

Christianity, the Resurrection of Christ, and the Mystery Religions

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Many university and college courses on Christianity or comparative religion express the view that Christianity is merely a variation of a more ancient religious theme. They teach that Christian faith developed from or was influenced by the ancient pagan mystery religions of Rome, Greece, and Egypt. Therefore, the conclusion of such courses is that Christian faith is not unique as it claims, but at best an imitation faith, claiming to be something it really is not. Professors draw numerous “parallels” between the motifs of “dying and rising,” “savior”-gods, and then, observing the centrality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in Christian faith, assert that Christianity was merely a later form of such pagan religions.

In the last hundred years, numerous books have been written that attempt to defend this idea. Among these are J.M. Robertson’s *Pagan Christs*¹ and Kersey Graves’ *The World’s Sixteen Crucified Saviors or Christianity Before Christ*.² This idea has also formed one line of argumentation for the larger theme that Jesus never existed as in G. A. Wells’ *Did Jesus Exist?*³ and more recently this concept has been popularized by the late mythologist Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth, The Masks of God*, and other books meant to, at least in part, discredit Christianity.

What were the mystery cults? Allegedly, the teachings of the mystery religions were revealed by the Egyptian god Thoth. They were eclectic religions cults that stressed nature religion, oaths of secrecy, brotherhood, and spiritual quest. They offered rites of initiation that were associated with or dedicated to various gods and goddesses of the ancient world. In fact, these rites often inculcated contact, or “union,” with the “gods” (spirits). Participants hoped to attain knowledge, power, and immortality from their worship and contact with these gods. In essence, the mystery religions were part and parcel of the world of the occult in ancient Europe and Asia. They were idolatrous, opposed Christian teachings, and not infrequently engaged in gross or immoral practices.⁴

Nevertheless, it was the theme of alleged dying and rising savior-gods that initially sparked the interest of some scholars and many skeptics as to whether or not Christianity was a derivative of the mysteries. For example, if there were religious cults in Palestine at the time of Christ who believed in a mythological central figure who periodically died and came back to life in harmony with certain agricultural or fertility cycles, it could be argued that Christianity was merely the offshoot of such a religion and that its distinctive theological teachings were later inventions. Hence the appeal of such an idea to skeptics of Christianity.

If true, Christianity would have been only a variation of an earlier pagan religious worldview, a religion that later evolved its distinctive theological doctrines about Jesus Christ being the

unique incarnation of God and savior of men. In fact, in this scenario, the biblical Jesus need never even have existed. The mysteries were, after all, based on mythical gods. Hence, some critics (not historians) argue that Jesus was only an invented figure patterned after the life cycles of mythological gods such as Attis, Cybele, Osiris, Mithra, Adonis, Eleusis, Thrace, Dionysus, and the like.

One consequence of interpreting Christianity as an embellished mystery religion is the conclusion that Christian faith per se is the invention of men, not a revelation from God. In the end, virtually all the unique teachings of New Testament theology, including the distinctive doctrines on Jesus Christ, God, man, sin, salvation, and so on, are viewed as mere religious innovation after the fact. For example, concerning Jesus Christ, this would mean His incarnation and virgin birth, miracles and teachings, atonement for sin, physical resurrection from the dead, and promised return are not historical facts, but later revisions of pagan stories. In essence, the cardinal teachings of orthodox Christianity become lies and falsehoods.

But is it Christianity that is the invention and deception, or is such a theory itself the invention and deception of atheists and skeptics merely to discredit Christianity? If we examine the manner in which this concept is utilized, not to mention the fact that not a shred of evidence exists in support, one can begin to see where the real invention lies. One illustration is atheist John Allegro's text, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*. Allegro is a lecturer in Old Testament and Inter-Testamental Studies at the University of Manchester. He weaves the origin of Christianity into pagan religious sects, rituals, secret eulogies, and the hallucinogenic properties of a particular mushroom. Thus, "The death and resurrection story of Jesus follows the traditional patterns of fertility mythology, as has long been recognized."⁵ Logically then, for Allegro, the New Testament is a "hoax" because the "validity of the whole New Testament story is immediately undermined."⁶ Not surprisingly, he claims it is foolish for Christians to maintain their religion is a unique revelation from God.⁷ As a result, Allegro's closing paragraph gives the reader the "assurance" that "we no longer need to view the Bible through die mists of piety."⁸

The truth is that Allegro's views are credible only to skeptics who already wish to find "evidence" to support their skepticism. Dr. J. N. D. Anderson is an authority on comparative religion, a professor of Oriental Laws, and director of the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies at the University of London. He observes that Allegro's book "has been dismissed by fifteen experts in Semitic languages and related fields... as 'not based on any philological or other evidence that they can regard as scholarly'—and has met with scathing criticism in review after review."⁹ Yet today it continues to be used in college courses on Christianity.

