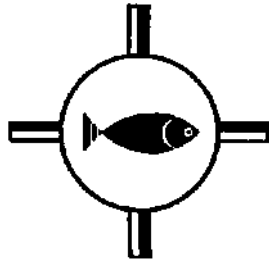


LIBERAL CATHOLIC INSTITUTE OF STUDIES



Unit 14

THEOSOPHIA AND THEOLOGY

Paper 1

THEOSOPHY AMONGST THE ANCIENTS

Volume I

by

The Right Reverend Sten von Krusenstierna



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UNIT 14

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No particular text is prescribed for this paper. Books for additional study are listed at the end of each chapter.

CHAPTER I: THE ANCIENT WISDOM

But we speak the wisdom of God (*Theu Sophia*) in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the world unto our glory.

(1 Cor. 2:7)

In this paper we shall deal with Theosophy in its wider sense and not as has often been the case this century - as including only the tenets of the modern theosophical movement and its many offshoots.

The third century Alexandrian philosopher Ammonius Saccas used the term *Theosophia* (*Theos* = God, *Sophia* = wisdom) for the philosophy he taught. So did the 18th century Swedish scientist and seer Emmanuel Swedenborg who even started a Theosophical Society, later called "the Church of the new Jerusalem" or the Swedenborgian Church. The 17th century seer and mystic Jacob Boehme, "The German Philosopher", has also been called a theosophist.

DEFINITIONS

Here are some definitions of Theosophy in this wider sense:

Theosophy

1. "A name given by the Alexandrian philosophers to the ancient Wisdom-Religion, the Hidden Wisdom, in the third century A.D."
2. That eternal revelation of the Divine Spirit which forms the source of all the religions, arts and sciences of the world.

Theosophy "is the one TRUTH which underlies all forms, all phenomena, all experience. Every system of religion arises from the attempt to formulate this underlying TRUTH, to give it definite expression in human language." Wm. Kingsland.

(*A Dictionary of Theosophical Terms*)

THEOSOPHY, THEOSOPHIA (GK.).

"Wisdom-religion or Divine Wisdom." The substratum of all the world religions and philosophies, taught and practised by a few elect ever since man became a thinking being . . . the early Rosicrucians and medieval philosophers called themselves Theosophists. (B) Modern Theosophy is commonly associated with The Theosophical Society, founded in 1875 (see, however, Swedenborg) and the general Theosophical Movements, but the original meaning of the word (first used by the Neo-Platonists in the first few centuries A.D.) is far wider and deeper than any specific set of doctrines or beliefs, and represents an inner enlightenment or experience. Theosophy can be equated not only with the ancient wisdom but with that of today and tomorrow. It is, in short, the perennial and timeless philosophy of mankind.

(*Key-words of the Wisdom Tradition*)

As Liberal Catholics we are interested not only in the modern expression of *Theosophia* - but also in the Theosophy of past ages.

The term 'theosophy' has constantly appeared in the religious thought of both East and West and denotes not only the mysticism but also the eclectic philosophy to be found in all religion. (*Statement of Principles, p. 7*)

THE WISDOM-TEACHING

Elements of Theosophy appear to have existed as a wisdom-teaching from time immemorial. The *Brahma Vidya* (God Wisdom) of India is an example of this. These wisdom-teachings have come down to us in a variety of forms, sometimes as Mysteries, sometimes in the form of what we now call Mysticism. Theosophy and mysticism largely overlap. Much that today goes under the name of mysticism is also part of *Theosophia*, the Divine Wisdom.

Some modern writers, often independently of modern Theosophy, have come to the conclusion that such a wisdom-teaching can be found in practically all religions, ancient and modern, though obviously expressed in different terms in different periods and among different peoples. The best known of recent writers on this subject is Aldous Huxley who, following the 18th century German philosopher Leibniz, calls this ancient wisdom, *The Perennial Philosophy*. The founders of the modern theosophical movement were, of course, well aware of the ancient roots of theosophy and books such as H.P. Blavatsky's monumental work, *The secret Doctrine*, contain many fragments of wisdom from the ancient religions and philosophies.

ITS CHARACTERISTICS

What, then, are the particular doctrines characteristic of this ancient wisdom which we should be looking for? Annie Besant in her book, *The Ancient wisdom*, gives us the following lead:

The main spiritual verities of religion may be summarized thus:

- i. One eternal infinite incognizable real Existence.
- ii. From That the manifested God, unfolding from unity to duality, from duality to trinity.
- iii. From the manifested Trinity many spiritual Intelligences, guiding the cosmic order.
- iv. Man a reflection of the manifested God and therefore a trinity fundamentally, his inner and real Self being eternal, one with the Self of the universe.
- v. His evolution by repeated incarnations, into which he is drawn by desire, and from which he is set free by knowledge and sacrifice, becoming divine in potency as he had ever been divine in latency.

(*The Ancient Wisdom, p. 5*)

We shall see that we can find ample traces of this "divine wisdom" in the ancient religions and philosophies though often veiled in allegory, myth and symbol. The ancients freely made use of myths and symbols to convey religious and metaphysical concepts. In our time Carl Gustav Jung and his school have realized the supreme importance of myths and symbols in the life of man. Genuine myths and symbols are expressions of the "collective unconscious," a deeper level of the human psyche. Myths may reveal aspects of reality otherwise not communicable to man. (See the chapter on Myth and its Significance in Paper 2, Unit 4, in this course.)

In this paper we shall not deal with the Indian and Far Eastern religions and philosophies, but mainly with those that have arisen in the Middle East and the Mediterranean area, because of their

influence on Christianity. Hinduism and Buddhism probably had some influence on the religious climate in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially after Alexander's conquest of the Persian empire and the northwestern part of India. Zoroastrianism, the religion of ancient Iran, is thought to have had some influence on Judaism.

The theosophical conception of religion differs from that of most scholars who generally see the religions as developments from primitive forms of worship such as fertility cults, etc. As against this view, theosophy generally sees the ancient wisdom in the various religions as having been given to mankind by great teachers and sages far advanced in wisdom and knowledge beyond the ordinary man. These great ones are seen as belonging to a brotherhood which has risen above average humanity in evolution.

The great Teachers - it is alleged by Hindus, Buddhists, and by some comparative religionists, such as Theosophists - form an enduring Brotherhood of men who have risen beyond humanity, who appear at certain periods to enlighten the world, and who are the spiritual guardians of the human race. This view may be summed up in the phrase: "Religions are branches from a common trunk - Divine Wisdom."

This Divine Wisdom is spoken of as the Wisdom, the Gnosis, the Theosophia . . .

(Annie Besant in *Esoteric Christianity*, p. 6)

ITS INFLUENCE ON CHRISTIANITY

It was known among the ancients that a Divine Wisdom under various names had existed from the beginning of human civilization. The wisdom tradition of the Egyptians and the Chaldeans was highly regarded by the Greeks.

Our *Statement of Principles* contains the following quotation from St. Augustine:

The identical thing that we now call the Christian religion existed among the ancients and has not been lacking from the beginnings of the human race until the coming of Christ in the flesh from which moment on the true religion, which already existed, began to be called Christian.

(*Retract.I, xiii, 3*)

We shall see how true this statement is as we study some of the philosophies and religious movements which preceded or were contemporary with Christianity. Much that at one time was thought to be unique to Christianity has been found to have been incorporated in various forms into that religion from ancient, so-called "pagan" sources. Many independent scholars regard Christianity as a syncretistic religion, in this respect somewhat similar to Hinduism, except that Christianity has lacked the tolerance of the former.

