

“The Influence of the  
Mystery Religions on Christianity”

[29 November 1949–15 February 1950]

[Chester, Pa.]

*King wrote this paper for the course Development of Christian Ideas, taught by Davis. The essay examines how Christianity developed as a distinct religion with a set of central tenets and how it was influenced by those pagan religions it assimilated. King repeats material from an earlier paper, “A Study of Mithraism,” but he extends the discussion here to the influence of other mystery religions.<sup>1</sup> Davis*

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*gave the essay an A, stating: "This is very good and I am glad to have your conclusion. It is not so much that Christianity was influenced by the Mystery Cults, or borrowed from them, but that in the long process of history this religion developed. It, Christianity, is the expression of the longing of people for light, truth, salvation, security.*

*"That is, with this study you have made, we see the philosophy both of Religion and History. Underneath all expression, whether words, creeds, cults, ceremonies is the spiritual order—the ever living search of men for higher life—a fuller life, more abundant, satisfying life.*

*"That is essential. Never stop with the external, which may seem like borrowing, but recognize there is the perennial struggle for truth, fuller life itself. So through experience, knowledge, as through other forms, the outer manifestations of religion change. The inner spiritual, continues ever."*

The Greco-Roman world in which the early church developed was one of diverse religions. The conditions of that era made it possible for these religions to sweep like a tidal wave over the ancient world. The people of that age were eager and zealous in their search for religious experience. The existence of this atmosphere was vitally important in the development and eventual triumph of Christianity.

These many religions, known as Mystery-Religions, were not alike in every respect: to draw this conclusion would lead to a gratuitous and erroneous supposition. They covered an enormous range, and manifested a great diversity in character and outlook, "from Orphism to Gnosticism, from the orgies of the Cabira to the fervours of the Hermetic contemplative."<sup>\*2</sup> However it is to be noticed that these Mysteries possessed many fundamental likenesses; (1) All held that the initiate shared in symbolic (sacramental) fashion the experiences of the god. (2) All had secret rites for the initiated. (3) All offered mystical cleansing from sin. (4) All promised a happy future life for the faithful.†

It is not at all surprising in view of the wide and growing influence of these religions that when the disciples in Antioch and elsewhere preached a crucified and risen Jesus they should be regarded as the heralds of another mystery religion, and that Jesus

\* Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity, p. vii.

† Enslin, Christian Beginnings, pp. 187, 188.

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2. S. Angus, *The Mystery-Religions and Christianity* (London: John Murray, 1925), p. vii: "These Mysteries covered an enormous range, and manifested a great diversity in character and outlook, from Orphism to Gnosticism, from the orgies of the Cabiri to the fervours of the Hermetic contemplative."

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himself should be taken for the divine Lord of the cult through whose death and resurrection salvation was to be had.<sup>3</sup> That there were striking similarities between the developing church and these religions cannot be denied. Even Christian apologist had to admit that fact.

Christianity triumphed over these mystery religions after long conflict. This triumph may be attributed in part to the fact that Christianity took from its opponents their own weapons, and used them: the better elements of the mystery religions were transferred to the new religion. "As the religious history of the empire is studied more closely," writes Cumont, "the triumph of the church will, in our opinion, appear more and more as the culmination of a long evolution of beliefs. We can understand the Christianity of the fifth century with its greatness and weakness, its spiritual exaltation and its puerile superstitions, if we know the moral antecedents of the world in which it developed."<sup>4</sup> The victory of Christianity in the Roman empire is another example of that universal historical law, viz., that that culture which conquers is in turn conquered. This universal law is especially true of religion. It is inevitable when a new religion comes to exist side by side with a group of religions, from which it is continually detaching members, introducing them into its own midst with the practices of their original religions impressed upon their minds, that this new religion should tend to assimilate with the assimilation of their members, some of the elements of these existing religions. "The more crusading a religion is, the more it absorbs." Certainly Christianity has been a crusading religion from the beginning. It is because of this crusading spirit and its superb power of adaptability that Christianity ~~has~~ {has} been able to survive.

\* Cumont, Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism, p. xxiv.

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3. The preceding three paragraphs are similar to a passage in King's earlier paper, "A Study of Mithraism," p. 211 in this volume.

4. Grant Showerman, introduction to Franz Cumont, *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (Chicago: Open House Publishing Company, 1911), pp. xi-xii: "Christianity triumphed after long conflict . . . It took from its opponents their own weapons, and used them; the better elements of paganism were transferred to the new religion. 'As the religious history of the empire is studied more closely,' writes M. Cumont, 'the triumph of the church will, in our opinion, appear more and more as the culmination of a long evolution of beliefs. We can understand the Christianity of the fifth century with its greatness and weaknesses, its spiritual exaltation and its puerile superstitions, if we know the moral antecedents of the world in which it developed.'"

