

Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui
Orphism and Christianity in Late Antiquity

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Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui

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Ἑλικῶνα μὲν καὶ Κιθαιρῶνα καταλείποντων, οἰκούντων δὲ Σιών
Let them abandon Helicon and Cithæron, and take up their abode in Sion!

(Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 1.2.3)

Preface

Greece and Rome matter because they are related to us. Classics should not be a self-contained realm for the enjoyment of a few, but a source of intellectual, moral and aesthetic inspiration for our own times. And research should not only pursue old questions and open new ones for fellow experts, but should also be able to transmit a deeper and more subtle – even enthusiastic – knowledge of Antiquity, to those approaching classical studies from other disciplines or out of general interest. Thus, this book, stemming from a PhD dissertation, is intended to be accessible not only to classicists and specialists in other areas, but to anyone interested in ancient religion. In order to make it so, I have restricted the use of Greek to a necessary minimum and I have tried to avoid excessive quotation, instead providing the most relevant texts in the Appendices. The introductory chapter seeks to embark upon this sailing ship of Orphism and its related controversies all who have no fear of the voyage. The five chapters that follow are intended to maintain the balance necessary to prevent anyone – either the expert or the general reader – from being tempted to jump ship.

This book deals with issues that have received increasing attention in recent scholarship. General interest in the first centuries of Christianity has spread beyond the confines of academia for a number of reasons – and this has been accompanied by a concomitant curiosity regarding the religions of Antiquity, especially those considered similar to the incipient Christian cult. Ever since its initial scholarly reconstructions in the nineteenth century, Orphism has been prominent among them. Several spectacular finds in the last decades have furthermore brought Orphism to the forefront of studies of ancient religion of the Classical, Hellenistic and Imperial periods.

The present study returns, from a new perspective, to the old question of the relationship between Orphism and Christianity, starting with a study of its form and spheres of influence in Imperial times (Chapters II and III). For the first time, the potential and implications of using the works of the Christian apologists as our primary source for ancient Orphism are fully explored, and the contents (Chapter IV), strategies (V) and perspectives (VI) of their Orphic references assessed. The two main fields of study, always murky, upon which the present work is intended to cast light, are the nature of Orphism within the Greek religious, literary and philosophic context and the

relationship between second- to fifth-century Christian literature and Greek culture and religion. My interest here is focused upon an already-developing Christianity, as it attempts to deepen its interaction with the Greek world that surrounds it without compromising its Jewish roots. This Hellenization of Christianity is not only a crucial development for much of Western history, but also one whose exploration has the potential to cast a certain amount of light backwards and to explain some aspects of the Classical world.

The research methodology is purely philological, inasmuch as it stems from the examination of written evidence. Its results do not depend upon any prior theoretical orientation. The fact that linguistic, sociological or anthropological theoretical models are used at times to clarify various aspects of the study does not mean that the research as a whole is structured by these approaches. This is also the case concerning comparisons with other historical eras, including modern ones: their function – to help with the explication of the texts – is simply instrumental to particular points, and is not aimed at developing some general theory.

The same desire for investigative independence applies also to the analysis of theology and religious experience, both Greek and Christian. Any attempt at absolute objectivity is vain in approaching religion, even more so given the fact that Christianity is a living religion which continues to pervade our culture. Doubtless, my attempts to liberate the analysis of Orphism from the Christian categories through which it has often been approached, careful though they may be, will betray the influence of my own culturally determined schemas. At the very least, however, I have tried to avoid an apologetic approach, which has been and still is the main reason for arbitrary and ungrounded extrapolations with regard to one side or the other. Christianity's similarity to or difference from the other religions of its milieu is not a proof of its truth or falsehood. The days when the study of Christian texts was the exclusive province of those seeking to demonstrate Christianity's truth or the contrary seem, fortunately, to have been left behind. Returning to them, in a more or less concealed way, only implies burdening our research with ideological prejudices. Religious experience and the theological constructs it has generated within both the Greek and Christian contexts – as well as in others – are a psychological and historical reality that, as such, deserves scholarly study. Deciding whether this experience corresponds to an objective reality or not is a question that does not depend on empirical research, but on personal choice.

