

## Annotated outline for *Hellenistic Mystery Religions* by Richard Reitzenstein<sup>1</sup>

### LECTURE.

Reitzenstein begins his discussion of his History of Religions approach pointing out that scholarly investigation of Christianity and paganism have coincided. Two approaches: focus on the unity of the period (and run the risk of allowing what is distinctive about Christianity to recede into the background) or focus on Christianity and be guilty of relegating any contacts with paganism to the periphery. Reitzenstein proposes to deal with some basic perspectives of Hellenistic religions that have not received the attention they deserve. By "Hellenistic" Reitzenstein refers to religious forms that contain a melange of Oriental and Greek elements.

Identification of two religious strands in western Asia that "constantly exert reciprocal influence" (9). The first, typical of Babylonian and Israelite religious expressions, maintains a more external connection between God and man, while the second is basically internal, where man's soul is akin to God in essence (e.g., Iranian, Indian). Both of these strands contribute in their own distinctive ways to the belief in the individual's participation in immortality through magic ("sacred actions"). Reitzenstein believes that these two elements make up the Greek concept of *mysterion* in both pagan and NT usage, for it is within Greek and Oriental thought worlds that Christianity was born. R elucidates the Oriental heavily, given that the Western elements have been studied adequately. The definite forms and symbols denoting membership are what the "mysteries" are all about (18).

These "mysteries" were increasingly syncretistic and individualistic, often appealing simultaneously to original revelation, tradition and ongoing direct revelation of the deity. Description of Apuleius' initiation into the mysteries with parallels to NT language (e.g. leaving earthly body). Bases much of presentation on Egyptian texts 100-300 c.e. Paul's concept of word gifts imitate the technical use of the word 'gnosis' in Hellenism (63-4). Reitzenstein defines *gnosis* as "the immediate knowledge, drawn from direct commerce with the deity, of the deity's secrets that had to remain hidden from the natural man and his understanding, and at the same time a knowledge that exerts a crucial influence upon our relationship to God and even our own creaturely existence—our *phusis*" (66). Gnosticism a dialectical development of practice, rather than an outside philosophical element imposed on existing practice. Other comparisons of mystery religions to Paul (68-69).

For mysteries, divine revelation trumps importance of tradition, which explains why Paul found it unnecessary to depend on the Jesus traditions contained in the gospels. R regards Paul as "the greatest of all Gnostics" (84). Ultimately, Reitzenstein attributes Paul's belief in his apostleship and liberty to Hellenism.

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<sup>1</sup> Supplemented by previous notes of Juan Hernandez and Kevin Munoz

## APPENDICES AND ELUCIDATIONS.

### I. Approach to the Material, and Its Definition

Goal is to find a general religious perspective of the Oriental and Hellenistic worlds, rather than the development of individual religions. The dominant component of these religions: mysteries. The data here hard to come by, they were after all, secrets. The source of much of these mysteries will be traced back to Persia and Egypt. Several religions considered: Isis, Manichaeism, Mithraism, Christianity. Traces mentions of mystery cults through Philo, Josephus, and Livy. Draws comparisons to Pauline letters (117). Presupposition of major syncretism within all religions, esp. Judaism mixed with Phrygian components (125). Language and milieu of early Christian letters incomprehensible without background of mysteries (127, 148). The Roman state and its attitude towards mystery cults frames the discussion about whether or not Christians indeed set the Roman fire of Nero's time. R. argues extensively that Christian zealots to blame for fire. Conclusion that Oriental mystery piety must have been present in Athens by time of Epicurus.

### II. Oriental and Hellenistic Cult

Attempts to acquire a feeling for Oriental piety, since so much has been done with Hellenistic side. His perspective will be that of confession and penance within these religions, comparing them for their overlap in concept and language. Examples of Jewish imagery mixed with Roman myth (178). Feast of Tabernacles considered as corresponding to ancient pagan new year's festival (Mohwinckel). Discussion of sacred meals (186). Zoroastrianism considered. Poem to Marduk in context of a sacral meal compared with Psalm 21 and sacral meal. Trace elements of Iranian religion in Acts of Thomas (208). Discussion of Oriental and Greek concept of *psyche*.

### III. Mystai, Divine Warriors, and Divine Captives

R. describes initiation into a mystery cult as a sacramental event in which the initiate becomes *doulos theou*. This initiation is effected by what he calls a "momentary death", which produces rebirth (and transbirth).

