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Christianity and the Mystery Religions wit Special Reference to Mithraism

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CHRISTIANITY AND THE MYSTERY RELIGIONS
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MITRAISM

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Historical Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Divinity

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For nineteen hundred years the Christian Church has been active in the world. One of the factors which this Church has always emphasized is the peculiar nature of its theology -- that it is not the thoughts or fabrications of the minds of men, but that it was conceived in the mind of God Himself, and brought to men through the direct intervention of His Son in the history of the world. But although the theology of the Church is above the world, the men and women of the church are in the world, and as such their lives are directly influenced by the history of the world. The purpose of this study is to consider to what extent the thinking of the men of this world influenced the theology that claimed to come from the next world. More specifically, this study aims to determine to what extent the religious thoughts of man, as expressed in the mystery religions, influenced the theology and practice of Christianity. By mystery religions is meant those forms of religious expression which flourished in the Graeco-Roman world especially during the four centuries on either side of the birth of Christ. The word "mystery" as here used does not necessarily connote that which is mysterious. It refers rather to that which cannot be known or comprehended except by one who has been initiated into certain rites, and which cannot be learned except by revelation of one who is already in possession of this religion.¹

¹Henry Sheldon, The Mystery Religions and the New Testament (New York: Abingdon Press, c.1918), pp. 9-10.

The problem of the relationship of the mystery religions to Christianity is no mere academic question. While the common layman has very likely never heard of the mystery religions he at least has been indirectly influenced by thoughts which these religions have provoked. The entire modern school of liberal criticism is based to a greater or lesser degree upon the thesis that Christianity was merely an outgrowth of the mystery-religions, one which evolved to a higher degree to be sure, but one which nevertheless borrowed most of its theological content and form directly from the mystery religions.² It is this writer's opinion that such a belief is too frequently accepted with less than a fair examination of the facts.

In making this study, the writer will attempt to compare Christianity to the entire mystery religion movement, but it would be impossible to consider all the varieties of beliefs and practices of all the mystery religions. For this reason, he has selected Mithraism as representing the best that was in the mystery religions. Mithraism was most like Christianity, and for this reason, was in the best position to influence Christianity. Many of the other mystery religions were by their very obscene and lewd nature abhorred by the Christian Church, and therefore unable to influence it. Mithraism however countered the good lives of the Christians with the good lives of its own devotees, and for this reason the influence of Mithraism is given special consideration.

²This opinion is expressed in its most radical form by Kersey Graves, The World's Sixteen Crucified Saviors (New York: Peter Eckler Publishing Co., c. 1875).

Although a considerable amount of literature has been written about the mysteries in recent years,³ the original sources on which any information can be based are very limited. One reason for this is the extreme secrecy to which the initiates into the mysteries were pledged.⁴ While some information is given by the church fathers, it must be remembered that this information is usually contained in an apologetic attack against the mysteries, and therefore may not always be historically accurate. The problem is further complicated by the fact that the characteristics of the various mystery religions changed from time to time. There were definite material and formal changes within the cults, and syncretism with other cults. Thus the mystery religions were in a constant state of flux, and what was true of one cult in one era, was not necessarily true of the same cult in a different era.

Some pertinent writings from the period of the mysteries do exist however. Most of these are scattered writings written about the mysteries by outside observers. Around the beginning of this century there was discovered in Egypt what appears to be the liturgical writings of one of the mystery religions.⁵ Albrecht Dieterich, who discovered these papyri, believes they come from at least the beginning of the fourth century.⁶ Be-

³The first major comprehensive study of Mithraism was made at the beginning of this century by Franz Cumont in his two volumes of Textes et monuments figures relatifs aux mysteres de Mithra. The present writer employed two authorized translations of this work, as noted in the bibliography.

⁴Samuel Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, c.1925), p. 78.

⁵Albrecht Dieterich, Eine Mithrasliturgie, third edition by Otto Weinreich (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1923).

⁶Ibid., p. 46.

cause he believes they represent Mithraic ideas and expressions, he has called this body of writings "Eine Mithrasliturgie." While the documents are undoubtedly authentic, not all scholars agree that they represent Mithraic teachings, but that they merely reveal the thoughts of some Egyptian school of mystics.⁷ Dieterich himself presents some convincing proofs in favor of his theory, however.⁸ In addition to this Mithrasliturgie, there are a considerable number of bas-reliefs, inscriptions on temples, chapels, and tombstones. A few fragments of poetry sometimes give scanty information about the mystery religions.

In recent years a considerable amount of emphasis has been placed on the writings of a certain Hermes Trismegistus. Frequently known as the "Hermetica",⁹ these writings embrace a collection of brief discourses by Greek and Roman philosophers about theological subjects. The exact date of all of these writings has never been determined, although it seems apparent that all of them were in existence by about 310 A.D.¹⁰ While these writings provide valuable background material by furnishing insights into the mind of the Hellenic world, they did not specifically refer to the

⁷Gordon Laing, Survivals of Roman Religion, Vol. XXV of Our Debt to Greece and Rome (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., c.1931), p. 226.

J. Gresham Machen, The Origin of Paul's Religion (New York: Macmillan Co., c.1921), p. 247.

⁸Dieterich, op. cit., pp. 30f.

⁹Hermetica, translated by Walter Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, c.1924).

¹⁰Ibid., I, 8.

mystery religions, nor give any precise information concerning them. For this reason, no arguments in this thesis are based upon the statements of these writings.

In order to present the necessary amount of background information, this study first describes the origins of the mystery religions, and then gives a brief description of several representative examples of mystery religions, with Mithraism being portrayed as the highest development of these mysteries. Thereupon the actual conflict between Mithraism and Christianity is described, a conflict largely of ideas which were outwardly similar, but which in most cases involved inner differences. The final downfall of Mithraism and with it the other mysteries, and the victorious establishment of Christianity concludes the study.

It should be stated that the writer approaches this entire problem from the Christian viewpoint. He makes no apologies for this. It is his conviction that the only viewpoint which can truly do justice to history is this Christian viewpoint, for he feels that all history, religious and secular, ultimately revolves about the visible entry that Christ once made into history, when He established the Church which today still bears His name.

CHAPTER II

THE AGE OF THE MYSTERIES

Rise of Mystic Tendencies

As one looks at the major religious systems active in the world today, he is able, without too much research, to determine the exact or approximate date of their origins, and in many cases also, to designate a certain individual as the real or nominal founder of that religion. The same cannot, however, be said of the many and varied religious systems and movements commonly referred to as the mystery religions. The fact of the matter seems to be that the mystic tendencies which eventually developed into the mystery religions are almost as old as man himself. Man, by his very creation, was equipped with the capacity to know God. By his fall into sin, man lost this image of God, and therewith lost also the complete knowledge of God that had once been his. But the mystical tendencies implanted in man were never lost, even though they were divorced from their true center--from their Creator. The story of how these mystical tendencies, after the true knowledge of God had grown dim, began to develop into definite religious systems is an interesting one. It is one which we can investigate, but probably never entirely solve.

Several explanations for the basic origins of the mystery religions have been advanced. Some scholars hold that the mystery religions had basically vegetative origins.¹ Since man was so dependent upon nature, either

¹Henry Sheldon, The Mystery Religions and the New Testament (New York: Abingdon Press, c.1913), p. 27.

for food for his flocks or for harvest for himself, his entire life, and therefore his spiritual devotion also, was centered in the caprices of nature, whether favorable or evil. It has also been suggested that the mystery religions had their origin in man's observation of the heavens, particularly of the sun and moon.² Among all the uncertainties of his primitive life, man could always be sure of this one thing, that every morning there would arise in the sky what appeared to him to be a great ball of fire, bringing light to his path, and warmth to his body. With regret he watched it sink in the opposite sky at the close of day, yet all the while certain that in the morning it would return. While the sun was hidden, there were lesser lights, notably the moon, and behind it myriads of dazzling lights, each of which seemed to be alive and in some way even interested in the man below. In time, man began to observe that there was not only a cycle contained in each day, but also one which spread over many days. He noticed how at regular intervals the sun would appear lower on the horizon, at which time the days would be shorter, the nights cooler. But even amidst this discomfort, he knew from experience that the day would come when the sun would arise earlier, when it would remain in the sky longer, until eventually its path would be almost directly overhead.

A third explanation for the origins of the mystery religions, is that they grew out of man's close association with the facts of life and death.³ Ever since man had begun his work of caring for the earth in which he had

²Samuel Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, c.1925), p. 168.

³Ibid., p. 43.

been placed, he had witnessed the miraculous way in which he was carrying out the command to repopulate the earth. In a way which he could not understand, his children were born before his very eyes, his flocks increased, even the wild beasts, the birds, and the fish continued to multiply. New life brought him joy, but for every joy there was a corresponding sorrow, as he faced the mystery of death. Sometimes ravaging beasts brought cruel death to his flocks, but sometimes the mere accumulation of the years took its toll. Why could he not continue to live, he wondered. Thus the momentous occasions of the beginning and end of life must have loomed very large in man's thinking.

If the origin of the mystery religions is to be related to any of the above mentioned factors, it is probably most correct to say that all three factors concurred in formulating in man's mind the thoughts which eventually led to the mystery religions. For as man pondered the acts of nature, the notion of the heavens, and the mysteries of life and death, he could not help but notice a definite relationship between them. He noticed that his own life and death, and that of his animals, was directly related to the forces of nature. Plants also grew and died. Only if a seed died could it grow into a new plant. Plant life had to be taken to maintain the life of animals. He also noticed in many cases a chronological relationship between the forces of nature and the mysteries of life and death. As the plants withered and died under the cold blasts of winter, so too the frailest animals of his flocks also died during these times. The same warm sun which ripened his meager crop of grain also gave strength to his animals. As man learned to watch the heavens more closely, he saw that even the rest of the universe seemed to act in sym-

pathy with his immediate life. He noticed that certain stars and constellations occupied similar positions at regular intervals. He learned that the varying lengths of the days were directly related to the climate around him. The incomprehensible movement of the heavens only added to the entire mystery of being, a feeling which we today with our scientific instruments, cannot fully sense or appreciate. But it must also be remembered that in all the actions of nature, of the universe and of his own life and death, man undoubtedly realized that he was doing more than simply observing a strange drama. For man himself was intimately related to the wonders he beheld. As he saw the recurring death and subsequent rebirth of nature, he must have wondered whether he too could look forward to a similar hope. Undoubtedly he interpreted the alterations of winter and spring, of sunset and sunrise, to mean that he too, though his bodily functions would cease, would in some way continue to exist. Although he was very likely given this knowledge at his creation, this memory was probably dimmed, or at least severely distorted, so that he was no longer certain of just what the future held in store for him.

It has been suggested that there were four stages in the history of the mystery religions.⁴ The first stage was one in which the mysteries were not formally organized systems of belief, limited to the initiated, but merely the consensus of the mystic beliefs of an entire people. These mystic beliefs were, for the people concerned, their religion. This theory seems to be substantiated by the well-known fact that there are no people on earth, even among the most primitive tribes, who are entirely devoid

⁴Ibid., p. 44.

of religious thought. For man, by his very creation as a being dependent upon God, is religious. The second stage in the development of the mystery religions was probably one in which these ancient mystic tendencies took on more definite forms, became associated with definite natural, physical, or astronomical phenomena, and were centered around certain divine or semi-human beings.

The third stage of development was one in which the mysteries became the religion of the private associations, as separate from national religions which may have been of more ancient origin. It was in this form that the mystery religions spread to the Hellenic world. This does not mean that the devotees of these cults refused to worship the deities of the established religions, but their own mysteries provided them with an additional (and to them, probably a more meaningful) way of religious expression. Since the upper classes of society more or less frowned upon these cults that had come from the orient, and were thus basically non-Greek, the mystery religions attracted mostly the lower classes of society. A large percentage of their devotees consisted also of foreigners, most of whom had originally been drafted from the very lands in which these cults originated, to serve in the Greek and Roman armies.⁵ During this third stage of development, the general attitude of the ruling authorities was one of disfavor.⁶ The fourth stage of development therefore begins with the reign of Caligula who personally dedicated a temple to Isis

⁵Salomon Reinach, Cults, Myths and Religions (London: David Nutt Co., c.1912), p. 184.

⁶The cult of the Magna Mater, however, still retained its prestige. Angus, op. cit., p. 44.

around 40 A.D.⁷ During this period, the mystery religions enjoyed the sanction of the imperial government. Under the Flavian emperors,⁸ the mystery religions became almost universally accepted, and then under the Syrian emperors, they were raised to the level of state religions.⁹ This acceptance was largely attributed to the support that the mystery cults gave to the absolutism of the Caesars.¹⁰ The only difference between the mysteries as state religions, and the original state religions of Greece and Rome, was that in the latter man entered automatically by birth, but in the former, the faithful were received only by initiation. And thus, what had once been naturalistic and mystic inclinations in the minds of ancient people, became organized cults which were formally recognized and accepted by a large percentage of the Graeco-Roman world.

Distinctive Features of the Mystery Religions

General Features Common to the Mystery Religions

Before outlining the distinctive features of some of the mystery religions, it may be well to state the general characteristics common to almost all of the mystery religions. The mystery religions directed themselves primarily to the individual, not to the masses.¹¹ For this reason,

⁷Ibid.

⁸Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, 69-96 A.D.

⁹Angus, op. cit., p. 44.

¹⁰Samuel Dill, Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius (New York: MacMillan and Co., c.1905), p. 614.

¹¹Angus, op. cit., p. 186.

one could not be considered a member of the cult unless he had been initiated into it. Whereas one could easily hold nominal membership in any of the state religions without being personally and intimately involved in the worship and practice of such religions, the mystery religions involved a personal commitment. By thus becoming an initiate into the mysteries, the individual could more or less sever his ties with the rest of society. He now belonged to something which had no respect for social or political standing. A slave could worship beside his master, a soldier along with his commander.

The mysteries did not deal merely with man as a lone individual, but rather as an individual in a relationship to a deity. The mystery religions aimed to effect a reconciliation between God and man. They have, for this reason, been called "religions of salvation."¹² As a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great, and his attempts to unify the thought and culture of East and West, there came into the West a growing sense of sin and evil, a factor which had long been a basic principle of oriental religions, particularly since the rise of Zoroastrianism.¹³ The western world not only looked at this concept of sin in an objective manner, but very rapidly realized that it's own standard of morals was at an extremely low ebb. Besides the more common sins of the darkened streets or of the market place, there was the daily treachery that delivered up anyone-- father, mother, soldier or Caesar--for a price. Daily life had become

¹²Michael Rostovtzeff, Mystic Italy (New York: Henry Holt and Co., c.1927), p. 138.

¹³Infra, p. 18.

very uncertain, and there was distrust and scheming on every side.¹⁴ Men tried to find certainty and security in witchcraft, magic and sorcery.¹⁵ As a result of man's efforts to find security, two religious trends developed, those of Stoicism and Epicureanism. The former attempted to give man steadfastness among all his insecurity by leading him to bear up under suffering, emotional fluctuations, and even under death. The latter presented man with a more earthly and material view of life. But neither of these really solved the problem of sin. Man therefore felt an ever increasing need for forgiveness. He had had enough of the gods of Olympus whose frailties matched and sometimes even went beyond those of his fellow-men. Men now felt the need for gods who were saviors, of gods who would bring them peace and holiness.¹⁶

The mystery religions offered gods who professed to bring salvation to those who were willing to become initiated. This salvation was presented to be primarily a hope for the future life. Both Plato and Sophocles for instance, pictured the mystery religions as bringing a blissful after-life for the mystes, but a terrible future for the uninitiated.¹⁷ Thus the mystery religions appealed to man by threatening him with punishment and encouraging him with promises of blessings. In addition to offering man hope beyond the grave, they also offered him in this life, a closer association with, and knowledge of God. Thus they proposed to

¹⁴A very striking description of life in the Roman Empire is given by Gerhard Uhlhorn, The Conflict of Christianity with Heathenism, edited and translated by Egbert Smith and C. J. Ropes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, c.1879), pp. 92ff.

¹⁵Thus, Alexander the Great, immediately upon reaching Babylon, consulted the Chaldaei. Angus, op. cit., p. 51.

¹⁶T. R. Glover, The Conflict of Religion in the Early Roman Empire (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., c.1909), p. 260.

¹⁷Cited by Angus, op. cit., p. 53.

satisfy man's desire for the knowledge of God.¹⁸

A third distinctive feature of the mystery religions was that they aimed to present a sacramental drama,¹⁹ similar to what we today call a passion play, but not nearly so elaborate. This does not mean that the entire drama was always enacted, but the entire symbolism and ritual was generally designed to direct the worshipper to a part or all of this sacred drama, in which the deity suffered in man's behalf, in order that man might have communion with the deity and eternal life.²⁰

Another characteristic feature of the mystery religions was their extreme syncretism, a factor which makes the study of these cults very difficult. This does not mean simply that different forms of religious expression were allowed within the same cult, or that varying doctrines were held, as is the case among more liberal Christian groups today, but even different gods and goddesses were worshipped. There seemed to be no, or very little jealousy among the deities, and one temple might accommodate worshippers of several different deities. In a Mithraeum²¹ at Ostia, near Rome, various Italian and Greek deities were worshipped together.²² Discoveries have also revealed that at Carnuntum in Pannonia, a Mithraeum and a temple of Jupiter Dolichenus adjoined each other.²³

¹⁸Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 58ff.

²⁰The nature of this sacramental drama was governed by the legend which had become associated with the deity. These legends are discussed below, beginning at p. 16.

²¹A meeting place of Mithraists.

²²Angus, op. cit., p. 192.

²³Franz Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, translated by Thomas J. McCormack (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, c.1903), p. 178.

But such syncretism did not alarm the devotees of the mysteries as it would us today, because among them there was actually very little concern for theological doctrine. With the possible exception of Orphism, and to some extent Mithraism, there was very little concern for an intellectual appreciation of the religion that the mysteries attempted to foster. Aristotle's statement that it was unnecessary for the initiated "to learn anything, but to have their emotions stirred"²⁴ may have been an overstatement, but this does indicate that theological instruction occupied at best a secondary position. This lack of emphasis on education and overemphasis on emotions was a natural outgrowth of the attempt of the mystery religions to present a sacramental drama. For in this worship great stress was placed on experiencing with the senses what the deity had done for man, and how man might enter into communion with the deity. This lack of doctrine also made it possible for various types of people to feel at home in the mystery religions. They did not have to be particularly intelligent, and in some cases, notably in the mysteries of Cybele and Attis, they did not even have to be particularly virtuous.

In order to see how these general features were expressed in specific mystery cults, we shall consider the mysteries of Eleusis, of Cybele,²⁵ and of Mithra. These three are chosen because they represent, respectively, a rather spiritual and morally wholesome cult, a basically obscene cult, and the pinnacle of development among the mystery religions. In addition, numerous other mystery religions might be mentioned, the most common of

²⁴Angus, op. cit., p. 62.