Unfortunately for skeptics, when Allegro's theory—or that involving any other mystery tradition—is objectively examined and compared with Christianity, only superficial similarities remain because Christianity and the mystery religions are as distinct as night and day.¹⁰ Even secular scholars have rejected this idea of Christianity borrowing from the ancient mysteries. The well respected Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard writes in *Theories of Primitive Religion* that, "The evidence for this theory... is negligible."¹¹ Negligible is defined in the *Webster's New World Dictionary* as that which "can be neglected or disregarded because small, unimportant, trifling."

In fact, the gods of the mysteries do not even resurrect; at best they are only resuscitated within the context of a gross mythology. Samuel N. Kramer's thorough work showed that the alleged resurrection of Tammuz (a fertility god of Mesopotamia) was based on "nothing but inference and surmise, guess and conjecture."¹² Pierre Lambrechts maintains that in the case of the alleged resurrection of Adonis no evidence exists, either in the early texts or the pictorial representations. The texts which refer to a resurrection are quite late, from the second to the

fourth centuries A.D.¹³ He reveals that for Attis there is no suggestion that he was a resurrected god until after 150 A.D.¹⁴ In the case of Adonis, there is a lapse of at least 700 years.¹⁵ If borrowing occurred, it seems clear which way it went.

The cult of Isis and Osiris ends with Osiris becoming lord of the underworld while Isis regathers his dismembered body from the Nile River and subsequently magically restores it. E. A. Wallace Budge, who Dr. Wilbur Smith asserts is “one of the greatest authorities of our century on ancient religions,”¹⁶ has this to say about the cult of Osiris: “There is nothing in the texts which justify the assumption that Osiris knew he would rise from the dead, and that he would become king and judge of the dead, or that Egyptians believed that Osiris died on their behalf and rose again in order that they might also rise from the dead.”¹⁷ Smith also observes French scholar Andre Boulanger’s observation that, “The idea that the god dies and rises again to lead his worshippers to eternal life does not exist in any Hellenic mystery religion.”¹⁸

It would appear then, that the real mythology is not in the origin of Christianity but in the minds of skeptics who are confusing such beliefs with the historical person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. (This is especially evident when one considers the immoral lives and deeds of the pagan deities since these are entirely disharmonious with the life and deeds of Jesus Christ.)

Indeed, as noted, scholars long ago refuted the idea that Christianity is related to the mysteries. Consider just a few of the great differences between Christian belief and the mystery cults that makes the claim of identity look foolish:

As for the motif of a dying and rising savior-god, which has so often been compared with the unique event which gave birth to Christianity, Metzger points out that the formal resemblance between them must not be allowed to obscure the great differences in content. In all the Mysteries which tell of a dying god, he dies “by compulsion and not by choice, sometimes in bitterness and despair, never in a self-giving love.” There is a positive gulf between this and the Christ who asserted that no man could take his life from him but that he laid it down of his own will (John 10:17; Matthew 26:53); the Johannine pictures of the cross as the place where Jesus was “glorified”; and the Christian celebration of the Passion as a victory over Satan, sin and death. Similarly, there is all the difference in the world between the rising or re-birth of a deity which symbolizes the coming of spring (and the re-awakening of nature) and the resurrection “on the third day” of an historical person.¹⁹

Former atheist and Cambridge and Oxford scholar C. S. Lewis emphasizes that the biblical concept of God in both Old and New Testaments is in no way compatible with the nature gods of the mysteries.

On the other hand, Jahweh is clearly *not* a Nature-God. He does not die and come to life each year as a true corn-king should... He is not the soul of Nature nor any part of Nature. He inhabits eternity; he dwells in the high and holy place; heaven is his throne, not his vehicle, earth is his foot-stool, not his vesture. One day he will dismantle both and make a new heaven and earth. He is not to be identified even with the “divine spark” in man. He is “God and not man.” His thoughts are not our thoughts...²⁰

In fact, Lewis had previously recorded that upon his first serious reading of the New Testament, he was “chilled and puzzled by the almost total absence of such ideas in the Christian documents.”²¹ In other words, he was familiar with the theories suggesting resemblance between Christianity and the mysteries, expected to find them, and was shocked to discover their absence.

