CHAPTER THREE

SYSTEMS OF VALUE

Nobody sees Death,
Nobody sees the face of Death,
Nobody hears the voice of Death,
Savage Death just cuts mankind down.

Gilgamesh XI.vi. tr. Dalley 1989, 108

Sacrificium est…corpus etiam nostrum cum temperantia castigamus

Augustine, De civ.Dei 10.6

The aim of this chapter is to collect the scattered evidence for what might add up to the system of values of these cults. Those who believe that they constituted merely one modality within the larger pagan system will of course see no point in such a quest. I am convinced however that, given the context of the Empire’s market in religious options, they were a response to the anxieties generated by a shift in the religious paradigm, a shift whose underlying cause, as in the Cuman-tian grand narrative, was the incapacity of the politicised religion of Rome to meet the needs of the diverse population of a complex and multi-cultural empire.

The oriental cults evidently did not offer their solution as an alternative cultural model. Christianity on the other hand did gradually construct such a paradigm, which we tend to see as more finished right from the start. In fact, however, the process took centuries of struggle towards a Christian self-definition vis-à-vis the world, and of

1 “Our body too [is] a sacrifice when we chasten it by temperance” (tr. P. Schaff).
2 Emblematic of such a view are Erwin Rohde’s remarks à propos the adherents of Dionysus: Psyche: Sedenkult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen (Freiburg and Leipzig 1894 (1898², repr. Darmstadt 1961) 391, He claims that once the ceremonies were over no profound trace of them remained in the hearts of these ecstaties, who received no impulsion to alter their conduct, no change of heart. He surely thought the same about all the other mysteries. Generally relevant here is the ancient construction of highly-coloured moral invective against opposing individuals and religious groups, esp. mysteries, which would have been pointless if the latter had had no ethical norms, explicit or implicit: R.M. Grant, Charges of Immorality against Various Religious Groups in Antiquity, in Van den Broek and Vermaseren 1981, 161–70.
internal confusion, until a uniform pattern emerged. The impression of coherence is the result of a process of intellectual and physical cleansing that has removed the sophistries and blood from the history of the Early Church. Such a process was quite foreign to the oriental cults, although they did experience changes both in their systems of belief, as we have seen, and in their rituals, which we shall look at in the next chapter; and their values too must surely have adjusted slowly to historical change. Unfortunately the evidence is simply inadequate to allow us any insight into such shifts over time, and we must be content with the more modest task of filling in the main outlines of their ethics within the wider cultural context, and considering how their adherents responded to divine injunctions. The aim is thus to provide a preliminary sketch-map of morality in these cults.

On the authority of Cicero, who translated Greek θηθηικός as moralis, we ordinarily treat morality and ethics as synonymous terms. In some contexts, however, the words need to be differentiated. Foucault for example has this to say about the word morality:

By ‘morality’ one means a set of rules and values through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies such as the family (in one of its roles), educational institutions, churches and so forth. It is sometimes the case that these rules and values are plainly set forth in a coherent doctrine and an explicit teaching. But it also happens that they are transmitted in a diffuse manner, so that, far from constituting a systematic ensemble, they form a complex interplay of elements that counterbalance and correct one another, and cancel each other out on certain points, thus providing for compromises or loopholes. With these qualifications taken into account, we can call this prescriptive ensemble a ‘moral code’. But ‘morality’ also refers to the real behaviour of individuals in relation to the rules and values that are recommended to them: the word thus designates the manner in which they comply more or less fully with a standard of conduct; the manner in which they obey or resist an interdiction or prescription; the manner in which they respect or disregard a set of values.

3 Cf. the excellent account of Lieu 2004.
4 Foucault 1985, 25. Foucault’s work must be approached with caution, as the feminists have shown. But it does at least set up a model that can be criticised, cf. the abundant information, debate and bibliographies in e.g. Goldhill 1995; D.H.J. Larmour, P.A. Miller and C. Platter (eds.), Rethinking Sexuality: Foucault and Classical Antiquity (Princeton 1998). On a quite different tack, J. Annas, The Morality of Happiness (Oxford and New York 1993) offers a densely-written review of the relevant currents of Greek thought and its influence on modern morals and ethics, with discussion of many points relevant to my project here.