

chapter 3

THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF GRECO-ROMAN PAGANISM

The earliest followers of Jesus had been nurtured in Palestinian Judaism. When they carried the message of Christianity to cities and villages throughout the Mediterranean world, they encountered a wide spectrum of philosophies and religions in the Greco-Roman world. In Athens Paul addressed Epicureans and Stoics (Acts 17:18), and at Ephesus he clashed with the promoters of the religion of Artemis (Acts 19:23-41).

Genuine belief in the reality of the ancient gods and goddesses of classical mythology had long since given way to widespread agnosticism. Through their plays Euripides and Aristophanes ridiculed the foibles and follies of the Olympian deities, and Euhemerus explained that the gods were originally men who had distinguished themselves either as warriors or benefactors of mankind, and who after their death were accorded divine honors from their grateful people.

Though rationalism had destroyed the foundations for belief, the pendulum swung for many from skepticism toward credulity. The growth of superstition and astrology, the consultation of horoscopes and omens, the use of amulets and charms, the honor given to exorcists and charlatans of all kinds who preyed upon the gullible—such was the understandable reaction to a crude and skeptical materialism. Divine honors were conferred not only upon deceased Roman emperors, but toward the end of the first Christian century Domitian began to require that sacrifices be offered before his image, and demanded that his subjects address him as “Lord and God.” Though the old deities were dead, new gods were brought to the Greco-Roman world by devotees of the exotic mystery religions from the East. Their popularity is testified by

the remains of temples and places of meeting that archaeologists have unearthed in cities and villages throughout the Roman Empire—except within Judea. Many persons, being promised ritual purification and spiritual salvation, were initiated into several of these cults, like a mistrustful capitalist who spreads his investments over as many ventures as possible to reserve at least something in the next financial crisis. This was the secret sickness of the mystery religions; their adherents believed, and yet they did not believe. What has been aptly termed “the failure of nerve” characterized the moral and religious vacuum which many felt but could not overcome despite the panaceas offered by a welter of competing teachers, philosophers, priests, astrologers, and quacks.

I. SCHOOLS OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

1. PLATONISM

Among the numerous schools of philosophy that flourished in the Greco-Roman world primacy of honor belongs to the system associated with the great Plato (427-347 B.C.), a pupil of Socrates. From Socrates' teaching Plato learned his method of dialectic, the questioning of common assumptions; from his teacher's character he gained the conviction of indispensable primacy of ethical goodness in all the relations of life. For forty years he taught at a school which he had established on the outskirts of Athens near the grove sacred to the hero Academus (hence the “Academy,” which had a continuous life until its dissolution by the Emperor Justinian in A.D. 529). With the exception of a small collection of Epistles, Plato's extant writings are in the form of dialogues, often with Socrates as the principal speaker and with various critics or pupils, after whom the dialogues are usually named, taking part in the discussion. Unsurpassed in literary artistry, intellectual breadth, and moral seriousness, Plato's dialogues have exercised a deep and pervasive influence upon subsequent Western culture.

The leading doctrine of Platonism is the view that true reality is found, not in the objects of sense, but in the “idea” or “form” which lies behind each class of objects and of which they are but unsubstantial shadows. By grasping and participating in the eternal forms, which belong to the higher world, the soul attains its true well-being and is lifted above the

flux of "becoming." The soul's eternal home is in the world beyond the senses, whereas the body with its sensual life is but its prisonhouse and grave. To fulfill his destiny man must escape the material world, search for the good, the true, and the beautiful, and thus become assimilated to the divine.

2. EPICUREANISM

Epicurus (342-270 B.C.) was a far greater person than the word "epicure," derived from his name, would lead one to suppose. A man of blameless character and amiable disposition, Epicurus gathered about him, in the garden which he had purchased at Athens, a brotherhood of devoted followers, who came to be known either as Epicureans or "the philosophers of the Garden."

Epicurus distrusted the dialectic and metaphysics of Plato as dealing with words, not things. Suspicious of abstract terms he appealed to the common sense of the plain man. He made sensation the standard of truth, declaring that internal feelings and the perceptions of sense are always true and trustworthy. Man's wisdom lies in the pursuit of pleasure (by which he meant genuine happiness, not sensual enjoyment), and this entails the avoidance of excesses of all kinds. The gods, if they exist, live in serene detachment and have nothing to do with human existence. Death brings a final dispersion of the atoms which constitute man's body and soul.