Neither general nor specific conclusions are intended to be absolutely definitive or beyond doubt. In a murky area such as this, subject to the changes introduced every few years by new discoveries and approaches, re-

search must aspire to offer a tool well adapted to the scientific community's pursuit of an always-partial truth. This study explores areas in which passionate debates have arisen in the last two centuries. My approach to previous works stems from an indisputable axiom that should be welcomed, in principle, by those who dedicate themselves to classics: fools do not abound in our scholarly field. Some results of the present work confirm and develop earlier theories; some explore new perspectives; others refute ideas still widely held. However, as wrong as any hypothesis might seem, we will have to investigate the motivations for mistakes made by researchers whose competence is generally beyond doubt, in order to extract from such hypotheses the truth that mistaken overarching visions might contain. The distortions introduced by modern authors, just like those of ancient ones, also contribute to an understanding of the reality which they are distorting. I hope that possible mistakes in my own work will receive an equally benevolent explanation from future critics.

This book is a revised translation of the original Spanish version, finished in 2006. I have introduced some minor changes in addition to those required by the appearance of new studies in the last three years. I am grateful to the readers and reviewers of the Spanish version, specially Olegario González de Cardedal, Alan Farahani and Thomas Figueira, who pointed out some elements that needed revision and / or updating, and also to the translators for their patient and efficacious work.

The Spanish Ministry of Education and Science has funded my research at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. I am very grateful for its trust. I also owe special gratitude to the Real Colegio de España at Bologna, where I was able to finish this work. I am grateful to Alberto Bernabé, my supervisor in my graduate years, for his constant support, generous work of critical correction, and unfailing openness to different approaches, and to Antonio Piñero, who introduced me to the study of early Christian literature. Discussion with other Spanish researchers on Orphism, associated with the same school of research often from very different perspectives, has been extremely positive on more than one level. I thank, therefore, Antonio Bravo, Francesc Casadesús, Rosa García-Gasco, Ana Isabel Jiménez, Mercedes López-Salvá, Sara Macías, Raquel Martín, Carlos Megino, Francisco Molina, and Marco Antonio Santamaría. I would like to thank Christoph Riedweg for his kind welcome and generous academic supervision in Zurich, just as I would Albert Henrichs and the Real Colegio Complutense at Harvard and Dirk Obbink and Christ Church in Oxford. I would like to thank as well Walter Burkert, Sarah Burges Watson, Giovanni Casadio, Bruno Currie, Renaud Gagné, Carmen Grande, Annewies van der Hoek, Marianne Govers

Hopman, Barbara Kowalzig, Gregory Nagy, Simon Price, and Jean-Michel Roessli for all their suggestions, advice and comments that have contributed to shaping this research and for having freed it from not a few of the errors it originally contained. For those that remain I am solely responsible. To share with all these friends and colleagues the merits of this book is a great honor for me.

