fanciful or legendary,³ but much is likely to be sound: in matters in which he can be checked, as in the historical events mentioned, Philostratus seems to be accurate.⁴ But perhaps further details, here, should wait for two other, and more urgent, considerations; Apollonius' relation with Christianity and to Neoplatonism.

In this period, as no doubt in others, there was a kind of change in the psychic balance. It is hardly to be explained; it just happened. It had different sides to it. There was a popular religious side. There was in the Roman West a passion for a personal,

direct, contact with divine protectors, a demand for new, unofficial cults such as the cult of the composite deity Serapis and a newly understood Hermes. Presently the at first Indian, and then Persian, Mithras became immensely important. His religion, like many others, involved an initiation with salvation for the initiated. There came to be more fortune-telling, and probably more magic and more superstition. There was a great demand for such satisfactions and such services. Many shrines in many places grew in renown as they satisfied the demand. No doubt their priests made a good profit. Whether many of them cheated, or pretended to be more adept than they were, is not known. Some did; but no doubt many did not. There were elaborately fanciful rites, with mixtures of magic, witchcraft, and sorcery. But there was also a great deal of seriously argued and responsibly believed theology, especially Gnostic, associated with the religions. And initiates might often feel uplifted to a purer state, above the stress and degradation of the earthly world, as Apuleius felt. Lucian's attacks tend to prove not only that there were charlatans but that a great deal of honest occult practice was going on.

Much of all this may not concern the condition of the dead and beliefs concerning them. To the ancients, as to people in the Middle Ages, not all spirits were spirits of deceased human beings: only some were. 'Demonologies' described and distinguished the varieties and their status. There were demonologies before the ancient Greeks, in Babylonia and China. In late Egyptian magical papyri of the early Christian centuries a great number of names occur, more and more fantastic and grotesque, supposed to belong to deities or spirits who are to be conjured or mollified. Possibly someone placed these versions of 'the foul fiend Flibbertygibbet' in a hierarchy. Perhaps not many people seriously believed that all these names represented truly existing spirits, to be classified like Milton's 'Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers'; or like the kinds of spirit which Iamblichus, the expert (probably c. A.D. 250-c. 325), could distinguish at his séances.

IN: ELYSION