

WAS CHRISTIANITY A CULT?

EXPLORING THE CULTIC ORIGINS OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

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Every religion and every sacred writing originates within a definite time and space. Christianity began as a small Jewish sect or splinter group in Roman Palestine during the third decade of the first century of the Common Era (C.E.). At that time, Judaism was already furcated into a number of branches and from certain of these groups Christianity was to inherit beliefs that would ultimately become part of its basic theology. At the same time, Christian writings were to make clear the conviction that Judaism was a religion apart—inadequate for salvation and simply a forerunner to Christianity (cf. Galatians 3:10ff).

Origins

The founder of Christianity, Jesus, was probably active for about one year, and certainly no longer than three (based on the mention of three Passovers in the Gospel of John). During that brief period he gathered a group of followers. After his death, the group continued to meet and expand and, ultimately, during the second half of the first century,

moved into the Mediterranean world.

The earliest Christian writings are the letters of Paul, which can be dated between 50 and 64 C.E., the year in which Paul was put to death by Nero. (The Gallio Inscription places Paul in ancient Corinth around 50 C.E., while references in a letter by Clement, the bishop of Rome, puts his death between 88 and 97 C.E. See Finegan, 1959, pp. 362-363.) The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke (the Synoptics) are usually dated between 70 and 85 C.E., while the Gospel of John appears to have been written near the close of the first century. The latest book in the Christian scriptures is probably II Peter which is usually dated between 150 and 175 C.E. (I have deliberately avoided the "New Testament" label because it is a Christian designation with pejorative overtones; Christians who generated the term labelled Jewish scriptures "The Old Testament." Jewish scholars prefer the term TANAK, which stands for Torah, or Law; Nebhiim, or Prophets; and Kethubim, or writings.) Therefore, the basic literary

evidence that describes the development of the small Jesus sect into a cult was produced between 20 and 150 years after the death of the founder, by writers who had never known Jesus in person. Of course there are additional source materials in writings not admitted into the official canon, such as the Gnostic Gospels, the Apocryphal writings, and certain letters from church leaders.

It is clear that from the very beginning, as Jesus' followers confronted the larger Graeco-Roman world, differing interpretations of Christianity developed. It is equally clear that Christianity adapted and changed as it grew, due to confrontation with the thought, doctrine, and practice of the flourishing mystery cults of that time. It is the purpose of this brief essay to explore certain facets of the mixed Jewish and nonJewish heritage of the early Christian cult.

What is a Cult?

It is important to note the usage of the term cult in this context, since it is unlikely that modern Christians would consider their religion a cult now or ever. A cult is a movement

centered about a founder who is recognized as a prophet, a savior, a divine deliverer—even if he is never seen. Cults may claim to embody aspects of older traditions and may use the accepted scriptures of the religious group from which they have emerged, but in reality they constitute a complete break from the older tradition and soon produce their own authoritative "scriptures." Members are perceived as forming a body apart from or separated from the rest of society; followers are enjoined to abandon family and friends who might interfere with their complete dedication to the "cause" or the "faith." What the adherent receives from the cult is the experience of mystic union with the deity, as well as divine empowerment to overcome evil and anticipate an eternal life in the presence of the god figure. The description of the mystery cults and the evidence of mystery cult influence in developing Christianity must be severely limited in this brief presentation. For additional information see Campbell, (1955), Cumont (1956), Grant (1961), Nock (1964), Otto (1965), Hatch (1957), Finegan (1989) and so many more.

Jewish Connections

The Sadducees, a group of powerful and prominent Jewish clergy concentrated in Jerusalem, controlled temple ritual, including animal sacrifice. Often labeled as "aristocratic" or "traditional" Jews, Sadducees rejected the current notions of the resurrection of the dead and an afterlife with rewards and punishments, (See Matt. 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 4:1-2, 23:6-8; Josephus: *Antiquities of the Jews*, XII. v.9; XVIII.i.3-4; *Wars of the Jews*, II.viii.14). Following the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., their influence diminished. From Sadducean tradition, Christianity inherited a belief in the importance of blood sacrifice as essential for the purification of both the nation and the individual. The Jews who constituted the original membership of the Jesus movement probably worshipped in the temple, but after 70 C.E., when the temple was destroyed, Jesus' death was

interpreted as the supreme sacrificial offering that replaced any need for temple rites or priesthood (see the book of Hebrews).

