

Did Christianity Arise Out of the Mystery Religions?

by Dr. John Ankerberg and Dr. John Weldon

In *The Da Vinci Code* professor of Religious Symbology Robert Langdon explains that Christianity arose as a kind of “hybrid” religion:

The vestiges of pagan religion in Christian symbology are undeniable. Egyptian sun disks became the halos of Catholic saints. Pictograms of Isis nursing her miraculously conceived son Horus became the blueprint for our modern images of the Virgin Mary nursing Baby Jesus. And virtually all the elements of the Catholic ritual—the miter, the altar, the doxology, and communion, the act of “god-eating”—were taken directly from earlier pagan mystery religions.¹

Did Christianity Arise from the Mystery Religions?

When people try to analyze why the New Testament was written, one of the things that some New Testaments scholars in the Jesus Seminar are saying is that they had a pattern before they ever got there. You have the mystery religions, you have other kind of legends going on and they’ll say, you know take the virgin birth for example. They’re all over Greek and Roman mythology. So if I have to accept that Jesus was born of the virgin, what about these other mysteries, these other legends? We asked Dr. Gary Habermas to answer this question:

Dr. Gary Habermas: Let’s take our mystery religion pattern or Hellenistic religion, Hellenistic divine man pattern. Let’s take a New Testament pattern and just look at the Hellenistic or non-Christian miracles for example. And what you’ll find, first of all, is a totally different philosophical framework. We’re talking about anthropomorphic gods. We’re talking about gods who are finite. We’re talking about cycles of vegetation. This is a cyclical view of history, not a linear view of history, totally different. Now, that’s one category, philosophical differences.

You’ve got historical differences. These people like to tell you when they find a case of resurrection on the third day, for example, they don’t tell you that’s it’s

much later than the New Testament, or that there are similar teachings on the 1st, 2nd, and 4th days, so you have to look at differences there. Take Isis and Osiris. One account says he's cut up in 14 pieces, his wife or sister or mother—the accounts varies so much—she finds 13 of the 14 pieces, puts them together and he revivifies, then he descends to the underworld. But another myth, she puts the pieces together and flaps her wings over Osiris, so we have to look at the differences here. Philosophical differences, historical differences.

Keep moving down the line, the gaps and the lateness of the accounts are amazing. Most of the Hellenistic divine man accounts, most of the mystery religions, postdate Christianity. Some of the earliest are mid-first and mid-second century. Almost nothing is early.

Fourthly, these early accounts they are known to have virtually no affect in Palestine. For example, there are dozens of temples to Isis in Egypt. Dozens more around the Mediterranean world. One in Israel and it's late. So there's very little influence in Palestine. And fourth, this is one of my favorites, these characters are not historical persons. They never lived in history, so what's the grounds for comparison? And I love the words of Plutarch, whose in his famous story of Isis and Osiris, he says, now listen don't you guys think that this is a historical account, I'm telling you a story here, and he says that twice. So, I think that's important that there's a contrast.

Now, when you get to the New Testament, you're looking at again, you're looking at some early sources, you're looking at some eyewitness sources and in the case of the Resurrection of Christ, you've got an empty tomb, so you've got remains where people can say, oh well, not talking about a mere idea here are we? So to compare non-Christian miracle claims to Christian miracle claims, I think we're talking about some serious differences that, philosophically speaking, weigh heavily against some of the non-Christian accounts.

Do other scholars agree with those conclusions?

Habermas: Well, I think you going to have to agree to this extent: virtually nobody is going to say that the Christians copied off these ideas. That's a pretty radical idea. You could find it a couple of decades ago with some of the Bultmannian ideas. You can find a hundred years ago with the history of religions movement of similarities and comparisons. Both have died death of a thousand qualifications. So in general, no one's going to push the heathen accounts, but they want to get them on the table because they want to show you Jesus isn't alone.

Christianity, the Resurrection of Christ and the Mystery Religions

Many university and college courses in Christianity or comparative religion express the view that Christianity is merely a variation of a more ancient religious theme. They teach that the Christian faith developed from or was influenced by

the ancient pagan mystery religions of Rome, Greece, Egypt, etc. Therefore, the conclusion of such courses is that Christian faith is not unique (as it claims), but at best an imitation faith, alleging to be something it is not. Professors draw numerous “parallels” between the motifs of “dying and rising” “savior” gods, and then, observing the centrality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in Christian faith, assert that certainly, or at least probably, Christianity was merely a later revisionist form of such pagan religion.