Madrid, September 2009

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I. Introduction

1. Orphism and Christianity

Modern interest in the Orphic tradition arose from the perception of its similarities with Christianity, and this is still one of the main reasons for the curiosity that Orphism arouses among scholars of ancient religion. Both are deeply asymmetrical entities that, however, share some apparently common elements, particularly appealing for the contrast these offer with the conventional image of Greek religion. The survival of the soul after death and its reward or punishment in the next world; the devaluation of this *lacrimarum vallis*, as opposed to a transcendent Afterlife; an original state of moral impurity from which only believers are purified; an individual and intimate relation with divinity; the possibility of passing beyond the border between the human and the divine: these notions and others associated with them seem completely inconsistent with the image of the Olympian religion transmitted in the *Iliad*, in Pindar's odes or in Aeschylus' tragedies. There death is an insurmountable boundary, which marks an insuperable distance from the gods. Mortals communicate with the Olympian immortals by means of a public cult, with the declared aim of securing their favour for a life characterised entirely by social and secular aspirations. Two Orphic tablets found in a tomb (*OF* 485–486) say to the deceased, "Now you have died, and now you have been born, thrice blessed one, on this very day." On the other hand, Pindar makes his choir sing in honor of a victor in the Olympic Games, "since death is unavoidable, why spend in vain an anonymous old age sitting in the shade, alien to any kind of glory? No, victory has to be mine!" (*Ol.* 1.82–84). Death is always central in the Greek *Weltanschauung*, always the moment that defines and sets its seal upon the life it terminates. In Orphism, however, death is the beginning of life, and not its end.

The poetic image of Greece, celebrated from Homer to Winkelmann and Nietzsche, is one deeply emblazoned in Western consciousness. In reality, however, this heroic – not to say idealized and biased – image of Greek religion has been constructed partly by a more-or-less conscious opposition to Christianity. Thus the shadow of Orphism, which does not readily conform to the marmoreal patterns of Olympian religion, has inevitably been traced on this template as a kind of Christianity *avant la lettre*, which introduced for

the first time in Greece the dualistic and eschatological notions that were to be developed further in the Hellenistic age, and came finally to dominate the Late Antique religious landscape. This apparent similarity may prompt a heavily distorted view of Orphism, onto which the scholarly tradition has attempted, and sometimes still attempts, to project an under-nuanced interpretation of Christian theology, or, even more dangerously, of Christianity's social structure. In turn, it is just this similarity itself that has often motivated the interest or the scorn of modern scholars – themselves seldom free of prejudice. Some saw in Orphism a process whereby the Greek spirit was being prepared for the reception of the greater Christian truth to come. Alternatively, others saw it as the seed of a Hellenistic spiritual decadence, which would lead eventually to the final disappearance of the Classical spirit. Yet others envisioned it as a kind of Protestant reform of traditional Dionysiac worship. All of these interpretations are informed by the underlying idea that Orphism is a forerunner of Christianity in the Greek world – an idea that, as we shall see, had already been formulated by some ancient writers, and that took root again strongly when nineteenth-century philology focused on Orphism as a subject of study.

It is only a small step, and one very easy to take, from postulating spiritual precedence to supposing historical dependence. Here the study of Orphism is framed within a broader intellectual fashion, the comparison of Christianity with ancient mystery cults. The overwhelming presence of Greek philosophy in the formation of Christian dogma made it appear logical to posit similar processes with regard to ritual and religious experience. The *Religionswissenschaft* of the nineteenth century explored the roots of Christianity with great enthusiasm, and many scholars found them in the mystery religions. But many others contested any direct dependence of the dogmas and central rites of Christianity upon the Greek or Eastern mysteries. Of course ideological *parti pris* on the “uniqueness” of Christianity was more or less explicitly present in these quarrels. The debate was long, complex and brilliant, and outstanding figures like the German scholars Albrecht Dieterich (1913), Richard Reitzenstein (1927³), Wilhelm Bousset (1913), the British anthropologist Sir James Frazer (1913), or the Belgian Franz Cumont (1929), on the first side, and Carl Clemen (1915) or Arthur Darby Nock (1928), on the other, left many contributions which retain a great significance today. While the comparatists showed the manifold coincidences between Christian texts, rites and ideas and those of the mystery cults, the other side developed various methodological lines which sought to underline the differences. Comparativism discovered many analogies and often deduced a more or less direct genealogy: baptism, for instance, would come from initiation rituals, salvation from mystic soteriology, etc. The compara-

