

# The Eleusinian Mysteries

By Douglas Lockhart

At the moment of death the soul experiences the same as those who are initiated into the great mysteries.

Plutarch

## Rite of Revelation?

I came across the above quote in Lama Govinda's *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*,<sup>1</sup> and within a few hours stumbled onto Walter Otto's essay on the Eleusinian mysteries where, in identical terms as Govinda, Otto states that "those who took part in them could look forward to a far better lot in the afterworld beyond the grave."<sup>2</sup> For Govinda "the initiated disciple attain[ed] dominion over the realm of death [through perceiving] death's illusory nature".<sup>3</sup> In both cases, "initiation" is the catalyst. So the question we have to ask is Otto's: ". . . what was enacted in these mysteries, what befell the initiates?"<sup>4</sup> According to Otto, this is a question with many answers, most of which are nonsense. But one thing stands out, and that is the preparatory rites of purification, rituals described as a great "rivalry between seeing and hearing" that results in "ineffable visions"<sup>5</sup> which, in the Govinda text becomes the opening of the initiates "inner eye".<sup>6</sup> Then, coincidental to Govinda's reference to Plutarch, Otto paraphrases Plutarch's treatise *On the Soul* with these words:

Plutarch compares death and its terrors, which are suddenly transformed into the beatitudes of the soul freed from suffering, with emotion and transfiguration of the *mystai* who, once they have beheld the sublime vision, no longer doubt that they are blessed.<sup>7</sup>

The words that stand out here are "no longer doubt that they are blessed"; initiates are suddenly certain about something they were not certain about prior to their experience. What could that have been, one wonders? Well, according to the Roman bishop Hippolytus, the big moment was the displaying of an *ear of wheat*, an act in perfect accordance with what is known of the Eleusinian mysteries in their agricultural aspect, but hardly impressive enough, surely, to bring about a *transfiguration of the mystai*. No, something else was going on, and it was related to "fasting", "silence", the "drinking of a potion" and, finally, to "myth realised" in the form of a *sublime vision*. For Otto, this sublime vision was Persephone, the Queen of the Dead, and in a form so intimate as to be

utterly beyond words. An experience related to death had been had that was so devastating it resulted in the initiate undergoing dramatic psychological change. In similar terms, Lama Govinda directs our attention to the *Bardo Thodol (thos-grol)*, the Tibetan Book of the Dead where the initiate undergoes an experience of death “in order to gain liberation within himself”;<sup>8</sup> an initiatory process that mimicked the actual stages of death and was experientially available in higher states of meditation.

The period of the Eleusinian mysteries (thought to go back before 700 BCE) also saw the rise of Orphism, Pythagoreanism and the cult of Dionysus, which in turn can be dated from around 570 BCE to 500 BCE. Unlike the Eleusinian mysteries, Orphism was not an organised religious form, but it did have a recognisable doctrinal system. Founded by Orpheus the famous lyre-player from Thrace, it too was a death cult in that it was believed the mythical figure of Orpheus had descended to Hades to rescue his dead wife Eurydice. Orphic doctrine gave instruction on how to live a morally pure life, and in line with being a death cult taught initiates what to do and say after they died. Perhaps because of Indian influence, reincarnation was also taught, the initiate eventually gaining the level of pure spirit and a place in heaven among the stars. The Homeric “Olympus”, generally thought of as a “mountain”, was now a sky-heaven more in alignment with Eastern astral religion. Pythagoreanism was quite different, being more an advanced school for musicians and mathematicians, but they too believed in reincarnation and in ascetic practices. The religion that developed around Dionysus (also known as “Bacchus”) was again quite different, and certainly the oldest of the mystery religions, its origins dating from about 1220 BCE. Dionysus was the God of Ecstasy, and although associated predominantly with wine, other ecstasy-producing substances may have been used by the cult.