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It is at this point that we are able to see why knowledge of the Mystery religions is important for any serious study of the history of Christianity. It is well-nigh impossible to grasp Christianity through and through without knowledge of these cults.<sup>5</sup> It must be remembered, as implied above, that Christianity was not a sudden and miraculous transformation, springing forth full grown as Athene sprang from the head of Zeus, but it is a composite of slow and laborious growth. Therefore it is necessary to study the historical and social factors that contributed to the growth of Christianity. In speaking of the indispensability of knowledge of these cults as requisite for any serious study of Christianity, Dr. Angus says: "As an important background to early Christianity and as the chief medium of sacramentarianism to the West they cannot be neglected; for to fail to recognize the moral and spiritual values of Hellenistic-Oriental paganism is to misunderstand the early Christian centuries and to do injustice to the victory of Christianity. Moreover, much from the Mysteries has persisted in various modern phases of thought and practice."\*

\* Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity, p. viii.

This is not to say that the early Christians sat down and copied these views verbatim. But after being in contact with these surrounding religions and hearing certain doctrines expressed, it was only natural for some of these views to become a part of their subconscious minds. When they sat down to write they were expressing consciously that which had dwelled in their subconscious minds. It is also significant to know that Roman tolerance had favoured this great syncretism of religious ideas. Borrowing was not only natural but inevitable.<sup>6</sup>

The present study represents an attempt to provide a survey of the influence of the mystery religions on Christianity. In order to give a comprehensive picture of this subject, I will discuss ~~Four~~ {Five} of the most popular of these religions separately, rather than to view them en masse as a single great religious system. The latter method is apt to neglect the distinctive contribution of each cult to the religious life of the age

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5. The preceding two sentences are similar to a passage in "A Study of Mithraism," p. 211 in this volume.

6. The preceding paragraph is similar to passages in two of King's earlier papers: "Light on the Old Testament from the Ancient Near East," 14 September–24 November 1948, p. 163 in this volume; "A Study of Mithraism," p. 212 in this volume.

15 Feb and, at the same time, to attribute to a given cult  
1950 phases of some other system. However, in the conclu-  
sion I will attempt to give those fundamental aspects,  
characteristic of all the cults, that greatly influenced  
Christianity.

The Influence Of  
The Cult Of Cybele and Attis

The first Oriental religion to invade the west was the cult of the Great Mother of the Gods. The divine personage in whom this cult centered was the Magna Mater Deum who was conceived as the source of all life as well as the personification of all the powers of nature.\*<sup>7</sup> She was the "Great Mother" not only "of all the gods," but of all men" as well.<sup>8</sup> "The winds, the sea, the earth, and the snowy seat of Olympus are hers, and when from her mountains she ascends into the great heavens, the son of Cronus himself gives way before her, and in like manner do also the other immortal blest honor the dread goddess."†

At an early date there was associated with Cybele, the Great Mother, a hero-divinity called Attis who personified the life of the vegetable world particularly. Around these two divinities there grew up a "confused tangle of myths" in explanation of their cult rites. Various writers gave different Versions of the Cybele-Attis myth. However these specific differences need not concern us, for the most significant aspects are common in all the various versions.<sup>10</sup> We are concerned at this point with showing how this religion influenced the thought of early Christians.

Attis was the Good Shepard, the son of Cybele, the Great Mother, who gave birth to him without union

\* Willoughby, Pagan Re-  
generation, p. 114.

† Quoted in Willough-  
by's, Pagan Regeneration,  
p. 115.<sup>9</sup>

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7. Harold R. Willoughby, *Pagan Regeneration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929), p. 114: "Of these Oriental mystery religions the first to invade the west was the cult of the Great Mother of the Gods, . . . The divine personage in whom this cult centered was the *Magna Mater Deum* who was conceived as the source of all life as well as the personification of all the powers of nature."

8. Willoughby, *Pagan Regeneration*, p. 114: "She was the 'Great Mother' not only 'of all the gods,' but 'of all men' as well."

9. Willoughby quoted from Apollonius *Argonautica* 1.1098 ff. (*Pagan Regeneration*, p. 115).

10. Willoughby, *Pagan Regeneration*, pp. 116-117: "With [the Great Mother] was associated a hero-divinity called Attis who personified the life of the vegetable world particularly. . . . Around these two divinities, the Great Mother and the god of vegetation, there grew up a confused tangle of myths in explanation of their cult rites. Various writers, pagan and Christian, gave different versions of the Cybele-Attis myth. . . . The specific variations in all these diverse statements do not concern us, for certain significant elements were common to all the various versions."

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with mortal man, as in the story of the virgin Mary.<sup>11</sup> According to the myth, Attis died, either slain by another or by his own hand. At the death of Attis, Cybele mourned vehemently until he arose to life again in the springtime. The central theme of the myth was the triumph of Attis over death, and the participant in the rites of the cult undoubtedly believed that his attachment to the victorious deity would insure a similar triumph in his life.

It is evident that in Rome there was a festival celebrating the death and resurrection of Attis. This celebration was held annually from March 22nd to 25th.\* The influence of this religion on Christianity is shown by the fact that in Phrygia, Gaul, Italy, and other countries where Attis-worship was powerful, the Christians adapted the actual date, March 25th, as the anniversary of our Lord's passion.†<sup>12</sup>

Again we may notice that at this same Attis festival on March 22nd, an effigy of the god was fastened to the trunk of a pine tree, Attis thus being "slain and hanged on a tree." This effigy was later buried in a tomb. On March 24th, known as the Day of Blood, the High Priest, impersonating Attis, drew blood from his arm and offered it up in place of the blood of a human sacrifice, thus, as it were, sacrificing himself. It is this fact that immediately brings to mind the words in the Epistle to the Hebrews: "But Christ being come an High Priest . . . neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood . . . obtained eternal redemption for us."‡ Now to get back to the festival. That night the priests went back to the tomb and found it empty, the god having risen on the third day from the dead; and on the 25th the resurrection was celebrated with great rejoicing. During this great celebration a sacramental meal of some kind was taken, and initiates were baptised with blood, whereby their sins were washed away and they were said to be "born again."§<sup>13</sup>

\* Frazer, Adonis, Attis, Osiris, p. 166.

