

“OVIDIUS” UNIVERSITY OF CONSTANȚA  
DOCTORAL SCHOOL  
THEOLOGY FIELD

**PhD THESIS SUMMARY**

**THE IDENTITY OF CHRISTIANITY  
AFTER THE NEW TESTAMENT.  
HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS  
CONSIDERATIONS**

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CONSTANȚA  
2019

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This PhD thesis proposes a more customary research theme in the biblical research horizon: *The Identity of Christianity after the New Testament. Historical and religious contextualization*, and comes to capture the position of primary Christianity in the religious landscape of the ancient Greco-Roman world. It is intended to highlight the founding of the Christian Church after the New Testament as a factor in the formalization of the representation of Christianity in the public space and the competition it had in the mystery cults, especially in the cult of Mithra. Our research helps to decrypt on the historical premise of Acts the differences between Christianity and Mithraism, how is defined the initiation in the two religions that this presupposes, and last but not least, highlighting evangelical historical evidence of Christianity, so disputed and blamed in contemporary postmodern society.

Christianity is "life in Christ", and being a Christian is to live in the sacramental and liturgical space of the Church, a space in which loving dialogue or communion with God takes place. This is the meaning around which Christian vocation revolves: the deification or likeness of man with God through grace. Man is the person placed in a personal relationship with Personal God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). If we catalog Christianity as a religion that fits into the statistical picture of the world's religions, we strip it of the depth of what defines it. Following Father Alexander Schmemman we regard Christianity as the "religion of religions" or "the end of all religions", in which the idea of God is not progressively outlined in man's perception and thought, in the development and expression of religious sentiment but the fundamental premise of Christianity is Revelation, by which God is revealed to man, and man aware of this relationship he lives with God, knows Him, though He remains permanently incognostible in His being. Man looks towards God in a mystical, spiritual view, aware through the act of grace shared with him by the Holy Spirit, and the act of faith, which is the meaning of his existence and the way of accomplishing the fulfillment of his existential act.

In Christianity, God is with man and man with God, a relation best expressed in divine and liturgical worship. In this ever-updated "Eucharist" man is spiritually enriched, and the process of knowing and understanding God is permeated. The Christian teaching promotes that God is incognizable in His being, He is above the human power of understanding, He is infinite, super-being, overcoming any spatial and temporal category. Both cataphasm and apophasm, as ways of knowing God, sum up in one definition: "God is He who is" (Exodus 3:14). He is the Creator who, through the act of love, brings from nothingness to existence, meaning that He creates man, and creates a universe, destined to man as the workspace of his spiritual maturity. God places man in a movement that converges to Him and in Him in the sense of his deification.

The apophatic expression in the knowledge of God creates the premise of the Christian mystery. The mystery or the secret of Christianity is not a concept understood in the way it is promoted by the religions of mystery, as a mere esoteric and external fact. In Christianity, the term mystery has a completely different meaning, profoundly and refers to the divine element. We are talking about the Christian mystery, because Christianity is interwoven with these two elements: divine and human, and the mystery regards the divine element as well as the

experience of communion with God. God remains a mystery even for the Christian, He is inexhaustible, "the divine darkness", and in the act of His knowledge we know the manifestations outside His being, but never His ineffable being. Jesus Christ, though having come to the utmost intimacy, near to us through the act of the Incarnation, taking human flesh to restore the human race from the tyranny of the devil, He remains permanently the true God, the divine-human person through which we open the possibility of reconditioning our primordial state before falling into sin.

By addressing the issue of religions of mysteries, and in particular the problem of Mithraism, we cannot make a correlation between the Christian mystery and the pagan mystery. There is no point of interference that allows us to associate the mystery of the Christian, because in paganism the mystery does not have an ontological function, if we could say, but a purely esoteric, mystery one, that is, the external aspect through which this religion was made known. Christianity has a universal message and does not address people on racial grounds, sex or age. The condition of entering Christianity is the reception of the three Holy Mysteries: Baptism, Chrismation and Communion, through which we become members of the Church of Christ, we incorporate into His mystery body.

Some scholars (Ernest Renan) have attempted to elaborate the thesis of the origins of Christianity to make a parallel between the mysteries of religion and Christianity-perceived as a mystery religion, as a religion that is strongly influenced by the pagan mystery. In fact, Christianity would only be a re-adaptation of the ancient mysteries of religion, in which the greatest contribution to its configuration was Mithraism.

