The Ecole Initiative: The Eleusinian Mysteries

43-54 minutes

The Ecole Initiative

The Eleusinian Mysteries

The Eleusinian Mysteries, held annually in honor of Demeter and Persephone, were the most sacred and revered of all the ritual celebrations of ancient Greece. They were instituted in the city of Eleusis, some twenty-two kilometers west of Athens, possibly as far back as the early Mycenaean period, and continued for almost two thousand years. Large crowds of worshippers from all over Greece (and later, from throughout the Roman empire) would gather to make the holy pilgrimage between the two cities and and participate in the secret ceremonies, generally regarded as the high point of Greek religion. As Christianity began to spread, the Mysteries were condemned by the early Church fathers; yet the rites continued for hundreds of years more and exercised considerable influence on the formation of early Christian teachings and practices.

Our sources of information regarding the Eleusinian Mysteries include the ruins of the sanctuary there; numerous statues, bas reliefs, and pottery; reports from ancient writers such as Aeschylos, Sophokles, Herodotus, Aristophanes, Plutarch, and Pausanias--all of whom were initiates--as well as the accounts of Christian commentators like [G] Clement of Alexandria, [G] Hippolytus, [G] Tertullian, and Astorias. Yet for all this evidence, the true nature of the Mysteries remains shrouded in uncertainty because the participants did, with remarkable consistency, honor their pledge not to reveal what took place in the *Telesterion*, or inner sanctum of the Temple of Demeter. To violate that oath of secrecy was a capital offense. (Aeschylos, for example, once had to fear for his life on account of coming too close to revealing forbidden truths.) For these reasons, scholars today must make use of circumstantial evidence and inferences, with the result that there is still no consensus as to what did or did not take place. Hence, we shall sometimes be forced to engage in the tentative weighing of alternative hypotheses, without always reaching definite conclusions.

Historical Antecedents and Cross-Cultural Influences

Eleusis was by no means the only place in Greece that featured yearly festivals in honor of a goddess of grain and the annual renewal of life. Similar rituals were characteristic of many centers of ancient eastern Mediterranean civilization, including islands as far north as Samothrace, as far east as Cyprus, and as far south as Crete. In all of these regions were cults of one or another Great Goddess of life, fertility, and the harvest, whose worship

involved secret rites of purification and initiation. In Pylos (western coast of Messenia), for example, an ancient tablet (Fr. 1222) mentions annual rites in honor of a pair of goddesses draped in a veil, who would be led in a formal procession with great pomp and solemnity down to the sea for washing and purification (Faure 33). On the west coast of Asia Minor, Greek city-states were practicing the cult of the Phrygian goddess Cybele as far back as the seventh century BCE. Known among the Greeks primarily as the Great Mother, or simply as *Meter*, this originally foreign goddess of nature and fertility was early associated with Rhea or Demeter herself (Burkert 178). Indeed, according to some scholars, "Demeter and Cybele were but local forms of the Great Mother worshipped under diverse names all over Greece" (Harrison 158; Baring and Cashford 369).

In the early part of this century, Foucart theorized, on the basis of statements by classical authors (e.g., Herodotus Bk. 2) as well as the discovery at some Mycenaean sites of Egyptian figurines and small artifacts, that the cult of Demeter in Greece originally derived, in whole or in part, from Egypt. Further support for this hypothesis comes from certain remarkable parallels between the myth of Isis (especially in the version presented by Plutarch in his *Isis and Osiris,* chs. 15 and 16) and that of Demeter (as recounted in the "Hymn to Demeter," see below). Among the details of these parallels are episodes in both stories involving infant princes who almost gain immortality--but not quite--at the hands of the respective goddesses.

On the basis of these correspondences, Foucart and his followers concluded that the Mysteries at Eleusis originally must have come from Egypt (Foucart 2-23; Magnien 44-46). Yet the fact that the sanctuary ruins in Eleusis evidently go back centuries earlier than the Hymn itself, and that excavations have unearthed no Egyptian artifacts there from that period, militates against this hypothesis (Mylonas 15, 276). On the other hand, since we know that Greek colonists and mercenaries had settled in Lower Egypt by the seventh century BCE (Leclant 245), it is reasonable to surmise that these Greek and Egyptian fertility goddesses had already begun to penetrate each other's cults and mingle in the minds of worshippers, perhaps by way of Cretan influences. There is still no consensus about this and it remains a topic of lively debate.

