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Mithraism and Mystery Phenomenology
(Résumé)

The esoteric and initiatory character of Mithraism doesn’t exhaust the peculiarity of it as it is a religious fact, object of a historical examination; in fact such character is explained and defined in relation to the number of beliefs and ritual practices which constitute Mithraism as a specified and historically individualized phenomenon. However, exactly in relation to that character, the Mithras cult, having spread through the Roman Empire in the first few centuries A.D. is inserted in quite a widespread problematic that involves numerous other cults contemporaneous, organized together so as to authorize the access only to persons sacredly qualified, who were obliged to keep the secrets on the beliefs of the religious group into which they were admitted and on the practised rites in the interior of it.

Therefore the question is put as to the opportunity and legitimacy of placing all these religious phenomena into one single typological category, so that, besides some individual and irreducible aspects in each of them, their fundamental homogeneity can be shown, because of the presence of a series of common characteristics.

The pledge of the secret on the content and the modality of religious experience by the initiates, moreover, does not appear sufficient for the determination of the phenomenologic specificity of such a category, this in fact being a characteristic that the Greek and Oriental “mysteries” share with the phenomenon of “initiations”.

Without prejudice to the debated question of an eventual historical continuity among initiations practised in the most archaic cultures and mysteries of the classical and hellenistic-roman age, it can be immediately observed that the latter ones, already from the first approach, reveal themselves as distinct from those because of the quality of the cults lent to single divinities that appear in a different way intimately connected with the esoteric
and initiatory ritual. Therefore, it appears legitimate to turn our attention to the type of divinity and to the nature of the relationship that is inserted between it and the believer in order to try to individualize the "quid" specific act to qualify under the phenomenological profile the "category" of mysteries.

The researches of Frazer already underline, especially in relation to the figures of Attis, Adonis, Osiris, the naturistic-chthonic fundament of myths and rites gravitating about these figures. As they usually appeared involved in an event of absence-presence, of disappearance and returning, differently motivated and characterized, one spoke of death and resurrection of the god of mysteries. The believer that participates in such rites through a mystic experience of death and "rebirth" would be likened to god to the extent of identifying himself to him, obtaining a salvation, understood as acquisition of a new divine life.

However, beyond every consideration of internal order to single contexts, the gravest objection to the validity of a definition of mysteries as cults celebrating death and resurrection of a god to whom the initiate ritually identifies himself, enjoying the beneficial effects of the positive solution of the event, come from the circumstance that such a definition cannot be applied to god titular of Mithraic mysteries. Mithras, in his quality of "invincible god", does not appear assimilable to the category of "the dying and rising gods".

A result acquired from the studies on the phenomenon of mysteries let them be either greek or oriental, is however the recognizing of the relation that, with a different title, connects the divinities celebrated in them with the sphere of fertility and chthonic fertility.

The importance of such a relation for the characterization of the phenomenological category of mysteries has been acutely perceived by Pettazzoni who, without slighting the typological connections of mysteries with the phenomenon of initiations of archaic culture, has elaborated a "historical-religious theory" on their origin, proposing the hypothesis of a historical continuity between them and old fertility cults.

The relation between fertility cults and mysteries, under a phenomenological and historical profile, acquires new importance