This may come as a shock to some. It is mainly because - partly through ignorance - the Christian religion has been proclaimed as a "unique revelation" in history, intended by God for the salvation of that minority of humanity which accepted Jesus Christ as saviour. Today we live in a world where we are constantly mixing with adherents of other religions. We have to accept that all religions have validity, that all contain a pathway of spiritual unfoldment.

That many of the theological, ritual and other elements in Christianity have also been present in earlier religions and philosophies is now well known to scholars. There are unique aspects in Christianity, just as in the other great religions.

But there are also elements which are common to most religions, though often expressed in different terms. These we can trace back to the Ancient Wisdom as found among the Greeks and Romans, in that great civilization of the ancient world which has left its indelible mark on our present-day Western civilization and on the Christian religion.

In the re-vitalized form of Christianity which is Liberal Catholicism, we must be aware of the fact that much of what is - and has been - part of Christian theology, philosophy, ritual and sacraments, has its roots in the Ancient Wisdom as it existed in the Mysteries and in the ancient religions and philosophies of that period and not only in Judaism. This knowledge gives us a much deeper appreciation of our Christianity. It adds greater strength and a more timeless quality to our religion, knowing that many aspects of it have come down to us from very ancient times. In Christianity - in its many aspects and in spite of its present low stage - we are dealing with a religion with deep roots not only in Judaism but in the great religions and Mysteries of the ancient world as well.

Books for further study:

Besant, A. *The Ancient Wisdom*, (T.P.H.)

Besant, A. *Esoteric Christianity* (T.P.H.)

Huxley, A. *The Perennial Philosophy* (Chatto & Windus 1946, al so in Penguin)

CHAPTER 2: THE ORPHIC RELIGION

Robed in pure white, I have borne me
clean from man's vile birth and coffined
clay, and exiled from my lips always touch
of all meat where life hath been.

(From an Orphic Hymn)

It is not known when the legendary sage, poet and divine musician Orpheus actually lived. G.R.S. Mead regards Orpheus as a generic name for several teachers of the Ancient Wisdom to the early Greeks. Other scholars regard Orpheus as an historic person, later transformed into a legendary, mythical figure.

According to the myth he was the son of a King and the Muse Calliope. His beloved wife, Eurydice, after having been bitten by a snake, dies and enters the underworld. Orpheus follows her into the depth and so charms Hades, the King of the underworld, with his music, that he allows them to return to earth under condition that Orpheus must not look back. At the last moment, before reaching the entrance, he turns to look at his wife who then disappears before his eyes. According to Mead the death of Orpheus is recounted in various ways. Either he died of grief for the loss of Eurydice or was killed by a thunderbolt from Zeus for revealing the sacred mysteries to mortals.

From about the Sixth century B.C., Orphism appears to have been firmly established in Greece. It never seems to have attracted large numbers of followers, but its influence on contemporary and later philosophers and writers was great. Many scholars regard it as a religion in its own right with its own mysteries and its own special theology.

Orphism, the greatest revival in Greek religion, proved a force of far-reaching importance through its influence on Heraclitus, Plato, Pythagoreanism, Greek Mysteries, NeoPlatonism, and on such writers as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Pindar and Virgil. It appeared at a time of great social upheaval when the very foundations of life seemed to be tottering. It confronted the situation by shifting the centre of interest from mere earthly existence, and making life here but a preparation for a life beyond.

Orphism introduced a theology of redemption. It taught a doctrine of original sin. Man's nature was dualistic, composed of the titanic elements closely associated with the body, and the dionysiac elements which were allied with the soul. By an ascetic morality the former must be repressed and the latter cultivated, to the end that the soul may escape 'from the body as from a tomb,' and may cease to be subject to the weary 'cycle of reincarnation'.

(S. Angus in *The Mystery Religions and Christianity*, p. 150)

THE DIONYSIAC MYTH

The central myth of the Orphic religion was that of the child Dionysos, who was torn to pieces and devoured by the Titans. Zeus then destroyed the Titans with his thunderbolt and from their ashes arose the human race.

... in the Orphic view, when man rose from the ashes of the Titans, it was not only the evil Titanic nature that he inherited. The Titans had eaten the boy Dionysus; thus the

ashes, and hence man as well, contained a divine, Dionysian part. The evaluation of man as a good and evil creature of Titanic and Dionysian origin is essential to Orphism and occurs here for the first time in Greece. Only recently a writer has called it the most original and far-reaching creation of the Greeks and spoken of the Titanic nature as the Orphic original sin. Rightly, in so far as this basic view led the Orphics to devalue human life and brought them the conviction that man must redeem himself by fleeing the Titanic and saving the Dionysian in himself. The divine soul must strive to return to its source. The body becomes the tomb and prison of the soul, which seeks flight into transcendence: the myth of the Titanic-Dionysian origin of man created the belief that the body was the tomb of the soul, the soma-sema dogma. This is the center of the Orphic Mysteries. It epitomizes the Orphic and un-Greek flight from the world.

(W. Wili in *The Mysteries*, p. 74)

Man then, in the Orphic view, is in essence divine, a god, but the spirit, the divine in him, is entombed in matter.

ORPHIC COSMOLOGY

Not much has been left of Orphic writings. But we have some knowledge of their theology from later - mainly neo-platonic - authors who frequently quote Orphic hymns and other works of the Orphic religion. The theology has strong parallels in Indian and Chaldean doctrines. One of their fundamental doctrines was that God is one and totally beyond our knowledge. In the words of G.R.S. Mead:

If there is one doctrine more insisted on than any other in the Orphic theology, it is that all the deific orders and powers are but aspects of the One.

(*Orpheus*, p. 49)

Quoting Thomas Taylor, he writes further:

Taylor sums up the emanation of primal principles or monads, setting forth the septenary order of primal essences as follows (Proclus on the *Theol. of Plato*, pp. x, xi): 'According to this theology, therefore, from the immense principle of principles, in which all things causally subsist, absorbed in superessential light, and involved in unfathomable depths, a beauteous progeny of principles proceed, all largely partaking of the ineffable, all stamped with the occult characters of Deity, all possessing an overflowing fulness of good. From these dazzling summits, these ineffable blossoms, these divine propagations, being, life, intellect, soul, nature, and body descend: monads suspended from unities, deified nature proceeding from deities.'

These are the roots and summits of the manifested Universe; each a monad from which all of its kind proceed; all beings proceeding from the one Being, etc., and all bodies from the 'vital and luminous' Body of the Universe.

Thus we have a septenary scale:

1. The Ineffable
2. Being
3. Life
4. Intellect
5. Soul
6. Nature
7. Body

These in their turn constitute one monad and two triads. He continues:

Each Triad is constituted according to three hypostases: (a) Hyparxis (or Father), (b) Power (or Mother), and (c) Mind (or Son). Zeus, the Demiurgic or Manifested Logos (the Brahma or Ishvara of the system) is the 'Mind' of the Noeric Triad, and thus the Monad or Arche (Source) of all below.

(G.R.S. Mead, *Orpheus*, pp. 61 & 62)

The cosmology and theogony of the Orphic religion is one of great complexity and in that respect can be compared to the Gnostic systems with their many Aeons.

THE ORPHIC WORLD-VIEW

Many theological concepts which we later find in Plato and the Neo-Platonists, among the Gnostics and among the Fathers of the Church, had their origin in the Orphic religion. The greatest effect of the Orphic religion (professor Angus calls it "a reformation") was on the general attitude to life of the Greeks:

Contrary to the prevalent Greek idea of a life according to nature, the body was viewed as a 'prison' or 'tomb' of the soul. Life became a grim struggle between the Titanic and the Dionysiac elements in man's nature, by which the Orphic became increasingly Dionysiac or divine till he reached the goal, 'Happy and blessed one, though shalt be god instead of mortal.'

