

THE MESSAGE OF THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES FOR TODAY'S WORLD

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Whoever among men who walk the Earth has seen these Mysteries is blessed, but whoever is uninitiated and has not received his share of the rite, he will not have the same lot as the others, once he is dead and dwells in the mould where the sun goes down.

Thus reads the praise in an epic poem known as "The Homeric Hymn to Demeter." The Mysteries referred to here are those of Eleusis, the most important mysteries of Greek antiquity. For almost two thousand years, from around 1500 B.C.E. to the fourth century C.E., these were celebrated at Eleusis, Greece, in honor of the goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone.

The events leading to the founding of the shrine of Eleusis are described in this Homeric Hymn. The author of this hymn, and his provenience, are unknown, but it must have originated around the end of the seventh century B.C.E.

One day, while Persephone, daughter of Zeus and Demeter, was picking flowers in the lovely meadows, she was abducted by Hades, god of the underworld. Her mother searched for her in vain, finally learning from Helios of the abduction of her daughter. Sorely afflicted, Demeter became alienated from Olympus, since she even came to know that her husband Zeus had been in agreement with the kidnapping.

Dressed as a simple woman among humankind, Demeter found friendly abode in the palace of the king of Eleusis, Keleos, and his wife Metaneira. In gratitude for their friendly hospitality, Demeter founded a temple in Eleusis after revealing herself to be a goddess. To castigate the Olympian gods for the

abduction of her daughter, Demeter caused all of the vegetation on Earth to die, threatening humankind with extinction. The gods feared the loss of the prayers and sacrifices of humanity and begged Demeter to make the Earth fruitful again. This plea was not granted until Zeus ordered his brother Hades in the underworld to return Persephone to her mother. Mother and daughter returned to Olympus, but henceforth Persephone had to spend a third of the year with her spouse in the underworld. When she did, winter reigned on the Earth. Yet every year, when Persephone returned to Earth in the spring, the plant world awoke anew with flowers and bore fruits.

Before Demeter returned to the other gods on Olympus, she instructed the kings of Eleusis, Keleos and Triptolemus, how to celebrate the rites in her temple. These were secret precepts, Mysteries to be closely guarded. Divulging or profaning them was punishable by death. In appreciation of the propitious outcome of the drama of Eleusis, Demeter bestowed upon Triptolemus, the first initiate of Eleusis, a sprig of grain and bade him instruct humankind in agriculture.

The cult of Demeter and Persephone in Eleusis, which was initially of only local significance, soon became an important part of Athenian citizenship, and it eventually developed into a pan-Hellenic institution, becoming of universal importance at the time of the Roman empire. Its character as a pan-Hellenic institution was signaled in 760 B.C.E., at the time of the fifth Olympiad, when the Oracle of Delphi called upon all Greeks to make communal sacrifice in honor of Demeter of Eleusis in order to banish a famine which was then affecting all of Greece.

What was the message conveyed at Eleusis, a message which transformed the cult into the most influential and spiritually significant Mystery of antiquity? This question cannot be answered in detail, for the veil of mystery, maintained by a severe commandment of secrecy, was never lifted during the millennia. It is only by examining the testimony of great initiates that we may gain an idea of the fundamentals and the spiritual significance which the teachings of Eleusis had for the individual. There is no question of any new religion having been promulgated in Eleusis; this can be ruled out because the initiates, when they returned to their homelands after the Mysteries, remained faithful to their autochthonous religions.

Instead, revelations about the essence of human existence and about the meaning of life and death must have been imparted to the initiates. Prayers are known from the Mysteries, offered by initiates to Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, imploring her to awaken and vividly maintain the memory of the holy initiation, that the initiation might persist as an experience illuminating all of life and transforming existence.