Many scholars today favor the view that the cult of Demeter probably derived from Thessaly or Thrace. They base this conclusion partly on references in Homer and other ancient authors to some evidently pre-Dorian temples to Demeter in the Thessalian towns of Thermopylae, Pyrasos, and Pherai; partly on certain etymological links connecting key words in the rites of Demeter to prehellenic dialects from the north (Mylonas 14-20; Kerényi 111, 145). Other scholars point out that Demeter may be the same as a goddess "Dameter," who is mentioned briefly in Linear B tablets from Pylos dating from approximately 1200 BCE. This evidence suggests that the cult of Demeter may after all have originated in the southern Peleponnesus (Ventris and Chadwick 289). But in any case, whether the specific cult of Demeter at Eleusis originated in northern or southern Greece, the undeniable parallels with worship of grain goddesses in other parts of the eastern Mediterranean region point to frequent contacts and the cross-fertilization of religious ideas.

Most closely related to the Mysteries at Eleusis were the so-called "Thesmophoria" (from *thesmoi*, meaning "laws," and *phoria*, "carrying," in reference to the goddess as "law-bearer"). These rites were celebrated by women only throughout all Greece in the month of Pyanepsion (late October), their characteristic feature being a pig sacrifice, the usual sacrifice to chthonic deities. The Greeks attributed special powers to pigs on account of their fertility, the potency and abundance of their blood, and perhaps because of their uncanny ability to unearth underground tubers and shoots. It was believed that mingling their flesh with the seeds of grain would increase the abundance of next year's harvest. The ceremonies comprised fasting and purification, a ritualized descent into the underworld, and the use of sympathetic magic to bring renewed life back out of the jaws of death (Harrison 120-31; Baring and Cashford 374-77). Similarly, the Eleusinian Mysteries also revered swine and their rituals featured the washing and sacrificing of young pigs sacred to Demeter (although this took place on the

beaches at Pireas near Athens rather than at Eleusis itself). The numerous correspondences suggest that the Eleusinian Mysteries were of a piece with the Thesmophoria, and perhaps shared the same historical origins.

The Hymn to Demeter

The Hymn to Demeter [DOC], 495 verses in length, is the canonical work associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries. Although traditionally attributed to Homer, it was probably written somewhat later, in the seventh century BCE (Evelyn-White xxxvi). The hymn recounts the story of Demeter and Kore (the Maiden, i.e., Persephone), how they were separated when Hades snatched Persephone up in his chariot as she was gathering flowers in a meadow and bore her down with him to the underworld. The story continues that Demeter, disconsolate over her daughter's loss, searched all over the world for her in vain. Finally, with the help of Hekate and Helios, she learned of her daughter's abduction and discovered, besides, that it had been approved in advance by Zeus himself.

At this point, the narrative introduces a lengthy interlude (lines 95 to 300) to explain how Demeter came to Eleusis and established her cult there. At the same time, the episode establishes her credentials as the bringer of immortality to humankind: When the goddess realized the role of the other Olympians in her misfortune, she abandoned her divine form and set forth disguised as an old woman from Crete. Eventually she reached Eleusis and set herself down by an old well (the Maiden Well, which later figured prominently in the Mysteries), her heart overflowing with grief. At this point she was accosted by the four lovely daughters of Celeus, a local chieftain, who befriended her and introduced her to their mother, Metaneira. So impressed was Metaneira by the old woman's dignified bearing that she offered her the position of nurse for her own infant son. Demeter accepted, and under her care the child thrived marvelously well. What the mortals didn't know, however, was that Demeter was secretly treating the infant with a series of mystical practices. Every night while the palace slept she would anoint his limbs with ambrosia and then put him into the fire. The child might have become ageless and deathless had the procedure continued; but unfortunately, Metaneira spied on Demeter one night, and when the boy was put into the flames she screamed in fright. At this, the indignant goddess broke off the treatment, revealed herself in her full divine majesty, and demanded that a temple be built in her honor. There, she would teach the people her special rites. And with that promise, Demeter disappeared.

