Paul and the Mystery Religions – Christianity Defended

Was early Christian teaching influenced by the mystery religions of the day? Don Closson presents a solid look at this question; concluding that Christian doctrine as taught by Paul and others was grounded in truth and was not influenced by these other religious concepts.

Introduction



A common criticism of Christianity found on college campuses today is that its core ideas or teachings were dependent upon Greek philosophy and religious ideas. It is not unusual for a student to hear from a professor that Christianity is nothing more than a strange combination of the Hebrew cult of Yahweh, notions adopted from the popular Greek mystery religions of the day, and a sprinkling of ideas from Greek philosophic thought. This criticism of traditional Christianity is not new. In fact, its heyday was in the late 1800s to the 1940s and coincides with what is now called the History of Religions movement. This group of theologians and historians accused Paul of adding Greek ideas to his Hebrew upbringing, and in the process, creating a new religion: one that neither Jesus nor His first disciples would recognize.

Was the origin of Christianity dependent on existing Greek philosophical and religious ideas? That question hinges upon how one is using the word "dependent." Philosopher Ron Nash argues that dependency can be weak or strong and that the difference is a vital one. A strong dependency would mean that the idea of Jesus as a dying and rising savior-god would never have occurred to early believers if they had not become aware

of them first in pagan thought. It would be admitting that Paul and the other new Christians came to believe that Christ was a resurrected God-man who made an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world because of pagan ideas. Proving a strong dependency of Christianity on Greek thought would be very damaging to those who hold a high view of Scripture.

A weak dependency means that the followers of Jesus used common religious terminology of the day in order to be understood by the Hebrew and Greek culture surrounding them. This poses no problem for a high view of Scripture. As Nash states, " . . . the mere presence of parallels in thought and language does not prove any dependence in the strong sense."{1} Nash and others argue that only a weak dependency can be shown to have existed between Greek religious thought and the Gospel of Christ.

In this article we will consider arguments against the strong dependency claims of the History of Religions movement and modern critics. Specifically, we will compare the theology of the apostle Paul with ideas found in the popular Greek mystery religions present during the early church period.

Although these ideas rarely surface in everyday discussions, Christians entering the academic world of our college campuses would benefit from time spent understanding this issue. In the hands of a professor hostile to Christianity, partial truths and exaggerated similarities between Christianity and the mystery religions can overwhelm an unaware teen. Being conscious of these arguments against Christian thought prepares us to give an answer to everyone who questions the hope that we have in Christ.

Arguments Against a Strong Dependency on Mystery Religions Viewpoint

Previously we noted that the History of Religions movement

claimed that Christian thought had a direct and strong dependency on the mystery religions. Although some scholars agreed with this view, many did not. A good example is the famous German historian Adolf von Harnack, who wrote:

> *We must reject the comparative mythology which finds a causal connection between everything and everything else. . . . By such methods one can turn Christ into a sun god in the twinkling of an eye, or one can bring up the legends attending the birth of every conceivable god, or one can catch all sorts of mythological doves to keep company with the baptismal dove . . . the wand of 'comparative religion' triumphantly eliminate(s) every spontaneous trait in any religion.{2}*

What were the basic traits of the mystery religions? The annual vegetation cycle was often at the center of these cults. Deep significance was given to the concepts of growth, death, decay and rebirth. The cult of Eleusis and its central deity, Demeter, goddess of the soil and farming, is one example. The mystery religions also had secret ceremonies and rites of initiation that separated its members from the outside world. Every mystery religion claimed to impart secret knowledge of the deity. This knowledge would be communicated in clandestine ceremonies often connected to an initiation rite. The focus of this knowledge was not on a set of revealed truths to be shared with the world, but on hidden higher knowledge to be kept within the circle of believers.