† Ibid, p. 199

‡ Heb. 9:11, 12.

§ Weigall, The Paganism In Our Christianity, pp. 116, 117.

11. Arthur E. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity* (n.p.: Putnam, 1928), p. 121: "Attis was the Good Shepherd, the son of Cybele, the Great Mother, or, alternatively, of the Virgin Nana, who conceived him without union with mortal man, as in the story of the Virgin Mary."

12. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity*, pp. 121-122: "In Rome the festival of his death and resurrection was annually held from March 22nd to 25th; and the connection of this religion with Christianity is shown by the fact that in Phrygia, Gaul, Italy, and other countries where Attis-worship was powerful, the Christians adopted the actual date, March 25th, as the anniversary of our Lord's passion."

13. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity*, pp. 122-123: "At this Attis festival a pine-tree was felled on March 22nd, and to its trunk an effigy of the god was fastened, Attis thus being 'slain

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There can hardly be any doubt of the fact that these ceremonies and beliefs strongly coloured the interpretation placed by the first Christians upon the life and death of the historic Jesus.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, "the merging of the worship of Attis into that of Jesus was effected without interruption, for these pagan ceremonies were enacted in a sanctuary on the Vatican Hill, which was afterwards taken over by the Christians, and the mother church of St. Peter now stands upon the very spot."<sup>\*</sup>

\* *Ibid*, p. 117.

### The Influence of Adonis

Another popular religion which influenced the thought of early Christians was the worship of Adonis. As is commonly known Antioch was one of the earliest seats of Christianity. It was in this city that there was celebrated each year the death and resurrection of the god Adonis. This faith had always exerted its influence on Jewish thought, so much so that the prophet Ezekiel<sup>†</sup> found it necessary to scold the women of Jerusalem for weeping for the dead Tammuz (Adonis) at the very gate of the temple. When we come to Christian thought the influence seems even greater, for even the place at Bethlehem selected by the early Christians as the scene of the birth of Jesus was none other than an early shrine of this pagan god—a fact that led many to confuse Adonis with Jesus Christ.<sup>‡</sup><sup>15</sup>

† Ezekiel 8:14.

‡ Weigall, *op. cit.*, p. 110

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and hanged on a tree,' in the Biblical phrase. This effigy was later buried in a tomb. March 24th was the Day of Blood, whereon the High Priest, who himself impersonated Attis, drew blood from his arm and offered it up in place of the blood of a human sacrifice, thus, as it were, sacrificing himself, a fact which recalls to mind the words in the Epistle to the Hebrews: 'Christ being come an High Priest . . . neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood . . . obtained eternal redemption for us.' That night the priests went to the tomb and found it illuminated from within, and it was then discovered to be empty, the god having risen on the third day from the dead; and on the 25th the resurrection was celebrated with great rejoicings, a sacramental meal of some kind being taken, and initiates being baptised with blood, whereby their sins were washed away and they were said to be 'born again.'

14. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity*, p. 123: "There can be no doubt that these ceremonies and beliefs deeply coloured the interpretation placed by the first Christians upon the historic facts of the Crucifixion, burial, and coming again to life of Jesus."

15. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity*, pp. 115–116: "Now one of the earliest seats of Christianity was Antioch; but in that city there was celebrated each year the death and resurrection of the god Tammuz or Adonis, . . . This faith had always exerted its influence on Jewish thought, and, indeed, the prophet Ezekiel had found it necessary to scold the women of Jerusalem for weeping for the dead Tammuz at the very gate of the Temple; while, in the end, the place at

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It was believed that this god suffered a cruel death, after which he descended into hell, rose again, and then ascended into Heaven. Each following {year} there was a great festival in commemoration of his resurrection, and the very words, "The Lord is risen," were probable used. The festival ended with the celebration of his ascension in the sight of his worshippers.<sup>16</sup> Needless to say that this story of the death and resurrection of Adonis is quite similar to the Christian story of the death and resurrection of Christ. This coincidence had led many critics to suppose that the story of the burial and resurrection of Jesus is simply a myth borrowed from this pagan religion.<sup>17</sup> Whether these critics are right in their interpretation or not still remains a moot question.

However when we come to the idea of Jesus' decent into hell it seems that we have a direct borrow from the Adonis religion, and in fact from other religions also. Both the Apostles Creed and the Athanasian {Creed} say that between the Friday night and Sunday morning Jesus was in Hades. Now this idea has no scriptural foundation except in those difficult passages in the First Epistle of Peter\* which many scholars have designated as the most ambiguous passages of the New Testament. In fact the idea did not appear in the church as a tenet of Christianity until late in the Fourth Century.†<sup>18</sup> Such facts led almost inevitably to the view that this idea had a pagan origin,

\* I Peter 3:19-4:6.