After the Eleusinians had built their temple to Demeter, she stayed there and pined for her daughter, refusing to rejoin the other gods on Mount Olympus. Moreover, she refused to make the seeds sprout in the dark earth, and all the world began to suffer famine. Even the gods suffered from the lack of gifts and sacrifices. Father Zeus sent Iris and other gods to intercede with her, yet Demeter would not relent. Finally, the king of the gods dispatched Hermes down to Hades, bidding the lord of the underworld to give Persephone up and return her to her mother. Hades reluctantly agreed, but first he contrived to make Persephone taste a small morsel of food--consisting of a single pomegranite seed--just enough to ensure, by a kind of divine symmetry, that she would always have to spend one third of every year with him (during the winter). And so Persephone was able to leave the underworld and return to the light, where she was reunited at last with her mother.

The poem ends with an invocation of the two goddesses and a promise of rich rewards to their devotees, both in this life and the next:

> 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.... Right blessed is he among men on earth whom they freely love ... (lines 480-87, Evelyn-White 323)

Participants

Only those who spoke Greek and had shed no blood (or had subsequently been purified) were eligible to participate in the rituals at Eleusis. Each new

initiate, known as a "*mystes*," would receive preliminary instructions and guidance from an experienced sponsor, or "*mystagogos*," who was often from one of the leading families of Eleusis. A *mystes* who returned a second time to Eleusis for induction into the highest levels of esoteric knowledge was known as an *epoptes*.

There were also numerous priestly functionaries connected with the proceedings: The *Hierophant*, or High Priest, would preside over the most mysterious and solemn portions of the ritual. He alone had the right to enter the secret chamber of the *Anaktoron*, where the sacred *Hiera*, or cult objects, were housed. The *High Priestess of Demeter* would share with the Hierophant the primary responsibility for presiding over the Mysteries. It is thought that she would assume the role of Demeter in a sacred drama reenacting the goddess's anguish and desperate search for Persephone. Most scholars also believe that the High Priestess would join the High Priest in performing an *ieros gamos*, or sacred wedding of symbolic significance (see below). The *Hierophantides* were two chief female assistants of the Hierophant who played a major role in the drama and initiation ceremonies. The *Panageis Priestesses*, also known as "bees," were celibate auxiliaries whose precise function remains unknown. Possibly they played a role in carrying the *Hiera* in the stately procession from Eleusis to Athens and back again. The *Dadouchos*, second male in rank after the Hierophant, was the torchbearer, who played an important role in the initiations. He alone at Eleusis had the authority to remove the stain of impurity from aspirants who had shed human blood. He and his female assistant, the *Dadouchousa*, were probably also responsible for the lighting effects in the *Telesterion* during the ceremonies. The *Hieorokeryx* was the official herald, whose stentorian voice would call the initiates to silence in order for the Mysteries to begin. Finally, the *Priest at the Altar* would preside over the animal sacrifices and other offerings to the two goddesses.

The Ceremonies

The celebration of the Mysteries at Eleusis was an elaborate affair which took place over a period of nine days in the month of Boedromion (late September). For each day, there was a prescribed series of ritual actions that initiates were expected to follow in the proper order (Parke 53-72; Simon 24-35).

Woman sacrificing a pig; vase painting, c. 450 BCE.

One day prior to the festival proper, a large crowd of participants would gather in Eleusis and proceed with much pomp to the sanctuary of Demeter in the Athenian agora. On the following day, 15 Boedromion, the actual festival would begin with a formal declaration in the agora announcing the event and inviting initiates to take part. From 16 to 18 Boedromion, the initiates would descend singly to the sea, each bearing a suckling piglet for purification and sacrifice. (Here the connection with the Thesmophoria, another ritual celebration of Demeter featuring a pig sacrifice, is most in evidence.) There would also be major sacrifices in honor of the city of Athens and other public institutions.

On the fifth day of the festival (19 Boedromion) the celebrants would proceed in formal procession from Athens back to Eleusis, bearing the sacred *hiera* as well as a statue of the boy-god Iacchos. The latter deity, who personified the shouts of exultation that the participants would periodically emit, was identified at least as far back as the days of Sophokles with Dionysos (cf.

Antigone, vv. 1115 ff.). This identificiation constitutes *prima facie* evidence of a very significant connection between the Dionysian and Eleusinian Mysteries. Yet the point remains controversial (see below).