The Scribes constituted a professional group of expert interpreters of Jewish law. Some were members of the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish council of 71 members. As legalists, they were concerned with the preservation of Jewish law and were involved in teaching and interpretation. In the Gospels, they appear as challengers of Jesus' teachings (cf. Mark 7:5; Luke 5:17ff., etc.).

According to Josephus, the first-century C.E. Jewish historian, the Pharisee sect was also concerned with the interpretation of Jewish laws. They believed in an afterlife with divine judgment when the souls of the wicked would suffer eternal punishment while the righteous—those who followed the "right way"—would be rewarded with immortality (*Antiquities*, XVIII.i.3; see Acts 23:8). The Pharisees were active in the synagogues located in towns and villages throughout Palestine and in principal cities in the Mediterranean world. From the kind of thinking they endorsed, Christianity drew beliefs in a divine judgment and an afterlife with rewards and punishments.

The Essenes, now identified by many scholars as the Jewish colony that lived at Qumran and produced the so-called "Dead Sea Scrolls," are described in some detail by Josephus (*Wars*, II.viii. 12-13; *Antiquities*, XVIII.i.5.). The Essenes believed they were living in the last days and that the arrival of a messiah or messiahs was at hand. They were among those Jews who had borrowed concepts from Persian Zoroastrianism. For example, they believed that human history was in decline and, having reached its lowest level, was about to end through a cataclysmic act of God. A final battle between good and evil would be fought—"The Children of Light" versus "The Children of Darkness"—after which God would establish his kingdom of the righteous, made up, of course, of Essenes. The Qumran writings indicate that the group freely interpreted Jewish law and prophetic writings to fit their own theologized history and





did not hesitate to produce their own authoritative scriptural guides. Members abandoned familial associations and yielded personal possessions to the group; Essenic travelers carried nothing with them, expecting to be welcomed by members wherever they went. From this kind of thinking, Christianity inherited messianic concepts, belief in an end time that was about to occur, and a war between good and evil. The cosmic struggle would end with the establishment of the kingdom of the righteous, made up, of course, of Christians. At some point, the Essenic notion of relinquishing personal associations and property was endorsed by the developing Christian cult (cf. Matt. 19:21ff; Acts 2:44, 4:32, 5:1ff). Jesus advised his followers to travel without baggage (Matt. 10:5ff, Luke 9:2-5, 10:4-11, etc.) and he himself appears to have been dependent upon the hospitality of friends and followers (Matt. 8:20; 9:10; Luke 7:36, 8:3, 9:52, 10:38, 14:1, 19:5, etc.).

Then there were Zealots—men whose fanatic zeal for Jewish obedience to religious law prompted them to see themselves as agents of God's wrath—a notion that led some to acts of violence against their own people (Philo, *On The Special Laws* 2.253; Acts 21:20-21; 23:12-14). One of Jesus' disciples is called "Simon the Zealot" (Luke 6:15; Acts 1-13). The Apostle Paul implied that prior to his conversion he was influenced by zealot thinking to the extent that he could identify himself as a strict zealot for the law (Gal. 1:13-14) and as one who persecuted the early church with "zeal" (Phil. 3:6). When he wrote to the Christians in Rome, he suggested that their "zeal" be channeled toward Christian enlightenment which would bring salvation (Rom. 10:1-4). A more extreme group were the *sicarii*, or dagger men, whose activities were directed against the Romans in the conviction that the only good Roman was a dead one!

John the Baptizer's followers formed a small sect employing ritual baptism (Acts 19:1-3), associated with repentance and forgiveness of sin as preparation for the coming kingdom of God (Luke 3:3, Matt.