E. O. James concludes,

There is *no valid comparison* between the synoptic story of Jesus of Nazareth and the mythological accounts of the mystery divinities of Eleusis, Thrace, Phrygia or Egypt.... Similarly, the belief in the resurrection of Christ is poles removed from the resuscitation of Osiris, Dionysus or Attis in an annual ritual based on primitive conceptions of mummifications, and the renewal of the new life in the spring.²²

No less an authority than the late comparative religion scholar Mircea Eliade points out that not only is the idea of Christian borrowing from the mysteries wrong, but that any borrowing probably first began on the part of the mysteries:

In 1958, one year before Campbell started publishing his fanciful theories in the *Masks of God* volumes, Mircea Eliade published in *Patterns of Initiation* a series of lectures he had given at the University of Chicago in the fall of 1956. In one of those lectures, Eliade said recent research did not support the theories that the origin of Christianity was influenced by pagan mystery cults. "There is no reason to suppose that primitive Christianity was influenced by the Hellenistic mysteries," said Eliade. In fact, the reverse may actually be true:

"The renaissance of the mysteries in the first centuries of our era may well be related to the rise and spread of Christianity.... certain mysteries may well have reinterpreted their ancient rites in the light of the new religious values contributed by Christianity."

Eliade added that it was only much later, when Christianity had to compete with the renaissance of the mystery cults, that Christians began to borrow from the religious symbols of these cults. They did this in order to help them explain their religion to others (not to modify it), thereby hoping to win converts.²³

Further, and probably most damaging, there is simply no evidence that the mystery religions exerted any influence in Palestine in the first three decades of the first century. If so, where did the material originate to make Christianity a mystery religion? In fact, one wonders why such parallels would be suggested at all.²⁴ The manuscripts we possess prove that the teachings of Jesus and Paul are those given in the New Testament; sufficient time never existed for the disciples to be influenced by the mysteries even if they were open to the idea, which they weren't. When the influence of the mysteries did reach Palestine, principally through Gnosticism, the early church did not accept it but renounced it vigorously as trafficking in pagan myths. The complete lack of resulting syncretism is difficult to explain if Christianity was ultimately a derivative of such paganism.

To illustrate, Mythraism was a chief adversary of Christianity, having a large following in the Roman army by 200 A.D.²⁵ The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* comments, "One of the last of the Oriental Mystery cults to reach the West, Mythraism, was also one of the most rigorous, and in the final death struggle of paganism it emerged as a chief rival and opponent of Christianity."²⁶ But from the earliest moment, the resistance of the Christian Church to all such mystical cults was absolute. One authority on comparative religion, Dr. Robert Speer, author of *The Finality of Jesus Christ*, observes that:

No Christian teacher of the first two centuries conceived the Christian gospel as a gospel to be bracketed in a fellowship with Stoicism and Neoplatonism, or Christ as a savior to be named with Mythra, or the Lord Jesus to be named with Lord Serapis or Lord Dionysus. The early church named One Name, and One Name Alone (see Romans 5:15, 17, 19)... and it steadfastly resisted every heresy from gnosticism onward which imperiled the New Testament view of the personality and primacy of Christ... Against

every assault of gnosticism and... against almost every conceivable objection to Christianity which the modern mind of our time has raised, the Christian thought of the first two centuries stood its ground utterly and unyieldingly.²⁷

Indeed, Christianity waged intellectual warfare, without compromise, against the mystery religions and their varied moral and theological deficiencies. That such deficiencies were indeed varied can be seen in the following accounts describing the Cybelene, Egyptian, Persian, and Dionysian mysteries. No wonder the church so resolutely opposed them!

In the wild orgies of worship associated with that [cybelene] mystery religion, some devotees voluntarily wounded themselves and, becoming intoxicated with the view of blood [cf. 1 Kings 18:28], with which they sprinkled their altars, they believed they were uniting themselves with their divinity. Others sacrificed their virility to the gods.