tivists' critics, on the other hand, refuted such genetic dependence, arguing from the differences of language and meaning that underlay the superficial resemblances. For example, Clemen established a rigid threefold filter to establish the dependence of a Christian narrative or ritual element upon a pagan one: 1) The Christian element should be inexplicable as an inheritance from Judaism or from Christian practice prior to its appearance. 2) Its similarity with the pagan element from which it is allegedly derived should not be merely superficial, but also concern its import and meaning. 3) The pagan element should exist before Christianity and in geographical proximity to it.¹ Along similar lines but from a refined linguistic approach, Nock denied that the mysteries played any significant role in the New Testament, since the common vocabulary (*myein, kyrios*) had a very different meaning in the Pauline Epistles than in pagan Greek sources.² However, even more than the weight of these arguments, it was the discredit of comparativism after its boldest exaggerations had been refuted that caused its exhaustion until its revindication in our own day along renewed lines³.

The question of "Christianity and mysteries" gradually disappeared from the forefront of scholarship in the second half of the century. The American historian of religions Jonathan Z. Smith published in 1991 a most influential book, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, which showed with great precision what had long constituted a general impression⁴. The old debates on Greek or Eastern influence on Christianity were largely a more or less conscious reflection of traditional Protestant vs. Catholic polemics over whether primitive Christianity had or had not been corrupted by Hellenism. Apologetic concerns about an unscholarly category like "uniqueness" distorted reality in their zeal to show

1 Clemen, though not mentioned by Smith 1991 in his overview of scholarship, is one of the most conspicuous defenders of this restrictive approach, consecrated by Metzger 1955 in a classic, apparently impartial article, where he states that "if any conclusions can be drawn from the preceding considerations of methodology, they must doubtless be, first, that the evidence requires that the investigator maintain a high degree of caution in evaluating the relation between the Mysteries and early Christianity; and, second, that the central doctrines and rites of the primitive Church appear to lack genetic continuity with those of antecedent and contemporary pagan cults."

2 On Nock's arguments, cf. Smith 1991, 66–84. A study of Nock's figure in Casadio 2009.

3 Cf. Patton/Ray 2000, drawing on the seminal study of Smith 1982.

4 On the impact of Smith 1991, cf. the collection of essays in *Numen* 1992. As Elsner 2003 shows, the same old ideological quarrels underlie some categories of the study of art, like the strict divisions among pagan, Jewish and Christian art.

that the influence was either overwhelming or insignificant, and as a result both Christianity and the mysteries were falsified in falsely symmetrical constructions. Their internal complexity and evolution were ignored, and later elements were projected into earlier times, since all that mattered was the (in) adequacy of the mysteries (taken as a single entity) and the diverse Christianities (also taken as a whole) when measured against the same template.

Fortunately, for some decades the study of the ancient mysteries, though still heavily burdened by concepts inherited from these old religious debates, has been in general free of apologetic concerns.⁵ Obviously Christianizing prisms and arbitrary genealogies are avoided, as also is the case with ideological presumptions. Current scholarship generally attributes the majority of the observed parallelisms between the mysteries and Christian practice to their common origin in the spiritual *koinē* that began to emerge in the Mediterranean in the second century BC, rather than to a sole and direct dependence of the latter upon the former or viceversa. Parallel religious situations produce analogous processes that do not imply borrowing, but shared concerns. For example, Hellenistic religions were deeply permeated by popularized Platonism. The aspiration to salvation through union with a divine entity and to moral and ritual purity found in both the Hellenistic mysteries and Christianity arises contemporaneously from the post-Classical individualistic, universalizing, and syncretistic climate portrayed so vividly in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*. Even the Hellenistic Judaism from which Christianity was eventually to emerge is permeated by this new spirituality, in which all religions of the time participated to some extent – but most especially those that arose from its ferment.⁶

The particular case of Orphism can only be understood within this general framework, for in its case the comparison with Christianity has been the backbone of its study for in its case. It is a clear instance of the enormous weight that ancient religious quarrels and national scholarly traditions have in shaping the terms of the question. Christian August Lobeck is generally – and dubiously – acclaimed as the first modern scholar of Orphism⁷. His monu-

5 Among modern studies on the mystery cults, I will refer foremost to Burkert 1979 and 1987, Versnel 1990, Price 1999, and Bremmer 2002.