The initiates would then rest, purify themselves, and maintain either a partial or complete fast. It is believed that they would break their fast as evening approached by drinking a special beverage known as the "*kykeon*," consisting of meal and water mixed with fresh pennyroyal mint leaves (the same brew that Demeter drank, as recounted in the Hymn, lines 210-11). Obviously, the grain in the drink was a symbol of Persephone, the eternal goddess who dies, goes under the ground, and then comes back to life again.

Scholars disagree widely over the significance of the *kykeon*. Some have maintained that it must have had a sacramental character involving a communion with, or assimilation of, the spirit of the deity (Loisy 69; Jevons 365ff.). On the other hand, Mylonas doubts that it had any such "mystic" significance, although he acknowledges that the drinking of the *kykeon* was an "act of religious remembrance" involving "an observance of an act of the Goddess" (259f.). Even on this muted interpretation, the similarity to the Christian Eucharist is striking.

As to the composition of the drink, it is generally agreed that it can have had no alcoholic content, since the Hymn expressly states that Demeter did not partake of wine. Yet it has been suggested that there might have been an admixture of some other intoxicating ingredients. Joseph Campbell, for example, has speculated that the grains of wheat may have contained small quantities of ergot, a natural hallucinogen often occurring in cereal products (video: "From Darkness to Light"). This hypothesis is rendered less plausible, however, by the extremely volatile character of ergot infections (as in Saint Anthony's fire), which would have been difficult if not impossible to control safely.

When the *mystai* entered the sacred precincts of the Telesterion, they may have been required to utter a special, formulaic password, or "*synthema*," to confirm their readiness to participate in the rites. Clement of Alexandria has reported the contents of such a *synthema* as follows: "I fasted; I drank the *kykeon*; I took from the *kiste* [a cylindrical reliquary]; having done my task, I placed in the basket, and from the basket into the *kiste*" (*Protreptikos*, II, 18; Loeb 43). These obscure, but suggestive words have given rise to a plethora of imaginative interpretations; yet scholars are divided about the reliability of Clement's testimony.

What next transpired in the ceremonies remains hidden behind veils of piously enforced secrecy. Most scholars believe, on the basis of testimony from Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian, that the Mysteries comprised three main components, known as the *deiknymena* ("things shown"), the *legomena* ("things said"), and the *dromena* ("things done"). We have already discussed aspects of the first two and will return to them again later. As for the *dromena*, these are believed to have included a ritual reenactment of the story of Demeter and Persephone, including the latter's abduction by Hades; Demeter's grief; her long, desperate search throughout the world for the departed goddess; the anguish of all living creatures as famine and death engulfed them. Very likely the initiates gained a sense of direct participation in Demeter's travail by searching with her and calling for her daughter in the same hallowed precincts which, according to tradition, actually witnessed these events. Then finally, perhaps illuminated in a sudden blaze of torchlight, there would have been the joyous moment of Persephone's resurrection, as she emerged from the underworld and returned to the loving arms of her mother. The dramatic intensity of this pageant, heightened (in all probability) by music and chanted invocations of the gods, would surely have created an awe-inspiring spectacle, whose memory the initiates would cherish for the rest of their lives.

Foucart has proposed, on the basis of a passage from Plutarch (cited by Themistius and preserved in Stobaeus), that in addition to representing the separation and reunion of the two goddesses, the Mysteries may also have

led the initiates through gloomy infernal regions, with horrible images and ghostly shapes in order to recreate a grim foreshadowing of what awaits the uninitiate (Stobaeus, "Agra" 107). Then, as Foucart also suggests, subsequent representations of a blissful afterlife in the company of the goddesses and other initiates would have produced a profound sense of relief and spiritual rebirth (392ff.). Other researchers have objected to this scenario on the grounds that the ruins at Eleusis include no remains of a stage installations, underground chambers, or any theatrical machinery such as would have been necessary in order to render the experience of a trip to the underworld (Noack 236ff.; Mylonas 268). Yet the absence of full-fledged stage equipment surely does not preclude the possibility of dramatic representations in some manner of an "underworld"--achieved through a judicious use of darkness, sound, and atmosphere. (Besides, a great deal could have been done with wooden props and settings, which of course would since have disappeared.) Foucart's hypothesis, though speculative, cannot be ruled out.