Death was a central motif of these four mystery religions, and the initiates (the *mystai*) had to pass through a series of preliminary rites to qualify as acceptable to the cult. These stages of initiation incorporated purification, the joining together with other *mystai*, the learning of ritual actions and words, and a final stage of knowledge and consecration leading to an “ultimate aim”, or *telos*. Here again, Govinda speaks of the initiate forming an ultimate aim to help him marshal and direct his energies towards a final liberation.<sup>9</sup> Early Christianity had of course its own mysteries, and in language not dissimilar to that used at Eleusis St. Paul creates the *mysterion tou Christou* to combat the pagan mysteries with which he was obviously familiar. With Paul, the *mystai* become the “saints”, and later writers continued this tradition by describing the Eucharist as *mysteria*.<sup>10</sup> The Gospels, too, have their fair share of mystery where the words *mysterion* and *mysteria* are to be found in Luke 8:10, in Matthew 13: 11, and in Mark 4: 11.<sup>11</sup> But it is St. Paul who most uses the term “mystery” in his writings, so in what sense exactly is he using the term? Well certainly not in the pagan sense; Paul’s *mysterion* is the mystery

of Christ, a mystery, we are told, made known to him in the form of a *revelation* and not known to others. And to whom is Paul to communicate this revelation? To the pagan world of course, a world long familiar with the Greek conception of mystery and initiation.

One of the curiosities of pagan initiation was that the high level initiate underwent his/her experience in the darkness and seclusion of caves, and generally at night. Paul Schmitt tells us that the cult of Eleusis “was devoted to one of primordial forms . . . to a form suggesting the darkness before birth as well as the darkness after death.”<sup>12</sup> Night, darkness and returning to the earth functioned as symbols in relation to birth, death and rebirth, and were experienced by initiates in terms of the soul’s depths, which is to say *Hades*. And for the high initiate all done in the strictest seclusion. Which tells us that there were two aspects to the cult, the public and the private, the exoteric and the esoteric. According to Schmitt, however, both levels were “moulded by profound psychic forces.”<sup>13</sup> There was a deep and lasting experience to be had for all concerned. Getting to the heart of what was actually experienced is however rather difficult. For Christians today, the Eleusinian experience was, at both levels, no more than a bit of inflated mythology, a nocturnal romp during which torch lit processions, drum music and ritual produced a frenzy of emotion in relation to the Earth Mother Demeter, and her daughter Kore (the maiden), also known as Persephone. For those actually involved, particularly at the esoteric level, it seems to have been a little more complicated than that: entering the underworld by way of initiation was a bit like entering a deep strata dream and waking up on the inside, a fact that caused early Christianity to view it with alarm.

In this regard, the Jungian psychologist James Hillman tells us that Hades “is the final cause, the purpose, the very *telos* (aim) of every soul and every soul process.”<sup>14</sup> There is no avoiding Hades, for Hades is “depth”; it is “a psychological realm now, not an eschatological realm later.”<sup>15</sup> But there is a problem, for Christianity has redefined Hades as “hell”, and in doing so placed a barrier between us and our own depths; we have ended up stranded at the conscious level. In Greek mythology, Hercules is said to have descended into the underworld and driven Hades from his throne, but according to Christian tradition Christ went one better: he “wiped out the entire kingdom, including death itself.”<sup>16</sup> And so St. Paul can claim in 1 Cor. 15: 55 that death and Hades have been overcome; the mission of Christianity to destroy polytheism has been accomplished. Well, not quite, the psychological complexes we are all so familiar with indicate that something of the ancient Greek conception of psyche as “multiple” is still around: psyche’s depths continue to beckon and disturb.

There is a great deal we do not yet understand about the Eleusinian mysteries as they were experienced by, and presented by, initiates. But we can perhaps get a glimmer of what was being experienced by examining the ancient Greek mysteries in

general. For this purpose I would draw attention to *The Mystery of the Serpent*, an essay by Hans Leisegang where, amidst a dizzying array of information, we come across mystical journeys described by the *mystai* in terms of ecstatic flights into the heavens. Leisegang is himself intrigued. Accounts of religious experiences that have initiates rising above the Earth and gazing into the “infinite plenitude of light and beholding God at its centre”<sup>17</sup> are common place, as are descriptions of “descents” and “ascents” leading to spiritual rebirth. One such text reads:

I . . . seemed always to be borne aloft into the heights with a soul possessed by some God-sent inspiration, a fellow-traveller with the sun and moon and the whole heaven and universe. Ah then I gazed down from the upper air, and straining the mind’s eye beheld, as from some commanding peak, the multitudinous worldwide spectacles of earthly things, and blessed my lot in that I had escaped by main force the plagues of mortal life.<sup>18</sup>

Journeys of the *mystai* into supercelestial realms are further described in these extraordinary terms.