²⁵Also referred to as The Great Mother of the Gods, or as Magna Mater.

which were the cults of Orpheus, Dionysos, Isis-Osiris, Attis, and Adonis. With the exception of the first mentioned, all the others revolved around a basically immoral myth, usually a variation of the myth of Cybele.²⁶

The Specific Features of the Eleusinian Mysteries *spiritual, morally wholesome.*

It would be difficult to date exactly the origin of the Eleusinian mysteries, although it is generally agreed that they were of quite ancient origin. Their name is derived from the fact that they were celebrated mostly at Eleusis, a city a few miles from Athens. The basic myth behind this cult was as follows: One day, while picking flowers in the field, Persephone was snatched away by Hades and taken to the underworld. Her mother, Demeter, was so bereaved that she gave herself to constant mourning and sorrowing for her lost daughter. Demeter, however, was the goddess who gave blessings to fields and crops that they might produce and bear fruit. As a result of Demeter's grief, the fields and crops left to themselves failed to produce. When the earth produced no fruit, starvation threatened mankind. In order to save the world, Zeus interfered and arranged that Persephone should spend only four months with Hades, and the remaining eight months of the year with her mother, Demeter. Thus it was that while Persephone was with her mother, nature was joyful and enabled the ground to produce, but while Persephone was in the underworld, nature too, went into mourning. From this legend it is obvious that the cult of Eleusis was originally agrarian. In time these rites took on a more spiritual nature. Initiation into the mysteries of Eleusis thereupon demanded

²⁶infra, p. 17.

a more morally upright life in this world, and promised eternal life in the next. Thus it is that an Eleusinian priest is recorded as saying, "Beautiful indeed is the mystery given us by the blessed gods; death is for mortals no longer an evil, but a blessing."²⁷

There does not seem to have been any outstanding rite practiced by the devotees of Eleusis. The emphasis was rather on contemplation and attempting to achieve communion with the gods by learning of the mysteries. The Eleusinian mysteries thus represented less of a materialistic emphasis, and were in general free from orgiastic or immoral forms of worship.

The Specific Features of the Cult of Cybele

The first oriental mystery religion to invade Italy proper was that of the fertility goddess of Anatolia, Cybele. Somewhere in her history she became identified with an Asia Minor deity Rhea, and thereby assumed the title, "Mother of the gods" or "Magna Mater."²⁸ Her cult reached Rome at a time when the life of that city was in danger. Hannibal was at the gates, and the people looked for a new deity on whom they could depend. In 204 B.C., the black stone symbol of this cult was brought to Rome and set up in the temple on the Palatine.²⁹ By a strange coincidence, Hannibal was forced to return to Africa to meet Scipio Africanus, and almost the entire Roman populace rallied around this new goddess who they believed had delivered them.

²⁷Quoted by Angus, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

²⁸Walter W. Hyde, Paganism to Christianity in the Roman Empire (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, c.1946), p. 46.

²⁹Gordon J. Laing, Survivals of Roman Religion (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., c.1931), p. 122.

The actual worship rites of this cult probably represented the depth of orgiastic devotion. They were the natural outgrowth of the legend which had grown around the goddess. Very briefly it was as follows: Cybele had been in love with another Asia Minor deity, Attis, but the latter proved unfaithful. To show his remorse, Attis wept under the pine tree, and ultimately emasculated himself. However, Cybele intervened, restored him to life, and forgave him. This legend was re-enacted every year, particularly by the priests of the cult. In maddened frenzy they danced under the trees cutting and mutilating themselves, symbolizing the suffering and death of Attis. This sorrow suddenly turned to joy when it was announced that Attis had revived. Thereupon followed the Hilaria, a time when unbridled celebrations were allowed with no regard for moral or social decency.³⁰

One of the peculiar rites of this cult was the taurobolium, a symbolic baptism in the blood of a bull, by which the initiate believed himself to be rejuvenated and made an heir to immortality. This rite, and the entire worship of the cult was particularly strong at Rome.³¹ As a religio licita, this cult remained in Rome till the end of the fourth century.

The Specific Features of Mithraism

Mithraism can be traced back to Zoroastrianism, a religion which began in eastern Persia around 1000 B.C. While Zoroastrianism was much more

³⁰J. G. Frazer, The Golden Bough (Third revised edition; London: Macmillan and Co., c.1914), p. 122.

³¹A. D. Hock, "The Development of Paganism in the Roman Empire" in The Cambridge Ancient History (New York: MacMillan and Co., 1939), XII, 425

strongly monotheistic than other pagan religions of that time, it still allowed for a number of other divine beings, both good and evil, in the form of a hierarchy. To understand the position of Mithra himself, he must therefore be considered in the light of the Zoroastrian hierarchy. At the head of that divine hierarchy was Infinite Time, who was later identified with the Greek Kronos. He is often represented by a winged figure with the head of a lion, encircled by a serpent. The son of Time is Ahura Mazda. In practice, he was really the chief deity of Zoroastrianism, holding a position comparable to that of the Greek Zeus. But there was one other power, a deity in his own right, called Ahriman, whose aim was to spread evil throughout the universe, and thus foil the good plans of Ahura Mazda. This very strong dualism is basic to Zoroastrianism, and was passed on to its successor Mithraism, though it thereupon became slightly less emphasized.³²

Mithra himself was one of twenty-eight geni created by Ahura Mazda.³³ Officially he never lost this subordinate position, although in practice he was worshipped more than his superior, Ahura Mazda, who was considered too remote to be concerned with human beings. Thus for example, Darius Hystaspes (d.485 B.C.) placed emblems of Ahura Mazda and Mithra in equal positions on a sculptured tablet above his tomb.³⁴ Likewise, Artaxerxes Mnemon (d.356 B.C.) placed an image of Mithra in his temple, and prayed jointly to Mithra and Ahura Mazda.³⁵ Uppermost in the minds of those who worshipped

³²The above is based largely on Salomon Reinach, Orpheus: A History of Religions, translated by Florence Simmonds (New York: Liveright Publishing Corp., c.1930), p. 72.

³³Sheldon, op. cit., p. 49.

³⁴John M. Robertson, "Mithraism" in Religious Systems of the World (London: George Allen and Company, Ltd., 1889), p. 197.

³⁵Ibid.

Mithra was the regard for him as the deification of light, particularly of the sun.³⁶ Originally, however, Mithra did not hold this position. As one of the geni, he was merely a radiant god who emerged from the rocky mountains every morning at dawn, and drove across the heavens with a team of four white horses.³⁷

As a created being, Mithra was believed to have had a definite life of his own.³⁸ Though he was the created son of Ahura Mazda, he was generally considered to be without mortal mother. One day, in some grotto or cave, he issued from a stone. When he grew up, he fought with various pestilent creatures, among them a divine bull, whose blood, when spilled upon the ground, rendered it fertile. In slaying this animal, Mithra was aided by his faithful dog who pursued the bull. While the bull was actually being killed, a scorpion was attacking its vital organs in an attempt to sap the bull's energy before it could be used to revitalize the ground. After slaying the bull, Mithra ascended into Heaven, to watch over his followers. This act of slaying the bull seems to have been considered the chief purpose for which Mithra was born. For this reason, the most common representation of Mithra in bas-reliefs and other drawings is that of Mithra slaying the bull.³⁹ Likewise, the most common object of devotion and contemplation in Mithraea was that of Mithra tauroctonos.⁴⁰

³⁶Dill, op. cit., p. 587.

³⁷Ibid., p. 586.

³⁸The account of Mithra's life as here given is largely based on Cumont, op. cit., pp. 131ff.

³⁹Cf. Appendix A.

⁴⁰That is, Mithra slaying the bull.

The worship of Mithra as a god in his own right is of very ancient origin. A cuneiform text, discovered at Pteriu, in the heart of Asia Minor, shows that about fourteen hundred years before Christ, certain Hittite tribes paid homage to Mithra, along with several other deities imported from India.⁴¹ The fact that the name "Mithridates" was in quite common use as early as 600 B.C. testifies to the early spread of Mithraism.⁴² By 500 B.C., Mithra had his own place in the Persian Pantheon.⁴³

To these early references to Mithra must be added the testimony of the sacred writings of Zoroastrianism, the Zend-Avesta.⁴⁴ Although Mithra is frequently referred to in the Zend-Avesta, the following quotations seem to summarize the references, and at the same time indicate the way in which the Zend-Avesta wanted the faithful to regard Mithra:

We sacrifice unto Mithra, the lord of wide pastures, who is truth-speaking, a chief in assemblies, with a thousand ears, well-shapen, with ten thousand eyes, high, with full knowledge, strong, sleepless, and ever awake.⁴⁵

Again we read,

We sacrifice unto Mithra, the lord of all countries, whom Ahura Mazda made the most glorious of all the heavenly gods. So may Mithra and Ahura, the two great gods, come to us with help. We sacrifice unto the undying, shining, swift-horsed sun.⁴⁶

⁴¹Reinach, Orpheus: A History of Religions, p. 65.

⁴²Robertson, op. cit., p. 198.

⁴³Reinach, Cults, Myths and Religions, p. 180.

⁴⁴The Zend-Avesta has been variously dated. Probably the correct explanation is given by Reinach, namely that although some of the ideas are quite ancient, the text itself is, at least to some extent, of Post-Christian origin. Reinach, Cults, Myths and Religion, p. 180.

⁴⁵The Zend Avesta, translated by James Darmesteter, Vol. III in The Sacred Books of the East, edited by F. Max Mueller (American Edition; New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1898), Mihir Nyayish 6.

⁴⁶Ibid., Mihir Nyayish 7.

Being a mystery religion, Mithraism possessed a very intricate system of initiation. Seven grades of promotion were strictly adhered to. Although the rites connected with these degrees were to have been kept secret, we nevertheless do know a few details about these degrees from a letter of St. Jerome.⁴⁷ The names ascribed to these grades were: raven, corax; secret one, nymphus; soldier, miles; lion, leo; Persian, Perses; sun-runner, Heliodromus; and father, pater. The designation raven referred to the bird through which Ahura Mazda sent the message to Mithra that he should slay the divine bull. The secret one was probably thus designated because he was veiled, and thus invisible to the rest of the assembly. Just what was involved in attaining the degree of soldier is told us by Tertullian, as he admonishes his fellow Christians:

For to him (the soldier of Mithra) when he is initiated in a cavern, a veritable home of darkness, a crown is offered on a naked sword, as if in parody of martyrdom; this then is placed on his head, and he is enjoined with his own hand to lift it from his head and voluntarily to transfer it to his shoulder, declaring that Mithra is his crown. Thereafter he is never crowned.⁴⁸

These three grades, raven, secret one, and soldier, were preparatory grades, and did not entitle the devotee to full communion in the mysteries. He became a communicant, *μετέχωντος* only with the fourth grade, that of lion.⁴⁹ This was the grade to which the lower mystes looked forward, and that probably explains why the grade of lion is the most frequently mentioned in inscriptions, and so often depicted in drawings. When the mystic attained the grade of Persian, he donned the Phrygian cap. The rank of Father was

⁴⁷St. Jerome, "Epistle ad Iactan, CVII," Patrologiae: Patrum Latinorum, edited by J. P. Migne (Paris: n.p., 1854), XXII, 870. Hereafter Migne's Latin Edition will be referred to as MPL.

⁴⁸MPL, "De Corona, XV", II, 102.

⁴⁹Dill, op. cit., p. 612.

the highest attainable, except for the unique position of *Pater Patrum*, which gave one priority even over the fathers. Cumont holds that the titles of Pater and Pater Patrum were chosen from Greek political life, designating community officers who held office until death.⁵⁰

Before the common man could enter into the mysteries of Mithra, he had to undergo a rigorous initiation. Various accounts of such initiations have come down to us, many no doubt exaggerated, even as pagan reports of early Christian activities were often distorted. The following descriptions⁵¹ of initiatory rites seem to be quite well attested: The initiate, with eyes blindfolded and hands bound, might be forced to pass through a flame, or in some cases, to swim a river. Some initiates were asked to jump down from a cliff, although this could not have been done within the Mithraea as most of them were too small for this. A relief found at Heddernheim shows an initiate standing in the snow. There also seems to be considerable evidence that the neophyte was compelled either to observe, or take part in, a simulated murder, with the neophyte himself in most cases serving as the "victim."⁵² When the neophyte was initiated, and whenever he later advanced to higher degrees, he had to be baptized, usually with water.⁵³

⁵⁰Cumont, op. cit., p. 154.

⁵¹Based on Dill, op. cit., p. 612, and Angus, op. cit., p. 89.

⁵²The fact that when the emperor Commodus, on initiation, actually committed a murder, he was regarded as polluting the chapel, seems to indicate that the murder was to be simulated only, and not to be really carried out.

⁵³More will be said of Mithraic baptismal rites in a later chapter.

It seems to be a well established fact that Mithraism was limited exclusively to males. Nowhere, in the hundreds of Mithraic inscriptions that are extant, is any mention made of a female initiate or of a priestess.⁵⁴ This exclusion of women is quite understandable. For one thing, Mithraism was to a large extent a religion of the army and of those connected with the army. Furthermore, the initiatory rites of Mithraism would have proved to be too rigorous for women. The wives of those who had accepted Mithra usually joined the mysteries of Cybele or of Isis. This accounts for the fact that in Ostia, near Rome, one of the four Mithraic temples practiced very close fellowship with a neighboring temple of Cybele.⁵⁵

Spread of the Mystery Religions

Reasons for their Rapid Spread

It has been said that "the rapid and amazing dissemination of Mithraism throughout the West remains one of the outstanding phenomenon of religious propoganda."⁵⁶ Various reasons have been given in an attempt to offer an explanation for this amazing spread of Mithraism, and for that matter, of the other mystery religions as well. To fully understand this development, it is necessary to consider the conditions in the areas to which Mithraism was spreading. Here three main factors become important. The Peloponnesian War in Greece⁵⁷ marked the end of the wonderful city-

⁵⁴Cumont, op. cit., p. 173.

⁵⁵Dill, op. cit., p. 591.

⁵⁶Angus, op. cit., p. 10.

⁵⁷431-404 B.C.

state system that had been developed in the Mediterranean world. The collapse of this system meant also the collapse of the religion of the gods of the Pantheon that had so long been associated with the polis. Because the state religions had so closely allied themselves with the political system, they had become very popular as long as local armies were victorious. But because of this very association, the state religions had to share in the political disintegration, and thus became defunct along with the city-state system.

Another factor that prepared the way for the spread of the mysteries was the unification of the Hellenic world by Alexander the Great. It would be impossible to overestimate the effects of the Macedonian's conquests on later history and for the mystery religions and Christianity in particular. Alexander's aim was to bring about a "marriage of east and west"--to make one cosmopolitan people. In doing this he not only gave to his new world a more or less common language in the Koine, and an excellent system of communication, but as a result of these factors, he also brought about "religious syncretism on a stupendous scale."⁵⁸ There was thus a large-scale religions "free-for-all," wherein only the fittest would survive. Since the people of the east had begun to think and act with the people of the west, and vice-versa, it was necessary that any religion, to be successful, would have to be divested of all local or ethnic entanglements. The mystery religions, with little emphasis on doctrine, were willing to make this sacrifice.

⁵⁸Angus, op. cit., p. 19.

A third factor that prepared the West for the influx of the mysteries was the growing skepticism about the gods of Olympus. Through the centuries there had developed an almost endless succession of legends and myths about the gods, until the people were forced to ask themselves, "Is it really so?" Experience had shown that the magic incantations and secret oracles of the gods were not always correct. This growing doubt in the minds of the people was fed by the reports of the black sins that besmirched Olympus. Even the philosophers, in their quest for the ultimate reality were willing to make their speculations without reference to the gods of their forefathers.

This lack of respect for the ancient deities only added to the spiritual plight of men. Now more than ever, they felt a craving and a need for gods who would be saviors. This need was so strongly felt that the appellation "savior" was given even to certain men. The Athenians called Demetrius the Besieger "the only true god." Julius Caesar was referred to as "Savior and benefactor," and again as "god manifest, the common savior of human life."⁵⁹

However disagreed historians may be as to the factors contributing to the successful spread of the mysteries, there is little disagreement as to the immediate cause for the spread of the mystery religions, particularly of Mithraism. There can be no doubt that the rapid spread of Mithraism was carried out largely by the soldiers. Plutarch, in his "Life of Pompey," states that in 67 B.C., Pompey took some Cilician pirates captive and sold them as slaves in various parts of Italy. The arrival of Mithraism in

⁵⁹Angus, op. cit., p. 227.

⁶⁰Dill, op. cit., p. 591.

Italy seems to be directly related to this event.

Why was it that the army should be the chief carrier of Mithraism? It must be remembered, that to make up for casualties suffered by the Roman armies in their eastern exploits, auxiliaries for the army were recruited from among the conquered people. Cumont points out that more soldiers for the Roman armies were recruited from the Commagene⁶¹ than from any other area, and it was precisely here that Mithraism had struck its deepest roots. In addition, many recruits came from Cappadocia, Pontus, Cilicia, all of which, centuries earlier, had been saturated with Mithraism.⁶² The very nature of the Mithraic religion, which even gave the name "miles" to one of its degrees, appealed to the deepest military instincts of the soldier. This then was the religion that the soldier of Asia Minor, wearing the uniform of the Roman army, brought to the West with him. When these same soldiers were sent out on duties to new lands, they took their original religion with them. Assembled under the sky of a foreign nation, away from home for many years, they would recall the legends and beliefs of their native lands, and invoke the blessings of their own god or gods upon their new tour of duty. At the same time they did not limit their assemblies to those of their own convictions, but left them open to all who were genuinely interested, and thus Mithraism spread.

A typical example of how Mithraism could suddenly engulf a new land is represented by the province of Dacia. When in 107 A.D. Trajan finally conquered Dacia after six years of war, the land had been reduced almost

⁶¹The area around the source of the Euphrates, north-east of Tarsus.

⁶²Cumont, op. cit., pp. 41ff.

to a wasteland. He therefore commanded that it be repopulated from all the territories of Rome, and be policed by the Roman army. The army was already Mithraic. The civilians who heeded the command to emigrate were mostly captives and renegades originally from the East, who were willing to go to this new land, while the Roman citizens with a long ancestral history in their native Italy did not want to leave their possessions so readily. The result was that in Sarmizegethusa, the capital of Dacia, the second largest Mithraeum that has ever been discovered was erected.⁶³ Yet, Dacia contains no evidence of such early Christian churches.