3:2; see also, Josephus, *Antiquities* XVIII.v.2). Jesus may have begun as a follower of John the Baptizer; certainly the Christian tradition makes clear that he underwent a Johannine baptism. In any event, Christian baptism, which may have been inspired by Johannine baptism, became an important cultic feature in the developing church. The Baptizer's sect continued to exist for some time after John's death and may have been considered a rival to developing Christianity.

The Cult of Rituals

From Judaism, Christianity received the following:

1. A belief in monotheism as opposed to belief in many deities. The single god had revealed his will to the Jews through Moses and the prophets, but now uniquely through Jesus, who was given the title "Son of God."

2. Belief in the efficacy of blood sacrifice to appease the divine anger and achieve forgiveness for sin and error. Following the destruction of the temple, when all Jewish sacrifice came to an end, Christian writers interpreted Jesus' death as the supreme blood sacrifice, achieving atonement for sins through the power or magic of the shed blood (Hebrews 9:13-14, 10:12; Eph. 5:2). Jesus became the high priest of the cult as well as the sacrificial offering.

3. The belief in circumcision as the mark of male membership in the cult. When Christians sought members from the non-Jewish population, however, ritual mutilation of the flesh plus the Jewish cultic requirement of eating only kosher food became a stumbling block and an embarrassment for the cult leaders (cf. Gal. 5:1-12; I Cor. 8). The early Church abandoned both requirements.

4. A belief in the existence of an anti-god personality known as Satan plus belief in demons and demonic powers (I Cor. 10:20-21). Just as God was personified as the embodiment of good, so evil was given an identity. Jesus was portrayed as an exorcist. Christians also accepted the Pharisaic belief in angels and angelic powers.

5. The notion of supernatural reve-

lation and belief in the divine authority of certain writings. Like the Essenes, Christians were soon engaged in producing their own "revealed" scriptures.

6. A pattern of gatherings not unlike those of the synagogue from which they had broken away. When Paul arrived in Corinth, he began his outreach in the local synagogue (Acts 18:1-5). Having been tossed out, he held meetings in a nearby non-Jewish home. (The 3rd century C.E. church excavated at Dura Europos on the Euphrates began as a chapel consisting of a single room in the home of a wealthy patron. See Finegan, 1959.)

7. A dogmatic conviction of the superior worth of their religious beliefs over those of other faith systems, including the Judaism from which they sprang.

8. Belief in the coming of a divinely appointed messiah. Only Christians believed that Jesus was this person. This meant that the messiah had come and would come again—an idea rejected by most Jews.

9. The rite of baptism for the forgiveness of sin, which became part of the ritual of initiation into the Christian cult.

Non-Jewish Connections

The one-world dream of Alexander the Great perished following his death in Babylonia in 323 B.C.E. His vast empire was divided among his generals. These military successors (the *Diadoci*) and their descendants (the *Epigoni*) perpetuated Alexander's cultural ambitions of developing a Hellenistic world—an ideal that continued to have influence in Roman times and in the first century C.E. world of developing Christianity. Alexander had sought to impose Hellenistic culture rather than a single religion on his conquered territories. He had exhibited political flexibility in permitting the Egyptians to honor and worship him as a god, the son of Ammon, even though everyone knew that his father was Philip of Macedon. He was the first mortal to have his image depicted on a coin.

The religions of the Mediterranean

world were well represented in Palestine during the first century and included elements of the following:

1. Nationalistic religion wherein the god was supposed to save the nation. The relationship between ruler and chief gods has had a long history going back to ancient Sumeria, Babylonia, Assyria, and traditional Judaism. In Egypt, the pharaoh was considered god. In Roman times, swearing allegiance to the emperor as a god was, at times, enforced as an act of patriotism. Both Christians and Jews, as monotheists, opposed this practice—Christians on the grounds that, having once sworn allegiance to Jesus as Lord, they could not acknowledge another. During certain periods they were persecuted for their stubborn refusal to compromise their faith and were, ironically, labeled "atheists" inasmuch as they did not subscribe to Roman deities.

2. Philosophy, which embodied the beliefs of the educated who were given to rationalism. But in attacking other faith systems these philosophies, such as the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Cynics and certainly the neo-Platonists, almost developed a kind of religion of their own.

