Many years ago Professor Quispel wrote that practically the entire Near East belonged among the ancestors of Gnosticism. These words, as it happens, provide a neat illustration of the danger of quoting statements out of context. In context they are perfectly in order, and beyond reproach, as the conclusion to some pages of discussion and backed as they are by a brief summary of the main points: «So hat dann angeblich beinahe der ganze Vorderorient zu den Ahnen des Gnostizismus gehört: der iranische Zostrianus, die babylonische Astrologie, die syrische Noria, der Samariter Dositheos, der judische ‘Wahre Prophet’ fanden sich in diesem Sammelsurium zusammen”.¹

Obviously it would be legitimate enough to cite these words as a warning against any attempt, in the present state of our knowledge, to identify any single fons et origo for the gnostic movement: practically the entire Near East has made its contribution. One may recall the famous words of Reitzenstein: «It is hardly to be avoided that according to inclination and the direction his studies have taken, one writer claims too much as Egyptian, another too much as Babylonian, a third all as Persian, and that the individual worker contracts a kind of colour-blindness, which makes him insensitive to important distinctions”.²

Professor Quispel, with many others today (including the writer), would stress the significance of the Jewish contribution, but this also cannot be done to the neglect of other factors. The gnostic phenomenon is too complex, and possessed of too many ramifications, to be pinned down to any single source or origin.

On the other hand it would a gross misuse of Professor Quispel’s statement, and indeed a logical fallacy, to use it as the basis for

¹ Gnosis als Weltreligion, Zurich 1951, 9.
including anything and everything: practically the entire Near East has made its contribution, therefore anything from the Near East in this period may be assumed to have contributed. The fallacy is obvious when stated in this form, but the danger is none the less present and it is easy to fall unwittingly into the trap.

The oriental mystery religions afford a case in point. They are all, or at least nearly all, older than Christianity, and form part of the background, the environment into which both Christianity and a developed Gnosticism emerged. How far are they significant for the origins of either, and what contribution have they made? In the early days of Religionsgeschichte there was in some quarters a tendency to multiply the possible parallels, to include as parallels and influences what were in fact no more than superficial resemblances, and in particular to assume that Christianity was always and everywhere the debtor; which of course provoked the inevitable re-action. Today we should in many ways see things differently, in a more balanced and nuanced way. In particular we should pay more attention to chronology: the peak period for the mysteries was precisely one in which Christianity was already making headway. Moreover we should wish to ask how far the ideas and beliefs of the mysteries remained constant over the centuries of their history, how far they were themselves modified by the influence of their environment.

The problem is in part that the mysteries were esoteric religions, their initiates vowed to secrecy, so that we know comparatively little of their actual beliefs and ceremonies. This unfortunately has sometimes allowed free play to speculation and to inferences for which there is no real foundation. A certain notorious book of recent years even speaks of the mystery religions having their headquarters in Jerusalem!


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3 To supply bibliographical details would give this volume a publicity which it does not deserve.