The spread of Mithraism was very much aided by the imperial recognition which was accorded it. When Mithraism first entered Italy, it was frowned upon, and therefore had to associate itself with the cult of Cybele, which had already received official sanction centuries earlier.⁶⁴ About a century after its entry into Italy, Mithraism came to the attraction of the Emperor Nero, who, it is believed, expressed the desire to be initiated into the mysteries of Mithra. When King Tiridates of Armenia arrived in Rome, he brought his oriental religion with him, and probably in order to gain the favor of Nero, considered Nero himself to be an emanation of Mithra.⁶⁵ The general official attitude, however, remained one of disfavor until the accession of the Flavian emperors in 69 A.D. From the beginning of the reign of Vespasian, therefore, the prestige of Mithraism continued to grow. Before the end of the second century, Marcus Aurelius⁶⁶ had granted civil immunities in order to encourage the use of

⁶³Ibid., p. 44.

⁶⁴In 204 B.C.

⁶⁵Cumont, op. cit., p. 35.

⁶⁶161-180 A.D.

the taurobolium.⁶⁷ The first emperor to become initiated into the rites of Mithraism was Commodus (180-192), and from his time on, Mithraism had its own chaplain in the palace of the emperor.⁶⁸ The greatest support given to Mithraism was that by Diocletian in 307 A.D. In that year, he, together with other high government officials, met at Carnuntum on the Danube River to dedicate a sanctuary to Mithra. In doing so, they proclaimed Mithra as Sol Invictus, and patron god of their empire.⁶⁹

The Ultimate Extent of the Mystery Religions

The geographical spread and dissemination of Mithraism followed a strange pattern. It had very early spread to Asia Minor, but before 67 B.C., at least, it was practically limited to that area. It did not seem to make the sudden jump from Asia Minor to Greece proper, that Christianity did about a century later. The introduction of Mithraism to the western world took place via Rome, not Greece. It is interesting to note that Mithraism never did become very popular in Greece, and very few traces of Mithraism have been discovered there.⁷⁰

Even from Rome, Mithraism did not spread out appreciably until the latter half of the first century.⁷¹ After the fifteenth legion of the Roman army returned from helping Titus capture Jerusalem, it was sent to the northern parts of the empire, and in this way brought Mithraism to Carnuntum on the Danube River. Mithraism grew so rapidly in Carnuntum that

⁶⁹Angus, op. cit., p. 168.

⁷⁰A. S. Geden, Mithraism, Select Passages Illustrating (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, c.1925), p. 8.

⁷¹Cumont, op. cit., pp. 37-38.

within less than fifty years of its inception, the third mithraeum had been built there, the two previous ones proving too small to accommodate the worshippers.⁷²

It would be impossible to list all the places to which Mithraism spread. By the time Mithraism had reached its height in the early part of the third century, it had saturated what are today the Balkan countries, including the civilized area north of the Danube. Italy was of course dotted with Mithraea from north to south. From Italy, the cult spread into what is today western Germany, and also into southeastern France. The greatest number of Mithraea have been discovered in Germany, particularly along the east bank of the Rhine. Three important temples have been exhumed at Heddernheim, north of Frankfort; and three others in Friedberg in Hesse.⁷³ By the fourth century Mithraism had also spread to Britain. It is interesting to note that while Britain is often said to have been Christianized under the Romans, there are no definitive signs of Christianity in Britain as early as the fourth century, while evidences of Mithraism abound.⁷⁴ A Mithraic inscription at Housesteads, in Northumberland reads, "To the god, best and greatest, invincible Mithra, lord of ages."⁷⁵ Another at Kichester is dedicated "To the god the sun, the invincible Mithra, the lord of the ages."⁷⁶

⁷²Ibid., p. 48.

⁷³Ibid., p. 52.

⁷⁴F. F. Bruce, Light in the West, in The Spreading Flame (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., c.1954), p. 79.

⁷⁵Robertson, op. cit., p. 194.

⁷⁶Ibid.

If one were to list the most important centers of Mithraism, he would probably have to begin with Rome, where nearly two hundred monuments dedicated to Mithra have been found.⁷⁷ Nearby Ostia was also a stronghold for Mithraism.⁷⁸ The largest known Mithraeum, as far as excavations have revealed, seems to have been at the Baths of Caracalla in Rome.⁷⁹ Carnuntum on the Danube, and Heddernheim on the Rhine have already been mentioned. In Britain, the cult was represented chiefly in London, and again along the Hadrian wall, where the Roman army was stationed.⁸⁰ In Dacia, it was primarily the capital city of Sarmizegethusa that was the stronghold of Mithraism.⁸¹

⁷⁷Reinach, Cults, Myths and Religions, p. 186.

⁷⁸Hyde, op. cit., p. 63.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Bruce, op. cit., p. 79.

⁸¹For a more detailed look at the spread of Mithraism, and to gain an over-all impression of its dissemination, the reader is referred to Appendix B.

CHAPTER III

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN MITHRAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

The Unique Factors of Mithraism

That Made it Superior to Other Mysteries

In characterizing Mithraism, Dill says,

It is perhaps the highest and most striking example of the last efforts of paganism to reconcile itself to the great moral and spiritual movement which was setting steadily, and with growing momentum, towards purer conceptions of God, and of man's relations to Him, and of the life to come.¹

This is giving quite a bit of praise to a pagan religion. But an honest study of Mithraism, particularly as it is contrasted to the other mystery religions, shows that such an opinion of Mithraism is justified.

One of the most honorable, and therefore outstanding features of Mithraism was its high system of ethics.² In this way, Mithraism was distinguished from the other mysteries. One reason that makes it impossible for many other mystery religions to demand a high level of moral living from their members was the fact that the deities themselves were not free of the passions characteristic of men. Serapis was, for instance, both the brother and the marital mate of Isis. Attis was the lover of Cybele. Baal found a mate in Astarte. In fact, a common feature of practically all oriental and Greek religions of this time was that there was a male and a

¹Samuel Dill, Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius (New York: MacMillan and Co., c.1905), p. 585.

²Franz Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, translated by Thomas J. McCormack (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, c.1903), p. 147.

female deity who were in some way considered married, and very often this relationship was basically incestuous. Mithra, on the other hand lived alone. In fact, it is quite possible that Mithraism demanded continence of all those who would hold the highest rank of Pater in the cult.³ This is further evidenced by Tertullian's reports that the order had virgin and men vowed to continence.⁴ It is significant to note that the Christian church did not attack Mithraism in the field of morals. In fact, one has to look hard to find any definite accusation of immorality brought by the church fathers against Mithraism. This high regard for ethics in Mithraism shows itself also in the fact that although its initiatory rites were more prolonged and exacting than those of the other cults, they were also less orgiastic, particularly when compared to the worship of the Great Mother. Here for example, the priests, called Galli, indulged in delirious dances while they lacerated their flesh with broken pottery and crude knives, and finally divested themselves of their manhood in imitation of the act of Attis.⁵

One reason that the faithful of the other mysteries committed such cruel self-mutilations and endured rigorous initiations was that they were attempting to appease their god, and by thus suffering with him or for him, they hoped to achieve communion with their deity.⁶ But Mithra was a dif-

³Salomon Reinach, Cults, Myths and Religions (London: David Nutt Co., c.1912), p. 192.

⁴Tertullian, "De Praescriptionibus, XL," Patrologiae: Patrum Latinorum, edited by J. P. Migne (Paris: n.p., 1844), II, 54-55. Hereafter Migne's Latin Edition will be referred to as MPL.

⁵Samuel Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, c.1925), p. 88.

⁶This fellowship in the sufferings of the deity was actually a central feature in almost all the other mystery religions. Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity, pp. ix, x.

ferent type of god. He was not basically a god of wrath as were the other deities. The very word Mithra means, in the native Persian, "friend."

Mithra's prime characteristic was his goodness. Thus the Avesta says of him: "I am the good protector of all creatures: I am the good savior of all creatures."⁷ And further it states:

Mithra whose foot is ever lifted is a wakeful god, and watcheth all things unceasingly. He is strong, but he heareth the complaint of the weak; he maketh the grass to grow, and he governeth the earth. He is begotten of wisdom, and no man deceiveth him; he is armed with the strength of a thousand.⁸

Another factor that made Mithraism superior to all the other mystery religions was its peculiar blend of philosophy, magic, and common sense, so that it could have equal appeal for rich and poor, for the illiterate and the educated, for the humble and the sophisticated. Although Mithraism was theologically weak when compared to Christianity, it was still stronger than the other mystery religions. This theology was basically the ancient philosophy which stressed the four basic elements of air, fire, water, and earth.⁹ By personifying Time as the First Cause, and worshipping the sun, planets, and constellations, it provided the intelligent and the truth-seeking magi with sufficient material for study and contemplation. On the other hand, the common man was fortunate in having everything deified. He saw his religious beliefs expressing themselves in the fire that cooked his meal, in the water he drank, in the air he breathed, and particularly in the light that arose every morning. In addition, the very

⁷Cited by Reinach, Cults, Myths and Religions, p. 180.

⁸Ibid., p. 181.

⁹Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, p. 148.

effective pictorial dramatizations of the exploits of Mithra, demonstrated in the services of worship, were able to win the hearts and convictions of those who could not understand the intricacies of the theology of Mithra. Thus Mithraism was equipped to win the interest of various classes of people, and rise up head and shoulders above any other religion that the mind of man had been able to develop. In fact, the religion of Mithra possessed such superiority that of all the mystery religions, it presented the only formidable rival to another new and powerful religion at that time arising from the Roman province of Palestine, the religion of Christianity. Whether the chief tenets and customs of Mithraism were really so very similar to those of Christianity will be discussed later. The fact remains however, that outwardly at least, there was a great deal of similarity, so much so that both Justin Martyr¹⁰ and Tertullian¹¹ felt that the devil had deliberately planned these similarities in order to confuse the Christians. Before these similarities can be carefully evaluated however, the points of alleged similarity must first be investigated and then compared to the corresponding teachings of Christianity.

Similarities to Christianity in Doctrine

Original Sin and the Necessity for Forgiveness

There was one factor basic to the entire religion of Mithra, as it was to the entire theology of Christianity. This was the factor of sin, and

¹⁰Justin Martyr, "Apologia I, 66-67," Patrologiae: Patrum Graecorum, edited by J. P. Migne (Paris: n.p., 1857), VI, 430. Hereafter Migne's Greek Edition will be referred to as MG.

¹¹MPL, "De Praescriptionibus, XL," II, 54-55.

the consequent need for forgiveness and redemption. The Mithraic concept of sin was a natural outgrowth of its emphasis on dualism. Ahriman, the evil spirit, was constantly at work putting evil in the hearts of men, and man was to a large degree helpless against him. Thus man was by nature sinful, and unless cleansed by initiation into the mysteries he could not hope to enter eternal bliss.¹² But Mithraism also recognized the fact that all sin could not be blamed on Ahriman, for men themselves were committing it freely. The fact that Mithraism spread to the west at a time when the opinions of the gods of Olympus were at their lowest point made this emphasis on sin seem quite sensible. Thus it was that before one could even enter into full communion in the rites of Mithra, he had to undergo a certain katharsis, a cleansing.¹³ A central emphasis of this cleansing was a complete confession of sins¹⁴ followed by a baptism which admitted the initiate into the first degree of fellowship.

This stress on the reality of sin was of course not original with Mithraism. Already in the sixth century B.C., it had been brought from the East to the Greek world by Orphism.¹⁵ This cult, with its emphasis on asceticism, a purer mysticism, and on individual responsibility for sin, made a definite lasting impression on the western world. It was this impression that Mithraism strengthened and fostered.

¹²Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity, p. 96.

¹³Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 45.

It would be extremely difficult to render judgment on the similarity between the concept of sin in Mithraism and the same concept in Christianity. The problem lies in the fact that very little is known of the real thinking that lay behind Mithraism's emphasis on sin and personal guilt. We can never know whether Mithraism had anything identical to the Christian doctrines of hereditary guilt through Adam, or of the perfect ideals of a holy God which make the smallest sin sufficient cause for eternal damnation. At least one difference does seem to be apparent. For the Mithraist, especially during the later years of the cult's existence, his initiation into the mystic rites of the taurobolium and the common meal not only forgave him his sins, but seemed to give him a kind of perfection, which meant that he was reborn for eternity.¹⁶ While the Christian religion also taught that in Christ one could be reborn to eternal life,¹⁷ it nevertheless also recognized the fact that even the Christian still sinned after his rebirth,¹⁸ and that this sin was just as surely sin in the eyes of God as was the sin of one who did not know God. Christianity therefore seemed to take sin more seriously. It could do this because it could offer a more positive plan of salvation than that proposed by Mithraism.

The Birth of the Deity

In trying to learn of the precise nature of the belief in Mithra's birth, one is severely handicapped by the fact that no written record of

¹⁶A. D. Nock, "The Development of Paganism in the Roman Empire," in The Cambridge Ancient History (New York: MacMillan and Co., 1939), XII, 424.

¹⁷John 3:5f.

¹⁸Romans 7:15f.

the birth of Mithra exists, not even in the Zend-Avesta. The legend of his birth must therefore be derived from bas-reliefs, which are sometimes contradictory. Some sources claim that he was born of a virgin,¹⁹ others that he was born of a generative rock.²⁰ The actual belief in the minds of the followers of Mithra probably was that this generative rock was in time considered to be his mother, but the best authorities discount the idea of a human mother.²¹ The complete legend of his birth was probably something like this: The generative rock gave birth to Mithra on the banks of a river, under the shade of a sacred tree. Some shepherds, hiding in a nearby cliff,²² were the only ones to witness the event. In awe and wonder they drew near to Mithra, offering him the first-fruits of their flock and harvest as tokens of their respect. To protect his naked body from the cold wind, Mithra cut branches of a fig-tree, ate some of the fruit, and with the leaves he made himself clothing.²³

It has been suggested²⁴ that the birth of Mithra thus represents an earlier form of a legend which was later borrowed and revised by Christians to explain the human origin of their Savior. Carpenter argues that there is a contradiction regarding Christ's birth, since the gospel writers say it took place in a manger,²⁵ whereas Justin Martyr²⁶ and Origen²⁷ say

¹⁹Edward Carpenter, Pagan and Christian Creeds (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, c.1920), p. 159.

²⁰Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, p. 131.

²¹Reinach, Cults, Myths and Religions, p. 187.

²²Ibid.

²³The above is based largely on Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, pp.131ff.

²⁴Notably by John M. Robertson, "Mithraism," in Religious Systems of the World (London: George Allen and Company, Ltd., 1889), p. 210, and Carpenter, op. cit., p. 159.

²⁵Luke 2:7.

²⁶MPG, "Dialogue with Trypho, LXXVIII," VI, 657.

²⁷MPG, "Contra Celsum, I, 51," XI, 644.

he was born in a cave.²⁸ This however is not a contradiction, but merely a misunderstanding of Palestinian life on the part of Carpenter. Such underground caves were frequently used as resting places for travelers and their beasts.²⁹

Justin Martyr, writing around 150 A.D., saw also in the birth of Mithra a similarity to a prophecy concerning Christ. Writing to Trypho he said,

And when in the tradition of the Mithraic mysteries they relate that Mithra was born of a rock, and name the place where his followers receive initiation a cave, do I not know that they are perverting the saying of Daniel that "a stone was hewn without hands from a great mountain"?³⁰

A closer look at this prophecy of Daniel reveals that if the account of Mithra's birth was to be an imitation of the prophecy of Daniel, it was indeed a very poor imitation. For according to Daniel, Christ Himself is to be the "stone hewn without hands" whereas Mithra merely issued from a rock, although he himself was not that rock.

The fact that shepherds were present at the time of both the birth of Mithra and Christ may also suggest a common mythical basis for the two events. However, in regard to the birth of Mithra, one very strange part of the account remains to be explained. Cumont points out that although there were shepherds present at Mithra's birth (and therefore also herds), all this allegedly took place before men and creatures had begun to dwell on the earth.³¹

²⁸Robertson, "Mithraism," in Religious Systems of the World, p. 210.

²⁹Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (Third edition, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953) II, 185f.

³⁰MG, "Dialogue with Trypho, LXX," VI, 640.

³¹Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, p. 132.

A further point of difference between the accounts of the birth of Christ and the birth of Mithra could be mentioned. Mithra's birth goes without a written account, nor was it ever dated. How different is the account of the birth of Christ! The historian Luke could record that the birth of Christ took place in the days of Caesar Augustus, at the time when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.³² He is able to speak as a man who recalled the days of Caesar Augustus, to fellow men who were also familiar with Augustus and with Cyrenius. He therefore gave to the birth of Christ a definite historical setting, not only in a definite place--Bethlehem--but also at a definite time. This was never done for Mithra. The only commonly accepted points of similarity were his birth from a rock, and his adoration by shepherds. The former has been shown to be completely different from the prophecy concerning Christ, the latter has been shown to be an impossibility.

Concept of Mediator Between God and Man

Because of the basic dualism of Mithraism, it was natural that sooner or later Mithra would come to be regarded as a mediator. Some kind of bridge was needed to span the distance between the all holy Ahura-Mazda and sinful man. Mithra, as the personification of light, seemed to be the ideal deity to bridge this gap. For just as, day after day, light streamed from heaven into this world, and was diffused among men, so the personification of light was pictured as mediator, coming down into this world. As light could not go from earth to heaven, but came always from heaven to earth, so too, the mediatorship of Mithra was considered to be

³²Luke 2:1-2.

solely a divine role, in which the beneficent deity sought to help suffering man. Mithra himself was therefore frequently given the title *μεσίτης*.³³

In precisely what act or acts of Mithra did his function as mediator consist? Probably the very followers of Mithra were unable to give a clear answer to this question. While other mystery religions also had mediating deities, this mediation was also carried out by a definite act of the deity, which usually involved his suffering and death, followed by a type of resurrection.³⁴ The one possible act of Mithra to which his mediating function could be related was his slaying of the bull. But even here, we have been left with a very imperfect knowledge concerning the way in which the slaying of the sacred bull was to be a man-redeeming act. Most attempts to explain this enigma have been equally mystifying. Carpenter for instance says,

The bull in heaven--the symbol of the triumphant sun-god--and the earthly bull, sacrificed for the god of humanity were one and the same; the god, in fact, sacrificed himself or his representative.³⁵

The difficulty however, lies in the fact that the bull was not a deity, but rather a creature of Ahura Mazda.³⁶ Cumont furthermore points out that the exploit of Mithra slaying the bull originally had no connection with a redemptive act of any kind, and any association with redemption came at a later date. The original purpose of slaying the bull was a creative, rather than a redemptive one; one by which the earth would be filled with animals, plants and every good thing.³⁷ It is doubtful whe-

³³Robertson, "Mithraism," in Religious Systems of the World, p. 198.

³⁴Thus in the cult of Cybele. Supra, p. 18.

³⁵Carpenter, op. cit., p. 44.

³⁶Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, p. 132.

³⁷Ibid.

ther, at the time Mithra was slaying the bull, man was even created, and if he was, he had not yet fallen into sin.³⁸

It appears therefore, that Mithra's mediatorship was not inseparably connected to any death and resurrection, but consisted rather in the mere fact of his goodness, in the fact that while Ahura Mazda was too high and exalted for man to approach him, Mithra himself was more human, more friendly.