† Weigall, op. cit., p. 113.

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Bethlehem selected by the early Christians as the scene of the birth of Jesus (for want to [sic] any knowledge as to where the event had really occurred) was none other than an early shrine of this pagan god, as St. Jerome was horrified to discover—a fact which shows that Tammuz or Adonis ultimately became confused in men's minds with Jesus Christ."

16. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity*, p. 116: "This god was believed to have suffered a cruel death, to have descended into Hell or Hades, to have risen again, and to have ascended into Heaven; and at his festival, as held in various lands, his death was bewailed, an effigy of his dead body was prepared for burial by being washed with water and anointed, and, on the next day, his resurrection was commemorated with great rejoicing, the very words 'The Lord is risen' probably being used. The celebration of his ascension in the sight of his worshippers was the final act of the festival."

17. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity*, p. 117: "This coincidence has, of course, led many critics to suppose that the story of the burial and resurrection of Jesus is simply a myth borrowed from this pagan religion."

18. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity*, pp. 118-119: "But there is one feature of the Gospel story which seems really to have been borrowed from the Adonis religion, and, in fact, from other pagan religions also, namely, the descent into Hell. The Apostles Creed and Athanasian Creed say that between the Friday night and the Sunday morning Jesus was in Hell or Hades; . . . It has no scriptural foundation except in the ambiguous words of the First Epistle of Peter; it did not appear in the Church as a tenet of Christianity until late in the Fourth Century."

15 Feb since it appears not only in the legend of Adonis, but  
1950 also in those of Herakles, Dionyses, Orpheus, Osiris,  
Hermes, Balder, and other deities.\*

\* Ibid, p. 114.

The Influence  
of Osiris and Isis

The Egyptian mysteries of Isis and Osiris exerted considerable influence upon early Christianity. These two great Egyptian deities, whose worship passed into Europe, were revered not only in Rome but in many other centers where Christian communities were growing up. Osiris and Isis, so the legend runs, were at one and the same time, brother and sister, husband and wife; but Osiris was murdered, his confined body being thrown into the Nile, and shortly afterwards the widowed and exiled Isis gave birth to a son, Horus. Meanwhile the coffin was washed up on the Syrian coast, and became miraculously lodged in the trunk of a tree. This tree afterwards chanced to be cut down and made into a pillar in the palace at Byblos, and there Isis at length found it. After recovering Osiris' dismembered body, Isis restored him to life and installed him as King in the nether world; meanwhile Horus, having grown to manhood, reigned on earth, later becoming the third person of this great Egyptian trinity.†<sup>19</sup>

† Weigall, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

In the records of both Herodotus and Plutarch we find that there was a festival held each year in Egypt celebrating the resurrection of Osiris. While Herodotus fails to give a date for this festival, Plutarch says that it lasted four days, giving the date as the seventeenth day of the Egyptian month Hathor, which, according to the Alexandrian calendar used by him, corresponded to November 13th.‡ Other Egyptian

‡ Frazer, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

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19. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity*, pp. 124-125: "The popular and widespread religion of Osiris and Isis exercised considerable influence upon early Christianity, for these two great Egyptian deities, whose worship had passed into Europe, were revered in Rome and in several other centres where Christian communities were growing up. Osiris and Isis, so runs the legend, were brother and sister and also husband and wife; but Osiris was murdered, his confined body being thrown into the Nile, and shortly afterwards the widowed and exiled Isis gave birth to a son, Horus. The coffin, meanwhile, was washed up on the Syrian coast, and became miraculously lodged in the trunk of a tree, . . . This tree afterwards chanced to be cut down and made into a pillar in the palace at Byblos, and there Isis at length found it. . . . Afterwards, however, he returned to the other world to reign for ever as King of the Dead; and meanwhile Horus, having grown to manhood, reigned on Earth, later becoming the third person of this great Egyptian trinity."

records speak of another feast in honour of all the dead, when such lamps were lit, which was held about November 8th.\*<sup>20</sup> 15 Feb 1950

\* Ibid, p. 258.

It is interesting to note that the Christian feast of all Souls, in honor of the dead, likewise falls at the beginning of November; and in many countries lamps and candles are burned all night on that occasion. There seems little doubt that this custom was identical with the Egyptian festival. The festival of all Saints, which is held one day before that of all Souls is also probably identical with it in origin.† This still stands as a festival in the Christian calendar; and thus Christians unconsciously perpetuate the worship of Osiris in modern times.<sup>21</sup>

† Weigall, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

However this is not the only point at which the Religion of Osiris and Isis exerted influence on Christianity. There can hardly be any doubt that the myths of Isis had a direct bearing on the elevation of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, to the lofty position that she holds in Roman Catholic theology. As is commonly known Isis had two capacities which her worshippers warmly commended her for. Firstly, she was pictured as the lady of sorrows, weeping for the dead Osiris, and secondly she was commended as the divine mother, nursing her infant son, Horus. In the former capacity she was identified with the great mother-goddess, Demeter, whose mourning for Persephone was the main feature in the Eleusinian mysteries. In the latter capacity Isis was represented in tens of thousands of statuettes and paintings, holding the divine child in her arms. Now when Christianity triumphed we find that these same paintings and fig-

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20. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity*, pp. 125–126: "Herodotus states that the festival of the death and resurrection of Osiris was held in Egypt each year, though he does not give the date; . . . Plutarch also records the annual Osirian festival, and says that it lasted four days, giving the date as the seventeenth day of the Egyptian month Hathor, which, according to the Alexandrian calendar used by him, corresponded to November 13th. Now we know from old Egyptian records that a feast in honour of all the dead, when such lamps were lit, was held . . . about November 8th."

21. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity*, pp. 126–127: "But the Christian feast of All Souls, in honour of the dead, likewise falls at the beginning of November; and in many countries lamps and candles are burnt all night on that occasion. . . . there seems little doubt that this custom was identical with the Egyptian festival. . . . the festival of All Saints, which is held one day before that of All Souls and which was first recognised by the Church in A.D. 835, is undoubtedly identical with it in origin. This still stands as a festival in the ecclesiastical calendar; and thus Christians unconsciously perpetuate the worship of Osiris and the commemoration of all his subjects in the Kingdom of the Dead."

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ures became those of the Madonna and child with little or no difference.\* In fact archaeologists are often left in confusion in attempting to distinguish the one from the other.<sup>22</sup>

\* Ibid, p. 123

It is also interesting to note that in the second century a story began to spread stating that Mary had been miraculously carried to Heaven by Jesus and His angels.† In the sixth century a festival came to be celebrated around this event known as the festival of Assumption, and it is now one of the greatest feasts of Roman Catholicism. It is celebrated annually on August 13th. But it was this very date that the festival of Dianna or Artemis was celebrated, with whom Isis was identified. Here we see how Mary gradually came to take the place of the goddess.‡<sup>23</sup>

† The spreading of this story has been attributed to Melito, Bishop of Sardis.

‡ Weigall, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

The Influence Of  
The Greater Mysteries  
At Eleusis

In the first century of the Christian era the Eleusinian mystery cult was more favorable known than any of the cults of Greece.<sup>24</sup> Its fame and popularity was largely due to the connexion of Eleusis with Athens. The origin of this cult is obscure and uncertain. Some writers traced its origin to Egypt while others upheld Eleusis in Greece as the place of its birth.

In order to understand the type of religious experience represented by this important cult, we must turn to the myth of the rape of Demeter's daughter

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22. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity*, pp. 129–130: "There were two aspects of Isis which commended themselves particularly to her worshippers: firstly, that of the lady of sorrows, weeping for the dead Osiris, and, secondly, that of the divine mother, nursing her infant son, Horus. In the former capacity she was identified with the great mother-goddess, Demeter, whose mourning for Persephone was the main feature in the Eleusinian mysteries; . . . In her aspect as the mother of Horus, Isis was represented in tens of thousands of statuettes and paintings, holding the divine child in her arms; and when Christianity triumphed these paintings and figures became those of the Madonna and Child without any break in continuity: no archaeologist, in fact, can now tell whether some of these objects represent the one or the other."

23. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity*, pp. 131–132: "At about this time a story, attributed to Melito, Bishop of Sardis in the Second Century, but probably of much later origin, began to spread that Mary had been miraculously carried to Heaven by Jesus and His angels; and in the Sixth Century the festival of the Assumption, which celebrates this event, was acknowledged by the Church, and is now one of the great feasts of Roman Catholicism, . . . It is celebrated on August 13th; but that was the date of the great festival of Diana or Artemis, with whom Isis was identified, and one can see, thus, how Mary had gradually taken the place of the goddess."

24. Willoughby, *Pagan Regeneration*, p. 36: "Among the cults of Greece none was more favorably known in the first century of the Christian era than the Eleusinian mysteries."

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by Pluto. It is stated with sufficient elaboration in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter. In this myth, Persephone is depicted playing in the meadows of Mysia in Asia with the daughters of Oceanus and Tithys. While playing she was stolen by Pluto and carried off to the underworld to be his bride. The mother, frenzied with grief, rushed about the earth for nine days in search for her lost daughter,<sup>25</sup> As a result of her wandering, she came to Eleusis where she was seen, although not recognized, by the four daughters of Kekeas sitting near a public well called the Fountain of Maidenhood. After telling a fictitious tale of her escape from pirates, she won the sympathy of the girls who took her home and at her own request was given a job to nurse their infant brother, Demophon. After making herself known, she commanded the people of Eleusis to build her a temple. In connection with the temple, she established certain ceremonies and rites for her worship.

