



The Mysteries

The word mystery is derived from the Greek word *mysterion*, which refers to a play in which the truths of life are both hidden and revealed. The idea of such a mystery is to give the student a direct apprehension of truth by experiencing it by means of the play, rather than just academic knowledge. Academic knowledge, learnt in the academies, was preparatory to and augmented the knowledge gained by experience in the mystery school. The two (academies and mystery schools) went hand in hand with each other.

In a classical mystery school the student entered into the mystery and thus became an initiate (from Latin *initio*, 'to enter', 'to commence', 'to induct'). But this entering into the mystery was done by degrees, a step (or degree) at a time.

For instance, in the Greek Mysteries the first degree was that of *katharsis* ('purification'). The initiates of this degree were referred to as *katharoi* ('purified'), from which our word catharsis is derived, as also the name of the Cathars of France. They were the ones who had purified their desires, their emotions, so that they became purely loving. This also developed the feelings into a true intuition.

The second degree was that of the *mysterion* or mystery. Whereas the first degree prepared the pupil for the mystery, the second degree was the first formal experience of the mystery. The initiates of this degree were referred to as the *mystes*, from which our word mystic is derived. They were the ones who saw something of the mystery and understood something of it.

The third degree was that of the *epopteia*. Initiates of this degree were known as the *epoptes*, from which our word epopt ('seer') is derived. They were the ones who perceived, understood and knew the inner truths of the mystery, from the experience of practising what they understood in an act of service.

After this were four further degrees, the fourth degree being the entrance into what are called the higher degrees. Fulfilment of the fourth degree means freeing oneself of carnal desire and rising above the demands of the personality and its body. Only in the higher degrees was the initiate, now an adept, truly entitled to teach others. If followed faithfully and successfully, the higher degrees led to a progressive mastery and finally full illumination in the highest degree, which is union through divine love with the unrevealed All.

I have given this brief account using the terms of the Greek mystery schools, the most famous of which was at Eleusis and Athens (the two sites linked together as one). But the mystery schools of other cultures, some more ancient than the Greek, all followed a similar plan and degree system. A second famous Greek mystery school was established at Delphi, on the slopes of Mount Parnassus, and a third at Cumae (near what is now Naples). Cumae was later used by the Romans.

The Greek mysteries were derived from the Orphic, and the centre of the Orphic mysteries was in the Rhodope and Rila mountains of Thracia (now Bulgaria). They in turn were based on the much more ancient Dionysian mysteries of Thracia, refined or reformed by Orpheus as a result of contact with Egypt. The Egyptian mysteries



had four main centres and several subsidiary ones, spread along the river Nile. The Mesopotamian mysteries were founded about the same time as the Egyptian, and both claimed they were derived from Atlantis. The Hebraic mysteries are also of ancient origin, deriving from Mesopotamia and Egypt. The Druids, too, had their mystery schools, spread throughout the British Isles and Gaul (France), as also did other cultures. The Christian mysteries, as taught by Jesus Christ to his disciples, were derived from a blend of the Orphic and Hebraic mysteries.

It was the Orphic Mysteries followed by the Christian Mysteries that specifically emphasised the truth that God is Love, and that it is this Love which is the true Power, Wisdom and Intelligence that constitutes the Light and Life of the universe. This is the greatest of the revelations of truth. All true degrees of initiation are stages in the expression, manifestation, knowledge and illumination of love. To become a full initiate is to become godlike, for God is Love. We all have this in potential, but we have to learn to release and fulfil that potential, to the greatest extent or degree possible.

All the mystery schools had in common the degree system, education and training via the mystery, a suitable location in the landscape in which the mystery was enacted, and an oracle. In the mystery it was understood that man, nature and the spiritual world are inseparable, and that all three are involved in enacting a story.

In other words, as Shakespeare said, we are all actors on the stage of the world. The question is whether we are conscious of it or not, and whether we are good actors or not. If the answer is yes, then ultimately we can learn to co-author the play. Such is the mystery.

The Shakespeare plays have a basis in the Mystery tradition and, with due preparation, can be experienced in a mystical way.

Pilgrimage in the landscape can also take us into a mystery, so that we find that we are consciously guided and taught as we play our part on the stage of the world. Through this we may become both a mystic and a seer, and maybe more.

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