Christ's office of mediator between God and man, as expressed by Himself, and by His apostles, was inseparably connected to His suffering, death, and resurrection. Jesus Himself was constantly aware of this, and fully expected it. Even in the face of the impending suffering and death at Jerusalem He told His disciples:

Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him; and the third day he shall rise again.³⁹

There is a basic difference also in the mediating roles of Mithra and of Christ as far as the nature of the salvation brought through this mediation is concerned. For the follower of Mithra, as for a devotee of most of the mystery cults, salvation consisted in being able to free himself from the entanglements of the physical body, and in some way to achieve identification with the deity.⁴⁰ This concept of redemption was natural for a

³⁸Ibid. pp. 136-138. To add to the vagueness of the significance of the bull's death, the Zend-Avesta reports that the bull was killed by the forces of evil by Ahriman and his Gahi. The Zend-Avesta, translated by James Darmesteter, Vol. III in The Sacred Books of the East, edited by F. Max Müller (American edition; New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1898), Fargard 21,1.

³⁹Matthew 20:18-19

⁴⁰Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity, p. 52.

dualistic system which regarded matter as basically evil, and spirit as basically good. It is precisely in this area that the mediating work of Christ is most diametrically opposed to that attributed to Mithra. Christ did not come to lead man away from the entanglements of his body, in fact He took on a human body. He did not come to teach man to despise the flesh,⁴¹ but He Himself became flesh and blood.⁴² Thus also Christ's apostles did not advocate a redemption which freed the spirit from the bonds of the flesh, but one which redeemed, and gave new worth to both body and soul, to the total person. Thus St. Paul writes, "For ye are bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."⁴³

It would be impossible, and probably of little use, to list in detail all the points of difference between the mediatorship attributed to Mithra and that attributed to Christ. A thorough study of both concepts however, will show a basic underlying difference which is readily discernible, though not always capable of expression and analysis. The mediation of Mithra is from the beginning to end associated with naturalistic and magical factors. Its very indefiniteness is evidence of its legendary origin, among people of a pastoral society.⁴⁴ The account of the sacrificial mediation of Jesus Christ, however, reads like history, like the actual account of what happened to a Man, and of how men reacted to this event.

⁴¹The word is not used here in the theological sense denoting the inherent ungodly nature in man, but rather the mere physical body.

⁴²John 1:14, "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us."

⁴³I Corinthians 6:20.

⁴⁴Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, p. 134.

The Immortality of the Soul and the Resurrection of the Body

There can be no doubt about the fact that the Mithraic emphasis on the immortality of the soul, and to a lesser degree on the resurrection of the body, provided it with its strongest appeal to the world. This does not mean that the idea of the immortality of the soul originated among the followers of Mithra. The Romans had for centuries expressed this belief in their manes-cult, and even the Greeks had in various ways evidenced this hope.⁴⁵ The reason that the Roman and Greek expressions of this hope had not become too universally accepted was the fact that they were unable to give it concrete, or for that matter even consistent, expression. Thus for instance, the shade of Achilles sadly spoke to Odysseus: "Speak not lightly to me of death, glorious Odysseus, For so I might be on earth, I would rather be the servant of another, of a poor man who had little substance, than to be lord of all the dead."⁴⁶ The other extreme is represented by one who had followed the Orphic rites faithfully. There the triumphant soul addresses the gods:

I come from the pure For I boast myself to be of your race
 I have escaped from the sorrowful weary round, I have entered
 with eager feet the ring desired. I have passed to the bosom of the
 mistress queen of the lower world.⁴⁷

To this the god replies, "O happy and blessed one, thou shalt be god instead of mortal."⁴⁸ Amidst the varying descriptions of immortal life,

⁴⁵In making these statements it is recognized that the idea of the immortality of the soul had been expressed long before this in the Jewish faith, but reference is here to Gentile lands only.

⁴⁶Homer, The Odyssey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, n.d.), Book XI, lines 486f.

⁴⁷Clifford Moore, Ancient Beliefs in the Immortality of the Soul, Vol. XXVII of Our Debt to Greece and Rome (New York: Longmans, Green and Co. c.1931), p. 11.

⁴⁸Ibid.

there were of course those who denied any possibility of immortality. Dill records as a rather frequently occurring epitaph, "Non fueram, non sum, nescio." Another was "non fui, fui; non sum, non curo." Some are even more sensual: "My friends, while we live, let us live." Of a veteran of the fifth Roman legion it is recorded, "While he lived he drank with a good will."⁴⁹

Into the midst of these contradictory and indefinite ideas of immortality, came Mithraism with its promise of a joyful eternal life for all those who would be initiated into its mysteries, and a theology intricate enough to explain what this immortality involved and how it was possible. Angus points out that it was precisely in this "clear promise of a life beyond the grave," that the fascination of Mithraism lay.⁵⁰ Thus it was that while the soldier of Mithra silently contemplated the tauroctony of Mithra, he saw in it his own conquest over the difficulties of life, and particularly his own victory over the powers of death. This faith is expressed in the prayer of invocation in the Mithrasliturgie:

O Lord, announce me to the greatest God, . . . I a man, N.N., son of N.N., and born of the mortal womb of N.N. receiving the strength of my life from such seed, who after being born again of thee today, and from among so many thousands having been elected by thee to immortality in this hour according to the plan of the surpassing goodness of God, strives and long to worship thee with all his human powers.⁵¹

When the emperor Julian attempted to re-establish the religion of Mithra toward the latter part of the fourth century he wrote this confession of

⁴⁹Dill, op. cit., p. 499.

⁵⁰Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity, p. 176.

⁵¹Albrecht Dieterich, Eine Mithrasliturgie, third edition by Otto Weinreich (Leipzig, B. G. Teubner, 1923), pp. 12f. Hereafter this edition will be referred to as Mithrasliturgie.

his own faith:

As for thee, I have given thee to come to the knowledge of thy father, Mithra. Keep thou his commandments, and so procure for thyself during life a cable and sure anchorage; and when it is necessary for thee to depart hence, thou shalt go with a good hope, having rendered thy tutelar god gracious to thee.⁵²

The Mithraic cult thus offered a clear belief in the immortality of the soul. To us who are living in the twentieth century, this faith which Mithraism offered seems crude to say the least, but for the ancient mind saturated with astrology and cosmic philosophy, this doctrine undoubtedly had a very strong appeal. To the doctrine of the immortality of the soul as taught specifically in Mithraism we shall now turn.

The doctrine of the immortality of the soul as expressed in Mithraism is based on its peculiar doctrine of the descent and ascent of the soul. Briefly stated, this doctrine is as follows: In the presence of Ahura Mazda, there are a large number of souls which he has created. As a body is brought into existence upon earth, a soul leaves the presence of Ahura Mazda and descends to the body in which it is to live. In making this descent, it travels through the gate of Cancer, through the spheres of the seven planets, and as it passes each planet it becomes more and more adapted to its future earthly state.⁵³ When the individual dies, the soul leaves its human prison, and the evil spirits (devas) dispute with the emissaries of heaven over its possession. If the soul had been stained by an impure life, the evil spirits dragged it down to the infernal depths, "where they inflicted upon it a thousand tortures or perhaps, as a mark of its fall,

⁵²Cited by Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity, p. 141.

⁵³The above is based on Dill, op. cit., p. 600.

it was condemned to take up its abode in the body of some unclean animal."⁵⁴

If, however, the man was faithful in the discipline and sacraments of Mithraism, he will have prepared his soul so that, upon death, it will not descend further but will instead ascend back to the heavenly regions and the presence of Ahura Mazda and Mithra. Probably one of the most intricate and involved doctrines which Mithraism ever developed was that of the ascent of the soul. A very good account of the belief in the ascent of the soul is that given by Origen, when he quotes Celsus as saying:

There is an ascending road with seven gates, and an eighth at the summit. The first gate is of lead, the second of tin, the third of bronze, the fourth of iron, the fifth of mixed metal, the sixth of silver, and the seventh of gold. The first is dedicated to Kronos, the lead symbolizing the planet's slow motion, the second to Aphrodite, the resemblance consisting in the bright and malleable nature of the tin, the third, firm and resistant to Zeus. The fourth to Hermes, in that like the iron, Hermes is the tireless and efficient worker and producer of wealth. The fifth to Ares, because of the variable and irregular nature of the alloy. The sixth, of silver, to the moon; and the seventh of gold, to the sun, from the comparison of their colors.⁵⁵

Other accounts⁵⁶ indicate that between each of the above mentioned spheres of the heavens, there was a ladder. At the gate of each planet there was an angel of Ahura Mazda standing guard. Only the initiate into the rites of Mithra knew the secret formulae which could appease the guardians.⁵⁷

⁵⁴Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, p. 144.

⁵⁵MG, "Contra Celsum, VI, 21," XI, 1325.

⁵⁶Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, pp. 144f.

⁵⁷A considerable portion of the Mithrasliturgie is made up of prayers and formulas that the devotee should use in order to gain entrance to the various levels of ascent. These prayers usually consist in a command to the guardian spirit to be still, followed by the command to open the heavenly portal to the soul. In each of these prayers, it appears as though the soul has the right to command that the portals be opened, rather than have to plead for this. Mithrasliturgie, pp. 3-15.

As the soul went through the different zones, it would rid itself of its passions and vices. To the moon it lost its vital and nutritive energy, to Mercury its desires; to Venus, its wicked appetites; to the Sun, its intellectual capacities; to Mars, its love of war; to Jupiter, its ambitious dreams; to Saturn, its inclinations to evil. Finally, naked and stripped of every vice and sensibility, it entered the eighth heaven to enjoy eternal bliss.⁵⁸

Closely related to these beliefs in the immortality of the soul is the picture of judgment day, and the resurrection of the body which Mithraism presented. Mithraism maintained that at the end of time, there would be another great struggle between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman, preceded by many plagues caused by the latter. In this battle, Ahura Mazda, with the help of his archangels will be victorious. Upon his victory, Mithra will descend from heaven. At the same time, a marvellous bull similar to the first which Mithra slew, will reappear on the earth. Mithra will then raise up all the bodies of the dead, both of the good and of the evil, and will then offer up the sacred bull. He will mix the blood of this bull with the juice of the sacred Haoma⁵⁹ and will offer this mixture to all the just, thereby imparting to them eternal life. All those who will have been raised will assume their former appearances, and will recognize one another.⁶⁰ Some beliefs in connection with the resurrection and judgment are not always identically expressed. For instance Reinach presents evidence for the be-

⁵⁸Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, pp. 144-145.

⁵⁹The Haoma was the source of the intoxicating drink used by the Mithraists to celebrate their communion meal. The meal itself is discussed infra, pp. 52f.

⁶⁰Angus also gives evidence of a belief that family ties would be maintained even after this resurrection. Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity, p. 143.

belief that although the wicked will be punished, this punishment will be temporary only, and eventually, after a great fire, all the world will be purified and even the wicked will unite in the adoration of Ahura Mazda.⁶¹ Cumont on the other hand shows that there was a belief in the total annihilation of the wicked.⁶²

The doctrines of Mithraism regarding the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the body and the final judgment have been treated as a unit because they are all so inter-related. To these doctrines we must now compare the Christian view of eschatological events. In doing this, we notice that unlike the other areas of doctrine, the eschatology of Mithraism contains a considerable amount of detail on which the Christian doctrine does not speak. The New Testament does state that on the last day Christ will visibly return,⁶³ that He will raise up all the dead,⁶⁴ that He will separate those who believed in Him from those who did not and give to the believers eternal life while the unbelievers will suffer eternal damnation.⁶⁵ But the New Testament still leaves very many questions unanswered, questions which Mithraism attempted to answer in a positive way. There is, for instance, nothing in the New Testament to compare with the ascent of the soul as set forth in the teachings of Mithraism. Even the events connected with the final day of the Lord are not so clearly defined in the Christian faith as they are for Mithraism. While Christ did give His disciples many signs that would precede His second coming, He also said that His coming would take place when it was least expected, "like a thief in the night."⁶⁶ In

⁶¹Salomon Reinach, Orpheus: A History of Religions, translated by Florence Simmonds (New York: Liveright Publishing Corp., c.1930), p. 68.

⁶²Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, p. 146.

⁶³Luke 21:27.

⁶⁴2 Corinthians 5:10.

⁶⁵Matthew 25:41-46.

⁶⁶1 Thessalonians 5:2.

Mithraism however, there would be at least the concrete signs of a battle between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman, the appearance of another sacred bull, and, according to some reports, the bearing of a messiah by a virgin on the last day.⁶⁷

It has been said that its doctrine of the future life probably provided Mithraism with its strongest appeal to men, and therefore it is understandable that in this very area it contained more specific doctrine, more facts which could be imparted to man, than in many other areas of its limited theology combined. However, this greater abundance of specific details does not necessarily make the eschatology of Mithraism superior to that of Christianity. There are in fact, several very basic differences. While Mithraism held that the wicked are eventually saved, or, according to other reports, that they are completely annihilated, Christianity suggested neither of these two ends for those who reject Christ. Jesus Himself clearly stated that they that have done evil shall go "unto the resurrection of damnation."⁶⁸ For He will say to them, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels."⁶⁹

Apart from this basic difference, the general idea of a return of the deity preceded by signs, of a final conflict between God and the evil one, and of a resurrection of all the dead with eternal life imparted to all the faithful is common to both Mithraism and Christianity. Other differences are in detail only, such as in the impartation of eternal life to

⁶⁷Reinach, Orpheus: A History of Religions, p. 68.

⁶⁸John 5:29.

⁶⁹Matthew 25:41.

the faithful Mithraists by drinking a magic potion—a feature entirely lacking in the Christian picture of eschatology. Also lacking is the re-sacrifice of the sacred bull. A corollary to this might possibly be that Jesus Christ would again return to be sacrificed once more, but this thought is also foreign to the Holy Scriptures.⁷⁰ The decision as to whether the mere fact that the eschatologies of Mithraism and of Christianity are at least somewhat analogous proves a basic similarity or a possible case of borrowing will be left to a later section.

Similarities to Christianity in Practice and Customs

A Baptism as an Initiatory Rite

The association of a washing in water with a spiritual regeneration was by no means limited to Mithraism, much less to Christianity. It was in very common use by almost all the mystery-religions. Thus, for instance, Tertullian states:

In certain mysteries, e.g., of Isis and Mithra, it is by baptism (per lavacrum) that members are initiated. . . . In the Apollinarian and Eleusinian rites they are baptized and they imagine that the result of this baptism is regeneration and the remission of the penalties of their sins.⁷¹

Similar washings were in use long before the mystery religions adopted them, although not always with the identical spiritual significance attached to them.⁷²

⁷⁰Hebrews 9:28. "So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for Him shall He appear the second time without sin unto salvation."

⁷¹MPL, "De Baptismo, V," I, 1312-13; "De Praescriptionibus, XL," II, 54-55.

⁷²Leviticus 16:24-28; 2 Chronicles 4:6. Thus the command of John the Baptist to be baptized was one which could readily be understood by all.

Mithraic baptism was sometimes carried out through sprinkling, but more frequently through total immersion of the neophyte.⁷³ It appears as though this baptism was repeated frequently,⁷⁴ probably as the mystic advanced from one grade to the next. When the mystic was received into the order of Lion, however, he was not baptized with water, since the lion symbolized the principle of fire, and water would be its enemy. Therefore, to preserve the mystic from sin, honey was applied to his hands and to his tongue.⁷⁵ It has also been pointed out that initiatory baptism into some of the lower grades was accorded even to male children.⁷⁶

In connection with the water baptism of Mithraism, one other type of baptism must be considered, that frequently referred to as the taurobolium. In simple terms this meant that the initiate was "baptized" in the blood of a bull. This taurobolium was not original with Mithraism but was probably borrowed from the cult of the Great Mother, who in turn borrowed it from earlier Cappadocian mysteries.⁷⁷ For this rite, a crude trench was dug, over which planks were loosely laid with considerable spaces between them. On this platform the sacrificial bull was slaughtered, with the blood dripping down onto the initiate who either stood⁷⁸ or reclined below.⁷⁹ The classic account of what this taurobolium was like comes from the pen of a Christian poet, Prudentius. He writes:

⁷³Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity, p. 89.

⁷⁴Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, p. 157.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 156.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 160.

⁷⁸Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity, p. 94.

⁷⁹Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, p. 180.

Through the thousand crevices in the wood, the bloody dew runs down into the pit. The neophyte receives the falling drops on his head, clothes and body. He leans backward to have his cheek, his ears, his lips and his nostrils wetted; he pours the liquid over his eyes, and does not even spare his palate, for he moistens his tongue with blood and drinks it eagerly.⁸⁰

Cumont concludes his description of this act by a statement which would more nearly summarize our reaction. He calls the taurobolium "a disgusting shower-bath of luke-warm blood."⁸¹ Purified by this bloody act, the initiate then stepped forth to be greeted by the spectators, with the firm belief that he had been thus purified from his sins. As a "taurobolati" he was reborn from sin for a period of twenty years.⁸² By the time of Julian it was held that such a one was reborn for eternity, "renatus in aeternum."⁸³

A great deal of speculation has been employed in search of the significance of the bull for this sacred act. The most obvious and logical solution would be to relate the slaying of this sacred bull with the slaying of the bull by Mithra. It has been argued, however, notably by Robertson⁸⁴ and Carpenter⁸⁵ that a zodiacal interpretation must be given to this act. Since Mithra was basically a sun-deity, particular significance came to be attached to the period of the year when the sun was at the vernal equinox. These men argue that the sun originally entered the sign of the bull in the zodiac at that very time, and therefore the bull was given special

⁸⁰Quoted by Franz Cumont, The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism, translator not named (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, c.1911), p. 66.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 208.

⁸²Hock, op. cit., p. 424.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Robertson, Mithraism, in Religious Systems of the World, pp. 200-02.

⁸⁵Carpenter, op. cit., p. 47.

significance. Due to the precession of the equinoxes, in the course of about two thousand years, the sun began to enter the sign of the ram instead of the bull at the vernal equinox. They claim that this accounts for the occasional substitution of a ram for a bull, making a criobolium instead of a taurobolium.⁸⁶

Outwardly there was probably very little difference between the water baptisms the Christians performed and those employed by the Mithraists. Both employed immersion as well as sprinkling, depending upon the circumstances. For this reason, it has been suggested that the specified formula "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,"⁸⁷ was used to designate and to differentiate between the Christian baptism and the baptism of these pagan cults.⁸⁸ One must admit therefore, that when Christ gave His disciples the command to baptize, He was not asking them to perform an act which would always be the singular property of the Christian Church. As far as outward comparisons between the baptism of Mithraism and that of Christianity are concerned, the only possible one that would be obvious would be that whereas the baptism of Mithra was repeated frequently, that of Christ was performed once, and its efficacy lasted for life. A consideration of the basic theological differences between the two baptisms, the differences in meaning and purpose, will be considered along with a comparison of the communion meals of the two religions.