Again, when on soaring wing it [the soul] has contemplated the atmosphere and all its phases, it is borne yet higher to the ether and the circuit of heaven, and is whirled around with the dances of planets and fixed stars, in accordance with the laws of perfect music, following that love of wisdom which guides its steps. And so, carrying its gaze beyond the confines of all substance discernible by sense, it comes to a point at which it reaches out after the intelligible world, and on descrying in that world sights of surpassing loveliness, even the patterns and the originals of the things of sense which it saw here, it is seized by a sober intoxication.<sup>19</sup>

A sober intoxication? Given that we learned earlier of “potions” being drunk during the lead up to initiation, and the possibility that the cult of Dionysus was interested in more than wine, it is, I think, not too much of a strain on the imagination to suggest the use of sensory enhancing substances during such ceremonies. The words “sober intoxication” may in fact point to just that, this particular initiate indicating that his heightened state of awareness was not due to alcoholic inebriation. I am in my right mind, he is telling us, and that in spite of being *out of his mind*, so to speak. This is not to suggest that all such experiences were the result of mind altering substances, I do not think they were, but the

tone and language of these particular journeys remind me of more modern descriptions where not dissimilar experiences have been recorded. And as the late Jackson Knight shows in his study of the Greek mysteries,<sup>20</sup> there was an outbreak of stories between 700 and 500 BCE that concerned “detachable souls”, “astral travel” and incidents of “biolocation” that are difficult to explain in ordinary terms. Hermetimus of Clazomenae is said to have reported on occurrences in far places when entranced, and Epimenides of Crete also reported travelling on the “astral plane” while asleep. The historian Herodotus records similar tales, Aristeas of Proconnesus and Abaris the Hyperborean being said to have *mysterious powers of mobility*, the Greek philosophers Parmenides and Empedocles (493-433 BCE) confirming reports of experiences of a spiritual world behind that of the phenomenal world.<sup>21</sup> All in all a perplexing mish-mash of experiences mixed with ecstatic visions that at first glance relay little of importance. But there are in fact indications of real contemplative knowledge, for the words “carrying [his] gaze beyond the confines of all substance discernible by sense” tells us that the *mystai* knew exactly what they were doing.

### **Faith, Reason and Gnosis**

I mention the above not by way of proof for odd goings on, but in an attempt to show that the mysteries experienced by the *mystai* were in fact more than fertility rites dramatised as theatrical productions. For alongside these experiences of initiation lay contemplative practices of considerable depth and quality; how else could Frederick Heiler claim that the “profoundist contemplative experiences of the ancient world entered into Christianity”. Heiler is not referring to fertility-rite initiations had by the general throng; he is pointing directly, and admiringly, at Platonic and Neoplatonic forms of contemplation grounded in the mysteries of Eleusis experienced by “advanced” *mystai*. This is altogether different from the thinking of Hugo Rahner where “what is most profound in these mysteries remains enclosed in the unbroken circle of natural life”.<sup>22</sup> The mysteries were, in other words, not really mysterious at all; they were merely the experience of “obscure religious emotions [that acted] directly on the nerves.” According to Rahner, everything was “external techniques”, “glaring light”, “sound effects” and “polyvalent symbolism that sublimates the elementary actions into images of supersensory secrets.”<sup>23</sup> Then comes what sounds like a concession: “Everything is calculated to compel an inner concentration for which the bustle of life otherwise leaves no room.” But that, too, is an illusion; this “inner concentration”, good as it is, leads to no more than a form of “suffering” that makes them hopeful of a good death.