In the last hundred years, numerous books have been written which attempt to defend this idea. Among these are J. M. Robertson’s *Pagan Christs*² and Kersey Graves’ *The World’s Sixteen Crucified Saviors or Christianity Before Christ*.³ This idea has also formed one line of argumentation for the larger theme that Jesus never even existed, as in G. A. Wells’ *Did Jesus Exist?*⁴ More recently, this concept has been popularized by the late mythologist Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth*, *The Masks of God*, and other books, largely as a means to “discredit” Christianity.

What were the mystery cults? Allegedly, the teachings of the mystery religions were revealed by the Egyptian god Thoth. They were eclectic religious cults that stressed nature religion, oaths of secrecy, brotherhood, and spiritual quest. They offered rites of initiation that were associated with or dedicated to various gods and goddesses of the ancient world. In fact, these rites often inculcated contact, or “union,” with the “gods” (spirits). Participants hoped to attain knowledge, power, and immortality from their worship and contact with these gods. In essence, the mystery religions were part and parcel of the world of the occult in ancient Europe and Asia. They were idolatrous, opposed Christian teachings, and not infrequently engaged in gross or immoral practices.⁵

Nevertheless, it was the theme of alleged dying and rising savior-gods which initially sparked the interest of some scholars and many skeptics as to whether or not Christianity was a derivative of the mysteries. For example, if there were religious cults in Palestine at the time of Christ which believed in a mythological central figure who periodically died and came back to life in harmony with certain agricultural/fertility cycles, it could be argued that Christianity was merely the offshoot of such a religion and that its distinctive theological teachings were later inventions. Hence, the appeal of such an idea to skeptics of Christianity.

If true, Christianity would have only been a variation of an earlier pagan religious worldview, a religion that later evolved its distinctive theological doctrines, e.g., about Jesus Christ being the unique incarnation of God and Savior of men. In fact, in this scenario, the biblical Jesus need never even have existed. The mysteries were, after all, based on mythical gods. Hence, some critics (not historians) argue that Jesus was only an invented figure patterned after the life cycles of mythological gods such as Attis, Cybele, Osiris, Mithra, Adonis, Eleusis, Thrace, Dionysus, etc.

Regardless, one consequence of interpreting Christianity as an embellished mystery religion is the conclusion that Christian faith per se is the invention of

men, not a revelation from God. In the end, virtually all the unique teachings of New Testament theology, including the distinctive doctrines on Jesus Christ, God, man, sin, salvation, etc., are viewed as mere religious innovation after the fact. For example, concerning Jesus Christ, this would mean His incarnation and virgin birth, miracles and teachings, atonement for sin, physical resurrection from the dead, promised return, etc., are not historical facts, but later revisions of pagan stories. In essence, the cardinal teachings of orthodox Christianity become lies and falsehoods, a conclusion that warms the heart of some people today.

But is it Christianity that is the invention and deception or is such a theory itself the invention and deception of atheists and skeptics merely to “discredit” Christianity? If we examine the manner in which this concept is utilized, not to mention the fact that not a shred of evidence exists in support, one can begin to see where the real invention lies. One illustration is atheist John Allegro’s text, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*. Allegro is lecturer in Old Testament and Inter-Testamental Studies at the University of Manchester. He weaves the origin of Christianity into pagan religious sects, rituals, secret eulogies and the hallucinogenic properties of a particular mushroom. Thus, “The death and resurrection story of Jesus follows the traditional patterns of fertility mythology, as has long been recognized.”⁶ Logically then for Allegro, the New Testament is a “hoax,” because the “validity of the whole New Testament story is immediately undermined.”⁷ Not surprisingly, he claims it is foolish for Christians to maintain their religion is a unique revelation from God.⁸ As a result, Allegro’s closing paragraph gives the reader the “assurance” that “we no longer need to view the Bible through the mists of piety,…”⁹ Really?

