Mystery Cults Essay, Research Paper

Mystery cults greatly influenced the development of Pythagoreanism as Pythagoreans adopted many of their traditions, behaviors and beliefs. Pythagoras, the founder of the Pythagoreans, established a school in which he developed and taught these adopted cultural behaviors and beliefs. “The nature of daily living in the school, both its moral and its intellectual disciplines, can perhaps best be understood as an intellectualized development from earlier mystery cults such as the Eleusinian” (Wheelwright 201). The Pythagoreans and the mystery cults were not identical, but they shared many similar beliefs on subjects such as the soul, transmigration and reincarnation, and they practiced many of the traditions of initiation, ritual and secrecy. Pythagoreans combined the mystery cults’ views on these subjects with philosophical thought as a foundation to develop their own unique beliefs.

The term “mystery cults” comes from the Greek word musteria and initially only referred to the mysteries of Eleusis and signifies a secret celebration or secret worship that only initiates (mustai) who have become initiated (muein) participate in. “Originally, then, mysteries denotes a specific religious manifestation that is essentially different in character from other, official cultic functions; the mysteries are not open to everyone but require a special initiation” (Encyclopedia of Religion Vol. #10 pg. 230). Contemporary religion historians now use the terms “mystery cults” or “mysteries” to refer to secret cults or ceremonies of initiation. These ancient “secret cults” influenced the development of many religions with their sacred beliefs on the divine, the soul, transmigration and, most importantly, their stressed importance in rituals, tradition, and secrecy. “In the view of the history of religions school, the mysteries were an expression of popular piety that drew sustenance especially from the so-called Oriental mystery religions of the Roman imperial age; in the long run, it was claimed, even the early church could not escape the influence of those religions” (Encyclopedia of Religion Vol. #10 pg. 231). The Greek mysteries are traced back to the pre-Classical Mycenaean period and were most likely ancient rituals of initiation into a clan or an association. Of the Greek mysteries, the mysteries of Eleusis, which provided a pattern for the idea of mysteries, were the most important. The mythological background for the Eleusinian mysteries centered on a story of the goddesses Demeter and Kore in which Kore (the divine daughter of Demeter) is carried down to the lower world by Aidoneus. After searching for her child and mourning for her, Kore is finally restored to Demeter. Before Demeter returns to Olympos, Demeter founded a sacred worship where she instructed the princes of the Eleusinians in the performance of the cult. The story of Kore’s return envelopes the theme of loss (death), grief, search, and (re)discovery (life).

Pythagoreans were a secret society begun by Pythagoras of Somos in the sixth century B.C. The Pythagorean School of Philosophy was founded by Pythagoras in the city of Crotona, Italy. Pythagoras established the school in pursuit of higher studies in mathematics, astronomy, music, metaphysics, and polydaemonistic theology (Wheelwright 201). The Pythagoreans practiced a very “disciplined community life, which included both a daily regimen of activities and studies and the practice of non-possession by sharing unreservedly all the necessities of living; and by carefully guarded conditions of membership which nevertheless allowed (for the first time in history, so far as known) the admission of women as members” (Wheelwright 201). The Pythagoreans’ religious beliefs were very similar to those of the early mystery cults. They believed in a dying and rising god and in the hope of life after death. “Their whole way of life is framed with a view to following God; this is the rationale of their philosophy” (Ferguson 92). In conjunction with their beliefs in reincarnation and transmigration, the Pythagoreans would not eat meat and were therefore vegetarians. The Pythagoreans also practiced many rituals such as local vegetation rituals. They believed that their founder, Pythagoras, was a semi-divine being (a theos aner) basically considered a shaman and forced this recognition through traditional rituals. “Pythagoreanism, which was not just a social movement but also a mystical world vision of the attunement and correspondence of all things, had its meaning and its end in an effort to assimilate existence to the divine, immortal life” (Encyclopedia of Religion Vol. #12 pg. 114). The belief in the doctrine of the immortal soul was the cornerstone to the beliefs on the soul, transmigration, initiation and the rituals and secrecy of the school.