During her short stay at the temple of Eleusis, the whole earth grew barren. Men began to die for the lack of food while the sacrifices to the gods decreased in number because the animals were dying out. The other gods pleaded with her to relent but she refused to do so until Persephone was restored to her. Pluto, (also called Hades) therefore, at the request of Zeus released her but not before he had caused her to eat a pomegranate seed which magically required her return after a period of time. Demeter, in her joy at the restoration of her lost daughter, allowed the crops to grow once more and institute in honor of the event the Eleusinian mysteries which gave to mortals the assurance of a happy future life.<sup>26</sup>

The significance of this story is immediately clear. It was a nature myth portraying a vivid and realistic picture of the action of life in the vegetable world in regards to the changing seasons. Every year nature

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25. Willoughby, *Pagan Regeneration*, p. 41: "In order to understand the type of religious experience represented by this important cult, it is necessary clearly to keep in mind the main points of the Eleusinian myth which was developed to explain and justify the cult rites. These are stated with sufficient elaboration in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, . . . According to the story, Persephone, . . . was stolen by Pluto and carried off to the underworld to be his bride. . . . The mother, frenzied with grief, rushed about the earth for nine days."

26. Willoughby, *Pagan Regeneration*, p. 42: "Demeter, in her joy at the restoration of her lost daughter, allowed the crops to grow once more and instituted in honor of the event the Eleusinian mysteries which gave to mortals the assurance of a happy future life."

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passes through a cycle of apparent death and resurrection. In winter, all plants die, this represents the period of Demeter's grief over her daughter. Spring, the time when all plants come back to life, indicates the return of plenty when the goddess maintains all life until autumn when her daughter returns to Hades and the earth becomes once more desolated.\*<sup>27</sup>

The myth is also an example of poignant human experience, reflecting the joys, sorrows, and hopes of mankind in the face of death. The mysteries of human life and death are vividly enacted by Demeter, Persephone, and Hades. Hades, the god of death, stole the beloved daughter, Persephone, from Demeter, the life giver, who refused to admit defeat until she secured her daughter's resurrection. In this legend, human beings, who are always loved and lost, are depicted as never or seldom losing hope for reunion with their God. These fundamental human experiences and the life of nature are the main substances of the Eleusinian Mysteries.<sup>28</sup> To the searchers of salvation, the Eleusinian cult offered not only the promise of a happy future, but also a definite assurance of it.†

Now when we observe the modern Greek Easter festival it seems certain that it preserves the spirit if not the form of the old Eleusinian worship. In the spring, those who had shared Demeter's grief for the loss of her daughter welcomed the return of Persephone with all the joy that the returning life of vegetation might kindle. And today similar experiences are represented by Greek Christians. After

\* Willoughby, *op. cit.*,  
p. 42.

† Nilsson, *Greek Popular Religion*, p. 54.

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27. Willoughby, *Pagan Regeneration*, p. 42: "The experiential basis for this story is quite clear. It was a nature myth, a vivid depiction of the action of life in the vegetable world with the changing of the seasons. Each year nature passed through the cycle of apparent death and resurrection. In winter vegetable life was dead while Demeter, the giver of life, grieved for the loss of her daughter. But with the coming of spring the life of nature revived again, for the sorrowing mother had received her daughter back with rejoicing. Through the summer the mother abundantly maintained the life of nature until autumn, when again her daughter returned to the underworld and earth became desolate once more."

28. Willoughby, *Pagan Regeneration*, pp. 42-43: "It was also a reflection of poignant human experiences, mirroring the joys, sorrows, and hopes of mankind in face of inevitable death. The three actors of the Eleusinian tragedy, . . . enacted the mystery of human life and death. The god of death himself stole the beloved daughter away from the life-giver; but the divine mother would not give up her loved one, and in the end she accomplished her daughter's resurrection. Here was human experience made heroic and divine; for man has ever loved and lost, but rarely has he ceased to hope for reunion with the loved one. The Eleusinian myth told of these fundamental human experiences as well as of the life of nature."

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mourning over the dead Christ, represented most conspicuously by a wax image carried through the streets, there comes an announcement by the priest, on the midnight before Easter Sunday, that Christ is risen. At this moment the light from the candle of the priest is passed on to light the candles of his companions; guns and firecrackers are discharged as they prepare to break the Lenten fast.\*<sup>29</sup> As in the Eleusinian mysteries the modern Greek Christian finds this a moment of supreme joy. So we might say that Eleusinianism was not blotted out by Christianity. On the contrary many of its forms and some of its old content has been perpetuated in Christianity.<sup>30</sup>

\* Fairbanks, Greek Religion, p. 288.

### The Influence of Mithraism

Mithraism is perhaps the greatest example of paganism's last effort to reconcile itself to the great spiritual movement which was gaining such sturdy influence with its purer conception of God.† Ernest Renan, the French philosopher and Orientalist, expressed the opinion that Mithraism would have been the religion of the modern world if anything had occurred to halt or destroy the growth of Christianity in the early centuries of its existence. All this goes to show how important Mithraism was in ancient times. It was suppressed by the Christians sometime in the latter part of the fourth century A.D.; but its collapse seems to have been due to the fact that by that time many of its doctrines and practices had been adopted by the church, so that it was practically absorbed by its rival.<sup>31</sup>

† Dill, Roman Society From Nero to Marcus Aurelius, p. 585.