Interestingly, Wilamowitz and Kerényi have used the same argument about the absence of theatrical installations, underground chambers, and so on to contest even the prevailing theory concerning the enactment of Demeter and Persephone's story. According to these scholars, the supposition that the *dromena* at Eleusis took the form of a stage-play is absurd (Wilamowitz 481; Kerényi 141). But this is not to say that they would necessarily deny the occurrence of any dramatic representations whatever. Instead, Kerényi proposes (134) that the *dromena* may have been a sacred dance, perhaps similar to the labyrinthine rope-dances that were performed on the island of Delos. By means of stylized gestures and ritual moves in which the initiates themselves participated, it would have been possible to evoke a profound, even trance-like sense of union with the divine.

Yet another controversy concerns the question whether or not an *ieros gamos*, or Sacred Marriage, also featured in these rites. There are three or four pieces of circumstantial evidence, most of them originating in the statements of early Christian Fathers, which have been used to infer the existence of an *ieros gamos*: (1) According to Clement of Alexandria, Demeter was sometimes referred to as "*Brimo*" (the Mighty, the Raging), on account of her anger toward Zeus (*Protreptikos* II, 14; Loeb 35). (2) Hippolytus of Rome (third century) reports that "At night in Eleusis, [the Hierophant] appearing in the midst of many fires, proclaims the great and secret mystery, saying, 'The Holy *Brimo* has borne a sacred child, *Brimos*,' that is, the mighty (f.) [has borne] the mighty (m.)" (*Philosophoumena* V, 38-41; Migne 3150). (3) Asterios of Amaseia (fourth century), in a diatribe against the pagans' barbaric and obscene rituals, asked the following rhetorical questions: "Are not the height and culmination of your religion those Eleusinian Mysteries, whose vanities the people of Attica, and indeed all Greece, gather to celebrate? Is there not in that place a dark underground chamber [*katabasion*], where the Hierophant meets with the High Priestess alone? Are not the torches then extinguished, and do not the vast multitudes believe it is for their own salvation--what those two do together in the darkness?" (Asterios, in Migne 324) (4) In his commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*, [G] Proklos Diadochos (fifth century) recounts the following: "In the ceremonies of Eleusis they would cry, raising their eyes to the heavens, 'rain' [*hye*], and then, lowering them to the earth, 'be fruitful' [*kye*]" (*Timaios* 293C; Festugiére 34).

On the basis of this evidence, many investigators have concluded that some form of Sacred Marriage probably took place at the Mysteries, and that this ceremony culminated in the symbolic birth (or rebirth) of a son. There are various proposals as to who that child might have been: possibly Iacchos, the tutelary deity whose statue accompanied the dual goddesses on the pilgrimage from Athens to Eleusis; Ploutos, the god of wealth who sprang, according to Hesiod and Homer, from the union of Demeter and the mortal Iasion of Crete; Dionysos-Zagreus, a Cretan deity, who according to Orphic tradition was the offspring of Persephone and Zeus; Triptolemos, an early prince of Eleusis much represented on vases and urns; or even Persephone herself. Perhaps, indeed, the "child" represents a mystical merging and identification of all these together.

Mylonas, however, followed by Brumfield, denies that any Sacred Marriage, or any birth of a Sacred Child, took place (Mylonas 270, 311 ff.; Brumfield 203). Mylonas's arguments are too complicated to discuss here in detail, but in essence they are: (1) that Clement mixed up and confused elements from Phrygian, Orphic, and even Alexandrian cults with the Eleusinian Mysteries (288-305); (2) that Hippolytus could not have had any information about what was actually said in the most esoteric ceremonies at Eleusis, hence he filled in the gaps in his knowledge with plausible-sounding phrases of his own invention (305-10); that Asterios came too late in history to have had any reliable data available, and besides he was writing for an audience that also lacked first-hand knowledge (311-15); that the words alleged by Proklos to have been an unutterable secret ("*hye, kye*") could not possibly have been, since they were inscribed for all to see on a well beside the Dipylon gate of Athens (270, 310). Mylonas's primary concern throughout his book is to avert what he conceives as the "error" of *theokrasia*, the intermingling of distinct deities and religious traditions. Whether this is always an "error" may, however, be open to question--a question to which this article will return below.