St. Augustine wrote that, as a young man, he “took pleasure in the shameful games which were celebrated in honor of the gods and goddesses,” including Cybele. On the day consecrated to her purification, “here were sung before her couch productions so obscene and filthy for the ear... so impure, that not even the mother of the foulmouthed players themselves could have formed one of the audience.”

During the ceremonial rites dedicated to the Great Mother, a young man stood beneath a platform upon which a steer was slaughtered and showered himself with the animal’s blood. After the blood bath, the gore-covered mystic offered himself to the veneration of the crowd. The ceremony was known as the taurobolia...

The Egyptian goddess Isis was honored especially by “women with whom love was a profession”.... The morals of the cult of Isis and Osiris were viewed by the Roman community at large as very loose, and the mystery surrounding it excited the worst suspicions.

Persia introduced dualism as a fundamental principle of religion, and deified the evil principle. It was taught that both evil and the supreme deity must be worshiped.... The Persian Mazdeans brought the dimension of magic to their rites and made their “mysteries” a reversed religion with a liturgy focused on the infernal powers. “There was no miracle the experienced magician might not expect to perform with the aid of demons.... Hence the number of impious practices performed in the dark, practices the horror of which is equaled only by their absurdity: preparing beverages that disturbed the senses and impaired the intellect; mixing subtle poisons extracted from demonic plants and corpses already in the state of putridity; immolating children in order to read the future in their quivering entrails or to conjure up ghosts...”²⁸

And:

The initiation ceremonies usually mimed death and resurrection. This was done in the most extravagant manner. In some ceremonies, candidates were buried or shut up in a sarcophagus; they were even symbolically deprived of their entrails and mummified (an animal’s belly with entrails was prepared for ceremony). Alternately, the candidates were symbolically drowned or decapitated. In imitation of the Orphic myth of Dionysis Zagreus, a rite held in which the heart of a victim, supposedly a human child, was roasted and distributed among the participants to be eaten.... In the Dionysus and Isis mysteries, the initiation was sometimes accomplished by a “sacred marriage,” a sacral copulation.²⁹

Again, if Christianity were really simply a derivation of such mystery religions, why did it so staunchly oppose them? The only explanation is that no such similarity existed because Christianity always was what it always claimed—a unique revelation from God.

We may conclude our topic by noting the research of Dr. Ronald H. Nash, head of the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Western Kentucky University and director of its graduate studies in philosophy and religion, and author of a number of books including *Ideas of History*, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, *Faith and Reason*, and *The Case for Biblical Christianity*. In *Christianity & the Hellenistic World*, he offers a devastating critique of this theory.

In evaluating the alleged borrowing concerning Christ's death and resurrection, Dr. Nash points out that the death of Jesus is distinct from the deaths of the pagan gods in at least half a dozen different ways. For example, none of the dying and rising "savior-gods" ever died for someone else, and they never claimed to die for sin. The concept of the incarnate Son of God dying a propitiatory, substitutionary atonement for man is a doctrine that is wholly unique to Christianity. In addition, biblically, Jesus died one time for all sin, whereas the pagan gods were often vegetation deities who mimicked the annual cycles of nature in their repeated deaths and resuscitations. Further, Jesus died in space-time history, whereas the pagan deities were simply myths. Finally, Jesus died voluntarily and His death was a victory, not a defeat, both of which stand in contrast to concepts found in the pagan cults.³⁰ In essence, regardless of the major biblical doctrine we are referring to, whether it be the nature of God, the incarnation, redemption, the resurrection, or the new birth, none of these reveals any dependence whatsoever upon the mystery religions.

Dr. Nash thus refers to the "serious errors" made by those who propose the alleged parallels³¹ and remarks, "The tide of scholarly opinion has turned dramatically against attempts to make early Christianity dependent on the so-called dying and rising gods of Hellenistic paganism."³²

Yet one need only take a course in comparative religion or the origin of Christianity at your local college or university to see how frequently this grotesque caricature continues to be taught as "historical fact." It's almost as bad as the documentary hypothesis of the Pentateuch, which also lives on, despite a similar entombment.³³