Greek mystery cults focused much of their attention on the soul. The mysteries supposedly founded by Orpheus (Eleusinian, Dionysian and Samothracian) usually devoted their existence to the theme of the immortal soul and its deliverance from the present world (Encyclopedia of Religion Vol. #10 pg. 234). They believed that the soul was a divine element located in the body, and that life was a gift from the gods. In the Eleusinian Mysteries, the members believed in a “kingdom of souls below the earth” (Rohde 218). The only way to the blessed kingdom was to worship Demeter and to keep the soul pure. The members of the cult held the Eluesinian Festival where the religious purification of the worshippers preceded and accompanied the holding of the festival. “To many of the believers it may have appeared that the whole festival itself was principally a great purification and religious dedication of unusual solemnity, by which the members (“the Pure as they called themselves) were made worthy of the favor of the goddesses” (Rohde 222). The only way to please the goddesses and to keep the soul pure was through proper worship where traditional rituals took place to pass “redemption” over the soul. The ultimate goal was to achieve the blessings of the goddesses and to become liberated from the human body. “According to Orphic doctrine man’s duty is to free himself from the chains of the body in which the soul lies fast bound like the prisoner in his cell” (Rohde 342). If when death occurs, the soul is pure, the “releasing gods” may bless the soul and grant it salvation. However, if the soul is not deemed pure and good, it will be condemned to return again to the realm of earth in another human or animal.

Just like many mysteries before them, the Pythagoreans were completely devoted to the soul and its immortality. This belief was something of paramount importance because Pythagoras implied more than the “mere survival” of the soul after death. “Pythagorean beliefs about the soul stand as the movement’s specific contributions to the development of religious thought; Pythagoras and his followers, whether original or not, were the first in the Greek world to articulate fully and successfully to advance the understanding of a self beyond the empirical personality” (Encyclopedia of Religion Vol. #12 pg. 114). As the Pythagoreans believed that “All is number”, they also believed the soul to be a harmony and that the great cosmic harmony with the soul is the ultimate destiny of existence. Alcmaeon, a Pythagorean, makes a statement that generalizes the Pythagoreans’ view on the immortality of the soul: “He says that the soul is immortal because it resembles the immortal beings in that it is always in motion; for all the divine bodies likewise are in continuous and unceasing motion-the moon, sun, stars and the whole heaven” (Guthrie 313). According to Pythagoreans plants as well as animals have life, but not all have soul. “Soul is a torn-off fragment of aither and the hot and the cold: it is not coterminous with life, and it is immortal because that from which it has been detached is immortal” (Guthrie 202). This gave Pythagoreans an aim in life which was to cultivate the soul and keep it pure in hope that one day they might be released from the cycle of transmigration into the great divine soul from which they had come. They believed that the soul was impure and weighted down with sins of the human body. In order to keep the soul healthy, Pythagoras and his followers stressed the symbolic character of the religious formulations. During rituals, Pythagoreans often practiced purification and revelation. Pythagoreans also tried to avoid contaminating the soul by avoiding bodily influences and practicing strict codes of conduct among the school.

Many mystery cults such as Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries believed in transmigration and reincarnation of the soul. “To those who share in the Eleusinian worship a privileged fate is promised” (Rohde 218). According to Orphic doctrine: “The death of the body only frees it for a short while; for the soul must once more suffer imprisonment in a body. After leaving its old body, it flutters free in the wind, but a breath of air sends it into a new body again” (Rohde 342). Throughout this “Circle of Necessity”, the soul may endure the lives of many human and animal life forms alike. This is the reason that many mysteries practiced strict vegetarianism except when sacrificing a beast to the gods during purification rituals. “Thus, Nature, ever reverting to its own beginnings, draws men with it in its senseless revolution around itself” (Rohde 342). To free the soul from the process of reincarnation and eternal misery, the soul must follow the ordinances of salvation with perfect obedience. In the Orphic mysteries, this salvation is granted directly from Dionysos himself.

