CHAPTER THREE

A CHALLENGE: 
THE THEORY OF THE GREEK ORIGINS

The "religionsgeschichtliche Schule", no matter how influential, does not enjoy the prestige of ancientness. In 1867, J.J. Bachofen was already deeply concerned with the Greek beliefs in the After Life and their transmission down to Plutarch. Between 1890-1894, Erwin Rohde's *Psyche* was published, an extremely consequential work for the study of the ecstatic phenomena. In 1893 appeared A. Dieterich's *Nekyia*, an exemplary piece of research into the Greek origins of the eschatological beliefs of Late Antiquity.

While Rohde went occasionally beyond his professional limits, widening the scope of his book to that of a comparative inquiry, Dieterich only seldom made any step outside the Classical world. However, the views held by these two authors were not entirely divergent and possibly complemented one another. Rohde and Dieterich might be considered as the first representatives of the only accredited theory, capable of challenging the dominant fashion dictated by the "religionsgeschichtliche Schule": the theory of the Greek origin of the *Himmelsreise*. Certainly, it would be a mistake to exaggerate the affinities between these two scholars: Rohde was not loath to seek the origin of ecstatic cults outside Greece, and Dieterich later became a convert to the ideas of the "religionsgeschichtliche Schule". Anyway, they shared, to a certain extent, the same basic principle: The beliefs of Late Antiquity were the outcome of an inner development, of a process occurring within the framework of the Greek and Roman religions.

In his interpretation of Greek religion, Rohde emphasized the role of the ancient chthonian divinities, of the Apollinian mantic phenomena, and, above all, of the "ThrAcian" god Dionysus. In doing so, he followed an evolutionary pattern, which led from the "ancient" religious layer of the underground divinities and heroes to Plato's philosophy. Chthonian cults and myths were authentically Greek, though shared by many other peoples of the world. On the contrary, Dionysus was an imported god, his native land being Thrace. His ecstatic cult, previously unknown in Greece, presented many affinities – Rohde believed – with shamanism, yoga, and other kindred phenomena. In the Dionysiac idea of a separable element, the soul, able to fly when her bonds with the body were loosened, Rhode saw the origin of the belief in immortality and of Platonic mysticism. In dealing with Apollinian seers like Abaris, Aristeas, Hermoditus and others, Rohde neither noticed their real affinities with the shamans, nor seemed to postulate that a different ideology from that of Dionysism underlay their exploits. In fact, Dionysism took, in Rohde's opinion, such proportions, that it absorbed a good part of the religious beliefs and cults of Ancient Greece.

A criticism of Rohde's view of the Greek religion would fall beyond the scope of this survey. As far as our subject matter is concerned, his work is important because
it emphasizes the continuity of ecstatic phenomena from Dionysism down to Late Antiquity. Rohde’s phenomenology of extasy is certainly subject to amendments. Dionysism, which is not imported from Thrace (although the god Dionysus himself is a stranger in Greece)\(^6\), does not form the background for a further development of the ideas concerning the immortality of the soul, mysticism and asceticism. The apocalyptic genre in Greece does not rise within Dionysiac circles, but within the circles of “seers and medicine men” *(iatroí kai manteis*, shortly “iatromantes”, as E.R. Dodds puts it) such as Abaris, Aristeas, Epimenides, Hermotimus, Pythagoras and others, whose activity is connected with a (Hyperborean) god called Apollo. It is now a common opinion that a single ideology underlies the exploits of these early prophets, but, even if it were not so, a case like that of Empedocles certainly points out the very direction where the origins of Platonic dualism (i.e., fall of the individual soul in the world, metensomatosis, and philosophical detachment) are to be sought.

Rohde’s book was a vast synthesis, not a specific inquiry into the background of Late Antique beliefs. Dieterich’s *Nekyia* was exactly the opposite: a thorough analysis of the origin of every motif occurring in the large fragment of the Greek Apocalypse of Peter discovered at Akhmim. This writing, mentioned by Clement of Alexandria, Methodius of Olympus and Macarius, was a Christian apocalypse of the second half of the II\(^{nd}\) century A.D.\(^5\). Dieterich has patiently shown in his research that almost every single passage of the text could be fully explained in the light of very ancient beliefs, already held by Greek authors of the V\(^{th}\) cent. B.C., but actually going back to a still earlier phase of the Greek religion. Only a few categories of sinners were directly inherited from Jewish-Christian beliefs concerning the expiation of faults in Hell\(^6\). But the structure of Heaven and Hell, as well as the forms of expiation, were Greek\(^7\).

The search for the remote origins of a phenomenon does not enjoy much popularity today. However, Dieterich’s *Nekyia* is extremely important, in so far as it shows the persistency and continuity of early beliefs, down to Late Antiquity. On the other hand, the beliefs in question are neither Iranian, nor Jewish, but purely Greek.

Rohde’s *Psyche* and, to a certain extent, also Dieterich’s *Nekyia*, are dedicated to the study of general subjects. The “ascension of the soul” is dealt with there, only in so far as it forms one of the manifestations of extasy, or, respectively, of the apocalyptic genre. Neither Rohde, nor Dieterich, are specifically concerned with the true origin of this motif, although Rohde believes that it is derived from Thracian Dionysism, and Dieterich, that it belongs to the mentality of the Orphics and Pythagoreans.

If we part from his very questionable hypothesis of the Iranian and Babylonian background of the *Himmelsreise*, W. Bousset seems to be the first scholar whose deep insight and outstanding competence enable him to perceive the extent, and to define the limits, of this phenomenon within the Greek world. Bousset, as so many scholars after him, believes that Plato’s apocalypse of Er depends on an Iranian model\(^8\). Apart from this debatable opinion, he does not indulge in idle commentaries, but traces the outline of the specific problems related to the transmission of Plato’s ideas down to Late Antiquity. He insists on the role that Xenocrates might