6 On this spiritual *koinē*, cf. Versnel 1990, Trombley 1993. Cf. Hengel 1975 on Hellenistic Judaism. Projecting this environment onto the mysteries of Classical times, such as Eleusis, must be avoided. Burkert 1987 and Price 1999, 108–125 advise against viewing traditional mysteries as entirely oriented towards eschatology, an understanding derived from wrongly projecting onto them a combination of Christian soteriology, the practices of later mystery cults and even the Orphic model.

7 Not only did he follow G. Hermann's edition of *Orphica* (1805) and earlier Ger-

mental *Aglaophamus sive de theologiae mysticae graecorum causis libri tres* (1829) is in fact heir to a long previous Protestant tradition of opposing Greek mysteries as irrational cults similar to Roman Catholic practice. It is in such terms that he portrays the *Orphica*. Orphic priests are explicitly compared to the Jesuits as apostles of a superstition that he condemns as pure phantasy devoid of any true mysticism⁸. Half a century later, Friedrich Nietzsche in his *Birth of Tragedy* and other works envisaged Orphism as a reformation of the true Dionysiac spirit, a forerunner of Christianity like Socrates, responsible for the decadence of the primitive tragic Greece⁹. Others held the same view from the opposite perspective, whereby Orphism was an imperfect precedent of the more advanced religion that was to come. Such was the opinion of the famous French writer Ernest Renan¹⁰. Eduard Zeller also, the great historian of Greek philosophy, saw in Orphism, as well as in the Essenes, “the prehistory of Christianity.” At the turn of the century, German scholars like Erwin Rohde, Ernst Maass, Albert Dieterich, Otto Gruppe and Robert Eisler¹¹; the Cambridge ritualist school led by Jane Harrison – who called Orpheus “a reformer, a protestant” and said that the “blood of some real martyr may have been the seed of the new Orphic Church”;¹² and also, with less depth and

man scholarship (cf. following note), but he also must have known N. Fréret’s learned commentaries on the Orphics in his study of 1740, “Histoire du culte de Bacchus” (*Histoire de l’Académie royale des inscriptions*, 23, 1756, a reference for which I am indebted to Renaud Gagné). On French eighteenth-century scholarship on Orphism, cf. Juden 1971, 66–98. Nineteenth-century German classical philology created its own *protoi heurētai*, and these fixed images still survive (cf. the introduction of Grafton and Most 1989 to the *Prolegomena* of F. A. Wolf).

- 8 Lobeck 1829, 964. Cf. Gagné 2008, 112f, who shows that Lobeck echoes earlier Protestant scholarship like J. H. Feustking’s *Gynaeceum haeretico-fanaticum* (1704) and J. Lomeier’s *De Lustrationibus* (1681). Lobeck’s rationalistic approach attacks symbolist and romantic visions of “Orphic wisdom” like those of A. C. Eschenbach in his *Epigenes* (1702, reedited and augmented by M. Gesner in 1764) and G. F. Creuzer in his *Symbolik* (1810).
- 9 On Nietzsche and Orphism, cf. Biebuyk, Pratel, Van den Poel 2004; McGahey 1994, 51–74; Aulich 1998.
- 10 Renan 1866, 338: “l’orphisme, les mystères, avaient tenté la même chose dans le monde grec, sans réussir d’une manière durable”. Arguing against Renan’s downplaying of Greek ancient religion, the French professor Jules Girard dedicated an influential book (1879) to proving that the most spiritual traits of Christianity could already be found in Orphism (pp. 6–9).
- 11 Zeller 1889; Maass 1895; Rohde 1907⁴; Gruppe 1906; Dieterich 1913; Eisler 1921 and 1925.
- 12 Harrison 1922³, 461, 468. The influence of Frazer’s *Goulden Bough* and Robertson Smith’s *Lectures* on her vision of Orphic “sacramentalism,” was also large (cf. p. 270f). Many less scholarly but equally famous books of that time share