So what was actually passed on to Christianity from the Greek mystery cults as they fused with Platonic and later Neoplatonic forms? Well, if Rahner is to be believed, it

was no more than a “subdued form of mystery language” as taken up by St. Paul, and later by Ignatius. What we have to understand, he tells us, is that there were three distinct periods in this section of Christian history: (1) the early 1st/2nd century period; (2) the 3rd century period of theology and ritual formation; and (3) the final 4th/5th century period during which the Church reached full development.<sup>24</sup> During the 3rd century, the “mysteries” were incorporated into Neoplatonic philosophy and mysticism, and it was during this period that Church theology took on a fixed form. Rahner is at pains to point out that it was at this point, *and not before*, that the “encounter between [the] mysteries and Christianity began.”<sup>25</sup> Conceived as a “diabolical aping” of Christian truth by Tertullian, this amalgam of Christianity and the Greek mysteries is described as a “gnosis” (a form of knowledge), and written off as “Gnostic” in origin: new kinds of Christians had surfaced that did not go along with the standard interpretation of the Roman Church. For the sake of communication with pagans, this Church “adapted itself to the Hellenistic world with its enthusiasm for mysteries and interpreted its own mysteries in the old, familiar images and words.”<sup>26</sup> But the difference between the two was stark: the New Testament doctrine of salvation was a “supernatural mystery”, Greek mystery symbolism a “natural mystery”, the Christian *mysterion* only “secret” to the extent that it transcended all human thought and *appealed to faith, rather than to reason*.<sup>27</sup> Yes, there had been a sharing of language with the Greek mystery religions, but at base the Christian mystery was not something hatched in the darkness of caves; it was a divine revelation from “above” solidly embedded in the history of 1st century Palestine.

But Rahner makes an interesting observation in relation to Hades: he tells us that Neoplatonism influenced Greek philosophy to such an extent that the older subterranean death cult of Hades was, by the 1st century, replaced with a solar cult complete with an “astral-celestial heaven”.<sup>28</sup> But as we saw earlier, indications of an “astral cult” are clearly detectable in the older Eleusinian mysteries, and this may have something to do with the two-tier system as it was practiced at Eleusis. Ordinary initiation (exoteric) was of the Hades variety; non-ordinary initiation (esoteric) was probably of the solar variety. This is pure speculation on my part, but I think the record is strong enough to support something of the kind. And there is, as Jackson Knight showed in his study of Eleusis, the influence of Eastern astral religion where a “sky heaven” and a doctrine of “reincarnation” became part of the death cult. Add the drinking of a special “potion” to this mix and you have a recipe for, well, who can say for sure? But Rahner’s point holds; a solar cult did come to strongly influence the later Greek mysteries, so much so that Cicero could write: “We have learned from [these rites] the beginnings of life, and have gained power not only to live happily, but also to die with better hope.”<sup>29</sup> Fact is, however, hopes of an afterlife had been embedded in the Greek mysteries from the very beginning, it was not a new thing: the vegetation cults had had a distinct and active

“mystical” dimension.

What interests me here is the way in which Rahner so carefully differentiates between the early indigenous mystery cults and their more popular, 1st century offshoots, the “ascent of the salvation-hungry soul by lunar ways to a blissful hereafter” by means of such cults (a tongue-in-cheek statement), and what he terms those who *nibbled* upon such things. The “nibblers” were of course the various pagan, Jewish and Christian Gnostic sects that arose with the advent of Christianity, those who challenged the Church’s authority and history as it consolidated its position and reached its full theological and ritualistic development during the 4th and 5th centuries. Before tackling what these “nibblers” were up to, the accusation that Christianity borrowed from the Greek mysteries requires one further qualification, a qualification made in all innocence by Rahner himself.