Pythagoreans adopted many similar if not identical beliefs on transmigration and reincarnation as the mystery cults. “The whole religious side of this movement, which included an elaborate cycle of rebirths, cannot be separated from that adopted by Pythagoras, and to make the attempt would probably be unhistorical. The Pythagoreans not only used the religious books promulgated under the ancient name of Orpheus: prominent members of the school were named in later antiquity as the authors of some of them, and the tradition ascribing some to Pythagoras himself goes back, as we have already noted, to the fifth century B.C.” (Guthrie 198). Pythagoras believed that “the present life is a sojourn, a temporary stage in a long pilgrimage; and the body (soma)was likened to a tomb (sema) in which they held that the soul has to live out a sort of shadow-life, a half-life, which is more nearly death than it is life” (Wheelwright 209). Pythagoreans were life-long abstainers from animal flesh just like the followers of the Orphic mysteries. The only time the Pythagoreans tasted meat was during ceremonial offerings to the gods. Pythagoreans strongly stressed the kinship of all life. “Since then all animals are our kin-if it is clear that, as Pythagoras said, they have the same soul-the man who does not keep his hand off his own relatives is rightly condemned as unholy” (Guthrie 195). Pythagoras recognized that (because of his belief in reincarnation) all learning in the present life is recollection from past lives, and so the Pythagoreans believed that truths are already in us waiting to be stirred up.

The initiation ceremonies and the entire initiation process were very important to members of the mystery cults. “By initiation into the mysteries of Demeter the Earth-mother and her daughter Persephone (Kore), their worshippers believed that they could be actually adopted into the family of the gods, and by this adoption secure for themselves not mere survival-but a far better and happier fate in the life to come” (Guthrie 197). All classes, including slaves, were admitted into the Eleusinian mystery cults. However, a distinction was made according to participation between the initiates (mustes) and the fully initiated viewers (epoptes). The initiation ceremonies were divided into two sections: 1) Lesser Mysteries, 2) Greater Mysteries. The Lesser Mysteries at Agrai took place annually in February and were regarded as a preliminary stage leading to the Greater Mysteries held at Eleusis in September. The initiation ceremonies were always directed by a hierophant, who from time immemorial had been a member of the Eumolpides, a noble family that had held the kingship of old, and the Kerukes family filled the other offices (Encyclopedia of Religion Vol. #10 pg. 233). “Sacrifices, libations, baths, ablutions, fasts, processions (especially bringing the “holy things,” the cult symbols, to Eleusis), and torches all played an important role in both feasts. The center of all activity was the ceremony that was not public” (Encyclopedia of Religion Vol. #10 pg. 233). These “secret” ceremonies were held in a place of consecration known as the telesterion. “The main Eleusinian practices involved two steps-purification and revelation, the ritualistic sea-bathing by boys undergoing initiation and the dramatic exhibition in a dark room of the sacred grain stalk in a flash of light” (Wheelwright 201).

The Pythagoreans initiated in much the same way as the Eleusinian initiates did. They were careful of who they let to become initiates, but they also were revolutionary in that they allowed women to join. “Granted that the ritual and the mystery had a symbolic character for the ancient Eleusinian worshippers, Pythagoras in taking over the basic pattern minimized the ritual and stressed the symbolic character of the religious formulations” (Wheelwright 201). To be eligible for consideration to become initiated, the initiates had to take a pledge of silence. “Iamblichus tells us that applicants for membership of the brotherhood were made by Pythagoras to keep a five-year silence as part of their novitiate” (Guthrie 151).

Traditional rituals (such as initiation) were a necessary characteristic of the “mysteries”, but many mystery cults practiced their own unique rituals, traditions and secrecy. The Orphics’ beliefs could only be satisfied through strenuous efforts and rituals lasting their whole life. “Initiation was an essential part, but the rites must be periodically renewed and life as a whole lived differently, with observance of ritual prohibitions among which abstention from meat was, as with the Pythagoreans, of the greatest importance” (Guthrie 198). During the Orphic rituals, a priestess most often purified the members of the cult by dumping water over their heads while the members prayed to god with a serpent in their hand. The Eleusinian mysteries held traditional beliefs, but did not practice ceremony with the exception of initiation. Common to all mysteries was the secretive way in which they all operated. Orphics and Eleusinian mysteries alike practice the sacred initiation ceremonies in secret. The beliefs of the mysteries were not beliefs expressed to the public, but beliefs only know to those who have been initiated. Often times, the initiates (mustes) weren’t fully educated to the beliefs of the cult until after the initiation occurred, and during initiation the members were made to take a vow of secrecy.

