
MYSTICISM: FROM THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES TO TODAY

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ABSTRACT

In the Hellenistic world, ‘mystical’ referred to “secret” religious rituals, specifically starting with the Eleusinian Mysteries in Ancient Greece. The mysteries were taken up in the same form in the Roman Empire and then morphed, as the dominant religion in the West shifted from the Olympians to the Way. This paper first focuses on the original meaning of the word, specifically as it refers to the Eleusinian Mysteries, the most significant Pan-Hellenic transcendence initiation ceremony aimed at accepting death and opening the consciousness into the superhuman understanding. The origins of the concept of mysteries, exploring in particular the Eleusinian mysteries, are briefly described, by investigating accounts from classical texts and archeological evidence. In the beginning of the last century the term mysticism reappeared and evolved in definition in religious studies and an account of the understanding is presented in the second part. The definition of the term “experience” is complex in general and even more complex for a term such as “mystical experience”. The last part of this paper explores the idea of what constitutes a mystical experience and how it relates to the accounts from the Eleusinian Mysteries. This paper uses literary and scholarly sources, in Ancient Greek, Greek and English.

When referring to the word mysticism it is relevant to start with an attempt at understanding the meaning of the word. The term ‘mysticism’ comes from the Greek «μύω» meaning “to conceal.” From the analysis of the verb «μύω» itself some insight into its original usage and meaning can be inferred. The verb has a connotation of closing one’s eyes, ears and mouth¹. From the same root of the verb comes the word «μύωψ» which refers to someone with short sightedness, who must squint their eyes to see. The implication is that a function of «μύηση» or initiation, allows someone to see beyond what they are able to see with their eyes open. The same can be said for the other senses.

In the beginning of the last century the term mysticism appeared and evolved in definition. The first notable attempt was delivered by William James in 1902 in his work: *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*. In lectures 16 and 17 he proposes four traits of a mystical experience: 1. Ineffability 2. Noetic Quality 3. Transiency and 4. Passivity. James notes that “although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe; when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.”

The word mysticism has evolved and has acquired a more limited usage in the last century. In the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, mysticism is defined as “a constellation of distinctive practices, discourses, texts, institutions, traditions, and experiences aimed at human transformation, variously defined in different traditions”. The comparative category of mysticism in religious studies today is a modern construct designed to elicit nuances in the investigation and description of these types of phenomena termed mystical experiences. The first notable instance of a ritual designed to elicit this elusive ineffable experience are the Eleusinian Mysteries², in Ancient Greece.

The Eleusinian mysteries are rites that were dedicated to the cult of Demeter³ and her daughter Persephone⁴. Demeter was the Goddess

of fertility of the land, and she valued her Kore above all. The myth that describes the kidnapping of her daughter by the ruler of the underworld is pre-Hellenic, possibly of Sumeric origins, with roots deep in the Neolithic Age. The myth in Greek literature first appears in Hesiod⁵'s Theogony, and is also significantly retold in the Homeric hymn of Demeter⁶. The Eleusinian Mysteries, that were practiced from around 1450 BCE to 392 CE, were held in Eleusis in the third month of the Attikon calendar, the month called Boedromion⁷, dedicated to the Boedromion⁸ Apollo⁹ (as is recounted in Euripides¹⁰ and Pausanias¹¹). The Eleusinian Mysteries, also referred to as the Great Mysteries, started on the 15th day of the month and lasted 9 days, and were an initiation ritual open to all men or women, free citizens or slaves, that had undergone the ritual of the Small Mysteries commemorating the birth of Dionysius, and aimed not only at teaching principles of living, but also at conquering the fear of death. Through the patronage of Pericles in the 5th century BCE they gained fame as a purification ritual in the then known world. The initiates¹² lined up to receive the great mysteries, that would open up the doors of death and rebirth, from the officiating priest, the hierophant¹³, the man who would reveal the great mysteries to them. During the ritual the hierophant and the overseers were dressed in very elaborate and flamboyant clothes that were understood to be sacred and were designated specifically for the mysteries¹⁴. The ceremony of the mysteries themselves as archeological evidence suggests¹⁵ was a very elaborate and glorious affair: there were sacrifices of boars, who lacked respect to the Goddess of fertility of the land by ruining the fields; offerings of fish, flowers, fruits (and in particular pomegranates¹⁶ that were symbolic of Persephone). It is known that participants were fasting and broke their fast by consuming a concoction based on barley called kykeon¹⁷. The initiates would be sworn to secrecy, the breach of which was punishable by death in Athenian law¹⁸, thus most of the knowledge of the secrets of the Eleusinian Mysteries was lost after the destruction of the temple in Eleusis and the slaughtering of all the priests and officiates by the Ostrogoths in the Christian era¹⁹. The interpretation of the archaeological evidence as well as surviving

traditions, both in terms of symbolism and of ritual meaning, are understood to be only partial descriptions of the less secret parts of the Great Mysteries and can only point to the basic aspects of this deep spiritual awakening²⁰. The Mysteries were rituals aimed at eliciting a mystical experience in the participants and were thus instrumental in their spiritual awakening. The mysteries were favored by Socrates and by his students, Plato in particular.