The fact that there are similarities between mystery and Christianity is something observed since the early centuries of Christianity, when both Christians and non-Christians discussed similarities. Appreciating the significance of similarities in certain crucial areas (The Holy Mysteries and the motives of the saving god) we must take into account the following:

a. Some of the parallel presuppositions are nothing but the result of the mixture of heterogeneous elements that modern researchers have taken from various sources. As Schweitzer says, almost all the well-known writings suffer from this inaccuracy. They build from various pieces of information a kind of universal mystery religion that never existed and even less during the time of the Holy Primary Christianity."

Even the most well-known scholars have succumbed to the temptation to be more precise than it allowed the existing information. Commenting on this, Edwyn R. Sevan<sup>1</sup> says caustically: "...of course, if someone makes an imaginary description of mysteries, as Loisy does, filling the missing places in the image left by the Christian Eucharist, then that one gets something impressive. After this plan you put the Christian elements there and then strive to find them. It goes without saying that the similarities discovered by such a methodology disappear when confronted with the original texts. In a word, we must avoid what is called "parallel made plausible by selective description".

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin R. Bevan, *The History of Christianity in the Light of Modern Knowledge*, Glasgow, 1929, p. 105

b. Even when comparisons are real and not imaginary, their significance, for the benefit of comparison, will depend on the fact that they are genealogical or simple analog comparisons. That is, we have to ask ourselves whether the similarities are seen as the results of a more or less equivalent religious experience, due to an equivalence, which can be called psychic, and one of the external conditions, or if they are due to the borrowings from one to the other.

As interesting as Sir William Fraser's parallel in the monumental "*The Golden Bough*", gathering information from the four parts of the world, it should never be seen as a result of a demonstrable borrowing. Seeking links it is not enough, as FC Conybeare<sup>2</sup> notices, "as an institution, a person, or a faith to remind us of another. Before affirming that there are literary and traditional links between similar elements of stories and myths, we must know surely that there was communication between them".

It is a recognized fact that great similarities in terms of expression, have been discovered in various areas, but they are not linked to each other by anything more than mere analogy.

Saint Clement of Alexandria - points out the essential difference between ancient mysteries and the Christian mystery, saying that "I will reveal according to the true teaching, the witchcraft which is hidden in them (in mystery)" showing that "these are the mysteries of those without God... That they consider gods those who are not truly gods; but, better said, they do not exist, but only have the names of gods". He asserted by this, with the knowledge that he had both as a Greek and a Christian, without hostility in terms of mysteries, the insurmountable contrast between the essence of Christian teaching and that which accompanied the mysteries of religion.

c. Even when the parallel is genealogical, we cannot fully believe that mysteries have always influenced Christianity, because it is not only possible, but perhaps in some cases the influence has been opposite. Frantz Cumont affirms this influence of Christianity, saying: "Christianity itself influenced other religions after it became a moral force in the world." As T.R. Glover named the "Conflict of the Early Roman Empire Religions", it was to be expected that the hierophants of the denominations who lost ground in the face of a rising cretinism, will try to oppose. One of the safest ways would have been to imitate the teachings of Christianity by offering the same things that it offered. Thus, the change in the Taurobolium ritual must be interpreted without doubt.

It is an important issue that requires the analysis of the missing words from the vocabulary of the first Christian writers. It is obvious that many ordinary words in the everyday life of contemporary pagan religions are missing from the New Testament; words like *misticos*: *misticos* or religious terms such as *mistagogos*, *katarsia*, *katarsis*. The Christians were never named as heroes, nor did they use the *naos* word for the meeting place. We would seek for nothing *telein* and its composites in the sense of initiation, *telos* with the same meaning, as

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<sup>2</sup> F. C. Conybeare apud Jean M. Metzger, *Considerations of methodology in the study of the Mystery Religions and Early Christianity*, Harvard Theological Review, no. 1 , vol. XLVIII, January, 1995, p. 9

*teleti, atelestos*, and other common words of the Mysteries as *ierofantis, orghia, katochos, entheos, enthousiazein*, and their equivalents as A.D. Nock<sup>3</sup> states “they may well be used to describe the state of comprehensiveness of the Holy Spirit”<sup>4</sup>. What is important, Nock continues, is that “these secretly meaning words belong to ordinary religious language and fall into the category of normal metaphors. It also seems that their avoidance is deliberate, perhaps due to unacceptable meanings. There is certainly no indication of the adaptation of pagan religious terms”<sup>5</sup>.

The few words that appear both in the New Testament and the mystery texts are either rare in the New Testament in order to be conclusive in establishing religious affinities (such as *miein, emvateuein, epoptis*, each one only occur once), or have a total different meaning in the two sources (*mistiriori*).