A vast number of ideas, words, rites, which formerly were designated offhand as ‘borrowings’ of Christianity from the mysteries, grew to life in the early Church from a root that has indeed no bearing on a historical-genetic dependence, but that did spring from the universal depths of man, from the psychophysical nature common to heathen and Christian alike - ‘from below’, as we have said. Every religion forms sensory images of spiritual truths: we call them symbols.<sup>30</sup>

The universal depths of man? The psychophysical nature common to heathen and Christian alike? Suddenly, unexpectedly, we are thrust back into the reality of human psychology, back into a recognition of the underlying forces that mould and shape us as human beings. Rahner is straining to distance Christianity from the mystery cults, but in doing so he inadvertently flings open a door and allows us to glimpse psyche in operation, psyche speaking to itself, psyche addressing the ego’s fear of death and much else besides. As Rahner admits, the “Hellenic religious experience . . . was by no means completed at the dawn of the Christian era; in fact, it had not yet gathered its full impetus.”<sup>31</sup> There would be a veritable explosion of symbols alongside Christianity as it developed its final doctrinal position, and these symbols suggested mind and psyche at war with itself. Faith was in the process of outpacing reason, knowledge as *gnosis* (profound understanding) was in the process of erecting defences against egoic intrusion.

As we saw earlier, Hades equals “depth”. It is, as James Hillman states, “a psychological realm now, not an eschatological realm later”. Or, as Hugo Rahner observed, “A vast number of ideas, words and rites [sprang] from the universal depths of man, from the psychophysical nature common to heathen and Christian alike - from

*below*". (my italics) Which allows us to form a psychologically-based view of pagan and Christian "truths" as they developed, for according to Hillman these truth were, and still are, in psychological opposition due to Christianity demonising Hades (depth) as *hell*. This holds true in spite of the "subterranean" aspect of the mysteries being replaced with an "astral-celestial heaven", for that does not denote an intrinsic change of focus as Rahner suggests, it simply reflects experiences had *in the depths of being* that allowed the initiate to transcend the limitations of body and mind. Nothing had changed except the amount of information surfacing, information eventually housed in myriad texts that would bemuse and anger apologists for the Christian vision.

The historian Morris Berman homes in on the above situation with the accuracy of a guided missile: "The mysteries of Eleusis, Orpheus, and Dionysus [and] those of Mithra, Isis, and Cybele/Magna Mater . . . probably had prehistoric roots". So what we're dealing with here isn't just some consciously dreamed up system of rites designed to reflect, and somehow control, the fertility of crops; it was, as Rahner was well aware, and Berman suggests, an expression of innate psychological forces whose origin predated the historical period. In Plato's hands, ecstatic experience as "gnosis" would be inverted to mean *heightened rational and intellectual awareness*,<sup>32</sup> a move that would later endear him to Christian thinkers as they attempted to wrest the mind away from psyche's depths towards an intellectually constructed theology of salvation.<sup>33</sup> The whole extraordinary history of soul travel, astral projection and other untoward experiences would be systematically suppressed as this new, intellect-driven religion took hold, but not at all in the clear cut manner we have been led to believe; more as a series of take-over bids where one particular Christian faction triumphed and systematically choked the life out of Christianity's interior life via St. Augustine and others like him. Or, as Berman puts it, "It is St. Augustine who sounds the death knell for the voice of interiority . . . By the end of his life, Manichaeism, the last manifestation of Gnosticism in the ancient world, was spent, and would not reappear in the West until the neo-Manichaean movements of the 11th and 12th centuries. The historian Paul Johnson states that in the intervening centuries the "Church was cocooned within the authoritarian tradition of Augustine."<sup>34</sup>

### **The Gnostic Experiment**

Much has been written about the Gnostics sects that accompanied the growth and development of Christianity, but little of it explains what was actually going on in the minds of these so-called 'nibblers', or, for that matter, in the minds of the early Christians. On the one hand there are those who laud the Gnostics as being more Christian than the Christians who won the factional fight, and on the other those who perceive the Gnostics



as spiritual vagabonds who almost destroyed the true Christian faith with their disparate, and often outrageous, views of spiritual truth. Before investigating whether either of these diametrically opposed versions of truth carries weight, I would like to take a detour and attempt to identify from what multi-faceted Gnosticism sprang in the first place. Was it, for instance, influenced by the Greek mysteries, and therefore *pagan* in origin? Was it the result of early Christians having gone off the theological rails and turned experientially feral? Or was it a mixture of both? Or was it connected in some obscure way to Judaism? Such questions can only be answered in part due to their historical complexity, but even partial answers will suffice to show what many readers will be quite unaware of, namely, that between the 1st and 4th centuries battles raged between “proto-orthodox Christians” - those who eventually compiled the canonical books of the New Testament and standardised Christian belief - and the groups they denounced as heretics and overcame.<sup>35</sup> It was not just a matter of those who had the “truth” winning over those *who did not have the truth*; it was a matter of luck, historical vicissitude and a matter of which faction first gained control over Rome’s security arm.