The truth is that Allegro’s views are credible only to skeptics who already wish to find “evidence” to support their skepticism. Dr. J. N. D. Anderson is an authority on comparative religion and Professor of Oriental Laws and Director of the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies at the University of London. He observes that Allegro’s book “has been dismissed by fifteen experts in Semitic languages and related fields, ... as ‘not based on any philological or other evidence that they can regard as scholarly’— and has met with scathing criticism in review after review.”¹⁰ Yet today it continues to be used in college courses on Christianity.

Unfortunately for skeptics, when Allegro’s theory—or that involving any other mystery tradition—is objectively examined and compared with Christianity, only superficial similarities remain because Christianity and the mystery religions are as distinct as night and day.¹¹ Even secular scholars have rejected this idea of Christianity borrowing from the ancient mysteries. The well-respected Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard writes in *Theories of Primitive Religion* that “The evidence for this theory... is negligible.”¹² Negligible is defined in *Webster’s New World Dictionary* as, that which “can be neglected or disregarded because small, unimportant, etc.; trifling.”

In fact, the gods of the mysteries do not even resurrect; at best they are only resuscitated within the context of a gross mythology. Samuel N. Kramer’s thor-

ough work showed that the alleged resurrection of Tammuz (a fertility god of Mesopotamia) was based on “nothing but inference and surmise, guess and conjecture.”¹³ Pierre Lambrechts maintains that in the case of the alleged resurrection of Adonis, no evidence exists, either in the early texts or the pictorial representations. The texts which refer to a resurrection are quite late, that is, from the second to the fourth centuries A.D.¹⁴ He reveals that for Attis there is no suggestion that he was a resurrected god until after 150 A.D.¹⁵ In the case of Adonis, there is a lapse of at least 700 years.¹⁶ If borrowing occurred, it seems clear which way it went.

The cult of Isis and Osiris ends with Osiris becoming lord of the underworld while Isis regathers his dismembered body from the Nile River and subsequently magically restores it. E. A. Wallace Budge, who, Dr. Wilbur Smith asserts, is “one of the greatest authorities of our century on ancient religions,”¹⁷ has this to say about the cult of Osiris:

There is nothing in the texts which justify the assumption that Osiris knew he would rise from the dead, and that he would become king and judge of the dead, or that Egyptians believed that Osiris died on their behalf and rose again in order that they might also rise from the dead.¹⁸

Smith also observes French scholar Andre Boulanger’s observation that, “The idea that the god dies and rises again to lead his worshippers to eternal life does not exist in any Hellenic mystery religion.”¹⁹

It would appear then, that the real mythology is not in the origin of Christianity but in the minds of skeptics who are confusing such beliefs with the historical person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. (This is especially evident when one considers the immoral lives and deeds of the pagan deities since these are entirely disharmonious with the life and deeds of Jesus Christ.)

Indeed, as noted, scholars long ago refuted the idea that Christianity is related to the mysteries. Consider just a few of the great differences between Christian belief and the mystery cults that makes the claim of identity look foolish:

As for the motif of dying and rising saviour-god, which has so often been compared with the unique event which gave birth to Christianity, Metzger points out that the formal resemblance between them must not be allowed to obscure the great differences in content. In all the Mysteries which tell of a dying god, he dies “by compulsion and not by choice, sometimes in bitterness and despair, never in a self-giving love.” There is a positive gulf between this and the Christ who asserted that no man could take his life from him but that he laid it down of his own will (Jn. 10:17; Mt. 26:28); the Johannine pictures of the cross as the place where Jesus was “glorified” and the Christian celebration of the Passion as a victory over Satan, sin and death. Similarly, there is all the difference in the world between the rising or re-birth of a deity which symbolizes the coming of spring (and the re-awakening of nature) and the resurrection “on the third day” of an historical person.²⁰

Former atheist and Cambridge and Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis emphasized that the biblical concept of God in both Old and New Testaments is in no way compatible with the nature gods of the mysteries.