In any case, after the performance of the *dromena*, the Hierophant would withdraw alone into the *Anaktoron* (the sacred, secret chamber of the *Telesterion*) and reemerge with the *Hiera*, those most mysterious and holy relics of Demeter and Persephone. In the full splendor of his sacerdotal dignity, he would reveal these to the initiates, who doubtless accepted them as objects that the two goddesses had personally consecrated and passed on to humankind. This culminating moment of the Mysteries was surely that which inspired the profoundest feelings of awe. Yet we have no idea today what the contents of the *Hiera* actually were. Theories have ranged from stalks of cut wheat, serpents, specially blessed bread, a stylized phallus or female pudendum (or both), ancient Mycenaean artifacts, or neolithic statuettes. In the final analysis, what the *Hiera* physically were is perhaps less important than how they were presented and the spirit in which they were received.

As the festival wound down, the participants would dedicate special services in honor of the dead. Ritual libations would be poured on the ground, the consecrated liquid flowing in the eastward and westward directions. The initiates (probably exhausted at this point) would then return to Athens singly or in small groups. There does not appear to have been any organized procession. This was a time for reflection and meditation.

Possible Connections of Demeter/Persephone with Other Deities

Among the most disputed issues in the scholarship is the question whether or not the rites held in honor of Demeter and Persephone also included significant connections with, or references to, other important deities and cults. These connections, if they existed, might have taken the form of explicit ascriptions of symbolic or sacramental roles to other gods and goddesses in the rituals; alternatively, they might have been implicit suggestions, indirect allusions to historical antecedents from other religious traditions. If the existence of religio-cultural connections of either kind could be determined with certainty, it would affect our understanding of the nature and significance of the Mysteries at Eleusis; for it is a general principle in religious studies that associations among deities parallel similar associations in the symbolic meanings attached to their cults.

Grand Relief of Eleusis, c. 450 BCE

The prime example of an explicit, though esoteric, connection between the goddesses of Eleusis and a deity from another cultic tradition would be the ritual association between Demeter and Dionysos from at least the fourth century BCE onward . The evidence in this case is fairly strong. It is known that these two deities were honored in Athens and elsewhere as "*paredroi*" [partner deities] (Pausanias 9.8.1; 9.22.5; 9.24.1); less certain is whether this partnership status had any deeper significance. Pindar (5th century BCE) spoke of Dionysos as the god "of the flowing locks who is enthroned beside Demeter" (*Isthmian Odes* VII, lines 3-5). The Orphics, who were widely influential and had their own Mystery celebrations, identified Dionysos-Zagreus as the son of Persephone and Zeus (Kerényi, 145, 148; Mylonas, 309). The Romans recognized a triad consisting of Ceres, Liber, and Libera, where Ceres corresponded to Demeter, Liber to Dionysos, and Libera to Persephone (Kerényi, 148). Stephanos Byzantios (6th century CE) recorded that the rituals in honor of Persephone were performed "in imitation of Dionysian happenings" ("Agra" 14). There is also a considerable amount of iconographical evidence, including pictures on ancient Greek vases from Attica and Apulia, testifying to a prominent Dionysian presence at Eleusis (Schmidt 162-65; Zuntz 407-11).

On the basis of this and other evidence, Schelling suggested already in the mid-nineteenth century that Dionysos and Iacchos were masculine counterparts of Demeter and Persephone--that indeed they were all aspects of a single deity (490)! In this century, Metzger has proposed that Demeter, Dionysos, and Persephone together formed a kind of holy trinity which presided over Eleusis (326ff.). Deubner has argued that episodes from the life of Dionysos most likely featured in the ritual representations at Eleusis (70). Harrison has gone so far as to assert that "all or nearly all their [the Eleusinian Mysteries'] spiritual significance was due to elements borrowed from the cult of Dionysos" (539). Baring and Cashford follow Harrison in attributing a pivotal role at Eleusis to Dionysos (378f.). Kerényi does the same (127, 139, 148).