The most obvious difference between Christianity and the mysteries lies between the historical basis of the first one and the mythological character of the latter. Unlike the deities that appear in mystery and are nebulae of an imaginary past, one of the Divine Persons of the Holy Trinity, whom Christians worship and call God, was known as a Real Person who lived on the earth very little before the first New Testament documents were written. From the beginning, the Christian Creed included the statement that Jesus Christ "was crucified in the time of Pontius Pilate". On the other hand, Plutarch felt it necessary to warn Priestess Clea that she would not believe that "any of these stories (about Jesus and Osiris) actually happened in the way they are reported".

c) Unlike the secret way in which those who kept the mysteries behaved, Christians left sacred books to everyone's reach. Even when the arcane discipline was developed, in the 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> century (either as a diplomatic and pedagogical technique, and / or as a borrowing that Christianity took from the mysteries), one can observe the simplicity and opening of the Christian rite in contrast to the secret nature of the pagan mysteries<sup>6</sup> (also a form of the arcane discipline we find in Roman Catholicism until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in the Greek Orthodox Church also the Russian ones today. This is understood by the insistent use of the sacred language (Slavic, ancient Greek) not understood anymore today by the believers, thereby depriving believers of the knowledge of the saving truth altogether).

d) The differences between the Christian Mystery of Baptism and the Eucharist and the corresponding ceremonies within the mysteries are as profound as the superficial similarities. These two Holy Christian Mysteries were initially considered to be blessings to those who by their nature were inappropriate to participate in the new faith instituted by the Person and Work of Christ. The pagan mysteries, on the contrary, offered the gifts of *ex opere operato* through

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur Darby Nock, in *Vocabulary of the New Testament, Essays on Religion and Ancient World*, selected and edited, with an Introduction, Bibliography of Nock's writings, and Indexes, by Zeph Stewart, Calderon Press, Oxford, 1972, p. 343

<sup>4</sup> *ibidem*, p. 345

<sup>5</sup> *ibidem*, p. 347

<sup>6</sup> Father Prof. I. G. Coman, *Probleme de filozofie si literature patristica*, Institutului Biblic si de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Romane Publishing House, Bucharest 1995, p. 212



"the liberation or creation of a mortal element in the individual with some action in the future, but which did not bring any change to the moral self for the purpose of living". For the Christian The Holy Mysteries are of decisive importance for that through them the Holy Trinity itself is working through the grace of the Holy Spirit in its soul, thus achieving a synergy between God and man.

4. Finally, Christianity and cults of the mystery differ in terms of the philosophy of history:

I. It is generally accepted that the rituals of mysteries, which commemorate the death and resurrection of a deity, represents seasons recurrence and vegetative cycle. In other words, these myths are the expression of the old symbolism of nature; the spirit of vegetation dies every year and then revives. According to popular expectation, this process of the world is repeated indefinitely, being a circular movement that does not lead anywhere. For Christians on the other hand, heirs of the Hebrew vision of history, the flow of time includes a series of unique events, of which the most significant is the death and resurrection of Christ. Unlike the recurrent death and resurrection of the deities, symbolizing the cycle of nature, for Christians, the importance of Jesus' work was linked to the character, once and for all, of His death and resurrection.

II. And in another way mysteries differ from the Christian interpretation of history. The speculative myths of mystery cults are totally devoid of any connection to the moral and spiritual meaning of history, which is, however, in Christianity closely involved in the passions and triumph of Christ. In fact, it is only in the fourth century, when the contrast between religions has become more and more powerful, that there is evidence of an attempt to find moral values in cultic myths. For any comparative evaluation of the relationship between the mysteries of religion and primary Christianity, caution should be exercised and a clear distinction be made between the elements that belong to them.

In the Orthodox Church no special study of the mystery has been undertaken because this is the intrinsic characteristic of the faith. At the center of this belief lies the Holy Trinity, which is "the supreme mystery of existence that explains everything or without which nothing can be explained". Therefore, the relationship of the faithful man with God is based on the model of the relationship of love existing between the people of the Holy Trinity. Personal existence makes both the relationship between the people of the Holy Trinity and the relationship with man inexhaustible and, as a result, mysterious. At the level of human existence, this relationship has gained the systematized form of doctrine and cult, but these forms of perception are only means of expression that do not limit or exhaust the relationship. The verbal symbol and symbolic action are means by which man expresses his mysterious relationship with God. The symbol always holds secret meanings, it is like a garment that shows the shape of the body, but at the same time conceals it. The symbolic theology of Hellenistic antiquity had certain knowledge of it, and exactly here we find the miraculous "key" to give meaning to the cultural rites of all mysteries.