Among the more noteworthy followers of Epicurus was the Roman poet Lucretius (about 99-55 B.C.), whose didactic poem, *De Rerum Natura* ("Concerning the Nature of Things"), manages to set forth abstruse philosophy in majestic hexameters of great power and beauty.

3. STOICISM

The Stoic school took its name from the circumstance that its founder, Zeno of Citium in Cyprus (about 336-263 B.C.) lectured in the Painted Porch (*Stoa*), a colonnade at Athens decorated with elaborate frescoes. Unlike Epicureanism, which tended to foster atheism and self-indulgence, Stoicism encouraged the development of religious and moral fibre. The universe, Zeno taught, was not meaningless, nor was man's place in it determined by blind fate. Pervading the whole of the material order is divine Reason, and man's duty is to live in accord with this

Reason or Natural Law. The soul is a divine spark or seed of the universal Reason, imprisoned within the body. Man, thanks to his soul, can rise above adverse circumstances, and in the face of difficulties can maintain a dignified tranquility (hence the modern usage of the word "stoical").

The ethical teachings of later Stoics, such as Seneca (a contemporary of the apostle Paul), Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, contain superb examples of moral maxims. Since, however, there is no personal God who reveals himself, the Stoic creed, though noble and elevated, always remained a philosophy and never made a religious appeal to the masses.

Like other educated men of his day, the apostle Paul was acquainted with a certain amount of Stoic teaching. In order to establish contact with his audience at Athens, he included in his Areopagus address several sentiments that were widely held among Stoics: "In him [God] we live and move and have our being. . . . For we are indeed his offspring" (Acts 17:28). Likewise Paul's letters contain occasional phrases that have a Stoic ring. Thus, the apostle's assertion, "I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content" (Phil. 4:11), would have been recognized by a Stoic as his own language. At the same time, however, the parallelism is more in the realm of words than basic idea, for the theological presuppositions and the springs of Paul's actions were very different from those of a Stoic philosopher; the source of his contentment, he goes on to declare, is found in his relationship to the personal and transcendent Deity ("I can do all things in him who strengthens me," Phil. 4:13).

4. CYNICS

Of the lesser Socratic schools one of the more interesting was that of the Cynics, whose founder, Antisthenes, was an older contemporary of Plato. Of his pupils the most famous was the churlish and eccentric Diogenes of Sinope (about 412-323 B.C.), who lived in a huge jar or tub and, when asked by Alexander the Great what he could do for him, replied, "Get out of my light!"

The Cynics taught a simplicity of life that all could follow. By practicing an extreme frugality one would learn to be independent of externals and thus attain true happiness. Man's salvation lies in a return to nature: let him live like the beasts (the word *Cynic* means "like a dog") and then

he will not be vexed with the artificial conventions of the world, its ambitions, its censure, and its praise. Let him face the changes and chances of life with the optimistic nonchalance of the great sage himself: "Bury me," said Diogenes, "face downwards, for everything is soon going to be turned the other way up."

Going out into the streets and fields the wandering Cynics brought philosophy to the common man. In their preaching and exhorting they developed the literary form known as *diatribe*. Though in modern usage the word is confined to denunciation, originally a diatribe was like a homily or sermon, and was characterized by a lively and vivid semi-conversational style. The literary form of the Pauline letters often resembles that of the Cynic diatribe, particularly in the use of a series of questions and answers (for example, Rom. 3:1-4:12; and I Cor. 6:2-19, with the repetition of "Do you not know . . . ?").

5. OTHER PHILOSOPHICAL SYSTEMS

Besides the philosophical schools already mentioned, during the early Christian centuries many others flourished. Though the greatness of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) was not fully appreciated in antiquity, some of his followers attempted to popularize his encyclopedic teaching.

The Skeptics, who looked back to Pyrrho of Elis (about 365-275 B.C.) as their founder, held that, because of the contradictions in sense perceptions and in opinions, knowledge and conviction are unattainable. One's attitude toward life, therefore, should be a cautious suspension of judgment, absolute indifference to outward things, and conformity to prevailing custom.

The Eclectics, as their name suggests, selected what they regarded as the best features of various philosophical systems and acknowledged no single teacher as their master.