Participating in the Mysteries was an experience which cannot be under-

stood by examining only their external appearance, for it evoked alterations in the soul of the initiate. This is evident from the testimony of the most famous initiates. Thus wrote Pindar of the Eleusinian blessing:

*Blessed is he who, having seen these rites,
undertakes the way beneath the Earth.
He knows the end of life,
as well as its divinely granted beginning.*

Cicero also attested to the splendor which illuminated his life from Eleusis:

*Not only have we found there the reason to live more joyously,
but also that we may die with greater hope.*

The initiates often experienced in vision the congruity of the beginning and the end, of birth and death, the totality and the eternal generative ground of being. It must have been an encounter with the ineffable, an encounter with the divine, that could only be described through metaphor. It is striking that the Eleusinian experience is described again and again in antitheses: darkness and light, terror and beatitude. This ambivalence is also evident in other descriptions, such as that of Aelius Aristides, who stated that Eleusis was:

*Both the most awesome and the most luminous
of all the divine things that exist among men.*

Emperor Marcus Aurelius counted the Mysteries among those endowments which manifest the solicitude of the gods for humankind.

We know as little of the essence of the ritual by which the illuminating vision was transmitted to the initiates as we know of the meaning of the vision itself. The events leading up to the inner sanctum, to the *telesterion*, in which the crux of the Mystery took place, are amply documented. The preparatory, so-called Lesser Mysteries were celebrated in Athens in springtime, in the month of flowers, *Anthesterion*. The celebration of the Greater Mysteries began annually in Athens in autumn, in the month *Boedromion*, which today corresponds to the end of September and beginning of October. After four days of rites and festivities in the city, the solemn procession to Eleusis, some fourteen miles distant, began with great pomp on the fifth day.

During the procession, rites, sacrifices, and purification ceremonies took place publicly, and these have therefore been made known to us in full detail. On the sixth day, sacrifices, festivities, and purification rites took place in Eleusis on the outskirts of the sanctuary. These have also been amply described. What then took place that night at the climax of the Eleusinian ceremony, in the inner sanctum of the temple, the *telesterion*, into which only the priests and the initiates could enter, has in essence remained a mystery. The law of secrecy was forever maintained.

What we do know, and what is crucial in the present context, is that before the climax of the initiation, before the illuminating vision of the initiates, a sacred potion, the *kykeon*, was administered. We also know that the *kykeon* was composed of barley and mint. In recent times, scholars of Eleusis have advanced the hypothesis that the *kykeon* must have contained some hallucinogenic compound. This would explain how it was possible for the priests to simultaneously induce, as if in programmed fashion, an ecstatic-visionary state in hundreds of initiates.

Thus, the problem of the *kykeon* is an essential part of the secrets of Eleusis. Could the visions of Eleusis have been produced solely by unknown rites, or was the *kykeon* a *psychopharmakon*, a plant extract capable of inducing an ecstatic state?

This question also brings us to a problem of our own time. This involves the question – much discussed today – of whether it is ethically and religiously defensible to use consciousness-altering drugs under specific circumstances to gain new insights into the spiritual world.

But before we consider this question, let us return to the problem of the *kykeon*. If the potion did indeed contain an hallucinogenic compound, then what sort of hallucinogen might it have been? This question is still relevant. Two scholars of the Mysteries have considered it: first, Professor Karl Kerényi, who published two books about the Mysteries, and then ethnomycologist R. Gordon Wasson, who approached me for assistance because I had become an expert on the chemical aspects of the problem following my discovery of the highly active hallucinogen LSD and my research into the Mexican magic plants.

The investigation regarding the putative hallucinogen of the *kykeon* which I conducted in collaboration with Gordon Wasson and Carl Ruck, Professor of Ethnobotany in Greek mythology at Boston University, uncovered interesting parallels and connections between the Eleusinian Mystery cult and certain extant magic cults among the Indian tribes in remote regions of southern Mexico.