3. Mystery religions which were cults of particular deities worshipped by those who had been formally initiated into as devotees. Some of the best known are the cults of Demeter and Dionysus in Greece and Thrace; Cybele and Attis in Phrygia; Atargatis in Cilicia; Aphrodite and Adonis in Syria; Ashtart and Eshmun (Adon) in Phoenicia; Ishtar and Tammuz in Babylonia; Isis, Osiris and Serapis in Egypt; and Mithra in Persia. With, perhaps, the exception of the Demeter cult which had become localized at Eleusis in Greece, these cults spread from their countries of origin and established centers throughout the Mediterranean world.

4. Popular superstitions that included belief in omens, divination, demon possession and the art of exorcism.

The New Mystery Cult

When Christians, like Paul, turned away from efforts to convert Jews



and began to seek new members among non-Jews (cf. Acts 18:5-6), the rich religious diversity of the Roman world began to impact on Christianity. Christianity adapted and became a new mystery cult—one of the latest to arrive on the Mediterranean scene.

There were three parts to mystery cult inductions. The first introduced devotees to the god-myth which usually involved a deity who died and rose again. In the Eleusinian cult, for example, the story centered about Demeter, the ancient corn goddess, and was directly related to agricultural productivity. According to the myth, Demeter's daughter, Persephone, was taken to the underworld by Pluto, the god of the dark regions. During the period when the mourning mother searched for her daughter, drought and famine plagued the land. Finally, an arrangement was made by which Persephone would spend two-thirds of the year in the upper world with her mother, and one-third with Pluto in the underworld. The pattern reflected the seasonal cycle and agricultural pursuits of planting, growth, and harvesting.

The second part of the cultic practice was ritual. Each year, in sacred rituals, worshippers reenacted the myth. Some rites, beginning in the fall, were related to the tilling of the soil, sowing seed, and to the coming of the autumnal rains. Rituals continued into the spring and summer. In Greece, at harvest time when the ripened crops were harvested and the soil was not productive, Persephone returned to the underworld to await resurrection in the spring.

The third part involved the initiation of the *mystae*, which in the Eleusinian cult involved a kind of baptism in the sea. The baptism was a *catharsis a loutron*, a laver of regeneration, out of which the devotee emerged as a new person. There followed a period of fasting and abstinence. Next came the *soteria* or sacrifice of salvation during which each candidate sacrificed a pig for himself. The spiritual journey along the *via sacra* provided pauses at sacred stations as Demeter's search for her daughter was reenacted. Then, spiritually and physically cleansed, devotees entered the dark-

ened hall of initiation at Eleusis where they beheld the sacred sights, received the secret information (*musterion*) of the cult which was never to be revealed to others, and entered into a mystic union with the deity. From what little we know, it is suggested that the *musterion* included a dramatization of the seizure of Persephone, her descent to the underworld and her resurrection. Symbols of rebirth were displayed—such as a sheaf of grain, statuettes of men and women engaged in sexual intimacy, or models of genital organs. What is important is that the *mystae* were no mere onlookers, they were intimately involved. They, who knew loss in their own lives, could identify with the grieving mother and experience her suffering, and ultimately her joy in the resurrection of her daughter. She was the mother goddess who understood human pain (as did Isis of Egypt and ultimately Mary, in Christianity). The cult provided a drama where death gave place to life and where the baptized and the initiated were lifted into a new state of being. Death had no terrors for them; they had a foreshadowing of the life to come.

In each mystery cult, the sacred myth portrayed the struggle between good and evil with which participants could identify. Baptismal rites of cleansing, either by water or blood (as in the Mithraic cult), prepared initiates for entry into the mysteries. The rites might include a love feast (as in Mithraism) in which bread and wine (particularly in the Dionysiac rites) were consumed, often designed to link the worshipper to the food of the gods (as Haoma was in early Mithraism) or to provide mental and physical vigor, wisdom and the power to combat evil (as in the Dionysiac cult).