On the other hand, Jahweh is clearly *not* a Nature-God. He does not die and come to life each year as a true corn-king should.... He is not the soul of Nature nor any part of Nature. He inhabits eternity; he dwells in the high and holy place; heaven is his throne, not his vehicle; earth is his footstool, not his vesture One day he will dismantle both and make a new heaven and earth. He is not to be identified even with the "divine spark" in man. He is "God and not man." His thoughts are not our thoughts....²¹

In fact, Lewis had previously recorded that upon his first serious reading of the New Testament, he was "chilled and puzzled by the almost total absence of such ideas in the Christian documents."²² In other words, he was familiar with the theories suggesting resemblance between Christianity and the Mysteries, expected to find them, and was shocked to discover their absence.

E. O. James concludes,

There is *no valid comparison* between the synoptic story of Jesus of Nazareth and the mythological accounts of the mystery divinities of Eleusis, Thrace, Phrygia or Egypt.... Similarly, the belief in the resurrection of Christ is poles removed from the resuscitation of Osiris, Dionysus or Attis in an annual ritual based on primitive conceptions of mummifications, and the renewal of the new life in the spring.²³

No less an authority than the great comparative religion scholar, Mircea Eliade, points out that not only is the idea of Christian borrowing from the Mysteries wrong but that any borrowing probably first began on the part of the mysteries:

In 1958, one year before [Joseph] Campbell started publishing his fanciful theories in the *Masks of God* volumes, Mircea Eliade published in *Patterns of Initiation* a series of lectures he had given at the University of Chicago in the fall of 1956. In one of those lectures, Eliade said recent research did not support the theories that the origin of Christianity was influenced by pagan mystery cults. "There is no reason to suppose that primitive Christianity was influenced by the Hellenistic mysteries," said Eliade. In fact, the reverse may actually be true....²⁴

Further, and probably most damaging, there is simply no evidence that the mystery religions exerted any influence in Palestine in the first three decades of the first century. If so, where did the material originate to make Christianity a mystery religion? In fact, one wonders why such parallels would be suggested at all.²⁵ The manuscripts we possess prove that the teachings of Jesus and Paul are those given in the New Testament; sufficient time never existed for the disciples to be influenced by the mysteries even if they were open to the idea, which they weren't.

Finally, when the influence of the Mysteries did reach Palestine, principally through gnosticism, the early church did not accept it but renounced it vigorously

as trafficking in pagan myths. The complete lack of resulting syncretism is difficult to explain if Christianity was ultimately a derivative of such paganism. Obviously, it wasn't.

As the Apostle Peter emphasized, "We did *not* follow cleverly invented *stories* when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were *eyewitnesses* of his majesty" (2 Peter 1:16)

Notes

- ¹ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2003), p. 232.
- ² John M. Robertson, *Pagan Christs* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1967).
- ³ Kersey Graves, *The World's Sixteen Crucified Saviors or Christianity Before Christ* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1971).
- ⁴ G. A. Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1975).
- ⁵ Cf. *Encyclopedia Britannica, Macropedia*, 15th edition, s.v., "Mystery Religions." This material is taken from the author's *The Secret Teachings of the Masonic Lodge: A Christian Perspective* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), pp. 244-245.
- ⁶ John Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* (New York: Bantam, 1971), p. 154.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 193.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 192.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 205.
- ¹⁰ J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity: The Witness of History* (London: Tyndale, 1970), p. 15.
- ¹¹ Cf., Jack Finegan, *Myth and Mystery: An Introduction to the Pagan Religions of the Biblical World* (Baker, 1989).
- ¹² In Tom Snyder, *Myth Conceptions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 191, citing the 1965 ed., p. 42.
- ¹³ Samuel N. Kramer, *Mythologies of the Ancient World* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), p. 10 from Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Arrowhead Springs, San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972), p. 263.
- ¹⁴ P. Lambrechts, "La' Resurrection de Adonis," in *Melanges Isidore Levy*, 1955, pp. 207-240 as cited in Edwin Yamauchi, "The Passover Plot or Easter Triumph?" in Montgomery, ed., *Christianity for the Tough Minded* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1973).
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1969, Vol. 15, article on Adonis.
- ¹⁷ Wilbur M. Smith, *Therefore Stand* (New Canaan, CT: Keats, 1981), p. 583.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), p. 38.
- ²¹ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1970), p. 119.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- ²³ Anderson, p. 41, emphasis added.
- ²⁴ Snyder, p. 194.
- ²⁵ . E.g., Anderson, p. 22.

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