⁸⁶Both Carpenter and Robertson also argue at length that there was a direct association between this slaying of a ram, and the Old Testament sacrifices. However, many of their arguments become extremely naive, when Carpenter for instance says that the reason Moses chided the children of Israel for making the golden calf was that they were thereby signifying they were still devoted to the bull in the zodiacal system, whereas the time had already come when the sun was entering the sign of the ram at the vernal equinox, and they should therefore adjust their sacrifices accordingly. Carpenter, op. cit., p. 47.

⁸⁷Matthew 28:19.

⁸⁸Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, translated by Walter Albrecht (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, c.1958) III, 258.

A Communion Meal of Bread and Wine

One of the most common rites of Mithraism was that of the common meal consisting of bread and a mildly intoxicating drink. When Mithraism was still developing in its native Persia, the custom was for the celebrant to consecrate bread and water mixed with the intoxicating juice of the Haoma. Thereupon he would eat this meal, sometimes alone, sometimes together with his fellow-worshippers. In the west, grape wine was substituted for the Haoma, because the latter was unknown.

We know very little of the manner in which the Mithraic communion was celebrated. Cumont, however, shows an interesting bas-relief that may represent one method of celebration. Two people are stretched out on a low couch. Before them are four tiny loaves of bread, each one marked with a cross. One of the initiates is holding a drinking horn, which undoubtedly contains the consecrated wine.⁸⁹

It has been suggested⁹⁰ that St. Paul was familiar with this custom of the Mithraists and therefore warned the Corinthian Christians against taking part in the practice when he wrote, "Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils."⁹¹ Whether or not Paul was here actually referring to the mystery religions cannot be known with certainty, although the possibility of such a reference is strong. It is certain, however,

⁸⁹Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, p. 159.

⁹⁰Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity, p. 128.

⁹¹1 Corinthians 10:21.

that the church fathers were very well acquainted with this communion of the Mithraists. They must have recognized these similarities, and therefore countered with the accusations that the devil had produced these similarities. Thus Justin Martyr writes of the Lord's Supper:

Which the wicked devils have imitated in the mysteries of Mithras, commanding the same thing to be done. For that bread and a cup of water are placed with certain incantations in the mystic rites of one who is being initiated, you either know or can learn.⁹²

Like the communion observed by Christians, this rite also was allowed only to those who had reached a certain degree of fellowship. The communion of Mithra was not given to one until he had reached the stage of *Idon*.⁹³ Thereafter he was called a participant, a *μετέχωνος*.⁹⁴

There seems to have been a similarity also in the actual occasion in the life of the deity to which this sacred meal was to refer. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper for His church, He was with that celebrating His farewell meal with His disciples, after which His early activities would come to their climactic end.⁹⁵ For faithful Mithraists, the sacred meal was also a remembrance of the last meal which Mithra ate with Helios, to mark the completion of his earthly duties, after which he ascended back to Ahura Mazda.⁹⁶

The very severe charge levied by Justin Martyr, namely that the Mithraic communion meal was a prefabrication of the devil, shows that it was

⁹²MG, "Apologia I, 66," VI, 430.

⁹³Dill, *op. cit.*, p. 612.

⁹⁴*Cf.* the Christian term, "communicant."

⁹⁵Matthew 26.

⁹⁶Fritz Danneil, Das Heilige Mahl im Glauben der Voelker (Guetersloh, C. Bertelsmann Verlag, c.1950), p. 92.

precisely at this point that the similarities between Mithraism and Christianity seemed the greatest, at least to the outside observer. But to fully evaluate these similarities one must go behind the outward forms and compare the significance which was attached to these acts, as well as the benefits which the faithful hoped to receive from them. Perhaps the prime benefit that the *ΜΕΤΕΧΟΥΤΕΣ* of Mithra hoped to receive from their sacred meal was the gift of immortality.⁹⁷ While they undoubtedly also frequently associated more material benefits with the reception of the bread and wine such as health, prosperity, wisdom, and protection against evil spirits,⁹⁸ it nevertheless seems that the real import of this sacred act was directed toward the life to come. Now it may be said that the Lord's Supper as instituted by Christ also indirectly offers eternal life as one of its benefits. It does this however, not because of the mere eating of the bread and drinking of the wine, but rather because of the relationship of the sacrament to the atoning work of Christ, as performed in His life, death, and resurrection. Jesus Himself, in instituting the sacrament related the drinking of the wine directly to his own death: "This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you."⁹⁹

Along with the promise of immortality, the Mithraic rites of initiation, both those of baptism and of the sacred meal, proposed to effect a union of the participant with the deity. This was in fact the explicit

⁹⁷Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, p. 160.

⁹⁸Ill, op. cit., p. 613.

⁹⁹Luke 22:20

purpose of these initiatory rites. The result is, as Dieterich said, "Die Mysterien sind in Gott oder Gott ist in ihnen, sie werden seine Kinder oder seine Brueder."¹⁰⁰ This very belief is expressed in the Mithrasliturgie, where the suppliant prays, "abide with me in my soul: leave me not" and "that I may be initiated and that the holy spirit may breathe within me."¹⁰¹ Some ancient inscriptions indicate a belief in a complete identification of personality with the deity, so that the initiate even loses his own identity.¹⁰² It must be admitted that Paul also expressed a certain communion with God as being the result of the sacraments, both of baptism and of the Lord's Supper. With regard to baptism, for instance, St. Paul says, "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ."¹⁰³ A type of communion with Christ is also implicit in the words of the institution of the Lord's Supper, "Take, eat, this is my Body."¹⁰⁴ Many other statements in the New Testament also speak of the intimate relationship between Christ and one who believes in Him. Jesus Himself prayed that His wish might be fulfilled: "I in them and thou in me,"¹⁰⁵ Paul said of himself, "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,"¹⁰⁶ and of his fellow Christians he said, "For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁰Mithrasliturgie, pp. 174-75.

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. 4, 14.

¹⁰²Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity, p. 102.

¹⁰³Galatians 3:27.

¹⁰⁴Matthew 26:26.

¹⁰⁵John 17:23.

¹⁰⁶Galatians 2:20.

¹⁰⁷Colossians 3:3.

For St. Paul this communion meant a very close personal relationship between Christ and the believer, but it did not mean a complete identification. The Christian became like Christ, but he did not become Christ. The initiate into the rites of Mithra on the other hand would say of his god, "Thou art I, and I am Thou."¹⁰⁸ St. Paul had very valid reasons for stressing his personal communion with Christ. He had himself experienced a miraculous conversion on the road to Damascus.¹⁰⁹ There he had personally seen Christ and heard Him speak to him. From that day on he felt that whether he lived or died he belonged to the Lord. But this was only because Christ had reached down and rescued him, not because he had climbed up and found God. Although Mithra held the position of Mediator, this communion with him was the result of man's striving for union by becoming initiated into the mysteries, not because of any gracious descent on the part of a deity.

Upon a closer study of the sacraments of Christianity and those of Mithraism, a further basic difference presents itself. There can be no doubt that the Mithraists believed in the ex opere operato effectiveness of their baptism and of their communion meal. This was true of all the rites of the various mystery religions. They always supposed a magical intervention, not clearly understood, but surely believed to be present.¹¹⁰ Because of this magical association, it was necessary for instance, in the

¹⁰⁸Quoted by Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity, p. 291.

¹⁰⁹Acts 9.

¹¹⁰Henry Sheldon, New Testament Theology (New York: The MacMillan Company, c.1913), p. 363.

Eleusinian mysteries, that the formulae connected with the rites should be pronounced with the correct intonation, lest they be of no value.¹¹¹ For this reason, it was absolutely essential that the rites be performed only by priests.¹¹²

Those who assume a close relationship between the sacraments of the mystery religions and those expounded by St. Paul operate on the principal that St. Paul himself held the ex opere operato view of the sacraments. There is, however, no support in the Pauline epistles for such a view, and there is a great deal that speaks against it. The fact that St. Paul was not such a "sacramentalist"¹¹³ is shown already in his attitude toward circumcision:

He is not a Jew which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter.¹¹⁴

Or again he says, "In Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love."¹¹⁵ Paul was not condemning circumcision as being evil or harmful, but was merely stating that the mere rite was of no value, and that whether one was circumcised or uncircumcised, God would still justify him only through faith.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹Henry Sheldon, The Mystery Religions and the New Testament (New York: Abingdon Press, c.1918), p. 31.

¹¹²Samuel Angus, The Religious Quests of the Graeco-Roman World (London: John Murray, c.1929), p. 199.

¹¹³The term is here used to designate one who attributes salvation to the mere outward performances of the sacraments.

¹¹⁴Romans 2:28-29.

¹¹⁵Galatians 5:6.

¹¹⁶Romans 3:30.

Particularly with regard to the doctrine of baptism it has been alleged that the Pauline expression of that doctrine indicates sacramentalism. It is true that St. Paul says, "we are buried with Him by baptism into death,"¹¹⁷ but the expression "by baptism" does not mean that it is the mere act of applying water to a person that gives to him the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection. For St. Paul there is one thing that makes the work death and resurrection of Christ valid for a person, and that is his faith.¹¹⁸

The passage which is probably most quoted to show that St. Paul believed in the ex opere operato efficacy of the sacraments is 1 Corinthians 15:29, where Paul speaks of a baptism for the dead (*βαπτισμα ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν*) which may have been a custom of the church at one time. It has never yet been conclusively determined exactly what the nature of this custom was, and therefore it is not logically sound to use this passage to attempt to prove Paul's sacramentalism. Even if this were a common custom of the Corinthian Christians, St. Paul does not in this passage in any way sanction it, but merely uses it as an example to show the inter-relation of the resurrection of our bodies to the resurrection of Christ.¹¹⁹ It is thus impossible to prove from the New Testament that either Jesus, the disciples, or the Apostle Paul considered the sacraments to be efficacious by the mere outward performing of the act, as was the opinion held by the followers of the mystery religions.

¹¹⁸Romans 3:28,30; Ephesians 2:8.

¹¹⁹There seems to be evidence that this custom of baptizing for the dead became quite wide-spread after the time of the apostles, so that it had to be officially condemned at the Synod of Hippo in 393.

Another point which speaks against any sacramentalism in St. Paul is that he never confined the administration of these sacraments to a priesthood. In the mystery religions, also in Mithraism, this was one of the specific functions of the pater.¹²⁰ It is significant, however, that not once does the New Testament mention priests as being among the "gifts" of Christ to His Church. The only "priests" in the Christian church are the people who have come to faith in His atonement.¹²¹

Furthermore, it should be noted that St. Paul nowhere ascribes an absolute necessity to either baptism or the Lord's Supper. If baptism had been an absolute necessity for salvation, it would have been an admission of negligence for St. Paul to state, "I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius."¹²² Even Jesus refused to pronounce on the absolute necessity of baptism when He said, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."¹²³ The same lack of absolute necessity is true of the Lord's Supper, by the very fact that those who receive it are to first examine themselves,¹²⁴ and this automatically excludes a considerable number of people. In the mystery religions however, these rites of initiation were absolutely necessary, especially that of baptism.¹²⁵

¹²⁰Angus, The Religious Quests of the Graeco-Roman World, p. 199.

¹²¹1 Peter 2:9.

¹²²1 Corinthians 1:14.

¹²³Mark 16:16.

¹²⁴1 Corinthians 11:28.

¹²⁵Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity, p. 253.

The Observance of Sunday as a Day of Worship

It has frequently been suggested by many historians¹²⁶ that almost all of the present festivals observed by the Christian church have their origin in corresponding pagan festivals of pre-Christian times. Although it would be impossible to consider every major and minor church festival from this angle, it may be well to consider the three days to which pagan origins are most frequently attributed. These are Sunday as the weekly day of worship, Christmas, and Easter. In making this study, one is under a much more serious handicap than in the study of the actual theological teachings of Christianity as compared to Mithraism. For the choice of certain days on which to worship are matters of pure custom, and the Scriptures do not pronounce any regulations governing the choice of such days. The Christian celebration of these days can therefore be considered only from the viewpoint of what the early Christians did, rather than from what Christ commanded them to do, for it is extremely doubtful that Christ ever gave such commands.

It seems to be an established fact that the first day of the week, Sunday, was for many centuries before Christ, especially devoted to Mithra.¹²⁷ This seems to be quite understandable since Mithra was primarily a sun-god, and therefore his day should be the Sun-day, a name which we still apply to that day in our own times. Jesus Himself, for practical reasons, and also to fulfill the requirements of the Mosaic Law, observed the Sabbath as the

¹²⁶A typical example is J. G. Frazer, The Golden Bough (Third revised edition; London: MacMillan and Co., c.1914), Part IV, p. 308.

¹²⁷Dill, op. cit., p. 611.

day of worship,¹²⁸ and as a day on which to preach to others.¹²⁹ St. Luke records that as late as the second missionary journey of St. Paul, it was customary for prayers to be offered on the Sabbath;¹³⁰ and that it was also St. Paul's habit to speak to new prospects on the Sabbath, probably because at that time they would be gathered together in one place.

In time, however, the Sabbath came to be more and more a distinguishing mark of those who wanted to make of Christianity a form of neo-Judaism, and St. Paul therefore was compelled to say, "Let no man therefore judge you . . . in respect of a holy day . . . or a sabbath day."¹³¹ Thus it became more and more common to observe Sunday instead of the Sabbath as the Lord's Day. By the time of St. Paul's third missionary journey, it was already common practice among the Christians to assemble on the first day of the week, both for worship and for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Thus we read, "And upon the first day of the week when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them."¹³² By the end of the first century, the first day of the week is actually designated "The Lord's Day."¹³³ The writings of the Post-Apostolic fathers contain frequent references to Sunday as the accepted day of worship for Christians.

What is of more interest to us, however, is the type of reasons the fathers gave for preferring Sunday over against the Sabbath. Writing to the Magnesians early in the second century, Ignatius speaks of "the Lord's

¹²⁸Luke 4:16.

¹²⁹Mark 6:2.

¹³⁰Acts 16:13.

¹³¹Colossians 2:16.

¹³²Acts 20:7.

¹³³Revelation 1:10.

Day, on which our life too rose through Him and His death. . . ."134 During the first half of the second century, Barnabas wrote, "This is why we also observe the eighth day with rejoicing, on which Jesus also rose from the dead. . . ."135 One of the most significant references to Sunday in the second century, and one which states also the reasons why the Christians chose this day is that made by Justin Martyr. He is describing a Sunday Service of worship in Rome:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in the cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying "Amen."; and there is a distribution to each and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. . . ."136

It is apparent therefore, that by the middle of the second century this congregation was observing a fairly complete worship service, together with the celebration of the Lord's Supper every Sunday. Justin Martyr then goes on to give the reasons for selecting Sunday for this worship:

But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead. For he was crucified on the day before that of Saturn, and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples. . . ."137

134"Letter of Ignatius to the Magnesians IX, 1," in The Apostolic Fathers, translated by Edgar J. Goodspeed (New York: Harper and Brothers c.1950),

135"Letter of Barnabas XV,9," in The Apostolic Fathers, translated by Edgar J. Goodspeed (New York: Harper and Brothers, c.1950).

136MFG, "Apologia I, 66," VI, 430.

137Ibid.

In view of the fact that Sunday had for centuries previously been dedicated to the worship of Mithra, and that the Christian apologists nevertheless propose entirely different reasons for having chosen Sunday as their day of worship, the question presents itself, just why did the Christians decide to worship on Sunday, instead of any other day of the week? It has been suggested that St. Paul is the first one who began to use Sunday as a day of worship, and that since Mithraism had been strong in Asia Minor, particularly at Tarsus, the place of Paul's birth,¹³⁸ the apostle directly borrowed the use of this day from the Mithraists, in order to replace the Sabbath.¹³⁹ It should be noted, however, that the use of Sunday for worship was begun during the second missionary journey of Paul, or even before that time. Since Paul was constantly traveling at this time, it would have been impossible and impractical for him to try to limit his services to Sunday. Furthermore, St. Paul who wrote to the Colossians to be on their guard lest anyone try to judge them with respect to certain holy days, and thus make fixed worship a matter of conscience,¹⁴⁰ would have been the last one to go against his own principle and impose a certain day as the obligatory day of worship.

Another theory based on the hypothesis that the Christian Sunday was borrowed from the Mithraists is that the early apostles chose this day in order to counteract the influence that Mithraism was gaining. By having

¹³⁸Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, p. 32.

¹³⁹Gordon Laing, Survivals of Roman Religion, Vol. XXV of Our Debt to Greece and Rome (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., c.1931), p. 149.

¹⁴⁰Colossians 2:16.

their meeting days the same as those of their rival cult, they would force people to show allegiance to one faith or the other, and in this way maintain control over many of their own members who through their weak faith might be interested in exploring the mysteries of Mithra. The passage on which this hypothesis is usually based is that from the post-apostolic treatise, the Didache. There the writer urges the Christians to gather together for communion and worship *κατὰ κυριακῆν δὲ Κυρίου*.¹⁴¹ It has been thought that this special emphasis is used to differentiate the Lord's day of the Lord, from the day commonly devoted to Mithra.¹⁴² This expression however, could well be translated, "the Lord's own day."¹⁴³ As such the thought could be that whereas every day must be wholly dedicated to the Lord, this one is His in a special way, insomuch as on this day the entire Christian community gathers for corporate worship.

In opposition to the theories that the church borrowed Sunday directly from Mithraism, there stand the arguments advanced by the church fathers themselves, which have already been listed, namely that Sunday was chosen as a remembrance of the day of creation, and as the day of Christ's resurrection.¹⁴⁴ Whether the reasons advanced by the early fathers of the Christian faith, or whether those proposed by modern historians are the valid ones, will probably forever remain undecided. History can record for us

¹⁴¹The Didache XIV, 1" in The Apostolic Fathers, translated by Edgar J. Goodspeed (New York: Harper and Brothers, c.1950),

¹⁴²Laing, op. cit., p. 149.

¹⁴³As does Goodspeed, loc. cit.

¹⁴⁴The post-apostolic fathers did not seem to use the argument that Sunday was also the day on which the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the Christian Church.

facts and events, but it can never fully reveal inner motives. These remain forever in the realm of speculation unless explicitly stated. There is this in favor of the reasons advanced by the church fathers, namely that at the time Sunday was becoming popular as a day of public worship, Mithraism was not yet very powerful along the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean, the area in which the custom undoubtedly began.¹⁴⁵ Thus whatever the reasons were for selecting Sunday as a day of worship, whether they were for those proposed by Justin Martyr, or whether they were also an attempt to cope with a rival faith, it must be admitted that the first day of the week is uniquely suited to be the Lord's special day, mostly because of the fact that Christ rose on that day, and thus provided the Christian faith with its very heart and core.