(The Mystery Religions and Christianity, p. 152)

This change in attitude was also manifested by a strong sense of justice, combined with the belief in reincarnation or transmigration.

A strong sense of justice, far greater than in previous Greek thinking, is manifested in the Orphic mysteries. In the doctrine of transmigration, which naturally posits the immortality of the individual soul and its existence prior to birth, the soma-sema myth is combined with the new ideas of justice and retribution. We now understand the pronounced severity of the Orphic rites of purification. These - in contrast to the mysteries of Eleusis and Samothrace - were demanded not only in times of festival, but throughout life. The Orphics also abstained from all meat - an astounding notion for the Homeric Greeks . . .

These commandments and prohibitions, early taken over by the Pythagoreans, thus enjoyed currency in the most spiritual order of the classical era.

(W. Wili in *The Mysteries*, p. 76)

A FORERUNNER OF CHRISTIANITY

The Orphic religion was a forerunner of the Later Mystery Religions and also of Christianity, itself at one stage a Mystery Religion. According to professor Angus, Orphism was the first to introduce into the religious consciousness of the ancient world the idea of sin, "never since eradicated in the west". It also put a new ideal before the west, that of hagios, holiness, personified by the saint. Purity of mind and body, including the abstention from meat, was another characteristic of the Orphic teaching. J. Harrison in her book, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge U.P., 1922) speaks of the higher Orphism as "a faith so high that it may be questioned

whether any faith, ancient or modern, has ever outpassed it" (quoted by Angus in *The Mystery Religions and Christianity*, p. 152).

Orphism transformed the originally crude and orgiastic Dionysiac cult into Mysteries in which, through mystical contemplation and spiritual ecstasy, union with the Divine could be obtained. This practice was continued in Neo-platonism and later in Christian mysticism. The Orphic Mysteries were built on Dionysiac ritual and mythology. The god of their ritual was Dionysos, while the esoteric god was Eros, Love.

MANY NEW CONCEPTS

Professor Angus points out that the Orphic religion introduced many new and original conceptions and practices. It was

. . . inevitably concerned primarily with the salvation of the individual soul - a startlingly new religious conception, enhancing the ideal of personal responsibility and making religion essentially a matter of a man's own moral choice . . . In another respect the Orphics prepared for the "free church" principle of the Mysteries and of Christianity. The Orphic cult-brotherhoods established the practice of voluntary association for religious purposes which became pronounced from the days of Alexander the Great. Orphism was steeped in sacramentarianism which flooded the later Mysteries and flowed into Christianity. Salvation was by sacrament, by initiatory rites, and by an esoteric doctrine. Rites performed religiously on earth affected the lot beyond, as is clear from the language of the Orphic tablets.

Orphic Purity, by which man attained divinity, could not be secured by mere self-reliance. Special divine help was requisite, a sacramental grace communicated by initiation. Thus, the optimistic or anthropocentric religious view of the West retreated before the humbler and theocentric view of the helplessness of man. This conviction quickened the yearning for redemption and created a demand for the sacramental grace of the Mysteries and Christianity.

(*The Mystery Religions and Christianity*, pp. 152-3)

We find then that the Orphic religion and its Mysteries foreshadowed many of the practices and theological tenets of Christianity many centuries before Christ. Among these were:

1. An ineffable Deity behind all manifestation, expressing itself through a triad or trinity.
2. The conception of sin, even a kind of "original" sin.
3. The idea of salvation through a saviour who died and rose again.
4. The ideal of purity and holiness - the saint.
5. Initiatory rites and sacraments.
6. Divine Grace by which salvation was obtained.
7. The idea of "deification" as still current in the Eastern Orthodox Church.
8. The conception of final union with the Divine - later found also in Christian mysticism.
9. The idea of purgatory, later developed in Roman Catholic theology.

Books for further study:

Angus, S., *The Mystery Religions and Christianity* (Murray, 1929)

Campbell, J. (Ed.), *The Mysteries* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1955)

Mead, G.R.S., *Orpheus* (Watkins, 1965)

CHAPTER 3: THE MYSTERIES

Happy is he among men upon earth who has seen these mysteries; but he who is uninitiate and who has no part in them, never has lot of like good things once he is dead, down in the darkness and gloom.

(from a *Hymn to Demeter*)

In the ancient world there existed alongside with - or as part of - the official religions what was called the Mysteries (Greek *Musteria*). Like the word "mystic" it is originally derived from *mustes*, an initiated person, from *muo*: close eyes or lips (Oxford Dictionary). In the previous chapter, mention was made of the Orphic Mysteries which were central to that religion.

Some of the Mysteries of antiquity seem to have been local cults originally attached to certain places or districts. About their origin little is known and some scholars are of the opinion that they have grown out of tribal practices of "rites of passage" (i.e., rituals in connection with the human cycle of birth, adolescence, marriage and death) or of the ecological cycle of the seasons, of sowing and harvesting, etc. In some cases this may well be true.

However, from the generally high moral content of the philosophy and cosmology taught in the Mysteries (at least from what we know of them) it is clear that they were in many cases schools of esoteric teaching into which those who were willing to undergo preparatory training and live a pure life could be initiated. They can also in some instances be regarded as embodying the higher education of their day, as was for instance, the case in earlier times with the Egyptian Mysteries:

The Mysteries were the great public institutions, centres of national and religious life, to which people of the better classes flocked in thousands, and they did their work well, for one who had passed through their degrees - a process of many years - thereby became what we should now call a highly educated and cultured man or woman, with, in addition to his knowledge about this world, a vivid realization of the future after death, of man's place in the scheme of things, and therefore of what was really worth doing and living for.

(C.W. Leadbeater in *The Hidden Life in Freemasonry*, p. 34)

But in most cases, the Mysteries were institutions in which aspects of the Ancient Wisdom were taught to its initiates in various stages. Much of this teaching was given in the form of ritual actions (Greek: *teletai*) and those admitted to these rites often had to go through severe trials to test their moral strength and determination.

Scholars have tried to piece together what actually took place in the Mysteries:

After purification (*catharsis*) and other preliminary rites, a rite of initiation (*myesis*) leads the neophyte into the circle of the initiates (*mystai*); he enters into a bond with them and with the numen of the cult; degrees or stages of initiation or knowledge lead him upwards; he becomes a seer (*epoptes*). The mystes or epopt keeps his insight or vision entirely or partially secret from outsiders or from those who have not yet attained to the same stage. A line is drawn between the esoteric and the exoteric. The degrees of insight are transmitted by *dromena* and *legomena* (ritual actions and words).

. . . The *telos* (ultimate aim) consists in the attainment of a beatific immortality, of a desirable state after death. Symbolically, man enters the underworld, he "dies" in a dromenon, or is "wedded," and he is always symbolically reborn; then he lives no longer in "death" but in "life." The uninitiate and hence unconsecrated remains "in death."

(Paul Schmitt in *The Mysteries*, p. 94)

The Mysteries of antiquity that we know of were all based on a central myth, the deeper meanings of which were gradually revealed to the candidates as they passed through the various stages. In the Egyptian Mysteries it was the myth of the dismemberment and restoration of Osiris, in the Orphic Mysteries the death and rebirth of Dionysos, in the Eleusinian Mysteries the myth of Demeter and the search for her daughter Kore.

The Mysteries were very much part of the great Greco-Roman civilization of antiquity from which our modern "Western" civilization is derived.