In conclusion, Nash summarizes eight of the most serious weaknesses in the critics' claim that Christianity was derived from the mysteries. First, similarity does not prove dependence. The fact of some similarities between Christianity and the mysteries no more proves Christianity was derived from them than similarities between dogs and cats proves dogs derived from cats. Second, even the alleged similarities "are either greatly exaggerated or invented." Third, "the chronology is all wrong" because the basic beliefs of Christianity were in existence in the first century, while the full development of the mystery religions did not happen until the second century. Historically, it is unlikely that any significant encounter took place between Christianity and the pagan mystery religions until the third Century. Fourth, as a devout Jew, the Apostle Paul would never have considered borrowing his teachings from pagan religion. There is not the slightest hint of pagan beliefs in his writings. Fifth, as a monotheistic religion with a coherent body of doctrine, Christianity could hardly have borrowed from a polytheistic and doctrinally contradictory paganism. Sixth, first century Christianity was an exclusivistic faith, not a syncretistic one, which it would have become had borrowing been significant. Seventh, Christianity is demonstrably grounded in the actual events of history, not myths. Eighth, if any borrowing did occur, it was the other way around. In other words, as Christianity grew in influence and expanded in the second and third centuries, the pagan systems, recognizing this threat, would be likely to borrow elements of Christianity to capitalize upon its success. For example, the pagan rite of bathing in bull's blood (taurobolium) initially held its spiritual efficacy at 20 years. But once in competition with Christianity, the cult of Cybele, recognizing that Christians were promised eternal life by faith in Jesus, raised the efficacy of their rite "from 20 years to eternity."³⁴

The best way for students or other inquirers to refute the idea of any collusion between Christianity and the mystery cults is simply to study the mystery religions and compare them carefully with the teachings of the New Testament. It is indeed regrettable that so many professors on our college and university campuses have failed to do this before they wrongly instructed their students that Christianity was only an offshoot of ancient paganism.

Notes:

- ¹ John M. Robertson, *Pagan Christs* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1967),
- ² Kersey Graves, *The Worlds Sixteen Crucified Saviors or Christianity Before Christ* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1971).
- ³ G. A. Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1975).
- ⁴ Cf. *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, 15th ed., s.v., "Mystery Religions," Some of this material is taken from the authors' *The Secret Teachings of the Masonic Lodge: A Christian Perspective* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), pp. 244-245.
- ⁵ John Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* (New York: Bantam, 1981), p. 154.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 193.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 192.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 205.
- ⁹ J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity: The Witness of History* (London: Tyndale, 1970), p. 15.
- ¹⁰ Cf., Jack Finegan, *Myth and Mystery: An Introduction to the Pagan Religions of the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989),
- ¹¹ In Tom Snyder, *Myth Conceptions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), p. 191, citing the 1965 ed., p. 42.
- ¹² Samuel N. Kramer, *Mythologies of the Ancient World* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), p. 10 from Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1981), p. 263.
- ¹³ P. Lambrechts, "La' Resurrection de Adonis," in *Melanges Isadore Levy*, 1955, pp. 207-240 as cited in Edwin Yamauchi, "The Passover Plot or Easter Triumph?" in J. W. Montgomery, (ed), *Christianity for the Tough-Minded* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1971).
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1969, Vol. 15, article on Adonis.
- ¹⁶ Wilbur M. Smith, *Therefore Stand* (New Canaan, CT: Keats, 1981), p. 583.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), p. 38.
- ²⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1970), p. 119.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- ²² Anderson, p. 41, emphasis added.
- ²³ Snyder, p. 194.
- ²⁴ E.g., Anderson, p. 22.
- ²⁵ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "Mysticism" in Everett F. Harrison (ed.), *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972), p. 366.
- ²⁶ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1969, vol. 15, pp. 604-605.
- ²⁷ Robert Speer, *The Finality of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1968), p. 100.
- ²⁸ As cited in Paul A. Fisher, *Behind the Lodge Door: Church, State and Freemasonry* (Washington, DC: Shield Press, 1987), pp. 273-274.
- ²⁹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropedia*, 15th edition, s.v., "Mystery Religions."
- ³⁰ Ronald H. Nash, *Christianity & the Hellenistic World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Probe, 1984), pp. 171-172.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 172-173.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- ³³ Critics also maintain that the Apostle Paul borrowed his ideas from the mystery religions, but Nash shows how weak this argument is. In fact, this idea was refuted 70 years ago in J. Gresham Machen's *The Origin of Paul's Religion* and more recently by the Korean scholar Seyoon Kim in *The Origin of Paul's Gospel*.
- ³⁴ Nash, pp. 192-199; citing Bruce Metzger on the cult of Cybele.