At the core of each religion was a myth in which the deity returned to life after death, or else triumphed over his enemies. As one scholar explains, the myth "appealed primarily to the emotions and aimed at producing psychic and mystic effects by which the neophyte might experience the exaltation of a new life."{3} On the other hand, the mysteries were not concerned as much with correct doctrine or belief, but with the emotional state of the followers. The goal of the

believers was a mystical experience that led them to believe that they had achieved union with their god.

The various religious movements found throughout the Roman Empire were not united in doctrine or practice, and they changed dramatically over time. Any impact that they may have had on Christianity must be evaluated by the time frame in which the religions encountered one another. When comparing religious systems, Philosopher Ronald Nash warns that caution is advised against using careless language. He states, "One frequently encounters scholars who first use Christian terminology to describe pagan beliefs and practices and then marvel at the awesome parallels they think they have discovered."{4}

What if someone told you that the root of Paul's New Testament theology was in obscure Greek mystery religions, rather than his Jewish training and his encounter with Jesus Christ? That's exactly what the History of Religions movement argued at the end of the 19th century. Many scholars still teach that Paul's portrayal of Jesus as a dying and rising savior would never have occurred without the presence of the mystery religions. Next, we will continue to consider arguments against what might be called "the strong dependency view."

Weaknesses in the Strong Dependency View

The first argument against this view is the logical fallacy of *false cause*. This fallacy occurs when someone argues that just because two things exist side by side, that one must be the cause of the other. As one theologian has written, the History of Religions School had the tendency "to convert parallels into influences and influences into sources."{5} Causal connection is much harder to prove than proximity. The mere fact that other religions may have had a god who died and then came back to life in some manner does not mean that this was the source of Christian ideas, even if it can be shown that

the apostles knew of this other set of beliefs.

Some scholars, hostile to Christianity, tend to exaggerate, or invent, similarities between Christianity and the mystery religions. British scholar Edwyn Bevan writes:

> *Of course if one writes an imaginary description of the Orphic mysteries . . . filling in the large gaps in the picture left by our data from the Christian Eucharist, one produces something very impressive. On this plan, you first put in the Christian elements, and then are staggered to find them there.{6}*

An example might be the practice of the taurobolium in the cult of Cybele or Great Mother. This initiation rite, in which the blood of a sacrificed bull is allowed to pour over a neophyte, is claimed by some to be the source of baptism in Christianity. Arguments have been made that the language "blood of the lamb" (Rev. 7:14), and "blood of Jesus" (1 Peter 1:2) was borrowed from the language of the taurobolium and criobolium in which a ram was slaughtered. In fact, a better argument can be made that the cult borrowed its language from the Christian tradition.

The cult of Cybele did not use the taurobolium until the second century A.D.; the best available evidence for dating the practice places its origin about one hundred years after Paul wrote his epistles.{7} German scholar Gunter Wagner points out that there was no notion of death and resurrection in the cultic practice.

After noting the change in meaning that the taurobolium experienced over time, scholar Robert Duthoy writes:

> *It is obvious that this alteration in the taurobolium must have been due to Christianity, when we consider that by A.D. 300 it had become the great competitor of the heathen religions and was known to everyone.{8}*

More Weaknesses in the Strong Dependency View

A simple but powerful argument against the likelihood that Paul would have turned to pagan thought for his theology was his strict Jewish training. In Philippians 3:5 Paul boasts of being a Hebrew of Hebrews. He had studied under Gamaliel, the most celebrated teacher of the most orthodox of the Jewish parties, the Pharisees. And in Colossians he warns against the very syncretism he is being accused of proposing. According to Bruce Metzger:

> *[W]ith regard to Paul himself, scholars are coming once again to acknowledge that the Apostle's prevailing set of mind was rabbinically oriented, and that his newly found Christian faith ran in molds previously formed at the feet of Gamaliel.{9}*

We find no accusations in the New Testament of Paul incorporating pagan thought into his theology, nor does he defend himself against such claims.