On the border line between philosophy and religion—with a strong dash of mysticism thrown in as well—was Pythagoreanism. Pythagoras of Samos, who flourished in the latter part of the sixth century B.C., paid great attention to numbers and their application to weights, measures, and the theory of music (the octave). He gathered about himself a group of followers to whom he communicated secret symbols and metaphysical lore, including belief in the transmigration of souls. Members of the Pythagorean brotherhood were vegetarian in diet and regarded the body

as the seat of all impure passions. Every evening they would make an examination of their conscience; going over the events of the day that was past, they would ask themselves, "In what have I transgressed—doing what I ought not to have done, or leaving undone what I ought to have done?" During the last century B.C. there was a revival of interest in Pythagorean symbolism and mysticism, and even the Stoic philosopher Seneca confessed himself fascinated by its teachings. Ultimately certain aspects of Pythagoreanism were adopted and adapted by various Gnostic systems of the early Christian period. Though Gnosticism took many different forms, a characteristic teaching of all gnostics was the fundamental antithesis between the material and the spiritual universe. The spiritual element in man could receive redemption only through *gnosis*, "spiritual enlightenment," which was the supposedly revealed knowledge of God and of the origin and destiny of mankind. The systems of gnostic teaching range from those which embody much genuine philosophical speculation to those which are wild amalgams of mythology, astrology, and magical rites drawn from all quarters.

II. MYSTERY RELIGIONS IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

As was mentioned in the introductory paragraphs of this chapter, the vacuum left by pervasive agnosticism concerning the traditional Greco-Roman gods and goddesses was filled, at least in part, by the growing popularity of what are called the mystery cults. Most of these were imports from the East and had a certain fascination arising from their novelty as well as from the vow of secrecy that was imposed upon the initiates not to disclose the content of the ritual or the doctrine. The chief mystery cults were those of Eleusis, Mithra, Isis, Dionysus, and Cybele or Magna Mater.

1. THE ELEUSINIAN CULT

The most highly regarded cult of antiquity, for which even Plato, who generally spoke depreciatingly of such cults, had only words of respect, was that located at Eleusis, a small town about fifteen miles west of Athens. The ritual commemorated the ancient myth of Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, "giver of goodly crops," who was carried off by

Pluto to the underworld to be his bride. Distracted with grief, the mother searched frantically for her lost daughter. In retaliation she refused to allow crops to grow, and consequently no offerings were made to the gods. Finally an arrangement was made with Pluto whereby Persephone was permitted to be with her mother for a portion of each year. Overjoyed at the restoration of her daughter, Demeter instituted the Eleusinian mysteries, through which the initiate was assured of a happy future life. During the portion of each year while she had her daughter, Demeter allowed crops to grow. This story, it need scarcely be remarked, provided an explanation for the cycle of changing seasons.

The Eleusinian rites involved preliminary instruction in the "lesser mysteries," celebrated in March at Agrae, a suburb of Athens on the banks of the Ilissus, and the "greater mysteries," celebrated in September. These latter comprised stages of initiation, each becoming more solemn. Cleansed by baptism in the sea and sprinkled with the blood of a sacrificial pig, the candidates marched in festal procession to Eleusis. Here, within the huge Hall of Initiation (which has been excavated), the priests took part in a religious pageant dramatically reenacting the Demeter myth, and the initiates, as spectators, shared the emotions of the goddess.

2. THE MITHRAIC CULT

More archaeological remains of Mithraism have been found than of any other mystery cult. Originally a god worshiped by the ancient Indo-Iranians, Mithra became prominent in the Zoroastrian pantheon as mediator between man and the god of light (Ahura Mazda). Carried westward first by the Persian military and later by the Roman, the Mithraic cult spread far and wide.

The devotees of Mithra (the cult was restricted to men) met in small chapels or sanctuaries located in caves or partly underground crypts. In the center of the apse stood a statue depicting the most significant work of Mithra, the tauroctony. This was the representation of Mithra, clad in a cape and pointed cap, in the act of slaying a bull. With his left knee astride the bull, which has been forced to its knees, and his left hand grasping and pulling back the snout of the animal, Mithra plunges a short dagger into the neck of the bull. From the wound there spring three stalks of grain. Other animals in the tableau are a dog,

which seeks to lick the blood flowing from the wound, a serpent in the foreground, a scorpion attacking the genitals of the bull, and a raven bringing a message to Mithra. Many tauroctonies are so carved as to represent all these figures within a semi-circular grotto, along the edge of which are depicted other scenes involving exploits of Mithra—such as his rising out of a rock, his carrying away a bull, and his riding to heaven in a four-horse chariot with the sun god—as well as the signs of the zodiac. The full significance of all these is not known, but it is supposed that the devotee saw in the central act of the slaying of the bull Mithra's overcoming of evil and the bringing of life and vegetation to mankind.