In his quite superb study *Lost Christianities*, Bart Ehrman tackles the question of Gnosticism’s origins and comes up with a surprising suggestion: Judaism was responsible. Not the Greek mysteries or Christian heretics spawning alternative theological systems to that of the standard Christian model. No, Judaism itself was the culprit; it was not the innocent bystander most scholars had presumed it to be. Oddly enough, Morris Berman is of much the same opinion, but with a Greek twist. With the help of the Jewish scholars Gershom Scholem and Jacob Neusner, he directs our attention to what he terms the “horizontal” and “vertical” paths to be found in Judaism, and describes those paths as the difference between “ecstasy” and the “law”; or, more precisely, the difference between *mysticism* and *legalism*.<sup>36</sup> There was, it seems, a battle going on between Rabbinic and anti-Rabbinic schools of Judaism, but this battle was confused and gradual, not mutually exclusive, both groups being “modulations” of Jewish Hellenism: the two forms had in fact existed within the same sect, even within the same psyche, and the tension between them lay at the heart of Jewish philosophy and Jewish cultural expression.<sup>37</sup>

Ehrman takes a different starting point, but is equally revealing with regard to the difference between Gnostic pessimism (the world as fundamentally evil) and Christian optimism (the world as fundamentally good). For Ehrman, *proto-orthodox* Christians of the 1st century (Christians prior to the full orthodoxy that formed in the 4th century) reacted against the form of Judaism that had emerged at the time of Jesus, a form subservient to “law” as the final arbiter in how to judge behaviour. The reason for this strict legal form lay in the dilemma that had arisen over God’s relationship to Israel in the distant past, and that of his relationship to Israel in the ensuing centuries. It had been

taken for granted that God would intervene on Israel's behalf when she was threatened by enemies, but this assumption had been continually dashed through military, political, economic and social setbacks. According to the prophets, this was the result of their having sinned against God, but as history clearly showed, returning to the paths of righteousness had had little effect: Israel's suffering had been ongoing. So what was the reason for this? Had these prophets mistaken what was in the mind of God? The answer came by way of a group of Jewish thinkers two hundred years before Christ called the "apocalypticists", their answer being that only at the very end of time and history would everything sort itself out, faithfulness to God's laws being the catalyst that would usher in Israel's release from servitude and suffering.<sup>38</sup> Morris Berman picks up on this theme with these pertinent observations:

The Jews . . . had long been in possession of a prophetic tradition, which told them that they would be redeemed through history. To this, from the time of Greek rule (360 B.C.), was added an apocalyptic tradition. The prophetic tradition was based on a 'Torah ontology', in which the Old Testament was seen as a kind of world map, or divine plan, and in which the march of time and events was taken to be linear and continuous. The apocalyptic tradition, on the other hand . . . saw history as divided into a series of discontinuous stages (usually four), with all but the last stage having taken place. It was an Orphic idea, and possibly an Oriental gnostic one as well; and from 360 B.C. onward it became increasingly popular.

Then comes the denouement:

The apocalyptic view of history included the notion of a popular revolt and rebellion, led by a deliverer, and it was strongly present [not] as a specific myth, but as a generalised mythic structure (that of heavenly ascent). This view of history, *via direct experience* (author's italics) . . . included the notion of being able to undertake soul travel, learn the Mystery of the Kingdom, and return to earth. In the Book of Enoch, for example - fragments of which are found in the Dead Sea Scrolls - we find the first mention in Judaism of a journey of the soul after death, and its subsequent incarnation, an idea that was as Greek as it was Jewish. Side by side, Gnostic notions and apocalyptic ones added up to an obvious image: the

deliverer would necessarily be a magus who would be able to sweep gradualism and Torah ontology aside. He would be able to travel between heaven and earth - even after physical death - and through his magic power . . . liberate the Jews from the yoke of foreign domination.<sup>39</sup>