Reference of the practices of the Great Mysteries can be found in part in many European Rituals, for example in England (Bober, 1951:33), where Roman culture was expanding its reach and influence. An aspect of the mysteries that has taken a great significance in the Christian Era is involves the concept of the three-parts of the Divinity of the God figure. This is reflected in the Christian idea of the Holy Trinity. The Eleusinian mysteries highlight the importance of the ineffable character and influence of death, as part of the trinity of the nature of the divine. This notion of the trinity of God is highlighted in Hesiod's Theogony. As Dias is replacing the trinity of Chaos, Uranus and Kronos, after the fight of the Titans he realizes that he cannot rule alone so he enlists his two brothers Poseidon and Hades, giving dominion of the underworld to Hades. This trinity is also a necessary part of honoring the divine in Ancient Greece²¹. The rituals themselves as a practice have had more of an influence in the Nordic Celtic and druid rituals. (Charalambides, 2013: 177-179) As time progressed, the symbolism around Eleusis was transferred to Christian rites and "this is why Clement – after speaking of Eleusis – called Christ the "true hierophant" (Eliade, 1978: 297).

The term mysticism that originally took its meaning from the Eleusinian mysteries evolved over the centuries and reappeared with its current meaning in the scholarship of the 20th century of those known as the philosophers of mysticism, such as William James, Evelyn Underhill, Joseph Marechal, William Johnson, James Pratt, Mircea Eliade, W.T. Stace, Steven Katz, and Robert Forman amongst others. The focus of investigation was shifted from what is or elicits a mystical experience to the more intellectual concern of what is the interpretation of the

understanding. The two main philosophical schools of mysticism referred to as the perennialists and the constructivists offer both points of study and approach as to what could be the definition of mysticism and mystical experience. The scholars of mysticism defend the validity of mystical experiences per se and question whether it is the experience that affects the interpretation or whether the experience itself is the one that gets colored by the interpretative markers of the mystics: namely religion, culture, and experiences. Katz opens his article “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism” (1978) by saying that “though no philosophical argument is capable of proving the veracity of mystical experience, one would be both dogmatic and imprudent to decide *a priori* that mystical claims are mumbo jumbo, especially given the wide variety of such claims by men (and women) of genius and/or intense religious sensitivity over the centuries as well as across all cultural divisions.” Forman goes further in acknowledging the particularity of mystical events, although he chooses to focus on “Pure Consciousness Events” (PCE) because “they are relatively common, rudimentary and may therefore indicate certain features of other more complex (perhaps more advanced) mystical phenomena.” It is the general view of both Katz and Forman and by extension of both branches of the mystical scholars that they influenced, that the mystics do in fact have a supermundane experience, namely the *mystical experience*. The Eleusinian mysteries were aimed at evoking a mystical experience and if anything forbade participants from discussing the experience. Today’s scholars, even if they do not deny the existence of the mystical experience, are often mainly concerned with defining, quantifying, and categorizing it.

Mystical experiences are defined as representing ‘an immediate direct contact with a variously defined absolute principle. After that direct contact the experience is interpreted according to the tradition’s language and beliefs. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy classifies and contrasts experiences in various ways, such as: extrovertive (sense-perceptual, somatosensory, or introspective content) versus introvertive (one’s mystical consciousness of the unity of nature overlaid onto one’s

sense perception of the world, non-unitive numinous extrovertive experiences, experience of “nothingness” or “emptiness); theistic (experiences purportedly of God, numinous theistic experiences), and non-theistic (ultimate reality other than God or of no reality at all); union with God (a falling away of the separation between a person and God, short of identity); identity with God (consciousness of being fully absorbed into or even identical with God); theurgic (from the Greek *theourgia*, a mystic intends to activate the divine in the mystical experience) versus non-theurgic; *apophatic* (from the Greek, “*apophasis*,” meaning negation or “saying away”, nothing can be said of objects or states of affairs which the mystic experiences) versus *kataphatic* (from the Greek, “*kataphasis*,” meaning affirmation or “saying with”, vivid and active experiences); pure consciousness events. In that sense the Eleusinian mysteries were aimed at eliciting an introvertive, theistic, theurgic and kataphatic experience.