The Language of Cults

The earliest evidence of this change in the developing Christian cult is found in Paul's use of the language of the mystery cults. For example, he wrote "We impart God's wisdom in a mystery (*sophia en musterion*)" in a letter to the Corinthian Christians (I Cor. 2:7). In Ephesians 5:32, he described Christ and the church as

the "great mystery (*musterion mega*) which revealed the divine plan of the ages (1:9-10, 6:19). When he wrote to Roman Christians he informed them that they, through the *musterion*, were given insight into the secret plans of God (Rom. 11:25, 16:25-26). As symbols were carried in the mystery cult processions, in Christian cultic processions the cross was carried—even as it is to this day. The cross symbolized the tree of life and immortality, denied to humans in the Adam and Eve myth (Gen. 3:22f). Now immortality was made available to believers through the cross, the secret symbol of the tree of life, which embodied the interpretation of Jesus' death as a blood sacrifice (Rom. 3:25).

When Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written between 70 and 85 C.E. they echoed the mystery cult theme. In Mark 4:11, for example, Jesus tells his 12 disciples, "To you is given the secret (*musterion*) of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables" (see also Matt. 13:11; Luke 8:10).

The cult of Mithra, the Indo-Iranian sun-god introduced in Rome during the reign of Nero (54 - 68 C.E.), was to become a rival to the developing Christian cult. In the Mithraic taurobolium believers were sprinkled with the blood of the slain bull; so in I Peter 1:2 (written about 150 C.E.), Christians could also speak of being "sprinkled" with Jesus' blood. Some 200 years later, in 274, the emperor Aurelius declared Mithra as *Sol Invictus* (The Invincible Sun), the official god of Rome. The god's birthday, December 25th, was later declared the natal day of Jesus when King Constantine became a Christian.

From Cult to Religion

Christianity began as a sect of Judaism. It then developed as a mystery cult before it became a religion (although I must admit that I fail to see much difference). Like cults everywhere it claimed to have a unique secret that gave meaning to life and that promised followers immortality. It called for total commitment and the abandonment of whatever might detract from such commitment—even to the extent of

deserting one's family. It promised to create a new familial relationship involving other cult members who gathered about the charismatic leader. Like the Greek mystery cults, it purported to possess a divine, supernaturally revealed, mystery providing salvation and rewards in the afterlife. Both Greek and Christian mysteries required baptismal cleansing; both involved rites in which sacred food and drink, symbolic of the life-giving power of the cult hero, were partaken. Both claimed to possess secret power which was made available to converts. Both had dying and rising hero figures. Both had mourning mothers who suffered loss paralleling that of humans. Both spoke to the need of salvation from the evils of the world. Both provided mystical union with the savior-god figure. What is different, is the emphasis on the Christian savior, Jesus, as an historical rather than a mythic figure, despite the theology that insisted on his divinity. This became an important factor as the developing church challenged the mystery religions with which it entered into competition for members.

Whoever or whatever the Jew, Jesus from Nazareth, may have been, was completely overwritten by the developing cult. (Though this is not to deny that there are Jewish elements in the Gospels. For example, the use of parables, the quotations from the Jewish canon, references to

Jewish theological issues such as the conflicts between Sadducees and Pharisees, are similar to what is found in the Talmud. See Sandmel, 1965.) The cultic Christ image drew from age-old hero motifs including divine conception, miraculous birth, the efforts by enemies to kill the infant, the power of the cult hero to heal and to control the elements and defeat demonic powers. From the mystery cults' deities came the image of the dying-rising god—the supernatural hero who disappears and promises to return (see Raglan, 1956; Rank, 1959; Campbell, 1956; some of these motifs appear in modern fictional characters like Superman and the Lone Ranger). The image of the human Jesus was retained, but he was no longer simply human; the cult had transformed him into the god-man reminiscent of the ancient Egyptian pharaoh. Christianity became the mystery cult that was to overpower and outlive all of its ancient rivals and become one of the most influential forces in medieval and modern history. The sect that started as a tiny and inconsequential cult over time shed its cultic origins and became a religion. All of the cultic themes, borrowed from Jewish and non-Jewish sources, became ritualized as formal components of what then became a major world religion. Time and distance cloud origins, and, like it or not, history matters. ■

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