Yet even if Dionysos did come to hold a position in the festivals of Eleusis, some would argue that he assumed this function only in his capacity as the patron god of drama and theatrical splendor, not for any constitutive role in the Eleusinian Mysteries as such. In that case, he might have been more analogous to a divine stage manager or set designer than to a ritual performer or object of worship in his own right. At any rate, Mylonas dismisses most of the ancient sources as confused about Dionysos' participation (238, 276). He insists that Dionysos had no significant role whatever in the Eleusinian Mysteries proper, although he admits (308, 318) that "in Roman times [Iacchos] was confused with Bacchus and Dionysos." Frank shares Mylonas's opinion that Dionysus played no important part in Eleusis (296).

The issue is obviously a thorny one, but in the present writer's judgment, the balance of evidence points to a definite correlation between Dionysos/Iacchos and Demeter/Persephone, at least in the later period and

probably as far back as the sixth century BCE. Such a correlation, if true, would have greatly colored the experience of the Mysteries and drawn them closer into a syncretistic congruency of meaning with the Dionysian and Orphic Mysteries.

Underlying Hermeneutical Controversies

We have already noted the existence of numerous controversies concerning the exact contents of the events at Eleusis. Many of the answers are doubtless lost irretrievably behind millennia of secrecy. Yet the deepest debate concerns not so much the *contents* as the spiritual *meaning* of the Mysteries. In the these concluding paragraphs, I shall briefly summarize this debate by means of contrasting two hermeneutical approaches that are almost diametrical opposites: that of Mylonas and that of Kerényi.

The central aim of Mylonas's book is to uncover the true character of the activities at Eleusis by scrupulously removing any false superimpositions originating from alien venues or traditions. In particular, as we saw, he wishes to combat the tendency toward religious syncretism, or "*theokrasia*," the indiscriminate intermingling of ancient deities and their characteristics. It is for this reason that Mylonas resists the idea that Dionysos had a presence in the cult of Demeter and Persephone; for this that he denies any mythological or ritual parallelism between the Orphic and Eleusinian Mysteries; for this that he refuses to admit the possibility of a mystical identification between Rhea and Demeter or between Demeter and Persephone; for this that he discounts the testimony of Clement of Alexandria and many others; for this also that he doubts a sacramental quality in the drinking of the *kykeon*.

Mylonas recognizes that in his zeal to recover the Mysteries in their original purity he is disregarding the opinions of numerous authorities who take more seriously the possibility of very early historical and religious associations between the deities worshipped at Eleusis and those of other cultic centers in the ancient world. Mylonas feels it necessary to reject such hypotheses because they nourish the unverified (and perhaps unverifiable) notion that religious ideas spring from transcultural impulses and needs deep within the human psyche. To treat this notion as a genuine scientific hypothesis, he thinks, can lead to an uncritical acceptance of highly questionable evidence. One quote will serve to illustrate Mylonas's general method of interpretation. In his discussion of the possible role of Dionysos at Eleusis, he writes:

> . . . As we have seen, Dionysos had no part in the Eleusinian Mysteries and all references to his participation are later in date and are the result of his confused equation with Iacchos. In late Orphic tradition, according to Guthrie, Dionysos seems to be equated with Eubouleus [a minor character in the myth of Demeter and Persephone]. Guthrie's conclusion is based on evidence belonging most probably to the third century of our era, when traditions were confused and *theokrasia* became a common practice in Orphic literature. (309)

The kinds of questions and objections that Mylonas raises are important ones. Through his skeptical attitude and cautious methodology, he has performed an invaluable service to the study of ancient religions. By calling into question the sometimes facile conclusions that others have drawn, he makes one aware of the obligation to be ever-critical and vigilant in scholarship.

Entirely different is Kerényi's approach. Although he doesn't use the word, he evidently accepts *theokrasia* as a valid and unavoidable feature of living religious traditions. For him, the phenomenology of divinities and myths naturally involves cross-cultural connections and gives rise to "unscientific," seemingly illogical identifications. This is the reason why he admits, even welcomes, the commingling of Dionysian motifs with those of Demeter as complementary aspects of a single, possibly hermaphroditic deity; why he acknowledges the influence of Orphic and other traditions as powerful and early forces that helped to shape the Eleusinian festival; why he recognizes Rhea, Cybele, Artemis, Hecate, and others as coordinate manifestations of one archetypal Goddess-figure implicit in the human spirit; why he accepts

the testimony of the Christian Fathers and other outsiders as significant, though flawed, indications of truths they themselves could not comprehend; why he also readily conceives the possibility that the psyche of a devout *mystes* could seem to merge via sacramental communion with the spirit of the Goddess.

