CHAPTER FIVE

MORALITY AND THE CULT OF ISIS

Until the recent outburst of scholarship on the cult of the Egyptian deities, mention of the goddess Isis seems primarily to have evoked thoughts of the sexual immorality of her adherents. This aspect of the cult has completely overshadowed the deeper, philosophical content of the Isiac religion and the contribution that it made to the development of ethical thought. The blame for the overemphasis on the immorality of the cult and especially of its female devotees can be placed on the authors of handbooks of antiquity and of histories of ancient religion. Even those who have centered their studies on the Isiac religion have tended to point out its apparent connections with the demi-monde. One scholar has recently suggested that the Isis religion would not have been so popular in Rome had it not corresponded to a “conception of love-life resulting from a natural evolution of Roman customs.” Ilse Becher, in a recent attempt to test the validity of these reproaches of immorality and to ask to what extent the charges corresponded to actual facts, has specifically mentioned a great number of handbooks of antiquity and works on ancient religion that have preserved these charges as reflections of true circumstances. Failing to place the state-

ments of the elegiac poets, Martial, Juvenal, and the historian Josephus into their proper perspective, and using the aretalologies for their own purposes, these authors have in their accounts made sexual promiscuity the rule rather than the exception among the followers of Isis. Whereas Becher has shown that the Isiac religion was not a cult of the demi-monde, it is also possible to demonstrate that it had essentially a stringent morality and in ancient society was known for its purity rather than for the opposite. Though it would be naive to assume that no one of its priests, priestesses, other functionaries, or ordinary adherents was ever involved in immoral actions, as it would be naive to assume this of any religion, the purpose of this chapter is to show that the evidence pointing to its high sense of morality far outweighs that on the other side, thus illustrating that its interrelationship with Christianity can be better understood when its ethical content is put in its proper perspective.

It is not difficult to understand why the ancient authors and ancient society in general viewed the happenings at the Isis temple, particularly in Rome, with a great deal of suspicion. For one thing the pomp of the Isiac festivals was far removed from the perfunctory ceremonies honoring the Olympian gods. A good deal of emotion, to which the Roman temperament in particular was not accustomed, was involved in the religion. For another thing, because a sense of mystery surrounded the cult, the imaginations of those who were not initiates or adherents had room to

R. Meyer, Die Bedeutung Ägyptens in der lateinischen Literatur der vorchristlichen Zeit (Diss. Zurich 1961) 186. Among those who warn us not to take these charges earnestly, she mentions Bonnet, Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte (Berlin 1952) 331; H. Kirchner, Die Bedeutung der Fremdkulte in der römischen Ostpolitik (Diss. Bonn 1956) 144; Tschudin, Isis in Rom (Basel 1958, unabridged version) 145, 26. J. Bayet, Histoire politique et psychologique de la religion Romaine (Paris 1957) does not even mention the demi-monde in connection with the Isis cult. To this last category I would add Tran Tam Tinh, Essai, see esp. p. 117-18, and Malaise, Les conditions de pénétration 138-39 n. 6 : “La réputation de licence faite aux cultes isiaques était certainement un moyen de dénigrement non fondé que les Romains utilisèrent d'ailleurs aussi contre les Juifs et les Chrétiens.” Witt, Isis, while he generally maintains a balance between moral and immoral elements, at one point (p. 138) states, “But for baser folk in the Italian capital the same temple could mean little else than a brothel.” Vidman, Isis und Sarapis 105 mentions the women of the demi-monde as adherents of the cult.