Distinction between *indigena* and *alienigena*: "The fanaticism of the adherents to the mystical cults and their hatred for those who did not strictly observe their ritual laws apparently was noted frequently" (239). His logic depends only loosely on the equation of the "Mithras liturgy" with the actual Mithras cult. The point R. is hoping to make here is that the initiates of a particular mystery see themselves as divine warriors, and this can be uncovered even without the use of suspect texts. High emphasis on Iranian origins. Strong dichotomy between philosophy (Greek) and religion (eastern) which is too forceful. Military language, esp. oath taking, from the east often presupposed to have taken place in west. R. suggests that Christianity is regarded as a mystery religion on account of its oath-taking.

R. addresses the question of "divine captives." He notes that the initiation includes a probationary period during which the initiate is considered a prisoner of the goddess and can't leave the temple (242). The initiate is required to practice asceticism, fully surrender

to the god and be a possession (*katoche*) (242-243). R. sees this originating in "Oriental piety toward total withdrawal from the world and from active life" (244). This period of servitude is transformative: "The goal is to become a pneumatic, non-corporeal" person (245). Once the pneumatic mode has been achieved, the initiate becomes a priest (*ibid.*). R.'s philological interests take over in his following discussion of the terms used with divine captive imagery. Defines use of the term *katoche*, suggesting confinement (not ecstasy, as some argued) as the mode in which it should be understood.

#### **IV. The Religious Impact of Persian Rule**

E. Meyer and Gunkel (1903) pioneers in demonstrating Persian influence on early Christian concepts, actually inherited from Jewish-Persian syncretism. Appears also in Manichaeism and Mithraism. Mani. actually preserves ancient Persian legends. The concept of the messiah's nemesis (antichrist) can be traced to Iran.

#### **V. The Report of Apuleius**

R. demonstrates that certain details of the mystery described by Apuleius can be traced to Oriental religion – they are not simply Egyptian/Greek (for example, celestial imagery and use of the four elements). He particularly discusses baptism as a death/rebirth action rather than mere purification, both understandings of the action being found in Paul.

#### **VI. The Hellenistic Concept of Pistis**

R. demonstrates that there was in fact a notion of faith in mystery religions throughout the Hellenistic world.

#### **VII. Philosopher and Prophet**

The double use of philosopher as wise man and quack is ancient. Likewise, the prophet as one speaking in ecstasy as proof of the working of the deity is ancient and widely attested in the mysteries.

#### **VIII. Mystery and Primitive Religion**

The mystery religions see in various national gods manifestations of one god, the original identity of the god being lost; but hints of nationalism are preserved by identifying a certain nation as teaching "true religion" (302). The progression is from identification of gods with each other (syncretism) to a nationalist claim that can still preserve universal religious sentiments.

#### **IX. The Internalizing of the Mysteries**

The reading or proclamation of the word actually transforms or enables the experience of the divine, or an experience of ascent. The reader ascends, but the pneuma remains trapped and a divine emissary must retrieve it. R. suggests that this is a pagan concept which made its way into Jewish and Christian Gnosticism.

#### **X. Love-Union with God**

R. traces theological explanations and cultic actions which arose from an Egyptian representation "of the begetting of the deity" (310), the actions having been later detached from the original concern with the Pharaoh's deification. What results in the

mysteries (and can be found in Philo as well) is the notion of divine marriage, whereby the soul is united with the deity by a ritualized union with it. Various narratives in Jewish and Christian Gnostic literature attest this “ritual,” with specific details often correlating with mystery practices. “We can recognize the transition of ancient Oriental belief into sacral action and the Hellenistic transformation of the action into narrative” (314).

### **XI. Election, Call, Justification, Glorification**

In the mysteries, it is essential that the initiate first be summoned or called by the god; the god is at work. This idea is found in Paul, but also in Judaism where the nation is distinguished by its selection. But with Christianity, God chooses a distinct people with correct knowledge of Him and a correct inner relationship (324). R.’s point, though, is not that Paul is relying on mystery concepts, but that his language (and thus to some degree his concepts) is colored by mystery terminology, for one finds in his description of the progression from being called to being justified (etc.; Rom 8:30) a reflection of the sequential progress found in the mysteries. Many others, not just Jews, hoped for justification. Also, for Paul, justification comes by a “voluntary dying” or assuming of Christ’s person (328-29).