Observance of a common date for the Nativity of the Deity

It has been admitted by almost all reputable scholars who concern themselves with the subject, that the selection of the twenty-fifth day of December as the day on which to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ was not one made by the apostolic or even the post-apostolic church. The apostolic church did not seem to be concerned with the precise birthdate of the Christ. Even the evangelist St. Luke, who as a historian is far more precise in his details than any other evangelist, and who mentions the time during which Jesus was born, did not record His birthdate. It seems that the entire emphasis on knowing one's birthdate was rather an Aryan custom and did not concern the Jews very much.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Cf. infra, p. 84.

¹⁴⁶ Walter Hyde, Paganism to Christianity in the Roman Empire (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, c.1946), p. 249.

The date which the church first chose on which to remember the Lord's birthday was the sixth day of January. This date was to commemorate His epiphany to the wise men of the East, His baptism, and only incidentally, His birth in Bethlehem. Thus it is that the actual observance of December the twenty-fifth as the day of Christ's birth cannot be dated earlier than about 353 at Rome,¹⁴⁷ and around 377 at Constantinople.¹⁴⁸ It appears as though the choice of this day was a direct borrowing from Mithraism. According to the Julian calendar, the winter solstice¹⁴⁹ was set for the twenty-fifth day of December.¹⁵⁰ ¹⁵¹ Because this day marked the lengthening of the sun's course through the sky, it was considered to be the birthday of the sun. Since the sun was associated with Mithra, the Sol Invictus, this day developed into one of the chief festivals of Mithraism. Along with the ceremony and celebrations which very early began to accompany this day, there was also a considerable amount of moral abandon and carefree living. As the leaders of the Christian churches beheld the pagan observance of this festival, they soon realized that their people could not be allowed to take part in these ceremonies without definite danger to their spiritual lives. The result was that the Christian church decided to celebrate the physical birth of their own Savior on that very same day. In so doing, they were not stating their belief that Jesus Christ was actually born on that day,

¹⁴⁷Ibid.

¹⁴⁸Idem, op. cit., p. 153.

¹⁴⁹The day on which the sun began to rise earlier on the horizon, marking the return to warmer weather.

¹⁵⁰Fraser, op. cit., p. 303.

¹⁵¹Our calendars today generally place it around the twentieth or twenty-first of December.

but that since the day of His birth was unknown, that day would be as appropriate as any other in order to commemorate His incarnation. Perhaps it may be well to consider the report of a Syrian Christian regarding the choice of December the twenty-fifth as the day of the Nativity:

The reason why the fathers transferred the celebration of the sixth of January to the twenty-fifth of December was this. It was a custom of the heathen to celebrate on the same twenty-fifth of December the birthday of the Sun, at which they kindled lights in token of festivity. In these solemnities and festivities the Christians also took part. Accordingly when the doctors of the Church perceived that the Christians had a leaning to this festival, they took counsel and resolved that the true Nativity should be solemnized on that day and the festival of the Epiphany of the sixth of January.¹⁵²

When present-day Christians discover that the day which they regard so highly as the birthday of Christ was really based on a pagan religion, they are usually somewhat alarmed at this startling discovery. After considerable reflection, they are apt to allow this thought to shake even the foundations of their Christian faith. However, it is well to remember that the only factor in this problem that can definitely be shown to be a borrowing, is the selection of the date. The date itself is of secondary importance. Of primary importance is the event of Christ's birth. History cannot disprove the authenticity of the actual event of Christ's birth. It is the actual birth of Christ which Christians today observe. The mere day on which they observe it is nothing more than a custom, as are the lights, trees and other outer features connected with that season. Nor should it be strange that the Church would borrow the day for these celebrations from the pagan world. There are festivals which we observe in our Church today of purely extra-Christian origin, which we nevertheless observe with deepest devotion in our churches, even though these are not in popular piety

¹⁵²Quoted by Frazer, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

comparable to the festival of the Nativity. New Year's Day is strictly a secular day, and is in fact opposed to the calendar of the Church, which begins its new year with the first Sunday in Advent. Yet there is hardly a Christian Church today which on the first day of January does not pay some recognition to the beginning of the new secular year. Another example, though less widespread, is Mother's Day. Although this day is non-Biblical, and does not even concern itself with any event in the life of Christ, it is widely observed by Christian churches in the western world in spite of its recent origin.¹⁵³ A third example is Thanksgiving Day, which, although little more than three centuries old, is nevertheless universally observed in Christian churches in the United States and Canada.

While it is therefore true that the actual day of the twenty-fifth of December was originally dedicated to the Invincible Sun, the fact that the church chose to use it to observe the birthday of the "Sun of righteousness"¹⁵⁴ in no way detracts from the historicity of the birth of Christ.¹⁵⁵

The Observance of a Common Date for the Resurrection of the Deity

It has been suggested that just as the Christian Church borrowed the pagan festival of the invincible sun and applied it to the birth of its own

¹⁵³This day was first observed in Philadelphia in 1906, and transferred to England in 1913.

¹⁵⁴Malachi 4:2.

¹⁵⁵Thus St. Augustine exhorts the brethren not to celebrate that solemn day like the heathen on account of the sun, but on account of Him who made the sun. MFL, "Sermons, CXC," XXXVIII, 1007.

Savior, so the Church also received her celebration of Easter from certain pagan customs.¹⁵⁶ It must be admitted that some of the mystery religions, notably that of Attis, gave a very central position to the doctrine of a crucified and risen deity. The anniversary of this death and resurrection was observed every year at the time of the vernal equinox, usually around the third week of March. In the cult of Attis, for example, the following custom was observed:¹⁵⁷ On the twenty-second day of March, a pine tree was cut and brought to the temple of Cybele. An effigy of a young man was made, tied to the tree, and then crucified. The twenty-fourth day was called the "day of blood," when the high priest would lash his arms till they bled. This so incited the worshippers that they too began slashing themselves, even indulging in the act of supreme self-mutilation until the entire foot of the tree was covered with blood. At night the effigy was laid in a tomb, and everyone mourned. Very early the next morning, a light was brought and the tomb was found to be empty. Sorrow turned to joy, and on the following day, there was unlimited carnival and rioting. During this "Hilaria," everyone might do as he pleased, commit any crime he wished, insult whom-ever he would, and be certain that the deed would not be punished. As far as Mithraism is concerned, there is no evidence of any similar observance until the fourth century. The chief reference to such a custom among the Mithraists comes from the pen of the Christian Firmicius. He describes how the faithful would lay a stone image on a bier late at night and then mourn for it, as though this image represented their dead god. The symbolic corpse

¹⁵⁶Frazer, op. cit., pp. 305f.

¹⁵⁷Based on Carpenter op. cit., p. 42.

was then placed in a tomb, and after a time was secretly withdrawn. Great rejoicing followed thereon, and the priest anointed the throats of the devotees, murmuring slowly, "Be of good courage; you have been instructed in the mysteries, and you shall have salvation from your sorrow."¹⁵⁸ With regard to this reference however, it must be remembered that Firmicus did not write until about the middle of the fourth century, and it is very probable that by that time Mithraism would have borrowed some details of this observance from the cult of Attis, or even from its rival, Christianity.

To say that Christianity borrowed the observance of Easter from Mithraism or even from the cult of Attis, is contradicting historical facts. From the references of almost all the early church fathers it is apparent that the resurrect of Christ had always been the central point of their theology, particularly in the churches of the East. Easter therefore, was probably the earliest church festival to become universally observed. Its observance is indicated already in 1 Corinthians 5:8, as evidence of the fact that this festival dates back to apostolic times. There never was any question as to its observance, and the nature of that observance. The only question which did arise was one concerning the exact date on which Christ's crucifixion should be observed, whether on the fourteenth of Nisan, regardless of the day of the week, or on a given Friday after the first full moon of the spring equinox. From the beginning it was clear to all that this day marked the physical resurrection of their Lord. Some of these disciples had been present when Christ was betrayed into the hands of His murderers. Others witnessed His trial, many of them no doubt stood staring

¹⁵⁸cited by John M. Robertson, Pagan Christs (second edition; London: Watts and Co., c.1911), p. 306.

at the center cross which bore Him. Even more were privileged to see Him after His resurrection. Thus there is not the slightest possibility that this great festival day could have had its origin in any outwardly analogous pagan rite. In the minds of all concerned, it was an historical event.¹⁵⁹

The Problem of Relationship

Between Christianity and Mithraism

Basic Views and Attitudes Toward This Problem

One purpose for the study of history is that the student may be able to analyze facts and evaluate possible relationships between these facts. A great deal has been said and written regarding the relationships of Mithraism to Christianity. Some views have been extremely radical, asserting either that there was a wholesale borrowing from Mithraism by Christianity, or that Christianity was merely an outgrowth of the former. These views usually come from men who are anxious to find in all religions a basically common theology. Thus for instance, Carpenter even goes so far as to say that Christianity was basically identical not only to Mithraism, but to all the mystery religions. Concerning the Apostle's Creed, he writes:

One has only, instead of the word "Jesus" to read Dionysus, or Krishna or Hercules or Osiris or Attis, and instead of "Mary" to insert Semele or Devaki or Alcmena or Heith or Hana, and for Pontius Pilate to use the name of any terrestrial tyrant who comes into the corresponding story, and lo! the creed fits in all particulars into the rites and worship of a pagan god.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹Whether the very idea of a resurrection of a deity represents a similarity between Christianity and the mystery religions will be discussed infra, pp. 83f.

¹⁶⁰Carpenter, op. cit., p. 164.

Many German scholars agree with this basic supposition. Thus, when Leopoldt speaks of the fact that there was once a Mithraeum under the present location of the church of St. Clement in Rome, he says,

das ist kein Zufall (that the Mithraeum is just one story under the original altar of the old church) . . . die eine Religion wurde die Nachfolgerin der anderen.¹⁶¹

A similar viewpoint is held by Schneider, a contemporary German scholar, who states that all the previous ideas of the mystery-deities became crystallized in Christ, customs were directly borrowed from the mysteries, and therefore the transition of an individual from the mysteries to Christianity was no serious move.¹⁶²

On the other hand, there have undoubtedly been those who, although their voice was not generally heard, steadfastly believed and taught that there was absolutely no similarity between Christianity and the mystery religions, and that these pagan religions could certainly not have influenced the Church which Jesus Christ founded upon earth. Such a viewpoint, however, can be held only if one is ignorant of the historical facts, or blind to them.

Before we can come to a decision which is historically accurate, we must realize that in making comparisons and evaluating relationships, certain distinctions must be maintained. It is one thing to consider the relationship of the mystery religions to the actual Gospel of Jesus Christ, as taught by Him, by His apostles, and as expressed in the canonical writ-

¹⁶¹Johannes Leopoldt, Die Religion des Mithra in Bilderatlas zur Religionsgeschichte, herausgegeben von Hans Haas (Leipzig: A. Deichertsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, c.1930), p. 5.

¹⁶²Carl Schneider, Geistesgeschichte des Antiken Christentums (München: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, c.1934), II, 237.

ings of the New Testament, and it is quite another thing to speak of the influence of the mystery religions on the church itself, particularly on the post-apostolic church. Along with this distinction there must be observed a further distinction as to the exact nature of this relationship. We can speak of a relationship or an influence in three areas, in material content of the opposing theologies, in the modes of expression and terminology which was employed, and in the meaning and sense which this terminology was to convey. What may be a similarity in one of these areas, may be a radical difference in another.

Relationship of Mithraism to the Christianity of the New Testament.

We shall consider first the possible influence of the mystery religions, particularly of Mithraism, upon the theology of the New Testament. It must first of all be stated that there cannot be the slightest thought of any influence by the mystery religions upon the theology of Jesus Himself. Throughout His ministry, He made it apparent to all that His theology was not of this earth, but from heaven¹⁶³ and thus had a supernatural origin. He had come not to declare the word of men, but the word of God, more than that, to declare God Himself.¹⁶⁴ The doctrine He taught was not His, as a man, but came from Him who had sent Him.¹⁶⁵ He who had the words of eternal life did not have to borrow from any thoughts of men. Thus Jesus Himself excluded the possibility of any human influence upon the material, form, and meaning of His theology.

¹⁶³John 3:12.

¹⁶⁴John 1:18.

¹⁶⁵John 7:16.

In considering the theology of St. Paul, some scholars are more ready to suggest a possible influence by the mystery religions. The most extreme view is probably held by Carpenter who says that St. Paul himself was "quite possibly an initiate in the mysteries."¹⁶⁶ Angus proposes a moderating view by suggesting that

as a wise missionary, eager to bring the Gentiles to Christianity, Paul was not the man to refuse to avail himself of the propaedeutic value of the current sacramental ideas of his converts from the pagan guilds, for whom the mysteries had proved a "paedagogue to Christ" as the Law to Israel.¹⁶⁷

Schneider says that Paul openly advocated this theory of borrowing from the mysteries by saying, "all things are yours, and you are Christ's."¹⁶⁸ He concludes, "damit war von Anfang an dem Christentum die Möglichkeit gegeben, die antike Welt in sich aufzunehmen."¹⁶⁹

In considering any possible relationship between St. Paul and the mystery religions, the general attitude of St. Paul for pagan thinking should be kept in mind. His words to the Corinthians indicate the extreme aversion St. Paul had for any and all pagan theology, even if it pretended to present itself under a Christian disguise:

Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? . . . Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate.¹⁷⁰

To St. Paul, the theology of the pagan religions was nothing but the theology of the devil, and "what concord hath Christ with Belial?"¹⁷¹ There-

¹⁶⁶Carpenter, op. cit., p. 252.

¹⁶⁷Angus, Religious Quests of the Graeco-Roman World, p. 199.

¹⁶⁸1 Corinthians 3:22-23.

¹⁶⁹Schneider, op. cit., II, 282.

¹⁷⁰2 Corinthians 6:14, 17.

¹⁷¹2 Corinthians 6:15.

fore, in view of this complete despisal of the vanity of Gentile religions, it is extremely doubtful that St. Paul borrowed any of the theological content of the mystery religions.

Some of those who have not been willing to accuse St. Paul of borrowing doctrinal content from pagan theology have nevertheless felt that the terminology of St. Paul's epistles is largely colored by the terminology of the mystery religions. The words of which St. Paul is most frequently accused of borrowing from the mysteries are: *μυστήριον*, *ψυχικός*, *πνευματικός*, *πνεῦμα*, *τέλειος*, and *κύριος*. All these words were part of the theological nomenclature of the pagan cults of the Hellenic world. St. Paul uses the term *μυστήριον* twelve times in his epistles, but this term was used almost as many times in the Septuagint version of the Bible, one with which St. Paul was no doubt intimately acquainted. The words referring to the spirit of man, *ψυχικός*, *πνευματικός*, and *πνεῦμα*, played a very large part in the doctrines of the mystery religions. While the Hebrew counterparts of these words were undoubtedly well known to St. Paul, it is quite possible that his decision to use these particular words was at least partly the result of their common usage in the Hellenic world at that time. These words, it should be noted, were not the peculiar property of the mystery religions, even as their corresponding English counterparts are not today limited to professional theologians, but form part of the current vocabulary of the common people. This, while these words may have been dictated by their Hellenic use, this is still not to say that St. Paul used them because they were important words in the mystery cults. The word *τέλειος* was used in the mystery religions to speak of the spiritual perfection of the initiate. But that St. Paul did not necessarily have to borrow the term from these sources is brought out by the fact that both the

Septuagint¹⁷² and Paul's contemporary, Philo, also make use of the word.¹⁷³ Although the term *Kύριος* is used frequently in the mysteries, particularly in Mithraism, it was already a familiar term to St. Paul from its very ample use in the Septuagint.¹⁷⁴ From this brief overview of St. Paul's terminology, it can be seen that the apostle did not have to turn to the mystery religions for his theological vocabulary, but that it was suggested to him both by his study of the Septuagint, and by the current popular terminology around him.

To a lesser extent, St. John has also been accused of using terminology derived from the mystery religions. The Johannine concept most frequently mentioned in this connection is that of Christ the Lamb of God, and salvation therefore consisting in being washed in the blood of the lamb.¹⁷⁵ Outwardly, there does seem to be a connection with the taurobolium of the mystery religions. However, it should be remembered that John was a Jew, not a Greek. It is therefore more probable to believe that this concept would have its origin in the Old Testament sacrificial system, where the blood of the lambs and goats slain in sacrifice, pointed ahead to the Lamb of God who should take away the sins of the world.¹⁷⁶

Finally, it must be noted that a mere similarity in theological vocabulary does not in the slightest degree indicate a necessary similarity in the meaning of these words. A look at current theological thought and expression brings this point out. To a large degree, the various branches of

¹⁷²For example, Judges 9:16.

¹⁷³Sheldon, The Mystery Religions and the New Testament, pp. 75-93.

¹⁷⁴Approximately eight thousand times.

¹⁷⁵Robertson, "Mithraism," in Religious Systems of the World, p. 202.

¹⁷⁶The fact that John spent many years in Ephesus would not necessarily incline him toward the mysteries, for Mithraism at least, was almost non-existent in that area. Cf. Appendix B.

the Christian Church are today using a common vocabulary, and even phrases which were once the distinct heritage of a particular body have become the common property of all. And yet it would be totally incorrect to say that this common vocabulary is accompanied by a common theology. For although the same words are used, these words often have an entirely different connotation for different people. A similar situation prevailed at the time of St. Paul. The apostle had to use certain words when speaking of God's plan for men. If he would invent new words as he proceeded, his communication would be meaningless. But the mere fact that he used existing words, in no way implies that he always used the existing meanings of these words.

Relationship of Mithraism to Post-Apostolic Christianity

When considering the influence of Mithraism upon post-apostolic Christianity, it must be recognized that there is a definite difference in the significance of such an influence from any influence upon the theology of the New Testament itself. Already at the time of St. Paul, there were tendencies in the Christian churches to discount the Pauline emphasis on faith in the righteousness of God through Christ, and to stress "knowledge" of God and of divine things.¹⁷⁷ Because of this emphasis on $\gamma\upsilon\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$ this tendency became known as Gnosticism. During his lifetime, Paul fought this evil with bitter vehemence, lest his Christians would lose their true source of wisdom, Christ. After Paul's death, and particularly after the death of the

¹⁷⁷Colossians 2:8.

last of the apostles, St. John, this sect became very influential particularly in the churches of Asia Minor where it could mingle with Greek philosophy. In Gnosticism, therefore, the mystery religions found an open door, by which their influence could invade the Christian church.¹⁷⁸ As a result, Christianity came under the direct influence of a syncretism which represented almost every form of philosophy in the Hellenic world, from the idealism of Plato to the dualism of Mithraism. Exactly how widespread Gnosticism was during its apex in the second century will probably never be determined, but it has been suggested that for a time, the majority of those who considered themselves to be Christians, were followers of some type of Gnosticism.¹⁷⁹

However, it was not in the form of Gnosticism that the mystery religions attempted to bear the greatest influence upon Christianity. About the time that Gnosticism was dying out, Manichaeism was entering the Christian world from the East. With its very strong emphasis on dualism, due to its Persian background, Manichaeism offered a basic view of man and God that was very similar to that of Mithraism. And so it was in this cult, more than in any other, that Mithraism was able to exert a very definite influence on the Christian church, particularly after the beginning of the fourth century. Thus it was that even St. Augustine, before his conversion to orthodox Christianity was a follower of Manichaeism.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸There is evidence to believe that the Gnostics adopted the name Mithra for their own use. By changing it to Μεθρας , and giving each letter its numerical value, they arrived at the total number of days in a year, 365. Robertson, Pagan Christs, p. 334.