In developing these ideas, Kerényi is aware that he is proposing a number of risky propositions, for he is basically treating as highly meaningful linkages--symptomatic of inner psycho-spiritual processes--what many other scholars would dismiss as merely fortuitous parallels, accidental accretions, or later interpolations. Yet Kerényi insists that one must be sensitive to the significance of these seemingly contingent connections if one is ever to succeed in recovering the inner dynamic of myths. The following passage will convey the flavor of his hermeneutical method. Speaking of the connection between the Erinys, goddesses of moral retribution, and the Demeter/Persephone duality, Kerényi writes:

> There are two ways of considering connections like this between Erinys and the rulers of the Underworld. One way begins with the dispersed state of the various aspects of the gods and believes in a *subsequent* mythological combination of them, with the result that mythology is understood at best as a coordinating and embellishing activity of the mind. Our way is opposed to this. It begins with the mythological ideas, which are easily recognized by their pristine *richness and many-sidedness*. Mythology is then understood as the mind's *creation* of gods in the sense that something real and valid is brought into the world. Realities that disclose themselves are stages in a process of (budlike) unfolding, and every unfolding tends ultimately toward dissolution. The primary thing for us is not this final state, not the Erinys as spirits of vengeance, or Demeter and Persephone existing independently side by side, but the historical *Demeter Erinys* who contains in herself her own Kore figure--Persephone. (125f.)

The virtue of Kerényi's approach is its depth of psychological insight. Through his explorations of the boundary zones whose unconscious associations link religious ideas, he has provided a valuable key for the interpretation of myths.

William James once remarked that there are two kinds of scholarly temperaments: those that dread above all the risk of possibly mistaking falsehoods for truths, and those that fear even more the risk of missing potentially valuable truths. Depending upon which type of disposition one has, one will prefer Mylonas's or Kerényi's hermeneutical method. Either way, the Eleusinian Mysteries will remain among the most intriguing, perennially fascinating legacies of the ancient world.

Concluding Comments and a Final Proposal

We have seen that the paucity of hard data about the Mysteries at Eleusis is counterbalanced by the wealth of speculative theories and hypotheses. At the risk of adding to the latter, it is worth considering the possibility that perhaps there was no unitary set of "secret" teachings at all, but rather a developing series of esoterica.

It is well known that the Mysteries continued for almost two thousand years, during which time the Greek world evolved tremendously in both intellectual and religious aspects. This period saw the transition from the traditional polytheism of Homer and Hesiod, through the beginnings of scientific philosophy in Thales, Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, and others, to the pinnacles of philosophical monotheism represented by Plato, Aristotle, and [G] Plotinus. Similar transformations also occurred in the realms of literature, art, and historiography. It would be unreasonable, therefore, to deny that there could have been corresponding changes within the sacred precincts of the *Telesterion* as well. We know that the greatest intellects of the ancient world testified repeatedly to the salvific power of participation in the Mysteries--why then assume that those secret rites and teachings would not also have

adapted to the times, so as to contain allusions to the deepest spiritual insights of which their devotees were capable?

To be sure, the outward phenomena of the rituals probably retained a remarkable consistency of form throughout the millenia of their practice, for this conservative tendency is characteristic of archaic religions in general. Yet the interpretations given to the ritual performances by the participants themselves may well have undergone substantial modifications over time. In particular, it seems not unlikely that a proclivity toward syncretism and *theokrasia* could have fused with philosophical speculations from about the fourth century BCE onwards, leading to a new type of religious mysticism and perhaps even containing intimations of monotheism or pantheistic monism.

It would be going too far to push this line of inquiry further, since there is no concrete evidence to support it. Yet there is cause to wonder whether the esoteric teachings of the Eleusinian Mysteries may not have helped in such a manner to prepare the way for the dawn of the Christian age.

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Sources

[Note: For a good annotated bibliography of the scholarly literature, see Eliade, below, 458-64. For a comprehensive listing of iconographical materials, see Beschi, 848-84. For an extensive collection of links to other World Wide Web sites pertaining to Eleusis, see Martin.]

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