In the Mazatec and Zapotec regions of the mountains of Southern Mexico, the thaumaturges and *curanderos* continue, as they have for millennia, to employ an hallucinogenic potion in their magico-religious curing ceremonies. This potion is prepared from the seeds of certain species of morning glories, *Turbina corymbosa* and *Ipomoea violacea*. In the chemical-pharmaceutical research laboratories of Sandoz Ltd. in Basel, Switzerland, we have investigated the active principles of this drug, known as the *ololiuhqui* potion. These proved to be alkaloids also found in ergot, namely *lysergic acid amide* and *lysergic acid hydroxyethylamide*, near relatives of *lysergic acid diethylamide*, the chemical name for LSD, also a product of ergot.

We also found the very same hallucinogenic compounds in ergot of the wild grass *Paspalum distichum* from the Mediterranean area. These findings led us to frame the hypothesis that the consciousness-altering component of the *kykeon* involved hallucinogenic compounds similar to those used to this day in the preparation of the sacred *ololuhqui* potion. The Eleusinian priests merely had to collect the ergot of this *Paspalum* species, which surely was very common in the vicinity of the temple, then to pulverize it and add it to the *kykeon* to give it its consciousness-altering potency.

Ergot is the name of the sclerotium of the lower fungus *Claviceps*, which parasitizes grains and also wild grasses like *Paspalum*. The ears of grain infested by the fungus form dark pegs in place of the normally light-colored grains – this is ergot. It is not at all unlikely that ergot would have been used as a sacred drug in the temple of the goddess of grain, Demeter.

A further connection between ergot and Eleusis is shown in an Eleusinian ritual which consisted of the presentation of an ear of grain by the priests. This ritual is related to the myth of the barleycorn, which dies planted in the Earth in order to give life to a new plant which leaps forth again to the light of springtime. Here we find a symbol of the annual rotation of Persephone from the darkness of the underworld to the light of Olympus as well as a symbol of the permanence of life in the eternal cycle of death and rebirth.

The studies leading to the hypothesis of an ergot preparation as the Eleusinian drug were published in a 1978 book, *The Road to Eleusis*.^{*} If the hypothesis that an LSD-like consciousness-altering drug was present in the *kykeon* is correct – and there are good arguments in its favor – then the Eleusinian Mysteries have a relevance for our time in not only a spiritual-existential sense, but also with respect to the question of the controversial use of consciousness-altering compounds to attain mystical insights into the riddle of life.

In the second part of this paper, I will be concerned with the following two questions:

- 1) What was the historic-spiritual function of the Eleusinian Mysteries in Greek antiquity?
- 2) Why and to what extent can the Mysteries serve as a model for our time?

The great importance and long duration of the Mysteries indicate that they answered a profound spiritual necessity, a yearning of the soul. If we adopt the viewpoint of Nietzsche, the Greek spirit was characterized by a divided consciousness of reality from its origin. Greece was the cradle of an experience of reality in which the ego felt itself separated from the exterior world. Here, conscious separation of the individual from the environment developed

^{*}R.G. Wasson, A. Hofmann, & C.A.P. Ruck. 1978. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc.

earlier than in other cultures. This dualistic world view, which the German physician and writer Gottfried Benn has characterized as the *European destiny neurosis*, has figured decisively in the course of European spiritual history, and is still fully operative in the Western world.

An ego that is capable of confronting the exterior world and regarding the world objectively as matter – a spirit capable of objectivizing the external world – was a precondition for the appearance of Western scientific research. This objective world view is evident in even the earliest documents of scientific thought, in the cosmological theories of the Greek pre-Socratic philosophers. The perspective of man in opposition to nature, which has made possible a vigorous domination of nature, was given its first clear philosophical formulation by Descartes in the seventeenth century. Thus, in Europe, a wholly objective, quantitative scientific investigation of nature has developed which has made it possible to explain the physical and chemical laws of the composition of the material world. Its findings also made possible a hitherto non-existent exploitation of nature and her forces. It has led to the industrialization and technification of nearly all aspects of modern life. It has brought a small portion of humankind a level of comfort and material well-being hitherto scarcely imaginable. It has also resulted in the catastrophic destruction of the natural environment, and now has produced a global ecological crisis.