For over eleven centuries Eleusis supported the hope of man till destroyed by the fanatic monks in the train of Alaric in 396. The Orphic gospel was heard in the Mediterranean for at least twelve centuries. For eight centuries Queen Isis and the Lord Serapis swayed their myriads of devotees in the Greek world, and for five centuries in the Roman. The Great Mother was passionately revered for six centuries in Italy. For over half a millennium the approach to religion for thoughtful minds was by the *Gnostic* path. Such facts - since no religion persists by its falsehood, but by its truth - entitle the ancient Mysteries to due consideration. As an important background to early Christianity and as the chief medium of sacramentarianism to the West they cannot be neglected; for to fail to recognize the moral and spiritual values of Hellenistic-Oriental paganism is to misunderstand the early Christian centuries and to do injustice to the victory of Christianity. Moreover, much from the Mysteries has persisted in various modern phases of thought and practice.

(Samuel Angus in the Foreword to *The Mystery Religions and Christianity*)

We also have to realize that some of the Mysteries had lower, cruder, aspects which included animal sacrifices, a very common practice in antiquity - as we know from the Old Testament and the practices of the Jews in that period.

THE MYSTERIES OF ELEUSIS

In some cases, what were at first locally practiced Mysteries, at a later period developed into full-scale religions which spread over wide areas of the Roman Empire. These religions are usually termed "Mystery Religions" because they had certain Mysteries at the centre of their worship. They will be dealt with in a later chapter.

Some of the Mysteries remained centred in a particular locality. The most famous of these throughout antiquity were the Mysteries of Eleusis. There were other Mysteries in Greece, such as those of the *Kabeiroi*, which were very ancient and were linked to the island of Samothrace. The Dionysiac and Orphic Mysteries have already been mentioned.

Eleusis was a town in Attica, not far from Athens. It had a famous sanctuary dedicated to the earth goddess Demeter. It was here that the Mystery rites were performed during certain parts of the year.

The central myth in the Eleusinian Mysteries - parts of which were enacted in the Mysteries - was that of the goddess Demeter and her daughter Kore - identified with Persephone. In the myth, Kore, while gathering flowers in a meadow, is sized up by Hades, the Lord of the underworld, and taken to his Kingdom. Demeter, in her sorrow wanders through the world in search of her daughter who is finally brought back by the god Hermes by the order of Zeus. But Persephone has to spend part of the year in the underworld and is only allowed back on earth every year in spring. Later in the myth she bears a son to Zeus, Iacchus.

Openly performed ceremonies, including large processions and nightly searches by torchlight - re-enacting the search of the goddess for her daughter - were also part of the Mysteries, in which in its heydays thousands of people took part.

In performance of the rite, the devotees formed an immense procession from Athens to Eleusis. The rite began after a threefold sacral purification: a bath first in the sea, then on the road to Eleusis in the salt lakes, the *rheitoi*, and finally within the sacred confines of Eleusis. Catharsis by water thus played an important role. The image of Iacchus, a god early assimilated to Dionysus, was solemnly borne over the sacred highway from Athens to Eleusis, a distance of nearly fourteen miles. Then the mystery rites were performed in and around the temple.

(Walter Willy in *The Mysteries*, p. 81)

The Mysteries of Eleusis were supported and protected by the state. Athenian law punished by death anyone who would reveal any of its secrets. As far as we know, there were several stages in the Mysteries, each with its own rite and secrets. The highest stage is generally thought to have been that of *epoptai*, those who "behold." If we want to understand and try to re-live the experiences of the *mustes*, we must think of the highest and most holy moments in our lives. This is very well expressed by Walter Otto in the chapter, "*The Meaning of the Eleusinian Mysteries*":

What, then, is myth? - An old story, lived by the ancestors and handed down to the descendants. But the past is only one aspect of it. The true myth is inseparably bound up with the cult. The once-upon-a-time is also a now, what was is also a living event. Only in its twofold unity of then and now does a myth fulfill its true essence. The cult is its present form, the re-enactment of an archetypal event, situated in the past but in essence eternal. And the moment when this myth is realized is the festival of the gods, the holy day, recurring at a fixed interval. On this day the whole memory of the great ancestral experience is again true and present. The gods are at hand, as they were at the beginning of time, not only as majestic figures demanding reverence, but as what they are: supreme realities of the here and now, primal phenomena of the movement of being, creating and suffering powers of the living moment which also encompasses death. Without death there can be no life; without dying, no fertility. The stupendous moment has returned, the moment when the young goddess was ravished by darkness, when the divine mother sought her, mourning and lamenting her, until she learned that she was Queen of the Dead and would remain so; but she rises up again and with her the grain, to which men owe their civilization.

And the mystai are witnesses of this event, which in essence is not a play, but divine presence, realized myth. Persephone is present, for mankind, for the congregation, in the great moment that time has brought to pass. And she will be present again for every single man when the moment of death has come, that terrible festival of the death night, with which the Eleusinian Mysteries have so often been compared.

The Eleusinian mystes lived the miracle of intimacy with the goddesses, he experienced their presence. He was received into the sphere of their acts and sufferings, into the immediate reality of their sublime being. His famous vision was no mere looking on. It was sublimation to a higher existence, a transformation of his being. What wonder then that the beholder of this vision should have been confident of a higher destiny in life, and in death, where Persephone was queen!

(*The Mysteries*, p. 29)

For further study:

Angus, S. *The Mystery Religious and Christianity* (John Murray, 1929)

Campbell, J. (Ed.) *The Mysteries* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1955)

D'Alviella, G. *The Mysteries of Eleusis* (Aquarian Press, 1981)

Leadbeater, C. W. *Glimpses of Masonic History* (T.P.H., 1928)

CHAPTER 4: GREEK PHILOSOPHY

Treat with respect the power you have to form an opinion. By it alone can the helmsman within you avoid forming opinions that are at variance with nature and with the constitution of a reasonable being. From it you may look to attain circumspection, good relations with your fellow-men, and conformity with the will of heaven.

(Marcus Aurelius: *Meditations*)

In classical times ethics and man's relation to the Deity were the main subjects of philosophy. In Greece - as in India - there were several schools of philosophy which varied in their views from the purely materialistic to the mystical and highly religious.

Some scholars are of the opinion that the conception of philosophy as a way of life arose through the influence of the Orphic religion. They also point to the similarity of Orphic beliefs and those of India. The influence of religion on Greek philosophy was no doubt considerable.

There are three outstanding figures and one school of philosophy which have left their special mark on the history of philosophy and religion: Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics. For our purpose we shall deal mainly with the first two and the last.

PYTHAGORAS

Pythagoras (c. 582-500 B.C.), a native of the island of Samos, was a contemporary of the Buddha. He founded a religious fraternity at Croton in Southern Italy, at that time colonized by the Greeks. The Pythagoreans were highly regarded in antiquity and had great influence on later philosophical, scientific and mystical thought. They made important contributions to mathematics, astronomy and physics. Pythagoras has often been regarded as "the father of modern science". He was definitely a pioneer in many fields.

I do not know of any other man who has been as influential as he was in the sphere of thought. I say this because what appears as Platonism is, when analysed, found to be in essence Pythagoreanism. The whole conception of an eternal world, revealed to the intellect but not to the senses, is derived from him. But for him, Christians would not have thought of Christ as the Word; but for him, theologians would not have sought logical proofs of God and immortality. But in him all this is still implicit.

(Bertrand Russell in *History of Western Philosophy*, p. 56)

Pythagoras taught that the human spirit was divine and immortal, but imprisoned in the body. He also taught reincarnation and the eventual return of the spirit to the Divine. He is said to have been the first to use the term "philosophy" (love of wisdom). He attached great importance to numbers and geometry and combined mathematics and logic with philosophy and theology.

Mystical doctrines as to the relation of time to eternity are also reinforced by pure mathematics, for mathematical objects, such as numbers, if real at all, are eternal and

not in time. Such eternal objects can be conceived as God's thoughts. Hence Plato's doctrine that God is a geometer, and Sir James Jeans' belief that He is addicted to arithmetic. Rationalistic as opposed to apocalyptic religion has been, ever since Pythagoras, and notably ever since Plato, very completely dominated by mathematics and mathematical method.