Since a *mystical experience* is generally construed as a direct encounter with the Divine or the Absolute, some scholars of mysticism claim that the “raw experience” is not affected by linguistics, cultural or historical contingencies” (Kripal, 2006: 96). But there is debate whether the *experience* is colored by the background of the experiencer or whether the *description of the experience* is colored by the background of the experiencer, or whether the experience even can be accepted as such given the lack of scientific evidence and proof. Therefore, scholars of mysticism often miss the most important element, the experience itself. In contrast in Ancient Greece, the philosophers like Plato, the doctors like Asclepius, the mathematicians like Pythagoras, were concerned with integrating what is ineffable into their own psyche and the psyche of their students, in order to expand their consciousness as well as their abilities.

Mystics are understood to have a direct, almost privileged access to the supernatural realms. The typical social function of mystics is to access the superhuman, ineffable realm, to provide guidance to the community. They are mediators between the two planes of existence: the visible and the invisible. This is the role of the hierophant and the guidance that he provides to the initiates. Mystics express that words are not enough, and

often they choose to speak in metaphors, in parables, in poetic forms or a combination of the above (James, 1902). Experiences can even be shared and yet each person can only describe his or her perception of what has occurred, sometimes only sharing a general sense of characteristics in the experience. Mystical experiences are a window to some essential truth. This is reminiscent of the ineffable quality of the experience acquired from the Eleusinian Mysteries.

In conclusion, the topic of mysticism and mystical experience through the ages is complex as it is not only a word that needs to be explored, the whole account of experiences has to be explored, across time and traditions, and somehow summarized in a way that makes sense to the religious studies field. In looking at the origin in the Eleusinian mysteries and how this beginning incorporated the elicitation through the ritual of a mystical experience, this paper is an attempt to show the strength of the influence of the Eleusinian mysteries to the understanding of mysticism. The parts of the mysteries that are most relevant in this investigation are the characteristics of transcendence, of mystical experience, or deep connection to the divine and to the afterlife, the fasting and use of hallucinogenic substances to expand the mind. The traditional understanding of mysticism, mystics, and mystical instances often focuses on events, experiences, and ideas that are more or less amenable to orthodox framings of what constitutes experiential truth and practice. The mystical experience may in fact be elusive and may not necessarily conduct itself as a scientifically quantifiable event that can be measured, and that points to the limitation of the investigative methodology that is part of religious studies today. It is important to consider that the philosophers in Ancient Greece, who were simultaneously scientists, doctors, mathematicians, considered the expansion of the psyche that was targeted by the Eleusinian Mysteries to be a central part towards the perfection of the human soul and of humanity.

ENDNOTES

¹ Standard definition, etymological analysis in the Demetrakos Great Dictionary (1953)

² Greek «Ελευσίνια Μυστήρια»

³ Greek Δήμητρα. Also often referred to as Rhea or Isis.

⁴ Persephone (Greek: Περσεφόνη) also referred to as Kore (Greek: κόρη, daughter) especially before her abduction. The root of the word comes from the myth of Perseus and killer (phoneuo). She is the daughter of Demeter and of Dias.

⁵ Hesiod c8th BCE was the second most important pre-classical poet after Homer.

⁶ In Theogony, an epic poem of 1022 verses, Hesiod accounts that Persephone was playing in the field with muses and was abducted by Hades, ruler of the underworld. He concealed the kidnapping and the rest of the Gods did not interfere. Demeter was so distraught that she stopped caring for the Earth and this resulted in a great famine that almost eradicated the human race. For 9 days Demeter was aimlessly wandering until the king and queen of Eleusina took her in. They provided so much caring for her, along with the jokes of their servant that the Goddess found interest in life again.

⁷ Greek: Βοηδρομιών The name of the month is related to the name of the city-state of Athens and Ion (Greek: Ίων), the son of Creusa (Greek: Κρέουσα), princess of Athens and of the God Apollo.

⁸ The name commemorating Apollo's son Ion who came to the aid of Athens during the war against Eleusis, and brought victory to the city state.