Pythagoreans practiced many rituals derived directly from preceding mystery cults such as sea bathing at initiation and fasts. They adopted most of the rituals and traditions from the Eleusinian mysteries, but they also used Orphic religious books as a reference to traditional ceremonies. Pythagoreans performed many rituals as part of their daily routine. “The practice of silence each morning, between rising from bed and the ascetically sparse community breakfast, was a means on the one hand of reawakening one’s inner affinity with the divine, and on the other hand of exercising and strengthening one’s power of memory by daily practice in recalling the ordered events of the preceding day, then of the day before that, and so on” (Wheelwright 201). These ritualistic actions were traditional to the Pythagoreans as well as daily readings, community meals and the practice of sharing. Pythagoreans are famous for their strict secrecy policies. “Isocrates in a bantering vein (Bus. 29) remarks that those who claim to be disciples of Pythagoras are more admired for their silence than their most famous orators for their speech” (Guthrie 151). To become a member of the school, an initiate took a pledge of silence for five years. Religious historians will never know exactly what Pythagoras said to his followers because of the remarkable silence the Pythagoreans kept.

While the Pythagoreans adopted most of their central beliefs from ancient mystery cults, they developed some differences as well. Mystery cults were totally dedicated to religious beliefs such as the immortality of the soul and transmigration, and so were the Pythagoreans, but the Pythagoreans dedicated themselves to higher learning as well (as is seen by the establishment of a school which mystery cults never had). “To a degree and in a manner which it is difficult for a modern thinker to realize, trained as he is in the ways of specialism, the Pythagoreans regarded mathematical and astronomical studies as inseparable from moral and religious disciplines and from personal self-examination. Behind the practices of self-discipline and self-examination which were part of the daily life there lay a profound set of convictions about the nature and destiny of the soul” (Wheelwright 209). Because of the Pythagoreans religious school, there was “a particularly strong temptation, not only to venerate the founder, but to attribute all its doctrine to him personally” (Guthrie 149). Mystery cults such as the Eleusinian mysteries worshipped a specific god or goddess, but the Pythagoreans can almost be considered worshippers of Pythagoras. Another difference between the mystery cults and the Pythagoreans lies in the beliefs on the route to salvation. “Eleusis taught that immortality was to be obtained through the single revelation, after suitable preparation, of the mystic objects or symbols; the Orphics added the need for carrying out in daily life an elaborate system of religious, possibly also moral, prohibitions; to Pythagoras the way of salvation lay though philosophy” (Guthrie 199). At Eleusis, initiation was all that mattered. The participants of the Eleusinian cults returned home to live normal lives. Pythagoreans dedicated their entire lives to education and excellence that would gain them access to the “divine soul” after death.

The Eleusinian and Orphic mysteries strongly influenced the development of Pythagoreanism with their beliefs on the soul and their practices in initiation, rituals and secrecy. Both these mysteries, as well as the Pythagoreans, believed in the immortal soul that cycles through the process of transmigration until the soul becomes pure enough to unite with the divine. The Pythagoreans adopted the initiation ceremony from the Eleusinian mysteries as well as many traditions and rituals. While the Pythagoreans adopted many of the rituals and traditions, they also developed their own in conjunction with the studies of mathematics, astronomy, music and metaphysics. The Pythagoreans also adopted and expanded upon the traditional secrecy policies of the mysteries. The central beliefs of the mystery cults were at the central beliefs of the Pythagoreans, but the Pythagoraeans developed and expanded (making minor changes to) the mystery cults using studies in education and philosophy.

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