The combination of mathematics and theology, which began with Pythagoras, characterized religious philosophy in Greece, in the Middle Ages, and in modern times down to Kant. Orphism before Pythagoras was analogous to Asiatic mystery religions. But in Plato, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz there is an intimate blending of religion and reasoning, of moral aspiration with logical admiration of what is timeless, which comes from Pythagoras, and distinguishes the intellectualized theology of Europe from the more straightforward mysticism of Asia

(*ibid*, p. 56)

PLATO

Plato (428-348 B.C.) has generally been regarded as the greatest and most influential of philosophers. He and his pupil Aristotle set as it were their stamp on philosophy as an intellectual pursuit right down to our present day. Christian theology was greatly influenced by Plato until the schoolmen of the 13th century decided to follow the reasoning of Aristotle. Plato is important to us in the Liberal Catholic Church as we follow the Platonic tradition of Christian theology (*Statement of Principles*, p. 6). What has not often been realized is that Plato in the broad outlines of his thinking followed Pythagoras and the Orphics.

From Pythagoras (whether by way of Socrates or not) Plato derived the Orphic elements in his philosophy: the religious trend, the belief in immortality, the other-worldliness, the priestly tone, and all that is involved in the simile of the cave; also his respect for mathematics, and his intimate intermingling of intellect and mysticism. In the second place: Plato, like all mystics, has, in his beliefs, a core of certainty which is essentially incommunicable except by a way of life. The Pythagoreans had endeavoured to set up a rule of the initiate, and this is, at bottom, what Plato desires.

(*History of Western Philosophy*, p. 123)

Plato's philosophy is expounded in the form of dialogues in his works. Of particular interest are his views on the real and the unreal, the immortality of the soul and his cosmology.

This world of the senses in which we live is a world of change and therefore unreal. The real world is the world of ideas (or "forms") which are the eternal models or archetypes of all things. In *The Republic*, Book VII, Plato illustrates this by the analogy of the cave. We, human beings, are like prisoners in an underground cave. A fire is burning behind the prisoners which are bound facing a wall so that all they can see is their own shadows and the shadows of those who pass between them and the fire. This is our situation in the physical world, we are prisoners of the body and see only the shadows cast on the wall of the cave. To see things as they are, the prisoners have to get out of the cave into the sun and the light above.

In the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*, Plato describes the immortal soul of man as belonging to the world of Forms or Ideas, the world of reality. As the soul has existed in that world before its descent into the body, it can have a recollection (*anamnesis*) "of those things which in time past our soul beheld" (*Phaedrus*). It is especially the sight of beauty in this physical world which reminds us

of the real world where we belong, because beauty here on earth is a reflection of the Divine, of the supreme Beauty as it exists in the real world.

The Highest, from which the forms and ideas which form the world of reality are derived, is the Good which he sees as beyond reality:'

'The Good therefore may be said to be the source not only of the intelligibility of the objects of knowledge, but also of their existence and reality; yet it is not itself identical with reality, but is beyond reality, and superior to it in dignity and power.'

(*The Republic*, Book VI, 509)

Beside the Good, he also frequently speaks of the True and the Beautiful which, in later Platonism, became a kind of Trinity. The world of Forms is seen as an organic whole which is the model or pattern on which the physical world is made.

The highest part of the human soul, "the eye of the soul", is *nous*, a word which has often been translated as "reason" or "intelligence", but also has the meaning of intuition or intuitive insight. There is also the *daimon*, or guiding genius in man (we may say his "higher self").

It is through *nous*, the divine part of the soul, that it can "recollect" the real world, the world of Forms or Archetypes. But to be able to do this while being attached to the body, the soul must be trained by a virtuous life, character building and a severe intellectual discipline. This must be followed by contemplation (*theoria*) by which a vision may be obtained which entirely changes a man's life. He may then, through the use of his *nous* "hold intercourse with that which really exists and beget wisdom and truth" (*The Republic*, Book VI). This view of Plato has been of great influence on later mysticism.

In the *Timaeus* Plato gives his views on the creation of the world. The Creator he calls the *Demiurge* (craftsman). Whether this creator is identical with the Good, or an aspect of it, is not clear. He creates the world out of a state of "inharmonious and disorderly motion" on which He imposes order:

TIMAEUS: Let us therefore state the reason why the framer of this universe of change framed it at all. He was good, and what is good has no particle of envy in it; being therefore without envy he wished all things to be as like himself as possible.

God therefore, wishing that all things should be good, and so far as possible nothing be imperfect, and finding the visible universe in a state not of rest but of inharmonious and disorderly motion, reduced it to order from disorder, as he judged that order was in every way better.

Plato sees the created world as a being, having soul and body:

. . . in fashioning the universe he implanted reason in soul and soul in body, and so ensured that his work should be by nature highest and best. And so the most likely account must say that this world came to be in very truth, through god's providence, a living being with soul and intelligence.

For god's purpose was to use as his model the highest and most completely perfect of intelligible things, and so he created a single visible living being, containing within itself all living beings of the same natural order.

(*Timaeus*, 30)

Plato's view of the world as having been created out of some kind of chaos, is in agreement with the Greek myth of creation, but was rejected by later Christian theology according to which God created the world *ex nihilo*, "out of nothing".

At the end of *The Republic*, Plato narrates in the form of a myth (called the myth of *Er*) what happens to the soul after it has left the body at death and before it reincarnates again. After a long period during which they receive their rewards and retributions, the souls are led before the three goddesses of fate, the Daughters of Necessity, who represent Past, Present and Future. From the lap of the goddess of the Past, an "interpreter" takes a number of lots and "types of life" and addresses the souls:

"Souls of a day, here you must begin another round of moral life. No Guardian Angel will be allotted to you; you shall choose your own. And he on whom the lot falls first shall be the first to choose the life which then shall of necessity be his. Goodness knows no master; a man shall have more or less of her according to the value he sets on her. The fault lies not with God, but with the soul that makes the choice." With these words he threw the lots among them, and each picked up that which fell beside him.

(*The Republic*, Book X, 617)

After having chosen from among the lots the lives they are going to live on earth, the souls are led before the goddesses of the Present and the Future, "so making the threads of their destinies irreversible". They finally are led through a dry land after which they drink the water from the river of *Lethe*, the river of forgetfulness. Then they fall into a deep sleep, after which they are swept away to be born on earth.

Plato was the founder of the Academy at Athens which remained a centre of learning through the classical period until it was closed in 529 A.D.

THE STOICS

In the philosophy of the Stoics (the first of which was Zeno, 340-265 B.C.), virtue was all important. The later Stoics were mainly Romans. The main characteristic of their philosophy was a very high ethical standard. Complete self-mastery, by overcoming the passions and emotions, is the Stoic ideal. Stoicism can be said to have been the religion of the educated classes at the period around the beginning of our era.

Their system was pantheistic. God is immanent in all creation and all beings are parts of Him.

God is not separate from the world; He is the soul of the world, and each of us contains a part of the Divine Fire. All things are parts of one single system, which is called Nature; the individual life is good when it is in harmony with Nature.

(*History of Western Philosophy*, p. 262)

Being divine in essence, man, through a virtuous life, has the capacity to reach perfection:

. . . for the Stoics there was no incompatibility in saying both that God and man were 'of the same substance' and that God directs all things. Men differ from God, in their view, only in so far as a particular natural event differs from Nature as a whole; man, to use one of the favourite Stoic metaphors, is 'a particle of God'. Since God is a fiery

spirit, man is a 'fiery particle', and since he is a particle of God, perfection lies in principle within man's reach.