¹⁷⁹Kenneth Scott Latourette, A History of Christianity (New York: Harper and Brothers, c.1953), p. 123.

¹⁸⁰Ibid., p. 96.

Of deeper interest is the influence which the centuries of Gnosticism, Manichaeism, and the mystery religions had upon the theology and piety of the common Christian people. The full extent of this influence will probably never be determined, but a few scattered references are enough to convince us that the influence must have been considerable. Perhaps it may be only a slight over-emphasis to say, as does Schneider, that during these centuries, it was possible to select any practice of the mystery-religions, as long as it was not too bizarre or offensive, relate it to Christ, and it would thus be made acceptable.¹⁸¹ If one wanted to compare Christ to any of the pagan deities, it was only necessary to place before the name of the deity, the adjective "true." Thus Tertullian even says of Christ: "Hic enim est verus Prometheus."¹⁸² Some recent archaeological discoveries have indicated even more the confusion that often existed in the minds of Christians who could not always see the distinction between Christ and the pagan deities. Thus there was recently discovered, under the present church of St. Peter's in Rome, a mosaic showing Christ and Helios¹⁸³ riding the chariot of the sun.¹⁸⁴ Under the church of St. Sebastian at Rome, several interesting graves have been excavated. On one of these, the deceased is pictured as enjoying a sacred banquet, standing before a judge dressed like a Roman magistrate, and in other ways this grave is marked by the typical pagan inscriptions. Yet to all this there is added the figure of the Good Shepherd, indicating that the deceased was very likely a Christian.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹Schneider, *op. cit.*, II, 287.

¹⁸²PL, "Apologia, XVIII," I, 434.

¹⁸³Undoubtedly Mithra.

¹⁸⁴With good reason Schneider calls this "das heidnischste aller bisher aufgefundenen Christusbilder." *Op. cit.*, II, 287.

¹⁸⁵Michael Rostovtzeff, *Mystic Italy* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., c.1927), p. 148.

This strange mixture of Christianity with pagan mystery cults was expressed even in the daily devotion of some early Christians. As late as the fifth century, it was customary in certain areas for those who were nominal Christians to bow their heads at the rising of the bright sun in the East, and murmur, "Have mercy upon us." The fact that they did this along side many who were openly unchristian, indicates that this act of devotion was very likely a direct survival of Mithraism.¹⁸⁶ It should not surprise us, however, to notice the lingering influence which the mystery religions had upon those who sincerely believed themselves to be Christians. Christianity was still in its formative period. Her converts were almost entirely of pagan background. Cumont well summarizes what our charitable reaction should be as we consider these doctrinal inconsistencies among the early Christians. He asks,

Should we be astonished if the multitudes of devotees failed always to observe the subtle distinctions of the doctors, and if in obedience to a pagan custom they rendered to the radiant star of day the homage which orthodoxy reserved for God?¹⁸⁷

We cannot approve the actions of such Christians, but neither can we be too astonished at them.

Factors Which Underline Basic Differences

It must also be remembered that such misdirected devotion on the part of individual Christians in no way implies that the cardinal truths of the Christian religion, particularly as these truths are expressed in the New Testament, were the victims of Mithraic influence. Two historical factors

¹⁸⁶Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, p. 193

¹⁸⁷Ibid., p. 193.

attest to the independent origin of Christianity. One of these is the time factor. Most reputable historians will agree that Mithraism exerted only a very limited influence, if any influence at all, during the time that Jesus and the apostles lived. Certainly the influence of Mithraism was very weak along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, in the land of Palestine especially, during the time that the New Testament was being written.¹⁸⁸ It has also been observed that in all his writings, Plutarch¹⁸⁹ does not refer to Mithra more than about half a dozen times.¹⁹⁰ While this by no means proves that Mithraism was inactive, it does indicate that Mithraism was not producing any world-shaking revolution, or taking the entire Roman Empire by storm.¹⁹¹ Upon noting that Tertullian resorted to calling the rites of Mithraism prefabrications of the devil¹⁹² rather than openly accusing it of plagiarism, one may think that this is a concession to the earlier origin of Mithraism. It should be observed, however, that when Julian wrote against Christianity, he did not accuse Christianity of borrowing from Mithraism either.¹⁹³

The other historical factor which must be considered is that of the different geographical and social spheres of influence enjoyed by Mithraism and by Christianity.¹⁹⁴ The earliest advances of Christianity were made

¹⁸⁸Sheldon, The Mystery Religions and the New Testament, p. 64.

¹⁸⁹T. R. Glover, The Conflict of Religion in the Early Roman Empire (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., c.1909), p. 105.

¹⁹⁰Plutarch lived approximately 46-120 A.D.

¹⁹¹Glover, op. cit., p. 105.

¹⁹²MPL, "De Praescriptionibus, XL," II, 54-55.

¹⁹³Reinach, Cults, Myths and Religions, pp. 188-90.

¹⁹⁴Adolf Harnack, Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den Ersten Drei Jahrhunderten (Leipzig: J. C. Hinricks'sche Buchhandlung, c.1902), pp. 534-36.

into the southern sections of Asia Minor, and also eastward into Syria. Its early spread into Europe proper was confined largely to a few cities in Greece and the city of Rome. Of these areas, about the only one in which Mithraism was also strong was Rome. The other strong areas of Mithraism in Europe were north of the Danube and along the valley of the Rhine. During the first century at least, the only areas where a conflict of any dimensions might have been possible were the city of Rome and possibly northern Africa.¹⁹⁵

Besides this geographical difference, there was also a difference in the social strata along which Mithraism and Christianity spread. While both these religions appealed to the lower classes of people, they still enjoyed a very different type of growth. Christianity's growth was to a large extent based on the diaspora. As such it was to a large extent a religion of the cities. Mithraism on the other hand was the religion of the army. As such it did not necessarily center in cities, but rather followed the Roman garrisons wherever they went. These garrisons were generally located in the outlying areas of the empire, to maintain the Pax Romana. Mithraism's spread was also aided by the importation of slaves and the transferring of governmental officers.¹⁹⁶ Naturally very few of those who were thus associated with the government were Christians, because of the mutual disfavor that existed between the Christians and the Roman government.

¹⁹⁵ibid.

¹⁹⁶Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, pp. 189-90.

One further point should be noted which minimizes the possibility of any serious influence of Mithraism on early Christianity. The Christian religion had its historical roots deeply set in Judaism. Although it later incorporated many emphases and concepts which were Roman in form, it was still originally a Palestinian religion. Jesus Himself was a Jew, a direct descendent of David.¹⁹⁷ All the disciples of Jesus were Jews. Although Paul himself was born in Asia Minor, the fact that he was a Pharisee, and a very strict one, shows that he was through and through a Jew -- "an Hebrew of the Hebrews."¹⁹⁸ As a Jew, Jesus recognized that His first responsibility was toward His fellow Jews.¹⁹⁹ He placed this same obligation on His disciples.²⁰⁰ It therefore follows that any customs or doctrines which may have been common to Judaism and other religions (such as the atonement for sin, original sin, etc.,) were ideas borrowed directly from Judaism, and not from the pagan religions.

Factors Which Account for Outward Similarities

But the emphasizing of these points of difference between Mithraism and Christianity does not remove the inevitable question, "How then can we account for the many similarities in doctrine and customs between Mithraism and Christianity that have been pointed out?" To be historically honest, one should be willing to admit frankly that there have been cases where

¹⁹⁷Matthew 1:6.

¹⁹⁸Philippians 3:5.

¹⁹⁹Matthew 15:24.

²⁰⁰Acts 1:8.

Christianity did borrow from Mithraism. The adoption of the twenty-fifth day of December to observe the birthday of Christ has already been pointed out. There was no valid reason why the Church should not choose this day. It would therefore be unfair to censure the Christian Church for this step. Thus Sheldon feels:

What Clement of Alexandria said of Greek philosophy, namely that it had the office of schoolmaster to bring the Hellenic mind to Christ, might be conceivably said of the mystery religions. The primacy of Christianity is not denied by any agencies that prepare the ground for its own ultimate dominion.²⁰¹

A second possible way of explaining the similarities between Mithraism and Christianity would arise from a consideration of the basic aims of any religion. Every religion aims to satisfy basic needs. If it did not do this, it would never gain any followers. Thus every religion must at least attempt to show one how he can find the favor of the deity, and it must give him some assuring answer regarding his hope for a life to come. These are the absolute basic considerations with which every religious system has to deal. Because of these common basic goals, it is only natural that some similar doctrines would arise. This probably explains why the idea of a mediating deity is common to so many religions. It may also explain why most religious systems teach an incarnation of the deity, inadequate or grotesque as it may be. This fact may also explain why all religions have something to say of the after life, with most of them holding to some form of the immortality of the soul, whether as a separate continuing entity or as a reincarnation.

However, to say all this is not to say that Christianity is merely the evolution of these features common to all religions, and thus represents the

²⁰¹Sheldon, The Mystery Religions and the New Testament, p. 60.

highest form of the development of these religious ideas.²⁰² By the same token, to say that the very nature of a religion demands that it reconcile God and man is not to say that Christ's reconciliation of man to God was merely such an idea expressed by some early fishermen turned apostles. Likewise, to say that because of their very nature, religions often propose an incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of their deity, is not to say that Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection can be mythologized in the same way. The difference between the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ and the similar beliefs regarding other deities, is that for Christ they were actually real events. Thus, although in the study of comparative religions many common doctrines present themselves as being outwardly similar, there is a world of inward difference between Christianity and any other religion.

In accounting for the many similarities between Christianity and Mithraism in particular, one other factor should be noted. Except for an incidental reference by Cumont,²⁰³ hardly any writer alludes to this factor. Another reason for the similarity of Christianity to Mithraism may be attributed to the Jewish exile in Babylon during the sixth century B.C. It was approximately in these same areas that Mithraism, still under the guise of Zoroastrianism, was gaining ground. There it undoubtedly came into contact with Judaism. Judaism was not a religion that would easily be swallowed up. Throughout their exile, the Jews held to their cherished hopes as expressed in their

²⁰²These views are expressed by Robertson, "Mithraism" in Religious Systems of the World, p. 33; and by Carpenter, op. cit., p. 211.

²⁰³Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, p. 16.

sacred writings. Undoubtedly the Jews also observed their Passover meal, as well as conditions would permit. It is not unreasonable to suppose that the common meal of Mithraism could have been influenced by this Jewish custom. Nor is it impossible that Mithraism may have borrowed some of its ideas of Mithra as Mediator from the Jewish belief in the Messiah. The occasional reference to a kind of "virgin-birth" for Mithra²⁰⁴ could also conceivably have been suggested by the prophecy of a virgin-birth of the Jewish Messiah. It is admitted that in each of these areas, Mithraism presented some ideas that are definitely not Jewish, and thus a wholesale borrowing from Judaism would be out of the question. The above theory has been suggested merely to show that the weight of guilt in borrowing is by no means against Christianity.

The entire problem of the relationship of Mithraism to Christianity is one which we, who are centuries removed from the issue, can never hope to solve. In this regard, Cumont sounds a very sober word of caution against all those who would jump to hasty conclusions. He writes, "We cannot presume to unravel today a question which divided contemporaries and which shall doubtless forever remain insoluble."²⁰⁵ The honest fact is that we are not sufficiently acquainted with either Mithraism itself or with primitive Christianity to be able to discern the thoughts that stood behind the writings and inscriptions we have received from that age. While it is undoubtedly true that there was a certain amount of borrowing in both directions, in the majority of these cases we can merely propose this exchange, but cannot really prove it.

²⁰⁴Carpenter, op. cit., p. 159.

²⁰⁵Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, p. 194.

CHAPTER IV

THE ULTIMATE VICTORY OF CHRISTIANITY

Mithraism Seemed Outwardly Assured of Victory

The statement has been made that "if Christianity had been checked in its growth by some deadly disease, the world would have become Mithraic."¹ Although this is merely an opinion, and may be somewhat exaggerated, it must be admitted that during the third and early part of the fourth centuries, Mithraism presented the most formidable enemy that Christianity had till that time known. In order to appreciate the significance of the victory of Christianity over Mithraism, it is therefore well to take note of the heights which Mithraism had been able to reach. During the latter half of the third century, the security of the Roman Empire was being severely threatened by the invasion of the barbarian hordes into Dacia. In the midst of this insecurity and confusion, the only factor which seemed to remain stable was the Roman army, and it was on it that the emperors placed their entire confidence. It was only natural therefore, that the religion which the soldiers professed, namely Mithraism, would also thereby become highly respected. One immediate result of this renewed support was that Aurelian openly endorsed the religion of the Sol Invictus in 273 A.D.² The action of Diocletian in 307, whereby he proclaimed Mithra as patron God of the empire has already been

¹Statement made by Renan, quoted by Samuel Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity (New York: Abingdon Press, c.1918), p. 160.

²Frans Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, translated by Thomas J. McCormack (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, c.1903), p. 199.

noted.³ At this time, Constantine ascended the throne of the Roman Empire. Although he is generally recognized as the one who gave the first significant sanction to Christianity, it should be noted that even he did not really persecute Mithraism, but to some extent recognized and tolerated it. It has been suggested⁴ that before his conversion to Christianity, he himself may have held some Mithraic beliefs.⁵ Constantine's successors surpassed their father in openly legislating against paganism. It was particularly under Constans, the son of Constantine who controlled what is today Italy that paganism suffered its worst setbacks. In 344 he banned pagan sacrifices and ordered all pagan temples closed.⁶ Constantius, the ruler of the eastern section of the empire, similarly persecuted and oppressed paganism.

Without doubt the greatest major reaction against Christianity and for paganism came under Julian, who ruled for nineteen months from 361-363, and who, because of his adverse ideas, has been designated "Julian Apostate." Julian was probably baptized a Christian, but it has been suggested that in his early youth he had been led to the mysteries of Mithraism by the philosopher Maximus of Ephesus.⁷ His devotion to paganism was sincere. When he therefore became emperor, he openly proclaimed himself to be a pagan, and did all in his power to introduce paganism in Constantinople. His new faith

³Supra, p. 29.

⁴Cumont, op. cit., p. 200.

⁵Although Constantine is mentioned here in passing only, the entire question of his relationship to paganism and Christianity is one which will always prove most intriguing. Suffice it to say here that it was Constantine who in 313 A.D., in his Edict of Toleration, introduced the first major legislation that favored the Christian Church.

⁶Walter Hyde, Paganism to Christianity in the Roman Empire (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, c.1946), p. 206.

⁷Cumont, op. cit., p. 202.

was more than the old mysteries of Mithra however. Although the god of Mithraism never lacked the central position in his devotion, he added to this cult a well-rounded philosophical and cultural system. For this reason it has been suggested that Julian presented one of the most powerful threats to Christianity, since he proposed to fight it, not with force, but with ideas.⁸ Julian openly propagandized in favor of Mithraism. In 362, writing to the Alexandrians, he says,

Are you blind to the splendour which issues from the Sun? Are you ignorant that He gives life to all animals and all plants? This Sun that humanity has seen and honored from all eternity, whose worship is the source of happiness, is the living image, animate, rational and beneficent, of the Intelligible Father.⁹

On another occasion he has Horace say to him:

To thee, I have given to know Mithra, thy Father. Do thou therefore observe his commands, providing for thyself in this life a sure cable and anchorage, and with a joyous confidence assuring for thyself when thou departest hence the gracious guidance of the god.¹⁰

It seems however, that Julian believed that a certain amount of persecution might help to convince the Christians that they should renounce Christ for Mithra and Julian. Patriarch George of Alexandria was one who suffered cruel murder because he tried to erect a Christian church upon the ruins of a Mithraeum. Julian's persecution of the Christians was not destined to last long. In 363 Julian set out in battle against the Persian army. Just at the point when his victory seemed assured, he was suddenly surrounded by Persian

Hyde, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

⁹Salomon Reinach, *Cults, Myths, and Religions*, translated by E. Frost (London: David Nutt, c.1912), p. 126.

¹⁰A. S. Geden, *Mithraism, Select Passages Illustrating* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, c.1925), pp. 58-59.

troops and mortally wounded. Julian thus died under the most ominous conditions. He was going to conquer the land that gave him his religion, and he died in the act. It is easy to surmise how this fact must have been seriously noted by both the friends and enemies of Mithra. Julian's defeat undoubtedly did much for the army also, and led them to seek a religion more favorable than the one they felt had betrayed and defeated their commander.

With Julian's death, Mithraism was doomed to failure. Nevertheless in spite of the fact that it received a most decisive blow at the hand of Theodosius in 394, it lingered much longer in various parts of the empire. Thus the Mithraeum of Sarreburg¹¹ for example, seems to have been in use till about 400 A.D.¹² In the Alps, it is quite possible that Mithraism endured into the beginning of the fifth century, although its observance was not very widespread. Thus it can be said that by approximately 400, most of the Mithraea were destroyed, and the cult which had once swept over the Roman world to become the favored religion of the emperors had now fallen in defeat, to be followed by a comparatively new religion of insignificant beginnings in the hills of Judea.

Reasons for the Victory of Christianity

Alleged Reasons

As a student of history views the popularity which Mithraism enjoyed in the third century, and then considers how this widely accepted cult was over-

¹¹About forty-four miles north-west of Strasburg, in France.

¹²Samuel Dill, Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius (New York: MacMillan and Co., c.1905), p. 619.

thrown by a faith which was at first despised and condemned, and which originated in the despised land of the Jews, he cannot but ask for the reasons that accounted for this phenomenal reversal. Scores of reasons have been advanced, some true, others less than half-true. Gibbons, for instance, lists the following as the reasons for the ultimate victory of Christianity over Mithraism:¹³ the enthusiasm of the early Christians, the belief in immortality, the miracles of Christ and His apostles, the high ethical code of Christianity, and efficient organization on imperial patterns. But even a surface glance at these alleged reasons, shows that with the exception of the third factor listed, all of these can in varying degrees be attributed to Mithraism as well. Perhaps the miracles of Christ and His apostles were unique and outstanding, and they undoubtedly did much for the people who actually witnessed them, or heard about them first-hand. But those who were two or three centuries removed from them could easily have denounced their validity, even though they actually did occur.

Political and social factors have often been mentioned as contributing to the cause of the Christian victory. While these factors undoubtedly helped Christianity, many of them helped the mystery religions as well. Thus the unification of the Greek world under Alexander and the common use of the Koine enabled both the mystery religions and Christianity to spread, and did not favor the latter any more than the former. It has been suggested that Christianity could take refuge under the protection of Judaism, a "religio licita," and therefore it was able to spread.¹⁴ This is true, but

¹³Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (New edition; Philadelphia: Porter and Costes, 1845), I, 504-590.

