CHAPTER ONE

RELIGION, CULT AND MYSTERY

ὡς τὰ…ἀπόρρητα τῆς κατὰ τὰ μυστήρια τελετῆς ἐνδο[ξ]ήτερον τε καὶ σεμνότερον…τοῖν θεοῖν ἀποδοθοῖ…

Letter of Commodus to the Eumolpidae at Eleusis, AD 180–92: Syll. 873 ll. 5–13

Le sacré revient au galop…Heureux, parce qu’il est temps de sortir de la mise à plat systématique. Dangereux, parce que rien n’est plus nocif que le faux sacré.¹

Haben jene Nationen der Vorwelt einander nur Elefantenzähne zugeführt, und Gold und Sklaven? Nicht auch Erkenntnisse, religiöse Gebräuche und Götter?

F. Creuzer, Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen (1810–12)¹ Introd.

In the Introduction I have already set out my reasons for choosing the group of cults that are the subject of this book. We now must try to enter their conceptual world, comprehend their rituals. The very fact that they managed to expand all over the Roman world confirms,

¹ J. de Bourbon-Busset, Localiser le sacré, in Champs du sacré (Paris 1982) 3. I have hesitated over the appropriateness of this epigraph, but its oddity finally induced me to include it. My objection is not so much that everyone writes whatever comes into his head, as that supposedly specialist publications appeal to esprits forts to discuss the idea of the sacred on the basis of supposedly objective knowledge (e.g. J. Ries, Retour ou permanence du sacré? in idem 1986a, 1–13). To be specific: what does it mean systematically to flatten everything, in connection with the sacred? Is it certain that there is ‘nothing more dangerous’ than the pseudo-sacred? And who exactly has the right to decide what the ‘pseudo-sacred’ might be? My reservations are by no means rhetorical; as good a historian of religion as C.J. Bleeker once wrote an article entitled, How to distinguish between True Religion and False Religion (in idem, 1975, 67–75), whose last paragraph reads: “One knows the tree by its fruits. The good deeds prove the truth of religion…we are not totally deprived of criteria to distinguish true religion from false religion. But such criteria should be handled with wisdom and discretion”. If he had known Karlheinz Deschner’s vast Kriminalgeschichte des Christentums (8 vols. up to 2004) (Reinbek/Hamburg 1986–), or M.J. Engh, In the Name of Heaven: 3,000 Years of Religious Persecution (Amherst 2007) 89–140, 161–213, 226–250, he would probably not have expressed himself so blithely.
whatever the actual number of their adherents at any one time, that the populations of quite diverse areas of the Empire felt attracted to such religious experiences and found in them a means, alongside more traditional religious forms, of responding to some of the new anxieties lurking in the realm of the *imaginaire*.

The task of studying a heterogeneous group of cults like this is studied with difficulties. In order to provide a self-consistent and coherent account, I have adopted a method I call ‘rapprochement’, which underlies the book’s structure. This procedure requires a little explanation.

In my view, religion is a cultural system itself articulated in a variety of sub-systems that reflect, at the level of the *imaginaire*, the real conditions of existence in a specific historical formation.2 Every society,

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