(John Passmore in *The Perfectibility of Man*, p. 55)

Among well-known Stoic philosophers were the emperor Marcus Aurelius and the slave Epictetus. The equality of all men and women was another characteristic of Stoic philosophy.

By nature, the Stoics held, all human beings are equal. Marcus Aurelius, in his *Meditations*, favours 'a polity in which there is the same law for all, a polity administered with regard to equal rights and equal freedom of speech, and kingly government which respects most of all the freedom of the governed'. This was an ideal which could not be consistently realized in the Roman Empire, but it influenced legislation, particularly in improving the status of women and slaves. Christianity took over this part of Stoic teaching along with much of the rest. And when at last, in the seventeenth century, the opportunity came to combat despotism effectually, the Stoic doctrines of natural law and natural equality, in their Christian dress, acquired a practical force which, in antiquity, not even an emperor could give to them.

(*History of Western Philosophy*, p. 276)

According to Stoic doctrine, God is also the cosmic "reason" or *Logos* which manifests itself in the order and beauty of all creation. This idea is first found in the system of Heraclitus (c. 500 B.C.) who saw the *Logos* as the universal reason governing the world, analogous to the reason in man. The Stoics developed this conception further. As the source of cosmic unity and perfection, it is called the "seminal reason" (*Logos spermatikos*) which is thought to contain within itself a large number of *Logoi spermatikoi*, intelligent and purposive reasons. There is a parallel here with Plato's Forms or Ideas.

The concept of the *Logos* was to play an important part in the philosophy of Philo, in St. John's Gospel and in the neo-platonic system of Plotinus.

Books for further study:

Marcus Aurelius: *Meditations* (Penguin Classics, 1964)

Plato: *The Republic* and *Timaeus* (Plato's works are available in many translations, including the Penguin Classics)

Russell, B. *History of Western Philosophy* (Allen & Unwin, 1961)

Spencer, S. *Mysticism in world Religion*, Ch. 5 (Penguin, 1963)

CHAPTER 5: THE HERMETICA

Holy art Thou, O God, Father of the universe. Holy art Thou, O God, whose Will perfects itself by means of its own Powers. Holy art Thou, O God, who willeth to be known and art known by Thine own. Holy art Thou, who didst by Word (*Logos*) make to consist the things that are. Holy art Thou, of whom All-nature hath been made an Image.

(Hymn from *Poimandres*)

In the literature attributed to *Hermes Trismegistus* (Thrice Greatest Hermes), we reach the apogee of Hellenistic theosophy. The Greek *Hermes* is identified with the Egyptian god *Toth* (or *Tehuti*). In this so called *Hermetic* literature teachings are given in the form of dialogue and hymns of praise to the supreme Deity. As far as can be ascertained, these teachings of *Hermes-Toth* - the few that have come down to us - are of Egyptian origin but expressed in language typical of Hellenistic theology.

Clement of Alexandria tells us that the whole of the religious philosophy - that is, the wisdom, discipline and multifarious arts and sciences - of the Egyptian priesthood was contained in the Books of Hermes, that is of Thoth.

(G.R.S. Mead in *Hymns of Hermes*, p. 9)

Scholars differ in their views concerning the period when these teachings were compiled, written down or translated. The three last centuries B.C. seem the most likely period, when Egypt was under the over-Lordship of Macedonian Kings and Hellenistic civilization flourished in Alexandria and elsewhere. This would make them contemporary with some of the "wisdom" literature of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha.

Many of the principles of the Ancient Wisdom which we have come across in the previous chapters are also present in the teachings of Hermes, often very beautifully expressed. Some scholars regard the Hermetic literature as the expression of a separate religion, based on aspects of the ancient Egyptian religion. In the words of Duncan Greenless:

This is a true religion; it speaks of realities that the reader may experience for himself, if he care to tread the path its authors have laid down.

(*The Gospel of Hermes*, p. XIV)

THE WRITINGS

Among the Hermetic writings which have been preserved, the most important are the *Poimandres* (The Shepherd of men), the *Kore Kosmou* (The Cosmic Virgin) and the *Asclepius*. The teachings are mainly in the form of dialogues between Hermes and his son Tat or between Hermes and Asclepius. In the *Kore Kosmou*, Isis is the teacher of her son Horus.

Apart from the uplifting teachings given in the Hermetica, one can infer from the nature of certain hymns that they must have been used in some kind of worship. Hermes says:

"Thus then, my son, stand in a place uncovered to the sky, facing the west, about the sinking of the setting sun, and make thy worship; in like manner, too, when he doth rise, with face unto the east."

And for those who cannot perfect the rite on all planes, let them stand naked, with all the garments of false opinion stripped from them, naked in the midst of High Heaven's clear sphere, facing straight with the Spiritual Sun, or the Eye of Mind that illuminates the Great Sphere of our spiritual nature in the stillness of the purified intelligence.

And so Hermes, before he sings what is called "The Secret Hymnody", once more utters the solemn injunction:

"Now, son, be still !"

Let every nature of the world receive the utterance of my hymn!

Open, thou Earth! Let every bolt of the Abyss be drawn for me! Stir not, ye Trees!

I am about to hymn creation's Lord, both All and One.

Ye Heavens open, and ye Winds stay still; and let God's Deathless Sphere receive my word!

For I will sing the praise of Him who founded all . . .

Let us together all give praise to Him sublime above the Heavens, of every nature Lord !

'Tis He who is the Eye of Mind; may He accept the praise of these my Powers!

Father, I give Thee thanks, to Thee. Thou Energy of all my Powers; I give Thee thanks, O God, Thou Power of all my Energies.

For Thou art God; Thy Man thus cries to Thee, through Fire, through Air, through Earth, through Water, and through Spirit, through Thy creatures.

(Abridged from *Hymns of Hermes*, Mead translation, pp 56-59)

G.R.S. Mead comments:

We can see at once that this is no ordinary hymn, no hymn conceived in the mode of the psalms to which we have been used, but the gnostic outpouring of a man who has begun to realize the nature of his own spiritual dignity and proper place in the universe, based on the tradition of what is best in Egyptian theurgy . . .

HERMETIC THEOLOGY

The theology of the Hermetica, as found in the dialogues, shows signs of Egyptian, Orphic and Platonic influence. This is what we would expect if we assume that the Hermetica were translations from Egyptian originals by men well acquainted with Platonic thought, as Iamblichus, the great neo-platonic scholar of the 3rd century A.D., asserts.

The Hermetic theology is clearly monotheistic. God is both transcendent and immanent. Man is in essence divine. Through ignorance he is fettered to the body.

For the Hermetists God is ineffable: 'Of Him no words can tell, no tongue can speak, silence only can declare Him' (I:31). He is the supreme Reality outflowing all concepts - 'transcending all pre-eminence, excelling all praise', most fittingly described as the Good and the Beautiful, as Mind (*nous*) and as Light. 'We may dare to say that the essence of God . . . is the Beautiful and the Good' (VI:4). *Nous* is 'of the very essence of God' (XII:1) and so are Light and Life (I:21). In the *Poimandres*, the prophet sees in vision the infinite divine Light which is the ultimate Source of all things, and he sees

within the Light the archetypal universe. The light consists of countless divine Energies or Powers, which constitute the ideal world.

The relation of God to the universe is conceived at once in terms of creative Will and of immanent presence or inner identity of being. God is the Creator and Father of the cosmos, which is His image and His offspring (VIII:2).

Man is 'a being of divine nature' (X:24). He who knows himself passes into God, because 'the All-Father is Light and Life, whereof man is made' (I:21). In his essential being man is *nous*, which is divine . . .