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29. Arthur Fairbanks, *A Handbook of Greek Religion* (New York: American Book Company, 1910), p. 288: "Certainly the Greek Easter festival seems to preserve the spirit if not the forms of the old Eleusinian worship. In the spring, those who had shared Demeter's grief for the loss of her daughter welcomed the return of Persephone with all the joy that the returning life of vegetation might kindle. And today the Greeks mourn over the dead Christ, represented most realistically by a wax image borne through the streets on a bier; then at midnight before Easter Sunday the Metropolitan at Athens, the priest in smaller towns, comes out of the church announcing that Christ is risen; the light from his candle is passed to the candles of his companions and on to candles throughout the crowd, guns and firecrackers are discharged, and as they prepare to break their Lenten fast the multitude drop all restraint in the expression of wild joy."

30. Fairbanks, *Greek Religion*, p. 293: "This religion was not blotted out by Christianity. On the contrary, whatever real life it had was perpetuated in Christianity, since the conquering religion had adopted many of its forms and some of the old content in these forms."

31. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity*, p. 135: "It was suppressed by the Christians in A.D. 376 and 377; but its collapse seems to have been due rather to the fact that by that time many of

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Originally Mithra was one of the lesser gods of the ancient Persian pantheon, but at the time of Christ he had come to be co-equal with Ahura Mazda, the Supreme Being.<sup>32</sup> He possessed many attributes, the most important being his office of defender of truth and all good things. In the Avesta,\* Mithra is represented as the genius of celestial light. He emerges from the rocky summits of eastern mountains at dawn, and goes through heaven with a team of four white horses; when the night falls he still illumines the surface of the earth, "ever walking, ever watchful." He is not sun or moon or any star, but a spirit of light, ever wakeful, watching with a hundred eyes. He hears all and sees all: none can deceive him.†<sup>33</sup> Tarsus, the home of Saint Paul, was one of the great centres of his worship; and there is a decided tinge of Mithraism in the Epistles and Gospels. Such designations of our Lord as the Dayspring from on High, The Light, the Sun of Righteousness, and similar expressions seem to come directly from Mithraic influence.‡<sup>34</sup>

Again tradition has it that Mithra was born from a rock, "the god out of the rock." It must also be noticed that his worship was always conducted in a cave. Now it seems that the general belief of the early church that Jesus was born in a cave grows directly out of Mithraic ideas. The words of St. Paul, "They drank of that spiritual rock . . . and that rock was

\* This is the sacred book of the religion of Iran.

† Cumont, Mysteries of Mithra, pp. 2, 3.

‡ Weigall, op. cit., p. 129.

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its doctrines and ceremonies had been adopted by the Church, so that it was practically absorbed by its rival."

32. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity*, pp. 135–136: "Originally Mithra was one of the lesser gods of the ancient Persian pantheon, but . . . already in the time of Christ he had risen to be co-equal with, though created by, Ormuzd (Ahura-Mazda), the Supreme Being."

33. The previous five sentences are similar to a passage in King's earlier paper, "A Study of Mithraism," pp. 213–214 in this volume. Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra* (Chicago: Open Court, 1910), pp. 2–3: "In the Avesta, Mithra is the genius of the celestial light. He appears before sunrise on the rocky summits of the mountains; during the day he traverses the wide firmament in his chariot drawn by four white horses, and when night falls he still illumines with flickering glow the surface of the earth, 'ever waking, ever watchful.' He is neither sun, nor moon, nor stars, but with 'his hundred ears and his hundred eyes' watches constantly the world. Mithra hears all, sees all, knows all: none can deceive him."

34. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity*, pp. 136–137: "Tarsus, the home of St. Paul, was one of the great centres of his worship, being the chief city of the Cilicians; and, as will presently appear, there is a decided tinge of Mithraism in the Epistles and Gospels. Thus the designations of our Lord as the Dayspring from on High, the Light, the Sun of Righteousness, and similar expressions, are borrowed from or related to Mithraic phraseology."

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Christ” also seem to be {a} direct borrow from the Mithraic scriptures.<sup>35</sup>

The Hebrew Sabbath having been abolished by Christians, the Church made a sacred day of Sunday, partly because it was the day of resurrection. But when we observe a little further we find that as a solar festival, Sunday was the sacred day of Mithra; it is also interesting to notice that since Mithra was addressed as Lord, Sunday must have been “the Lord’s Day” long before Christian use.\* It is also to be noticed that our Christmas, December 25th, was the birthday of Mithra, and was only taken over in the Fourth Century as the date, actually unknown, of the birth of Jesus.<sup>36</sup>

\* Ibid., p. 137.

To make the picture a little more clear, we may list a few of the similarities between these two religions: (1) Both regard Sunday as a holy day. (2) December 25 came to be considered as the anniversary of the birth of Mithra and Christ also. (3) Baptism and a communion meal were important parts of the ritual of both groups. (4) The rebirth of converts was a fundamental idea in the two cults. (5) The struggle with evil and the eventual triumph of good were essential ideas in both religions.<sup>37</sup> (6) In summary we may say that the belief in immortality, a mediator between god and man, the observance of certain sacramental rites, the rebirth of converts, and (in most cases) the support of high ethical ideas were common to Mithraism as well as Christianity. In fact, the comparison became so evident that many believed the Christian movement itself became a mystery cult. “Jesus was the di-

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35. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity*, p. 137: “Mithra was born from a rock, as shown in Mithraic sculptures, being sometimes termed ‘the god out of the rock,’ and his worship was always conducted in a cave; and the general belief in the early Church that Jesus was born in a cave is a direct instance of the taking over of Mithraic ideas. The words of St. Paul, ‘They drank of that spiritual rock . . . and that rock was Christ’ are borrowed from the Mithraic scriptures.”