### **XII. Designations for Transformation**

R. begins by discussing mystery terminology for transformation, the “outward symbol” for which is the initiatory garment (334). In language relating to this garment, we see the transformed state as described as *phōs* and *pneuma*.

### **XIII. Virtues and Vices as Members**

R. traces from Manichaeism and its Oriental antecedents notions of primal man/world who is “clothed” in virtues coordinated with elements and/or planets, the development of which may also be seen in Philo, Jewish Gnosticism, and Colossians. R. also examines development of the numbers of garments, elements, etc.

### **XIV. The New Manichaean Fragments**

In critique of E. Waldschmidt’s and W. Lentz’s *Die Stellung Jesu im Manichäismus*, R. questions the methodological validity of seeking the influence of Christianity upon Manichaeism. He maintains that the peculiarities of Jesus in Mani’s doctrine put Him in the role of the divine emissary who comes to release souls trapped in earth. Though one can see this vein of thought in Paul’s notion of Christ as life-giving Spirit, the idea is ultimately most intimately related to Persian ideas, Zoroastrianism, and to some degree Mandaean ideas.

### **XV. The Concepts of Gnosis and Pneuma**

A. R. states that “gnosis” is gnosis of God, but knowledge as a life changing power that makes one distinct from those who do not know God. It is vision of God. In certain strands, full gnosis occurs only after death and the shedding of the earthly body, and this is in fact full deification. But some real, transforming gnosis is available now. Originally the gnostic and the ignorant were two distinct categories, separate states of being for people. This was negotiated as the acquisition of gnosis took on the form of a gradual ascent (often expressed in astrological symbolism), although the core concept of

two kinds of human beings remains intact under the surface. R. argues that gnosis in Paul has this kind of mystery religion meaning. Gnosis is not rational knowledge but this transforming reception of power that for Paul cannot be perfect on earth (in the mystery system, it is the deity who is perfect knowledge, and gnosis often takes on spatial imagery as being heaven, “the world of the suprasensual” (382)). For Paul, full knowledge only comes when one knows with complete knowledge just as God knows the person. But gnosis does (for Paul as for others) transform the person into B<,Λ:∀, enabling prophecy. Also, R. argues, “nothing is more thoroughly wrong than to consider Gnosticism as a first attempt at Christian philosophy or philosophy of religion, and indeed to view it at all in terms that are related to its theoretical elements” (387-88).

**B.** *Pneuma*, especially in magical texts, can be an “indefinite or minor deity” (392), a part of a person (distinct from the body), or “*pneuma* within the world, although itself God, [distinct] from God” (393), and thus one must be pure for it to dwell in one. As a divine being, *pneuma* can hear a human *pneuma* and grant power. “As the *pneuma* in us appears in contrast to the *sōma*, so the *pneuma* in general appears as the suprasensual in contrast to the sensual” (395). Philosophy alone cannot explain these understandings. R. traces several lines of development. In non-Christian circles, *psychē* receives a specific definition through philosophy. We find in Jude and James the development of what are only hints in Paul, according to which the *psychikoi* become the opposite of the true *pneumatikoi*. In Gnosticism, the term *psychikoi* must be interpreted as an intermediate category between *sōmatikoi* and *pneumatikoi*. As prophecy, the word is a gift of the spirit, and *logos* becomes equated with, or a manifestation of, spirit. Thus Paul’s phrase cannot be “rational (*logikēn*) worship” but must still be viewed in terms of mystery concepts. The larger point R. makes, however, is as follows: there is an ongoing, developing attempt to express Oriental concepts in Greek philosophical terms. Thus, the terms become immensely complex through ongoing development and refinement.

**C.** Some important notes in this chapter that do not fit neatly into a summary:

1. Notions that “effects of the Spirit” or the “concepts of *pneuma theou* or *pneuma anthrōpou* are exclusively biblical” must be discarded (401).

2. In Philo, the *horatikoi* are the ones who should be able to “practice allegorical interpretation” (403); thus, R. argues that *horatikoi* denotes essentially the same as *gnōstokoi*.