Even more serious than the material consequences is the spiritual damage of this evolution, which has led to a materialistic world view. The individual has lost the connection with the spiritual, divine ground of all being. Unprotected, without shelter, and alone with oneself, the human individual confronts in solitude a soulless, chaotic, materialistic, and menacing universe. The seeds of this dualistic world view, which has manifested itself so catastrophically in our time, were, as previously mentioned, already evident in Greek antiquity. The Greek genius sought the cure, so that the external, material world, under Apollo's protection, could be seen in its sublime beauty. The colorful, joyous, sensual, but also painful Apollonian world was complemented by the Dionysian world of experience, in which the subject/object cleavage was dissolved in ecstatic inebriation.

Nietzsche wrote of the Dionysian world view in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

It is either through the influence of narcotic potions, of which all primitive peoples and races speak in hymns, or through the powerful approach of spring, penetrating all of nature with joy, that those Dionysian stirrings arise, which in their intensification lead the individual to forget himself completely ... Not only does the bond between person and person come to be forged once again by the magic of the Dionysian rite, but alienated, hostile, or subjugated nature again celebrates her reconciliation with her prodigal son, mankind.

The Eleusinian Mysteries were closely connected with the rites and festivities in honor of the god Dionysus. They led essentially to healing, to the transcendence of the division between humankind and nature – one might say to the abolition of the separation between creator and creation. This was the real, greater proposition of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Their historical, cultural significance, their influence on European spiritual history, can scarcely be overestimated. Here, suffering humanity, split by its rational, objective spirit, found healing in a mystical experience of totality that made it possible for the individual to believe in the immortality of an eternal being.

This belief persisted in early Christianity, albeit with different symbols. It is found as a promise in certain passages of the Gospels, most clearly in the *Gospel of John*, Chapter 14:16-20. There, Jesus addresses his disciples as he takes leave of them:

*And I will pray the Father,
and He shall give you another comforter,
that He may abide with you forever in the Truth ...
At that day ye shall know that I am the Father,
and ye in me, and I in you.*

But ecclesiastical Christianity, defined by the duality of creator/creation and with a religiosity estranged from Nature, has completely obliterated the Eleusinian-Dionysian heritage of antiquity. In the Christian sphere of belief, only specially blessed people testify to a timeless, comforting reality attained in spontaneous visionary experience; an experience which untold numbers of people could attain in antiquity through the Eleusinian Initiation. The *unio mystica* of the Catholic saints and the visionary ecstasy described in the writings of Jakob Boehme, Meister Eckhart, Angelus Silesius, Teresa von Avila, Juan de la Cruz, Thomas Traherne, William Blake, and others are obviously closely related to the "enlightenment" attained by the initiates to the Eleusinian Mysteries.

Today the fundamental importance which a mystical experience of totality can have for healing a humanity afflicted by a one-sided, rational, materialistic world view is emphasized not only by adherents to such Eastern religious currents such as Zen Buddhism, but also by leading representatives of psychology and psychiatry. Even more significant is that not just in medicine, but in ever-wider circles of our society, even ecclesiastical circles, overcoming the dualistic world view is considered to be a prerequisite and fundamental step in the healing and spiritual renewal of Occidental civilization and culture.

The official Christian churches, whose dogmas correspond to an expressly dualistic conception of the world, offer little room for such a renewal. Rather, it is private groups and associations who are attempting to satisfy the need

and the longing for an all-encompassing experience of the world appropriate to our present level of knowledge and consciousness. Great numbers of all sorts of workshops and courses in yoga, meditation, and self-encounter are being offered, all with the goal of an alteration or expansion of consciousness. A new direction, transpersonal psychology, has branched off from academic psychiatry and psychology, which are based on a dualistic conception of reality. In this new discipline, various means are sought to aid the individual to attain a healing experience of totality. More and more, individuals seek security and shelter through meditation, pressing onward into deeper levels of experience of reality.