rigor but even greater imagination and popularity, the French universal comparatist Salomon Reinach.¹³ they all saw in Orphism the proximate source of several ideological, moral and ritual elements later absorbed by the Christians. Though the majority of their hypotheses have been disproved, or at least modified, by subsequent scholarship, the works of these path-breaking scholars are not devoid of interest to the modern reader. They created the classical image of Orphism. Projecting the Christian model onto it, they posited a network of Orphic communities who read the Orphic poems as sacred texts, who celebrated rituals commemorating the sacrifice of Dionysus, and who held uniform practices and religious beliefs. The influence of such portrayals is still largely perceptible.

Other scholars went even further, and purported to find in Orphism the source of the central dogmas of Christian theology. The Italian Professor Vittorio Macchioro expressed this theory in its most radical form in several works, which attained great popularity in the twenties thanks to their clarity and audacity, and which remain as the most extreme statements of the theory of “Pan-orphism.” In Macchioro’s view, St. Paul was the actual creator of the Christian theology whereby the Son of God dies for the sins of mortals and through His resurrection gains for them the promise of eternal life. This conception would be a straightforward transplantation of the Orphic myth according to which Dionysus, son of Zeus, died and was resurrected, to become the guarantor of the salvation of mortals – descendants of the Titans who sacrificed him. Christ’s theological character is, according to Macchioro, the direct result of the transposition of the Orphic Dionysus into Biblical categories, and the system of Christian salvation stems directly from the Orphic one. Other scholars, like the French liberal priest Alfred Loisy, were heavily influenced by this portrait.¹⁴

such conceptions e. g. the much-reprinted English work by Legge (1915) on the *Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity* dedicates a whole chapter to the *Orphici*.

- 13 Reinach was particularly fascinated by the pretended parallelism of Christianity and Orphism. He entitled his general history of religions *Orphée* (1909), and he published an article, “La mort d’Orphée” (1902), where he derived the Christian Eucharist from Orphic sacrifice, which had enormous influence on Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (cf. p. 270) Cf. Duchêne’s introduction to a reedition of his selected articles (1996). In an article understandably not included in that selection, “Morale orphique et morale chrétienne”, Reinach argues for their symmetry from the idea that both would forbid masturbation, and goes on to draw the following conclusion: “ce tabou n’existe pas chez les singes et existe fort peu chez les nègres; c’est peut-être pourquoi les singes sont restés des singes et la plupart des nègres leurs cousins germains” (1923 III, 279).
- 14 Macchioro 1922 and 1930; Loisy 1919 (on whom Reinach’s influence is also clear). Macchioro’s works and influence are analysed by Graf-Johnston 2007, 58–61.

To Macchioro's claims, the most conclusive – and, being devoid of apologetic interest, the most objective – response was that provided in 1925 by André Boulanger, one of the most sensible and qualified experts in Greek religion of his time. The French professor demonstrated, with arguments that remain valid today, that Macchioro's theory, besides presenting a much-distorted image of Orphism, did not meet any of the aforementioned conditions enunciated by Clemen. Dionysus's sacrifice is not voluntary and does not bring redemption, but is precisely the crime that condemns mankind. In addition, Boulanger demonstrates the very low probability of any direct Orphic influence upon Paul, given the very slight evidence we have of Orphism's presence in the first century and the lack of any trace in the New Testament.¹⁵ Boulanger's work succeeded in refuting Macchioro over the long term, and though the Italian scholar still published a well-known English version of his writings in 1930 under the programmatic title *From Orpheus to Paul: A History of Orphism*, this path was abandoned.¹⁶ The question of Christianity and Orphism has not been directly posed again, though its shadow is always present in the scholarly discussion. Once the question of direct influence seemed out of place, attention turned elsewhere.