Christianity is never only the religion of the empty word, of the mere understanding of moral exertion, but that of the incarnated Word, of the wisdom that reveals the meanings through love, the grace that is hidden in the sacramental symbols, and therefore the mystic religion has begun behind the simplicity of the word and the cultural rituals that reveal God's incomprehension. In this sense God is the Mystagogus, the High Priest (the hierophant) of these mysteries.

The essential difference between the revealed religion, which is Christianity, and the ancient mysteries, between the "mystery of iconomy" (Eph. 3: 9) and the Hellenistic mysteries, between the "natural mystery" of the symbolism of Greek mysteries and the "supernatural mystery" of the doctrine of salvation in the New Testament, it is obvious. That's why researchers like Heinrici could say, "If we were to ask about the overall character of primary Christianity, it could be called an anti-mystery religion, rather than a mystery religion". It cannot be recognized thus at St. Paul or also at Saint Ignatius or other Christian writers a concession or adaptation to any kind of mystery language as little as veiled.

It is quite different in the second period, in the third century, which is only a time of "mysterization" exaggerated by all the thinking of the late antiquity and the time of the incorporation of mysteries in neo-platonic theosophy and mysticism. During the same period, the theology and cult of the Church takes fundamental forms.

Those who fight Gnosticism, discover how the Theurgy of new doctrines mix the Christian point of view with myths and rites of mystery. The theologians, and before all Clement of Alexandria, begins to expose to the Greek man the mystery of the Logos in pictures that are familiar, and thus the theological language of Christianity has received its forever form. G. Anrich - presents with caution and erudition this process that began in Alexandria and showed how a certain mystery terminology was introduced into the linguistic uses of the Church. Once again, the question of the relationship between mystery and Christianity at the end of ancient religion, and at the time when the mysteries of the universes are breaking apart, is quite different. They are no more then a neo-platonic opposition to the teaching of Christ, as used by Cyril of Alexandria in the literary opera of the Emperor Julian the Apostate, whom he regards as a Hellenic city against the greatness of Christ.

Christianity as an essential religion revealed by God in Christ has neither in its appearance nor in its development any of the important things that would have to do with the world of ancient mysteries-indicating above the differences that separate them.

We have seen how from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century the Primary Church meets the Greek world, the Greek who is "enjoying the mysteries", to explain its own mysteries in words and images that have been familiar to him for so long. Clement of Alexandria makes full use of the images and Greek mythology only to make the new Christian doctrine accessible, but he does not take the ideas of this mythology, but exposes the teaching of faith using the images known to those he addressed (Protreptic, XII, 119, 1-120) in the same sense, St. Athanasius the Great says that people "have been tempted to rise as gods to their rulers and their sons, whether for the honor

of the rulers or for the fear of the tyrants", reminding Isis and Osiris among them, which demonstrates the knowledge of mythology and mysteries of religion.

The difference between the religions of mystery and the Christian mystery is obvious. The action of the mystery rite on the initiate and its outcome is uncertain. Salvation itself is not realized by the initiation as it is realized in Christianity, but by overcoming the destiny, enjoying a happy existence after death, as the Hymn to Demeter states, "happy the one who saw this (the mystery) before going underground!" What the initiate assures is that it will not be a sad and faded shadow, lacking in force and memory, which Homeric heroes feared, but will be able to continue, to have which is characteristic to the human being. Although there is progress in this personalized vision of death, the Christian relationship between man and God is not a personal relationship. For the Christian, salvation is accomplished by reaching the state of personal communion with God through love.

The rites of initiation are also different in meaning and content. Though similarities have been sought between them, the purpose of the Holy Mysteries, lately called of initiation of Baptism, of Chrismation, and of the Eucharist, is totally different from that of mystery rites. These Holy Mysteries only place the believer on the path of Christian faith and living. It does not offer salvation itself: I am baptized, I am saved, as we see in the sermons of the sects today. They put us in the relationship of communion with Christ through the grace of the Holy Spirit, so that we can progress in this relationship until we achieve salvation in Christ. Nothing is known about certain post-initiation prescriptions in mystery rites, whereas in Christianity, only after receiving the initiation Mysteries (Baptism, Chrismation, Eucharist), the true Christian life begins with all the obligations that arise from receiving them.

Another crucial difference is related to the presence of the god and his relationship with the initiate. It is clear that within the mysteries there was no real presence of the god, but only the teaching that he transmitted through the myth. In Christianity, it is always spoken of the true presence of the Holy Trinity in the Eucharist of the Holy Mysteries, in the Divine Liturgy and all other acts of sanctification of life.

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