The very nature of the mystery cults, with the conflicting pantheon of deities and mythical beings, makes it highly unlikely that the strict monotheism and the body of doctrines found in the New Testament would be their source. Although the mystery religions did move towards advancing a solar god above all the others, this change began after 100 A.D., too late to impact the theology of the New Testament.

It should also be noted that early Christianity was an exclusivistic religion while the mystery cults were not. One could be initiated into the cult of Isis or Mithras without giving up his or her former beliefs. However, to be baptized into the church one had to forsake all other gods and saviors. This was a new development in the ancient world. Machen writes, "Amid the prevailing syncretism of the Greco-Roman

world, the religion of Paul, with the religion of Israel, stands absolutely alone."{10}

Paul's religion was grounded in real events. The mystery religions were not. They were based upon dramas written to capture men's hearts and passions. Reformed scholar Herman Ridderbos writes:

> *Whereas Paul speaks of the death and resurrection of Christ and places it in the middle of history, as an event which took place before many witnesses . . . the myths of the cults in contrast cannot be dated; they appear in all sorts of variations, and do not give any clear conceptions. In short they display the timeless vagueness characteristic of real myths. Thus the myths of the cults . . . are nothing but depictions of annual events of nature in which nothing is to be found of the moral voluntary, redemptive substitutionary meaning, which for Paul is the content of Christ's death and resurrection.{11}*

Next we will conclude with further arguments against Paul's use of the mystery religions.

Conclusion

Muslim author Yousuf Saleem Chishti writes that the doctrines of the deity of Christ and the atonement are pagan teachings that come from the apostle Paul, not from Christ Himself.{12} He states that, "The Christian doctrine of atonement was greatly coloured by the influence of the mystery religions, especially Mithraism, which had its own son of God and virgin Mother, and crucifixion and resurrection after expiating for the sins of mankind and finally his ascension to the seventh heaven."{13} Were these doctrines something Paul made up or borrowed? What did Jesus teach regarding the atonement?

First, both Jesus and Paul taught that Christianity was the

fulfillment of Judaism. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus said that He came to fulfill the law and the teaching of the Prophets, not to abolish them. In Colossians (2:16-17), Paul writes that the religious codes of the Old Testament were merely a foreshadowing of the things that were to come, and that the new reality is found in Christ. Both Christ and Paul taught the necessity of the blood atonement for sin. Jesus stated that, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). At the Last Supper He added, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Paul affirmed Christ's teachings when he wrote, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace" (Ephesians 1:7). Tying the doctrine back to the Old Testament, Paul wrote, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

The idea that Jesus was the Son of God, born of a virgin, dying on the cross, and being resurrected are hardly Paul's ideas alone. They are found in the earliest Christian writings and held consistently wherever the faith spread. The parallels between Christianity and Mithraism claimed by Chishti are hard to evaluate or confirm. He gives us no references as evidence for the similarities.{14} Other scholars who have looked at the issue find that most of the similarities disappear on close inspection. Where they do occur, it can be argued that Mithraism borrowed ideas from Christianity rather than vice versa. Bruce Metzger writes, "It must not be uncritically assumed that the Mysteries always influenced Christianity, for it is not only possible but probable that in certain cases, the influence moved in the opposite direction."{15}

Those who find Christianity hard to accept have offered many reasons for not doing so. The claim that the doctrines of Christianity had a strong dependency on the mystery religions stands on shaky ground and should be investigated thoroughly

before one rejects the good news of the New Testament writers.

Notes

1. Ronald Nash, *The Gospel And The Greeks*, (Probe Books: Dallas, TX, 1992), 18.

2. Ibid, 118.

3. Ibid, 124.

4. Ibid, 126.

5. Ibid, 193.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid, 154.

8. Ibid, 155.

9. Ibid, 196.

10. Ibid, 197.

11. Ibid. 198.

12. Normal Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, (Baker Books, 1999), 490.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid. 492.

15. Nash, 198.

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