36. Weigall, *Paganism in Our Christianity*, p. 145: “The Hebrew Sabbath having been abolished by Christians, the Church made a sacred day of Sunday, partly because it was the day of the resurrection, but largely because it was the weekly festival of the sun; for it was a definite Christian policy to take over the pagan festivals endeared to the people by tradition, and to give them a Christian significance. But, as a solar festival, Sunday was the sacred day of Mithra; and it is interesting to notice that since Mithra was addressed as *Dominus*, ‘Lord,’ Sunday must have been ‘the Lord’s Day’ long before Christian times. . . . December 25th was the birthday of the sun-god, and particularly of Mithra, and was only taken over in the Fourth Century as the date, actually unknown, of the birth of Jesus.”

37. The preceding five sentences are similar to a passage in “A Study of Mithraism,” pp. 222–223 in this volume.

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vine Lord. He too had found the road to heaven by his suffering and resurrection. He too had God for his father. He had left behind the secret whereby men could achieve the goal with him.”\*

\* Enslin, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

Although the above paragraph makes it obvious that there are many similarities between these two religions, we must guard against the fallacy of seeing all similarity as direct borrowing. For an instance, the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist have been mentioned as rites, which were ~~pre~~actice {practiced} by both Christians and pagans. It is improbable, however, that either of these were introduced into Christian practices by association with the mystery cults. The baptismal ceremony in both cases (Christian and Pagan) was supposed to have the effect of identifying the initiate with his savior. But although baptism did not originate with the Christians, still it was not copied from the pagans. It seems instead to have been carried over from Jewish background and modified by the new ideas and beliefs of the Christians. The eucharist, likewise through similar in some respects to the communion meal of Mithraism, was not a rite borrowed from it. There are several explanations regarding the beginning of the observance of the Lord's Supper. Some held that the sacrament was instituted by Jesus himself. Others saw it as an out-growth from Jewish precedents. Still others felt that, after the death of Jesus, the disciples saw in their common meal an opportunity to hold a kind of memorial service for him.

On the whole, early Christians were not greatly concerned about the likenesses between the Mithraic cult and their own. They felt at first that these competitors were not worthy of consideration, and few references to them are found in Christian literature. When Mithraism became widespread and powerful, it attracted so much attention that certain Christian apologists felt the need to present an explanation for the similarities in their respective characteristics. The only one they could offer was quite naive, but it was in keeping with the trends of thought in that age. They maintained that it was the work of the devil who helped to confuse men by creating a pagan imitation of the true religion.<sup>38</sup>

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38. The preceding two paragraphs are similar to a passage in "A Study of Mithraism," pp. 223-224 in this volume.

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There can hardly be any gainsaying of the fact that Christianity was greatly influenced by the Mystery religions, both from a ritual and a doctrinal angle. This does not mean that there was a deliberate copying on the part of Christianity. On the contrary it was generally a natural and unconscious process rather than a deliberate plan of action. Christianity was subject to the same influences from the environment as were the other cults, and it sometimes produced the same reaction. The people were conditioned by the contact with the older religions and the background and general trend of the time.<sup>39</sup> Dr. Shirley Jackson Case has written some words that are quite apt at this point. He says: "Following the lead of the apostle Paul, the Christian missionaries on gentile soil finally made of Christianity a more appealing religion than any of the other mystery cults. This was accomplished, not by any slavish process of imitation, but by {a} serious attempt to meet better the specific religious needs that the mysteries had awakened and nourished, and by phrasing religious assurances more convincingly in similar terminology."\*

\* Case, "The Mystery Religions," *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Edited by Vergilius Ferm, pp. 511-513

The greatest influence of the mystery religions on Christianity lies in a different direction from that of doctrine and ritual. It lies in the fact that the mystery religions paved the way for the presentation of Christianity to the world of that time. They prepared the people mentally and emotionally to understand the type of religion which Christianity represented. They were themselves, in varying degrees, imperfect examples of the Galilean cult which was to replace them. They encouraged the movement away from the state religions and the philosophical systems and toward the desire for personal salvation and promise of immortality. Christianity was truly indebted to the mystery religions for this contribution, for they had done this part of the groundwork and thus opened the way for Christian missionary work. Many views, while passing out of paganism into Christianity were given a more profound and spiritual meaning by Christians, yet we must be indebted to the source. To discuss Christianity without mentioning other religions

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39. The preceding four sentences are similar to a passage in "A Study of Mithraism," p. 224 in this volume.

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would be like discussing the greatness of the Atlantic Ocean without the slightest mention of the many tributaries that keep it flowing.<sup>40</sup>

Christianity, however, [~~strikeout illegible~~] survived because it appeared to be the result of a trend in the social order or in the historical cycle of the human race. Forces have been known to delay trends but very few have stopped them. The staggering question that now arises is, what will be the next stage of man's religious progress? Is Christianity the crowning achievement in the development of religious thought or will there be another religion more advanced?

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40. The preceding two sentences are similar to a passage in "A Study of Mithraism," p. 224 in this volume.

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