'The evil of the soul is ignorance. The soul that has not come to know Reality or the nature of things or the Good, but is blind, is tossed about by the passions of the body; and the wretched soul, not knowing itself . . . carries round the body like a load, not controlling it, but controlled by it' (X:8).

(Sydney Spencer in *Mysticism in world Religion*, p. 143; the figures refer to verse and chapter in *Poimandres*)

A version of the doctrine of the fall of man appears in the Hermetic writings:

In the *Poimandres* we have the myth of the Fall. The Primal Mind, it is said, gave birth to a man in His own image - i.e. to a heavenly man. He gave him authority over all creatures, and man conceived the desire to create, and entered the created world. Nature saw him and loved him, and he returned her love. Through his union with Nature man lost his purely celestial character, and became a twofold being - mortal by his attachment to matter, immortal by his inmost being. The Fall of the heavenly man is thus at the same time the origin of earthly man. It is the essential significance of the myth that it points to the way which man must tread, if he is to fulfil his true destiny: he must liberate himself from the bonds of matter, and lay hold upon his deeper self. (*ibid*, p. 144)

The immanence of God in all creation is stressed - as in the words of the *Hymn to All-Father God*:

All are in Thee; all are from Thee; O Thou Who givest all and takest naught, for Thou hast all and naught is there Thou hast not. For Thou art all, and there is nothing else which Thou art not. Thou art all that which doth exist, and Thou art what doth not exist, - Mind when Thou thinkest, and Father when Thou makest, and God when Thou dost energize, and Good and Maker of all things (ii., 105).

(*Hymns of Hermes*, p. 45)

MAN'S LIBERATION

The method by which the soul can be liberated from its ignorance and its bond with the body is through identification with the indwelling Divine Life. As man is divine in essence, it is possible for him to rise to the knowledge of - and ultimate union with - God. By applying the principle of "like to like", he can gradually achieve this.

. . . it is possible to rise to the knowledge of God, which implies identification with Him, by the application of the principle that 'like is apprehended by like' (XI:20). 'If thou canst not make thyself equal to God, thou canst not know God.' Such equalization to God can be attained by the illimitable extension of our being. 'Expand thyself into the immeasurable greatness, passing beyond all bodily limits; raise thyself above all time,

become eternal. Then thou shalt know God.' A man is to transcend all spatial and temporal limits - to 'become higher than all height, lower than all depth', to take to himself 'the qualities of all creatures', to conceive himself to be in every place, in the living and the dead. By such an expansion of the range of his consciousness man may rise into oneness with God, who is Himself the Whole.

(*Mysticism in World Religion*, p. 145)

It is through mystical experience that man may attain liberation. The soul is then wholly absorbed in the "vision" of God and man is "deified", passing into the divine light.

But this can only come to pass after practicing a life of virtue and by acquiring the necessary wisdom, *Gnosis*, which eventually leads to liberation. Then, by the grace of God - without which nothing can be achieved - liberation or redemption may finally be attained.

Although certain conditions are necessary in man - the desire for God, the conquest of the lower self, the practice of inner silence - union comes, not simply through the will of man, but by the grace and mercy of God. It is the Will of God which impregnates the soul with the seed - 'the true Good', the essence of God - from which man is reborn. Hermeticism is typically a religion of grace.

(*ibid*, p. 146)

Duncan Greenless emphasizes the influence of the Hermetica on later religious thought:

Great has been the influence of "Hermes" on Western religion. It is impossible for an honest, unbiassed reader to turn afterwards to the Christian mystics or even to our English hymns, without recognising the source of so many striking phrases, so many beautiful analogies, that have made religion real to millions in Europe all down these nineteen centuries. This is not to say that Christian theologians, mystical or dogmatic, have copied from the pagan writers. But many of the noblest Hermetists themselves - we need only name Dionysius the Syrian "Areopagite" - carried over into Christianity when converted the old theology and so enriched the new. They did not invent Hermetism, any more than the first Christians invented Christianity; they used the older truths, revealed in an earlier day, to explain, to beautify, the new-found revelation, and so made it acceptable to the great minds of the Alexandrian and Asiatic doctors of the Church. Nor can Islam deny the preparation of her field by theism and devotion taught by "Hermes".

(*The Gospel of Hermes*, p. XIV)

Books for further study:

The Divine Pymander (Shrine of Wisdom, 1955)

Greenless, D. *The Gospel of Hermes* (T.P.H., 1949)

Kingsford, A. & Maitland, E. *The virgin of the world* (Wizard's Book Shelf, Reprint 1977)

Mead, G.R.S. *Hymns of Hermes* (Theosophical Publishing Society, 1907)

Mead, G.R.S. *Thrice Greatest Hermes*, 2 vols. (Watkins, 1949)

Spencer, S. *Mysticism in World Religion* (Penguin, 1963)

CHAPTER 6: THE MYSTERY RELIGIONS

Who will not agree that the Mysteries and the initiations lead the souls upward from this life of matter and mortality, and bring them into contact with the gods?

Proclus

Western culture, science and philosophy, as we know it today, began with the Greeks. Through the conquests of Alexander Greek culture spread over a wide area, from the Mediterranean to Western India. The resultant mixture of Greek and Oriental cultural elements resulted in what is called Hellenism (from *Hellas* = Greece). At a later stage the Romans made Greek culture their own and added to it their special talents for organization and law and order.

It was in the generally tolerant climate of this period (approximately 300 B.C. - 300 A.D.) that not only Christianity, but also several other cults and religions came into being and flourished. Before that period Greece itself had already experienced an apex of cultural development, especially in the fields of art and philosophy.

THE MYSTERY RELIGIONS

It was, therefore, only natural that many of the religious cults of the time were expressed in terms of a mixture of Greek and Oriental myths, symbols, ritual and theology. Some of these cults were descended from actual religions such as the Egyptian and the Persian. Others arose as local cults in specific areas such as Asia Minor and Syria.

At the centre of each of these cults there were secret Mysteries into which its adherents could be initiated. They are, therefore, generally known as the Mystery Religions. They were on the whole of a later date than the local mysteries of Eleusis and other places in Greece, the myths of which were based on the official Greek religion and its gods and goddesses. The importance of the Mysteries and the Mystery Religions for the development of Christianity and European civilization in general cannot be over-emphasized.

For over a thousand years the ancient Mediterranean world was familiar with a type of religion known as Mystery-Religions which changed the religious outlook of the Western world, and which are operative in European civilization and in the Christian Church to this day.

(Samuel Angus in *The Mystery Religions and Christianity*, p. VII)

(Professor Angus' book is still one of the most comprehensive and readable books on the subject.)

The most important among the Mystery religions were those of *Isis* and *Osiris-Serapis*, *Mithra* and the one of the Great Mother, *Cybele*. These cults usually had a higher and a lower side, depending on the type of followers it attracted. Writes Professor Angus :

We shall detect the conjunction of faith and credulity, the degeneration of mysticism into occultism, the revivalist phenomena and mass-psychology, and those pathological conditions of illusion, suggestion, and hypnotic hallucination and emotional excitations which too easily issue in moral aberrations. We shall meet the extravagances and extremes which are the concomitants of every great movement, and which in healthy

creative periods are kept in restraint, but waiting to force their way to the front with any weakening of the originating conception or native power.

On the other hand, the Mysteries stood for much of permanent value. Above all they emphasized the perfect humanity and passion of the Deity, and suggested a fellowship of suffering as the pre-condition to participation in the divine victory. This *sympathia* was more akin to the mediaeval desire to share the sufferings of the Saviour in extreme forms, as in the marks of the Cross or the wounds of Christ. They offered a gospel of salvation by means of union with Saviour-Gods, and of a Hereafter of blessedness for initiates. As trans-social organizations they furthered personal religion. In their general trend they made for monotheism. In their emotional triumphs they satisfied the need of exaltation and escape. By their cosmic outlook they made men comfortable in an uncomfortable Universe.