⁹ The month Boedomion starts at the new moon of August until the new moon of September, roughly August 15th to September 15th

¹⁰ Euripides, in his tragic play relates how Creusa, daughter of Erechtheas, conceived a son through her union with the God Apollo, whom she abandoned upon birth in the Acropolis. Hermes rescued the infant transporting him to Delphi where Pythia found him and raised him. After this Ksouthos became an ally to Athens and as a reward received the crown of the city-state and married the princess Creusa. The couple was not able to conceive so they went to the oracle in Dephi to ask for guidance. Ion at the time was serving as an altar boy to the temple, offering his services to Apollo, without knowing that Apollo was his father. Creusa upon meeting him tried to unsuccessfully poison him thinking him to be a child of her husband from his previous marriage. Finally, she recognized her own son in him, and was Ion through divine interference and reverence was accepted by Ksouthos as his son and heir. ,the great mysteries to them. tarot decks as the high priest. During hte he capital city of his kingdom. Pausanias places his

¹¹ Pausanias relates that Ion arrived in Athens at the time of the kingdom of Selinountas. He married his daughter Eliki, and became his successor. He built the city of Eliki that he named after his wife, and that he made the capital city of his kingdom. Pausanias places his death during the fight between Athens and Eleusis.

¹² The initiates were called *mystes* (Greek: μύστες), those that had been initiated during the small mysteries that celebrated the birth of Dionysus, had spent the previous six months learning the secrets of the first initiation, and then prepared for six months (from March until August) for the Great Mysteries.

¹³ The hierphant (Greek: ιεροφάντης) was the supreme religious leader in the Mysteries and in some accounts in Ancient Greece. During the Eleusinian mysteries he was the leader of the rituals. He always belonged to the lineage of Evmolpides (Greek: Ευμολπιδών). His role was to be the supreme guide to the mysteries. This image of the hierophant can today be seen in the tarot decks as the high priest.

¹⁴ Ploutarch, in *Parallel lives* describes the dress of Aristides the Just, during the initiation ceremony, as made of gold and so flamboyant that a Persian soldier who saw him in full dress during a battle capitulated to him, thinking he was the king. Herodotus in his 8th book describes the impressive dress of the four men who were overseeing the mysteries. Overall it is in several sources that the dresses of the officiates during the mysteries are described in all their glory.

¹⁵ Painting in amphorae (Preka-Alexandri, 1991)

¹⁶ Hesiod recounts how upon leaving the underworld, Hades offers pomegranate to Persephone in order to keep her bound to him.

¹⁷ Greek *κυκεών*. References to *kykeon* date as early as the Homeric texts. It is a term that was loosely used in Ancient Greek accounts to describe a drink as simple as water, milk or wine with barley, or as complicated and secret as the drink used to break the fast of the initiates at the Eleusinian Mysteries, often described as a mixture of 16 different herbs that today are incompletely known, although it is believed they included fungi, like ergot, and possibly variations of opiates.

¹⁸ Alciviades was tried and condemned to death for drunkenly imitating the initiation rituals (he was exiled and later pardoned and performed great offering ceremonies to the temples instead) as narrated by Plato.

¹⁹ The mysteries were spread to the Roman Empire and to Britain and it is believed that the teachings were adapted and incorporated in Nordic Mystical Initiation rituals.

²⁰ Inferences have to be made about most of what was or could possibly have been used or done during the rituals due to the secrecy that enveloped the practices. (Fotiadis 1982, Preka-Alexandri 1991, Vlaxos 1984)

²¹ Καθάπερ γάρ φασι καὶ οἱ Πυθαγόρειοι, τὸ πᾶν καὶ τὰ πάντα τοῖς τρισὶν ὠρισταί· τελευτὴ γάρ καὶ μέσον καὶ ἀρχὴ τὸν ἀριθμὸν ἔχει τὸν τοῦ παντός, ταῦτα δὲ τὸν τῆς τριάδος. (As can be seen by the Pythagoreans, the whole of universe can be determined in the number three, the trinity.) Διὸ παρὰ τῆς φύσεως εἰληφότες ὥσπερ νόμους ἐκείνης, καὶ πρὸς τὰς ἀγιστείας χρώμεθα τῶν θεῶν τῷ ἀριθμῷ τοῦτω. (So to honor that number in nature, so do the rituals for God have to be observed in three) Ἀποδίδομεν δὲ καὶ τὰς προσηγορίας τὸν τρόπον τοῦτον· τὰ γὰρ δύο ἄμφω μὲν λέγομεν καὶ τοὺς δύο ἀμφοτέρους, πάντας δ' οὐ λέγομεν, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τῶν τριῶν ταύτην τὴν κατηγορίαν κατὰφαιμεν πρῶτον. (So when dealing with the divine it is to be realized that there are three parts of God and as such each of these three parts is to be honored.

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