Boulanger's work preceded by only a few years, and to some extent heralded, the sceptical reaction that would shortly place in doubt the very existence of Orphism – and that would cause its disappearance from academic literature for almost forty years. The main cause of "Orphic-scepticism" then and now, in fact, is a thorough rejection of these early attempts to extrapolate Christian elements into a reconstructed "Orphism." The champions of the reaction – Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, André-Jean Festugière, Ivan Linforth, and Eric Robertson Dodds – protested justifiably against arbitrary visions of an "Orphic Church," complete with communities, dogmas and common rites for which there were no literary witnesses, and which was accordingly best explained as a result of the semi-conscious projection of a template derived from primitive Christianity onto a subject area in which little hard evidence existed.¹⁷ But the sceptics themselves were not

15 Boulanger 1925. The only proof adduced by Macchioro that Boulanger does not discuss, and that leaves open the possibility that Paul knew the myth directly, is a speech to the people of Tarsus in which Dio Chrysostom (*Or.* 33. 2–4) mentions a cult to the Titans that might (or not) be linked to the myth. Cf. pp. 329ff regarding parallels and differences between the Orphic Dionysus and Christ.

16 Guthrie 1935, for instance, makes little use of Macchioro and confines the question of Christianity to a few cautious pages at the end of his book. Boulanger's arguments were revived, against Loisy, by Father M.-J. Lagrange 1937, 191–222.

17 Wilamowitz 1931, Festugière 1935, Linforth 1941, Dodds 1951, for whom the

entirely objective: if they were ready to criticize “the unconscious projections upon the screen of Antiquity of certain unsatisfied religious longings characteristic of the late 19th and early 20th centuries” (Dodds 1951, 148) in the classical reconstruction of Orphism, they were not themselves free of their own religious agendas. Repugnance for elements that might stain a pure and idealized, Winkelmanian view of Classical Greece is clearly detectable in Wilamowitz or Linforth. On the other hand, Father Festugière, the pride of Jesuit scholarship, was all too ready to reject the idea of pagan precedents for Christian beliefs and rituals. Finally, a certain Protestant vision of a “Puritan” reform of ritual religion can still be traced in the work of Dodds, who also accepted some other key postulates of previous scholarship, like Dionysiac sacramentalism and Orphic original sin.¹⁸

Since the 1960s, new discoveries have returned Orphism to a central place in studies of Greek religion and philosophy, and the topic has since been freed of its crudest deformations. I will shortly be returning to the question of what precisely is to be understood by the term “Orphism.” For the present it is sufficient to point out that recent studies do not take its historical relationship to Christianity as their central concern. Rather, they are concerned with a phenomenological comparison between religions of salvation intended to illuminate aspects of both, and refrain as far as possible from excessive extrapolation. Mutual borrowing and syncretism are plausible in some contexts of direct contact, but these sporadic assimilations are better explained as a result (rather than as the cause) of the typological affinities between them, as we shall see at the end of the present study. The prevailing principle healthily tries to focus more on analogies among diverse elements than upon establishing a dubious genealogy between them.¹⁹

It is now necessary to take up again the question of the relationship between Orphism and Christianity, which has been at a standstill since the 1930s. Several studies dealing with related matters have referred tangentially to the

Orphic Church was a “historic mirage emerging from our own unconscious projection of our own worries into the remote past” (170, n.88). An epigone of these four great scholars was the French scholar L. Moulinier (1955).

18 Cf. Parker 1995, 505, n. 20 on Linforth; Bremmer 2002, 18, on Dodds; Dodds himself sometimes falls into the same mistaken Christianization he denounces: he speaks of “Orphic apocalypses” to refer to the *katabasis* (1951, 170); for his Eucharistic conception of Dionysian omophagy, cf. p. 270.