The unity of all Life, the mysterious harmony of the least and nearest with the greatest and most remote, the conviction that the life of the Universe pulsed in all its parts, were as familiar to that ancient cosmic consciousness as to modern biology and psychology.

(Angus, *ibid*, p. IX)

Trying to describe the nature and expressions of these religions we may say (following Angus) that a Mystery Religion was:

1. A system of religious symbolism (with a basic myth)
2. A religion of redemption
3. A system of Gnosis or esoteric knowledge
4. A sacramental drama
5. An eschatological religion (life after death explained)
6. A personal religion (usually anybody could join)
7. A cosmic religion with a cosmogony

THE STAGES IN THE MYSTERIES

There were stages or degrees in the various Mysteries. They usually had three main stages:

a) Preparation and Probation:

This usually included Purification (*Katharsis*) in various forms such as fasting, abstention from meat, some form of baptism with water, confession, vows of secrecy, etc.

b) Initiation and Communion:

This included the rites of initiation, the imparting of esoteric doctrines, regeneration and various means of communion with the Deity, such as by:

1. *Ecstasis and Enthousiasmos* (inspiration or "possession" by the Deity)
2. *Deification*. This included mystic identification, (*Henosis*), divine indwelling and endowment of immortality.
3. *Religious Marriage* (symbolical union with the Deity)
4. *Sympathia* with the Deity, including entering into the trials, suffering and symbolical death and resurrection of the Deity.
5. *Divine Services*. These were of a congregational as well as of a private character, with priests or priestesses leading the services and sometimes offering sacrifices.

6. *Sacramental Meals*. These were not only symbolical but often the outward means or "sacrament" of union with the respective Deity.
7. *Contemplative Adoration* or meditation.

. . . we may say that a Mystery-Religion was a religion of symbolism which, through myth and allegory, iconic representations, blazing lights and dense darkness, liturgies and sacramental acts, and suggestion, quickened the intuitions of the heart and provoked in the initiate a mystical experience conducing to *palingenesia* (regeneration), the object of every initiation.

(Angus, *ibid*, p. 45)

c) *Epotheia* and Blessedness:

When this stage had been reached, the initiate may behold an *epiphany* (manifestation) of the Deity in a vision. It was also the stage at which salvation and immortality was thought to have been obtained.

This brings us to the concept of salvation or redemption, which was prominent in the Mystery Religions.

All the Mystery-gods were primarily saviour-gods. To initiation was ascribed a sacramental efficacy which atoned for a man's past, gave him comfort in the present, a participation in the divine life, and assured to faith an hereafter of such dazzling splendour that the trials and conflicts of this earthly existence were dwarfed into insignificance. The Mysteries held out to men the salvation which was so eagerly and pathetically sought by those intensely religious centuries - salvation as it was then understood in its various aspects, more religious than ethical, physical and spiritual.

(Angus, *ibid*, p. 137)

And further:

"The deity of the society was a *theos soter*, and the society sought through fellowship with him to reach a state of *soteria*, safety or salvation, a salvation belonging alike to the present life and that beyond the Grave . . . It was the deities of the Mysteries who were in an emphatic sense the saviours of those who trusted in them, and they saved by allowing the votary to have a share in their lives."

(quoted by Angus from P. Gardner: *The Religious Experience of St. Paul*)

Among the Mystery Religions contemporary with Christianity, two were of special importance: Mithraism and the Mysteries of Isis.

MITHRAISM

Mithra is the god of Light in the Indian Vedas and is also found in the ancient Persian religion as the god of heavenly Light. Mithraism spread through the whole Roman empire (and was particularly strong in the West) after the conquest of its Eastern provinces, mainly through the military.

In the Mithraic myth the god is born from a rock or in a cave and is adored by shepherds. He performs certain miracles and slays a bull from whose blood all verdant life springs. Many bas-reliefs and statues have been found depicting Mithra as a young man in a Phrygian cap plunging a dagger into the side of a bull (there is some analogy with the later St. George and the dragon). The Mithraic mysteries were performed in a *Mithraeum*, usually a cave or underground temple.

These mysteries had seven degrees or stages, each known by a symbolic name such as the *Raven* (indicating one who immitates, a learner), the *Lion* (symbolizing courage), the *Heliodromus* (messenger of the sun), etc. The Mithraic cult was extremely strict. Purity, courage, loyalty and comradship were its main characteristics. It was predominantly a religion of soldiers. As far as we know women were not admitted and the wives and daughters of the military were often Christians or joined the cults of Isis or Cybele.

The Mithraic Sacraments consisted of bread, wine and salt. These elements were consecrated at a solemn ceremony using a Mitraic Liturgy and then partaken of by the assembled brethren. The lower stages were not admitted to the sacrament.

Sunday was the day of the week sacred to *sol invictus* (the invincible sun), identified with Mithra. The 25th of December, the winter solstice, was the birthday of Mithra. Both were later taken over by Christianity. In the 'eschatology of Mithraism, after death, the soul was judged by Mithra and guided through seven spheres where it shed all earthly passions and attachments before reaching the bliss of heaven. Regeneration through a rite of symbolical death and re-birth seems to have been part of one of the stages in the Mithraic Mysteries.

THE MYSTERIES OF ISIS

The Mysteries of Isis were the stepping stones to the greater Mysteries of Osiris of which we know little.

The central myth is the ancient Egyptian myth of Osiris and Isis. Osiris is killed and divided into fourteen parts by his brother Set. His devoted wife, Isis, laments his death and then begins her wanderings searching for the pieces of her husband's body which she eventually finds and puts together again. With the help of their son Horus, who slays Set, she succeeds in resurrecting Osiris who then becomes the king of the "other world" where he judges the dead. Osiris is the great God, the "Hidden Light". The passion and resurrection of Osiris was celebrated annually in Egypt, preceded by a fast of 10 days.

In the syncretistic climate of the time and under Greek influence Osiris was identified with both Zeus and Dionysus and worshipped in a new form as *Serapis*. The promise of a life after death and the gaining of immortality were some of the main features of the Isiac faith which, with its beautiful temples and rich processions, was one of the most popular cults of the time, especially in the Eastern part of the empire.

Egypt, that had for millennia brooded upon the mystery of death, offered in Isis and Serapis life and immortality to the dwellers in the Roman Empire. Conspicuous among the symbols of the Isiac faith appears the lotus, emblem of immortality, out of the calyx of which comes forth the youthful god Harpocrates, who had overcome death.

Multitudes, never touched by the reasonings of Platonism for the immortality of the soul, found in life a new value as a probation for a blessed hereafter. 'As truly as Osiris lives, so truly shall his followers live; as truly as Osiris is not dead he shall die no more; as truly as Osiris is not annihilated he shall not be annihilated,' says an Egyptian text.

(Angus, *ibid*, p. 139)

We can learn something about the Mysteries of Isis from the *Metamorphoses* of the writer Lucius Apuleius, who lived in the second century A.D. In the story the hero of the book is transformed

into an ass, but through the grace of the goddess he becomes a man again and is initiated into her Mysteries. The few lines in the book mentioning this event are of great interest:

I approached the very gates of death and set one foot on Proserpine's threshold, yet was permitted to return, rapt through all the elements. At midnight I saw the sun shining as if it were noon; I entered the presence of the gods of the under-world and the gods of the upper- world, stood near and worshipped them.

(Apuleius: *The Golden Ass*, Robert Graves translation, p. 241)