In relation to rabbinical Judaism as it had formed by the time of Jesus, the fundamental reason for obeying the law in such a strict sense (apart from the fact that it was considered better to obey than not to obey), was to hasten the End of Time and bring the whole disastrous affair of being on this planet to its close. Suffering, so it seemed, was not a punishment for sin as such; the whole planet was a veil of tears through which everyone had to pass. So went the theory, and alongside it lay beliefs and practices reminiscent of the Eleusinian mysteries, for these apocalypticists derived their ideas from visions and ecstatic experiences, and interpreted them in terms of Israel's long and tortured history. Berman is quick to point out what Hugo Rahner suspected and Carl Jung attempted to prove: human biology was at work. Or, as Berman so succinctly puts it: "ecstatic experience is ecstatic experience; what system of symbols it gets translated into is a matter of context."<sup>40</sup>

Bart Ehrman's thesis is that Gnosticism in its many dizzying forms was linked to failed Jewish apocalyptic expectations in the 1st century, and that Christianity, too, was embedded in this complex environment. An important alternative influence had been the radical dualism of the Middle Platonists, thinkers at the time of Jesus who believed in a God beyond all descriptive categories, a God beyond the limitations of cultural and intellectual exchange.<sup>41</sup> This, to my way of thinking, presents us with a curious problem, for it demands an uncluttered approach to the divine, an emptying of the mind, and this kind of approach will again and again prove too difficult for Christianity as it undergoes its stages of development. To compensate for this threatening emptiness, a mythology of intermediary beings was developed by the Gnostic groups, and along with this came a complex theology linked to Plato's dialogue, the *Timaeus*, where Plato himself described how the world of matter had emerged from the world of *nonmatter*.

With this in mind, Philo of Alexandria, a 1st century Jewish philosopher deeply influenced by Middle Platonism's conception of God as *ineffable*, drew a line of spiritual continuity from Moses to Plato and developed an overview of Scripture based on Middle Platonist ideas.<sup>42</sup> When put alongside the visionary and ecstatic experiences of the apocalyptic Jews, the similarly experienced, but more legalistic, rabbinical Jews, and the Hellenic-influenced milieu in which they all existed, it is not difficult to see how the varied Christian groups and their more gnostically-oriented companions came into being. For as is obvious from the New Testament, Christianity was itself "apocalyptic" in its

earliest stage, Jesus' imminent return from Heaven fully expected but necessarily jettisoned as the years turned into decades after his "ascent" to heaven. Along with their Jewish counterparts, Christian thinkers progressively pushed their expectation of deliverance into the future and swapped their apocalyptic theology for an End Time theory that later returned as an *end of time* contemplative experience. As conceived by deep strata Christian mystics over the ensuing centuries, doctrine and theology were but a shadow of what religious "truth" was in itself. Ultimately, how Christianity and the many Gnostic forms arose hardly matters. What matters is the ecstatic, visionary experiences had by individuals in those disparate groups. For one thing is certain, what ended up as "standard Christianity" by the end of the 4th century was but a pale reflection of what had emerged from Judaism by the end of the 1st century. Religious truth, it had been discovered, was not just *for* everyone; it was, more importantly, *of* everyone. We were, whether we realised it or not, walking psychic laboratories within which the most unimaginable things could, and did happen.