## **XVI. Paul as a Pneumatic**

With the connections, schemas, and insights outlined above in hand, R. now embarks upon an in-depth investigation of 1 and 2 Cor. R. contends that the notorious “Christ party” of 1 Cor is no party but a general claim of all to be “of Christ.” Essentially, Paul finds himself confronting a community of pneumatics. Since they too have been baptized into Christ, he cannot deny that they are of the same Spirit as he; they are *pneumatikoi*, not *psychikoi*, the outsiders. However, Paul employs the schema of progression – they are still children, too enmeshed in the flesh. They are *sarkikoi*, which, unlike being *psychikoi*, is not mutually exclusive with being *pneumatikoi*, but a problem of the human being still on earth. In 1 Cor 15, Paul makes a crucial alteration to the traditional

mystical concept. Christ is for Paul the second, rather than the first, Adam. The One Who gives life is not a primal man who gets consumed by matter; rather, the first Adam was flesh, and the second is a *pneuma* who gives life. The flesh must be transformed and receive glory. In 2 Cor, Paul intensifies the battle for his authority. For a Gnostic like Paul, knowing Christ as He was on earth gives one nothing; what matters is having Christ's spirit dwelling within one so that one is linked immediately to divine knowledge. For R., the super-apostles are the original twelve. Paul's claim to authority is just as great, if not greater, than theirs due to his vision. However, precisely here is the birth of conflict in Corinth – what gives one authority is gnosis through individual vision and pneumatic change. But the *pneuma* is one, and so the doctrine must also be one. If there are many *pneumatikoi*, there will inevitably be conflict and dissension, different teachings all based on pneumatic experience (albeit for Paul, the strife itself is proof that the Corinthians are still fleshly, for true perfection and spirit means destroying the workings of flesh (cf. 435)). So, in Paul's schema, not knowledge, which can only be imperfect in the flesh, but faith, hope, and especially love become primary. Indeed, R. argues that 1 Cor 13:13 was originally a formula that included gnosis, which Paul intentionally drops.

### **XVII. The Technical Language of the Gnostics**

By a comparison of a passage from Paul (2 Cor 2:14-17) with one from Ignatius (Eph 15ff.), and a similar exercise with a passage from John (15:4ff.; 14:6ff.) and 1 John (2:20ff.), R. shows how earlier writers somewhat freely worked with vocabulary with mystery connotations, while in later writings this vocabulary could take on a more fixed or understood reference to the earlier meaning. The later texts require the earlier meanings, but in these later texts the rhetoric is more fixed. Thus, the insiders develop their own language that is fully comprehensible only to other insiders.

### **XVIII. The Dual Awareness in Romanticism**

By a comparison with an essay on E. T. A. Hoffmann, R. tries to help explain how ideas of those like Paul can arise. We have seemingly otherworldly experience (like falling in love) that suggests an elevated, "rich inner life" (514) contrasted with the humdrum of the outside world and daily life. We then internalize this dualism – we are in part divine but trapped in this world.

### **XIX. The Meaning of the Self**

R. examines the notion of the self in several linguistic trajectories, but focusing on the Greek terms *nous* and *psychē*. Both can mean self. Certain Oriental religions understand that which is divine or immortal in a human being as either a part of the deity consumed by matter and in need of awakening or imparted by the deity. Thus, in one language, one word means both religion and self. Thus, it becomes comprehensible why in Greek several words, particularly *nous* and *psychē*, must be employed to get at the various facets of the concept of the self. R. questions whether Oriental thinking had any concept of immateriality at all, for the soul and the god/s are material (i.e. light). Paul, unacquainted with the standard Greek understanding of the soul, uses the Oriental concept *pneuma* to express Christ being in him, a Spirit that has merged with him, a new Self (cf. 527).

Similarly, he uses *nous* -- knowledge of God that can be in us but also has independent existence.

## **XX. On the Developmental History of Paul**

Oriental religious ideas and the mysteries had been mixing with Judaism, especially outside Palestine, since before Paul came on the scene. In some circles, the nationalist Messiah who comes to save or help Jews becomes the emissary of God who somehow “preserves knowledge of God” (535). Thus, despite Paul’s zeal as a Jew, he became a Greek to win Greeks and learned well their concepts, even though he was to some degree already immersed in them. R. concludes by emphasizing the importance of careful philological work in understanding the history of religions. Only by carefully tracing the words of a figure like Paul can one truly appreciate the wealth of religious feeling they may convey, the complexity of meanings, and the ways in which the writer is both conserving and reshaping existing concepts.

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