According to information preserved by early church fathers, Mithraism had an elaborate ritual of initiation that involved seven stages, called the grade of the raven, the bridegroom, the soldier, the lion, the Persian, the courier of the sun, and the father. During the ceremony the celebrants wore costumes and masks appropriate to the grade of initiation (for example, a huge papier-mâché bird's head and wings which could be flapped; a soldier's panoply; a lion's head and skin; the distinctive garb of a Persian; etc.). There was also a ceremony of baptism and a sacramental communion involving bread and water.

The most elaborate rite of Mithraism, which it had appropriated from the Magna Mater cult, was the taurobolium, or blood bath. The initiate, who was naked, crouched in a pit covered with a grating over which a bull, garlanded with flowers, was slaughtered. As the warm blood streamed over the devotee, he would eagerly drink in some of the life-giving fluid. Inscriptions dating from the early Christian period and commemorating the performance of this rite indicate that the initiate believed that he had been reborn for twenty years or, in some cases, for eternity.

3. THE ISIAIC CULT

The essential elements of the myth of Isis and Osiris, preserved in pyramid texts and in a treatise by Plutarch, include the following: Osiris, a wise and beneficent king, fell victim to the plotting of his wicked brother Set, or Typhon, who hacked Osiris into fourteen pieces and dispatched them to different parts of Egypt. Isis, wife and sister of Osiris, searched out and found all but one piece of the dismembered

body, which she reassembled and carefully embalmed. After a ceremonial lament over the corpse, in which her sister Nephtys joined, by means of magical rites Isis revived Osiris, who then received the title, "Lord of the Underworld and Ruler of the Dead."

Through miniature passion plays in chapels dedicated to Osiris, and by means of funerary rites performed over the body of a deceased person, the benefits of spiritual rebirth were held to be conferred. An Egyptian text testifies to the hope of a future existence for one who had shared in Osirian rites: "As truly as Osiris lives, he also shall live; as truly as Osiris is not dead, shall he not die; as truly as Osiris is not annihilated, shall he not be annihilated."

During the Hellenistic age Ptolemy Soter (323-283 B.C.) modified the cult by replacing Osiris with a new, syncretistic god named Serapis. The reformed Isiac religion spread throughout the Mediterranean world, and many Greek and Latin authors refer to the warm devotion that was felt for Isis, who was revered as the giver of security and happiness in this life and the next. The popularity of the Isiac cult was fostered by impressive ceremonials, some public and others private and secret. Women, in particular, found special satisfaction in the worship of Isis, and often her temples were located near a Mithreum. Roman coins bearing images and inscriptions honoring Isis and Serapis were minted as late as the fourth Christian century.

4. THE DIONYSIAC CULT

Dionysus was the god of wine and of animal life. In order to attain communion with their god the devotees of Dionysus (called Bacchantes) drank wine until thoroughly intoxicated, experiencing thus the influence of their god. Another realistic sacrament was the feast of raw flesh. The initiates, after indulging in a wild, whirling dance that induced a frenzied delirium, tore asunder a goat or a fawn and devoured the dripping raw flesh. Such orgiastic rites, called Bacchanalia, were celebrated in Crete as late as the third and fourth centuries of the Christian era.

5. THE CULT OF CYBELE

The rites of Cybele or Magna Mater ("the Great Mother") flourished first in central Asia Minor and from there spread westward. The myth

told of the death of Attis, a shepherd lad who was the consort of Cybele, and of his subsequent restoration by the goddess. Celebrating her principal rites in the springtime, her devotees would work themselves into a frenzy of excitement, during the course of which they gashed their arms and sprinkled the blood on their altars, while her priests went so far as to emasculate themselves. Those who could afford the expense underwent the rite of the taurobolium. This religion was officially introduced into Rome in 204 B.C., to ward off the Carthaginian threat; native Romans, however, were not permitted to take part in it until about the beginning of the Christian era.

As is the case of other mystery cults, the myth of Cybele and Attis represents the annual dying of vegetation in the autumn and its coming to life again in the spring. As late as the fourth century a Roman Emperor, Julian the Apostate, wrote an elaborate philosophical interpretation of the cult.¹

The question how far the theology of the apostle Paul may have been influenced by one or another of the mystery religions is discussed on pp. 245 f.

¹ Other ancient religions contained features that resembled the Magna Mater cult. Thus the Babylonian Ishtar (known to Old Testament writers as Ashtoreth) had as her consort Tammuz, who was slain (Ezek. 8:14), and the Syrian goddess Atargatis loved and lost Hadad (Zechariah knew of the lamentations for Hadad; Zech. 12:11).