It is no accident that drugs are employed by these groups and in the private sphere as pharmacological aids in the production of altered states of consciousness. And, of course, this involves the same sort of drugs hypothesized at Eleusis and still used by certain Indian tribes. These are the *psychopharmaka* of the hallucinogenic class, which have also been described as *psychedelics* or *entheogens*, whose most important modern representative is LSD. The Greeks used the term *pharmacotheon*, or "divine drug." This sort of psychotropic compound differs from the opiates, such as morphine and heroin, and from such stimulants as cocaine, in that they do not produce addiction and act specifically on human consciousness.

LSD in particular played an important role in the 60s movement, which addressed war and materialism, and whose adherents sought to expand consciousness. As a matter of fact, under specific internal and external conditions, this class of drugs, whether called hallucinogens, psychedelics, or entheogens, is capable of producing a totality experience, the *unio mystica*. Before the use of these substances was prohibited worldwide, this effect was applied in academic psychiatry to assist psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic treatment from the pharmacological side.

A prerequisite for meaningful use and a propitious psychic experience of these compounds – which can be described as Sacred Drugs – is the external environment and the spiritual preparation of those experimenting with them. The Mexican Indians believe that were the LSD-like *ololiuhqui* taken by an impure person, that is, anybody who was not prepared for the ceremony with fasts and prayers, then the drug might provoke insanity or even death. This wise and prudent manner of use, based on millennia of experience, was regrettably not heeded when many members of our society began to use psychedelics. Accordingly, the results sometimes took the form of psychotic breakdowns and severe accidents. In the 1960s, this led to the prohibition of any use of this type of drug, even in formal psychiatry.

In Eleusis, where the preparations and the associated ceremonies were optimal (as is still the case among some Indian groups in Mexico where their

use is still in the control of shamans), this sort of drug found a meaningful and propitious application. From this perspective, Eleusis and these Indian groups can indeed serve as a model for our society.

In conclusion, I wish once more to raise the fundamental question: why were such drugs probably used in Eleusis, and why are they still used by certain Indian tribes even today in the course of religious ceremonies? And why is such use scarcely conceivable in the Christian liturgy, as though it were not significant? The answer is that the Christian liturgy worships a godly power enthroned in heaven, that is a power outside of the individual. At Eleusis, on the contrary, an alteration in the innermost being of the individual was striven for, a visionary experience of the ground of being which converted the subjects into Mystes, Epotetes, Initiates.

Alteration within the individual is again underway today. The requisite transformations in the direction of an all-encompassing consciousness, as a precondition for overcoming materialism and for a renewed relationship with Nature, cannot be relegated to society or to the state. The change must and can only take place in each individual person.

Only a few blessed people spontaneously attain the mystical vision which can affect this transformation. As a result, mankind has repeatedly sought paths and evolved methods to evoke deeper perception and experience. First among these are the different techniques of meditation. Meditation can be assisted by such external means as isolation and solitude, a path the hermits and desert saints followed; and by such physical practices as fasting and breath control. An especially important aid in the induction of mystical-ecstatic states of consciousness, discovered in the earliest times, is decidedly the use of certain plant drugs. In the preceding discussion, I have made it quite clear that their use must proceed within the scope of religious ceremony.

The fact that extraordinary states of awareness can be induced with various means and in various ways shows us that capacity for mystical experience is innate to every person. It is part of the essence of human spirituality. It is unrelated to the external, social status of the individual. Thus, in Eleusis, both free men and women, as well as slaves, could be initiated.

Eleusis can be a model for today. Eleusis-like centers could unite and strengthen the many spiritual currents of our time, all of which have the same goal: the goal of creating, by transforming consciousness in individual people, the conditions for a better world, a world without war and without environmental damage, a world of happy people.

—Translated by Jonathan Ott