#### References and Notes:

- 1) Govinda, Lama Anagarika, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, Samuel Weiser, Inc., US. 1969. p. 125.
- 2) Otto, Walter F, *The Meaning of the Eleusinian Mysteries*, Bollingen Series xxx. 2. Pantheon Books, N. Y., 1955. p. 14.
- 3) Govinda, Lama Anagarika, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, (see above) p. 125.
- 4) Otto, Walter F, *The Meaning of the Eleusinian Mysteries*, (see above) p. 21.
- 5) Ibid, pp. 21-23.
- 6) Govinda, Lama Anagarika, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, (see above) p. 123.
- 7) Otto, Walter F, *The Meaning of the Eleusinian Mysteries*, p. 23. See also *The Mother's in Faust* by John Hopkins in which he refers to Goethe's Faust part two and the ritual descent of the initiate of the Hellenistic mysteries. In *The Jung Cult*, Richard Noll's highly critical book on Jung's association with *volkisch* philosophy, it is observed (p. 173) that initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries "gave the initiate 'better hopes' for his or her position in the afterlife" through having had a vision of Persephone in the underworld.
- 8) Govinda, Lama Anagarika, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, (see above) p. 125.
- 9) Ibid, p. 135.
- 10) Schmitt, Paul, 'Ancient Mysteries and their Transformation', pp. 87-88. An essay in *The Mysteries*, Bollingen Series xxx.2. Pantheon Books, New York, 1955.
- 11) Ibid, p. 96.
- 12) Ibid, p. 99.
- 13) Ibid. See also G.R.S. Mead's *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*, p. 48. Mead considered the Mysteries the most interesting phenomenon in the study of religion. The idea in antiquity was that there was a gradual process of unfolding in things religious, a science of the soul to be had through initiation. Tradition had it that the mystery institutions had been founded by superior beings, or gods, and that they had introduced not only knowledge of unseen things, but also the arts of civilisation. Withdrawing from humanity, these beings had left the Mysteries in the hands of advanced pupils, what had previously been revealed by higher means reduced to symbols and devices, dramas and scenic representations.
- 14) Hillman, James, *The Dream and the Underworld*, Perennial Lib rary, harper & Row, New York, 1979. p. 30.
- 15) Ibid, p. 30.
- 16) Ibid, p. 87.
- 17) Leisegang, Hans, *The Mystery of the Serpent*, p. 235.
- 18) Philo, *De specialibus legibus*, III, pp. 475-77.

- 19) *De opificio mundi*, pp. 55-57.
- 20) Knight, W. F. Jackson., *Elysion: Ancient Greek and Roman beliefs concerning life and death*, Rider and Company, London 1970. p. 73
- 21) Ibid, p. 63.
- 22) Rahner, Hugo, *The Christian Mystery and the Pagan Mysteries*. Bollingen Series xxx.2. Pantheon Books, New York 1955. p. 350.
- 23) Ibid.
- 24) Ibid, p. 353.
- 25) Ibid.
- 26) Ibid, p. 355.
- 27) Ibid, p. 357.
- 28) Ibid, p. 348.
- 29) *De legibus*, II, 14, 36, p. 414).
- 30) Rahner, Hugo, *The Christian Mystery and the Pagan Mysteries*, (see above) pp. 362-363.
- 31) Ibid, p. 348.
- 32) Berman, Morris, *Coming to Our Senses*, Bantam Books, 1990. p. 157.
- 33) Ibid, p. 158.
- 34) Ibid, p. 177. See also Thomas Cahill's wonderful little book *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, pp. 63-67.
- 35) Ehrman, Bart D., *Lost Christianities*. Oxford University Press, New York 2003. Details taken from book's cover blurb.
- 36) Berman, Morris, *Coming to Our Senses*, (see above) p. 166. See also Arthur I Miller's eye-opener of a book *137/Jung, Pauli, and the Pursuit of a Scientific Obsession*, W.W. Norton & Company 2010. p. 85 where Miller names the kabbalistic scholar Gershom Scholem as a friend of the physicist Wolfgang Pauli. I consider it unfortunate that I came upon this book after my own book was complete.
- 37) Ehrman, Bart D., *Lost Christianities*, (see above) pp. 116-117.
- 38) Ibid, pp. 118-119.
- 39) Berman, Morris, *Coming to Our Senses*, (see above) p. 167.
- 40) Ibid, p. 169.
- 41) Ehrman, Bart D., *Lost Christianities*, (see above) p. 120.
- 42) Ibid. See also G.R.S. Mead's *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*, pp. 66-86 where Philo's writings on the contemplative life and, in particular, his thoughts on the Alexandrian *Therapeutae* and *Therapeutrides* (men and women) are laid out in some detail.