¹⁴Angus, op. cit., p. 276.

the same was also true of Mithraism. During its early years in the empire, it found shelter under the religio licita of the Great Mother, but by the time it came into real conflict with Christianity it had become a religio licita in its own right, and therefore had an even greater advantage than Christianity. Another political factor which undoubtedly assured Christianity of victory was the sudden death of Julian. But Robertson attributes too much importance to Julian's death.¹⁵ For even before Julian's apostasy, Christianity had been gaining the victory over Mithraism. Thus the victory of Christianity over Mithraism can obviously not be attributed solely to political or social factors. There must have been an inherent superiority in Christianity that made its ultimate victory inevitable. In order to fully understand the nature of this superiority, it will be well to consider first the inherent weaknesses of the mystery religions that predestined them to failure.

Basic Weaknesses of Mithraism Led to its Downfall

Mithraism, like all the other mystery religions, was never able to divorce itself from its association with primitive naturalism, astronomy, and magic. This remained true of Mithraism, in spite of its admitted superiority over the other mystery religions. Thus a bas-relief showing the commemoration of the holy communion meal of Mithraism shows the participants wearing grotesque masks, with long beaks.¹⁶ Another picture shows Mithra himself

¹⁵John M. Robertson, Fagan Christs (Second edition; London: Watts and Co., c.1911), p. 335.

¹⁶Johannes Leopoldt, Die Religion des Mithra in Bilderatlas zur Religionsgeschichte, herausgegeben von Hans Haas (Leipzig: A. Deichertsche Verlagbuchhandlung, c.1930), Plate 46.

with a ram, a scorpion, and balances engraved upon his chest and thighs.¹⁷ This association with naturalism and magic was carried over even into the worship of Mithraism. Otherwise beautiful prayers are interspersed with directions as to proper breathing, shouting, etc.¹⁸ Even the Zend-Avesta, revered as it had become through the course of time was not free from this weakness. Thus for example, when Zarathustra asks Ahura Mazda, "What is the most energetically mortal act by which mortals sacrifice to demons?" the answer is:

It is when man, combing and cutting their hair, or cutting their nails, let them fall into holes or crevices. . . . Thou therefore . . . when thou combest thy hair or cuttest thy nails, carry them ten paces from the faithful, twenty paces from the fire and fifty paces from the faithful faces of the baresman. . . .¹⁹

Along with this degrading magic and superstition there was also a strong inclination toward astrology. In the years when Mithraism was gaining popularity, its emphasis on astrology was a definite asset. But in time, astrology became a dead weight which prevented Mithraism from rising to higher levels. While the sun was a very convenient object of worship, it also weakened the position of any god who would have to share his position with that of the sun. The Christian also revered the wonders of nature, but for him, his God was above and beyond nature. He was the creator and Lord of nature, not on an equal or lower level than the heavens He had created.

Another basic weakness of Mithraism was its theology, or it is perhaps more correct to say, its lack of theology. What theology there was, con-

¹⁸Thus for instance, upon concluding his prayers, the worshipper is commanded to give a shrill whistle, snap the fingers and recite a magical formula. Albrecht Dieterich, Eine Mithrasliturgie, third edition by Otto Weinreich (Leipzig, B.C. Teubner, 1923), p. 7.

¹⁹The Zend Avesta, translated by James Darmesteter, III, in The Sacred Books of the East, edited by F. Max Mueller (America edition; New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1898), Fargard XVII, 1.

tained two main emphases. The first of these was an emphasis on fatalism. There was considered to be an inevitable Destiny controlling the events of this world. This fate was so all-powerful, that even Ahura Mazda was subject to it. What made this emphasis so naive was the fact that there was an equal emphasis on the efficacy of prayer,²⁰ and of the initiatory rites.

The second, and more apparent emphasis was the one on emotionalism. With the possible exception of Orphism, none of the mystery religions were really interested in theology.²¹ The emphasis was instead on the liturgical, the dramatic, the spectacular, rather than on the doctrinal. The entire worship service of Mithraism was designed not to instruct, but to impress. There was absolutely no concern for any clarity, much less for any purity, of doctrine. But faith cannot exist in a vacuum, and it was therefore inevitable that the vagueness which once made it possible for men of every persuasion to accept Mithraism would sooner or later cause them to reject it.

Because of this lack of concern for purity of theological thought it was only natural that Mithraism would become very syncretistic. Mithraism had been willing to identify Helios with Mithra, Jupiter with Ahura Mazda, and had thereby won the hearts of the Greek world.²² But in so accommodating itself, it forfeited the distinctness and superiority that had once given it the power to dominate all the other mystery religions. (Strange as it may seem, along with this syncretizing tendency, Mithraism tried to retain

²⁰Cumont, op. cit., p. 147.

²¹Angus, op. cit., p. 61.

²²Reinach, Cults, Myths and Religion, p. 191.

a certain amount of exclusiveness. It always remained a sort of freemasonry.²³ Candidates made oaths not to divulge any of the secrets of the cult.²⁴ Women were denied admission.] While this secrecy at first contributed to the fascination of Mithraism, in time it also contributed to its downfall. While the Christians also had their secrets, it was still possible for strangers to learn all they wanted about the central theology of Christianity. They did not have to be initiated to hear of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Christianity thus presented to men a much friendlier welcome than Mithraism did.

Intrinsic Superiority of Christianity Assured Its Victory

The weaknesses of Mithraism which resulted in its downfall were ones that affected the basic nature of Mithraism.²⁵ Similarly, the strength of Christianity that assured her ultimate victory lay within her very nature. The mysteries had been extremely syncretistic. [A dominant characteristic of Christianity however, was its intolerance.] Unlike the mystery religions, Christianity alone was from the beginning free of "dead and dying polytheism."²⁵ Only Judaism had been as intolerant as Christianity, and even it would allow outsiders to be loosely associated without undergoing circumcision. Whereas Mithraism cared little whether the faithful worshipped Ahura Mazda or Jupiter, or whether the devotees worshipped at the shrine of Isis or in the cave of Mithra, Christianity said, "Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is none other name under heaven, given among

²³This is also the opinion of Robertson, op. cit., p. 330.

²⁴Cumont, op. cit., p. 156.

²⁵Reinach, op. cit., p. 190.

men, whereby we must be saved."²⁶ Jesus had said, "Enter ye in at the strait gate. . . strait is the gate, and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it."²⁷ St. Paul had written, "There is one God and one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus."²⁸ St. Paul allowed no syncretism among those who wanted to bear the name "Christian." He warned his fellow Christians, "You cannot drink of the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils,"²⁹ and commanded them to "come out from among them, and be ye separate."³⁰ This extreme emphasis on loyalty to Christ alone did much to invigorate the faith of the Christian Church. Because its new converts were required to surrender so much, and to make such a complete break with paganism, their faith involved a deeper conviction and a more ardent desire to spread the Gospel to all men.

It was easy to spread this gospel, because Christianity was a truly universal religion. The faithful Mithraist was considerably limited in his proselytizing efforts because the cult was meant for men only. The Christian Gospel on the other hand, knew "neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, bond nor free."³¹ This Gospel was offered to all, its mysteries were open to all who would give evidence that they were not merely curiosity seekers, but had through their instruction shown their sincere intention to accept the new faith. Its sacred writings were accessible to all

²⁶Acts 4:12.

²⁷Matthew 7:13-14.

²⁸1 Timothy 2:5.

²⁹1 Corinthians 10:21.

³⁰2 Corinthians 6:17.

³¹Galatians 3:28.

who would read them. Its theology was intelligible to all. For the simple there was the Sermon on the Mount, the plain words of Jesus. For the intellectuals, there were the unfathomable mysteries of the incarnation and the atonement, and the inter-relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in one Godhead. Christianity was well equipped to embark on a universal conquest, it had a universal appeal.

Christianity approached the world with a rich and living body of doctrine. While the mysteries had been theologically weak, Christianity was theologically powerful. Central in its theology was the doctrine that by His life, death, and resurrection, Christ had atoned for the sins of the entire world. If a man placed his trust in the value of this atonement for him, he would be eternally saved. This trust, this faith, was one of Christianity's unique emphases. It was this faith in God's plan of justifying the sinner that made Christianity superior to the mysteries. The mystery religions attempted to regenerate man by giving the initiate the power to live a holy life. Christianity on the other hand, offered a forensic justification to all those who would but accept it,³² and only thereafter, gave the power to live a life that would give evidence of this unmerited justification. But for the Christian, faith was not merely trust in God's atoning work. The result of this faith also gave the Christian consolation in the midst of his daily cares. The Christian could say, "This is the victory which overcometh the world, even our faith."³³ Faith was more than mere knowledge of, and consent to, a body of doctrine. It was a personal relationship of trust in a God who had revealed Himself in love, in the

³²Romans 3:24,25; 2 Corinthians 5:19.

³³1 John 5:4.

person of His Son, Jesus Christ.)

The faith of the Christians was expressed in love--to God and to their fellow men. This genuine love was another factor which became a distinguishing feature of the Christian faith. It is no wonder that St. Paul said that such love was the highest gift of the Spirit.³⁴ The pagans, in spite of their own attempts to achieve high moral standards, must have been impressed by the love that the Christians showed for each other. This love was of course not directed only to those of the Christian community, but to others as well, and hospitality, the love of strangers, became one of the chief means by which the Church made its impact upon the world.³⁵

In listing factors which aided the victory of Christianity, one cannot overlook the significance of the Greek New Testament. For it was this book which presented to the world the doctrines which the Christian Church believed. It called forth faith that meant salvation, and demanded love as evidence of that faith. It came in an age when men were longing to find authority. It spoke furthermore in a language that could be understood by all, using not only the vocabulary of the tradesman and of the fisherman, but in some cases even of the philosopher.³⁶

But when all these factors are considered and evaluated, there remains yet one more factor which must be noted. It is this factor which stands at the very center of the entire Christian faith and therefore is the underlying cause for the victory of Christianity. This factor is the historical

³⁴1 Corinthians 13:13.

³⁵Romans 12:13.

³⁶As in the opening verses of the Gospel according to St. John.

Person of Jesus Christ, around Whom the entire Christian faith revolves. This historical center of Christianity was greater than His teachings. The Greek gods were not gods in their own right, but were still subject to fate. Jesus Christ on the other hand was the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.³⁷ He was not a God who existed far away from this present world, showing no concern for it. Instead He was present when He created this world, He visited it to redeem it, and He will return to it and judge it. This emphasis on the historicity of Christ always held a central position in the proclamation of the Christian Gospel. Throughout the Old Testament God had been intimately associated with events of history, both with regard to His own chosen people Israel, and with the world at large. In the New Testament also, this constant involvement in history is clearly discernible. Jesus was born "in the days of Caesar Augustus" when "Cyrenius was governor of Syria." He was "crucified . . . under Pontius Pilate." Throughout the Gospels, the life of Jesus is shown in its relationship to the lives of other men, of beggars, fishermen, scribes, and kings. It is always associated with definite places; Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Golgotha. It was as a historical Person that Christ entered the world, and it was therefore a historical religion which went out to conquer the world.

Since it is this very historicity of Jesus which made the Christian faith unique, and since this same historicity is so commonly attacked and doubted among nominal Christians today, it may be interesting to consider a little more closely the historical existence of Jesus. Of course, His life and death are clearly recorded in the New Testament as being histori-

³⁷Revelation 1:8.

cal, but there are those who question the authority of these writings. We therefore look briefly at some secular references to the life of Jesus, coming from the writers of His age. In doing so, it should be recognized that this means going from a greater authority, the Bible, to a lesser authority, the words of men, but the secular references are none the less corroborating evidence, and therefore valid. Josephus, writing toward the end of the first century, speaks of Jesus as "a wise man if indeed it is lawful to call him a man. . . ." because He performed so many miracles. He says that Pilate, "condemned Him to the cross. . . ." but that on the third day He appeared again to His disciples.³⁸ Tacitus also refers to the crucifixion of Jesus and names Him as founder of the Christian faith.³⁹ Writing around 150 A.D. Lucian of Samosata stated, "The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day, the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account. . . ."⁴⁰ Although these secular references tell us nothing new about Jesus, they are nevertheless extremely interesting. They show that the mention of His name was not limited to those who followed Him, or to those who wrote the books of the New Testament, They show fur-

³⁸Flavius Josephus, "Antiquities of the Jews, XVIII, 63ff." in Kurt Linck, De Antiquissimis Veterum quae ad Iesum Nazarenum Spectant Testimoniis (Gieszen: Verlag von Alfred Toepelmann, c.1913), p. 4. It is recognized as authentic. The present writer, however, feels that there is sufficient evidence to believe that the major portion of the section is authentic, although textual emendations may have been made.

³⁹Tacitus, "Annales, XV, 44," in Kurt Linck, De Antiquissimis Veterum quae ad Iesum Nazarenum Spectant Testimoniis (Gieszen: Verlag von Alfred Toepelmann, c.1913), p. 51.

⁴⁰Lucian of Samosata, "Works, IV, 82-83," quoted in Hyde, op. cit., p. 120.

therefore that those who question the historicity of Christ are not being true to the accounts of history itself. It is of course admitted, that these secular references are very scanty. Speaking of them, Hyde says, "from these pagan notices we get little knowledge of Jesus beyond the fact that He lived."⁴¹ This however, is more than enough. For this is more than can be determined of any of the gods or goddesses of the mystery religions. It is this feature therefore, this undeniable historicity of Jesus Christ, that made and still makes, Christianity uniquely superior to all the religions of the world; past, present, and future.

⁴¹Hyde, op. cit., p. 120.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This overview of the relationship of Christianity to the mystery religions has attempted to give the pertinent points of evidence which show the inherent superiority of the Christian faith. Many distinctions between the two forms of religion were necessarily thin. This was unavoidable because of the fact that modern man will probably never be able to fully understand the nature of the mystery religions. He may learn much of their outward form, but will never fully comprehend their inner nature. The entire age during which this conflict between Christianity and the mysteries raged, is also one which man will never entirely understand. This is true in spite of the fact that this age is in many ways the most significant in the history of the world, for it presents to us One who entered world history in a tangible way.

Thus it is that this study leaves many questions unanswered. It was suggested that some of the features common to Christianity and Mithraism may have been genuine similarities which arose independently. But how can we explain these similarities which had independent origins? How for instance, can we explain what is probably the oldest form of religious expression, that of sacrifice? Biblical history records only that the second generation of man already practiced it,¹ but gives no hint as to the reason for its origin. While Mithraism proper offered only a male deity and was a religion designed for men, the other mystery religions all had a unique

¹Genesis 4:4.

feature that would also be worthy of further study. This is the role of a female deity. It would be interesting to discover whether there is any evidence that the Roman Catholic emphasis on the exalted role of the Virgin Mary can be traced to pagan devotion to a female deity.² As one considers the historical origins of Christianity and the mystery religions, another question presents itself. Why is it that all the ancient religions which became truly world religions, and which persist down to our own day, had their origin in Asia? None of the religions which had their origin in the Western Hemisphere, such as the religions of the North American Indians, or of the Aztecs, were able to survive the coming of the white man, whereas religions of the Orient, be they Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism, have persisted down to the present day. The spread of Christianity itself presents yet another problem. Why is it that until very recently, the Christian faith was to a large extent limited to those people who were at one time affiliated with the Roman Empire, while the vast hordes of Asia and Africa were left comparatively uninfluenced? Even the missionary attempts of recent years to bring Christianity to these areas, has, in spite of the use of every modern means, failed to measure up to the phenomenal spread of Christianity during the first four centuries of its existence. All the above problems would be worthy of further study.

The mystery religions entered a world and an era which was crying for salvation and immortality. Into this world the mysteries brought what they considered to be an evangel, it offered hope in this world and eternal life in the next. These mystery religions, and particularly Mithraism, repre-

²This thought is advanced by John M. Robertson, Pagan Christs (Second edition; London: Watts and Co., c.1911), p. 21.

sented the highest form of development of the mystic tendencies that had existed in the hearts of men for centuries. Their conquest of the Roman world was rapid, and more thorough than that of any other religion before that time. But another evangel inconspicuously arose to enter the race. It centered around a "gibbeted sophist."³ Whereas the mysteries had presented hero-deities, this one presented a "pale Galilaean"⁴ who was innocently crucified. Although this new Gospel was preached by uneducated fishermen and learned scholars, it maintained its unique center in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. It proved, as it was intended to, to be the power of God unto salvation. Although it entered the Graeco-Roman arena later than its competitors, it soon surpassed them. It was battling for the hearts of men, and it alone, among all the religions in the fray, had the power to convert the inner man, it alone could give genuine assurance of forgiveness, and it alone could with certainty offer the believer eternal life.

And yet, Christianity owes a certain debt to the mystery religions, strange debt that it was. For the mystery religions played a very definite role in preparing the western world for the onward movement of Christianity. The mysteries had represented the highest and ultimate attempts of man to forge his own religious system. But in so doing, they had also shown the futility of these attempts. They demonstrated the inescapable need for man to depend on a religion divinely given, one conceived in the mind of God,

³This phrase is attributed to Lucian, by Samuel Angus, The Mystery Religions and Christianity (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, c.1925), p. 235.

⁴This phrase is attributed to Swinburne, by Walter Hyde, Paganism to Christianity in the Roman Empire (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, c.1946), p. 209.

and given to men in the form which He deemed best--in God's own incarnation, death, and resurrection. Although the central point of this religion, the cross of Calvary, became an offence to Israel and foolishness to the Hellenic world, this cross became the emblem of the divine victory that God won for man. Thus it is this same emblem, the cross, which nearly twenty centuries later has remained the lone symbol of hope for a lost world.



A Bull in Motion

This figure of a bull, possibly a bull-dancer, was found at
 ... and probably dates from the second century B.C. The figure clearly
 shows the most important aspects of the bull's power and life. While the bull holds
 the ball and plunges his hoofs into it, the crowd attempts to suck the
 bull's blood, while the champion attacks its vital organs. The bull's faithful
 dog, who helped to track down and capture the bull, is also present.

Reference: *The Bull in Motion*, by ... in ...
 ...
 ...

APPENDIX A



A Mithraic Relief*

This figure of Mithra tauroctonus, made of white marble was found at Rome, and probably dates from the second century A.D. The figure clearly shows the most important aspects of Mithra's great act. While Mithra holds the bull and plunges his knife into it, the serpent attempts to suck the bull's blood, while the scorpion attacks its vital organs. Mithra's faithful dog, who helped to track down and capture the bull, is also present.

*Johannes Leipoldt, Die Religion des Mithra, in Bilderatlas zur Religionsgeschichte, herausgegeben von Hans Haas (Leipzig: A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, c.1930), IV, Plate 13.

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