19 Cf. for example Bianchi 1966. The debate among several scholars following the exposition of Burkert 1977 includes very accurate observations in this respect.

subject, with brilliant results²⁰. The question, however, has not been directly tackled again, as if the lack of any new approach had made researchers afraid of simply repeating well-known topics, or of falling into the same mistakes as their predecessors. A part of the resistance to dealing with the question arises, furthermore, from the vagueness of the terms concerned. This work attempts to avoid both problems by fixing clearly the limits of the questions it poses and the testimonies it uses to discuss them. Its central concern is to study the Orphic tradition that Christians knew, assumed, or rejected in the first five centuries of our era. This raises some new questions and provides some heretofore neglected sources for understanding what Orphism was in Antiquity. The problem of influence has been left to the end, as a validation of what the new approaches can contribute to old questions.

The scope and definition of the various terms involved in such an investigation will be discussed in this chapter. First, however, it is necessary to observe that neither “Christianity” nor “Orphism” are immutable and self-contained realities – despite the tendency of the apologists and their many modern scholarly descendants to present them in this light. Both possess considerable fluidity within their temporal, spatial, and ideological limits. The Orphism contemporary with Christianity is different from that of the Classical period, though of course, lines of continuity between the two can be traced. Moreover, Orphism overlaps with several philosophical, literary, and religious traditions, through which it coincides with Christianity in the Hellenistic spiritual *koinē* as a whole, far removed from any uniform orthodoxy. Chapters II and III will accordingly describe, on the basis of the available literary, epigraphic, papyrological and iconographic material, the character of the Orphic tradition in the Imperial age and the nature of its direct and indirect encounters with Christianity. These chapters, therefore, will depict a very fluid panorama, in which sections are instrumental for presenting the evidence but by no means closed compartments.

Such is the context within which several Christian authors of the second to fifth centuries AD make their multiple references to Orphism. Chapters IV, V and VI, on the other hand, will depart from the strict distinctions introduced by apologetic texts. The description of Orphism detailed in the

The methodological cautions of Smith 1991 are also applicable to the particular case of Orphism (cf. Edmonds 2004, 37–46).

20 Riedweg 1993 on Orphic-Jewish literature, transmitted almost entirely by Christian sources; Bremmer 2002 studies the lines of continuity between Christian and Orphic eschatology, and Burkert 1987 refers on several occasions to the similarities and differences in religious experience; the Jewish and Christian iconographic appropriation of Orpheus has fuelled academic debate for more than a century (cf. III).

first part of the book serves as a counterpoint and yardstick for the Christian texts that are studied in the second. In previous works, the near-exclusive attention paid to the question of Orphic influence on the central tenets of Christianity naturally demanded an overwhelming focus on the New Testament – and in particular upon the Pauline texts, in which any passing reference to Orphism is undetectable²¹. The attention paid to subsequent Christian authors, however – whose contact with Greek culture and religion is much more intense than that of the previous generation, and who confront a movement toward which they show ambiguous and mixed reactions – has been much less. Yet these texts are fundamental to understanding not only the Orphism of the Imperial age, but also that of the Classical period, on three levels.

First, much of the material that we have for the reconstruction of Orphism – very considerable in its quantity, and of great importance for its quality – comes from Christian sources: it is enough to look at the *index fontium* of the editions of Orphica. However, this material must not be used without first analysing the sources, intentions, and manipulations of the author who transmits it, since the apologetic literature is anything other than innocent and neutral. Crucial testimonies (such as Dionysus's sacrifice as reported by Clement of Alexandria) have been excerpted from Christian sources without adequate account being taken of their origin, or of the alterations the text may have suffered in the hands of these authors. Sometimes related apologetic passages are treated as independent testimonies, when in fact they have been derived directly from each other in such a way that these apparently numerous witnesses in reality can be seen to resolve ultimately into a single source. Other times, Christian texts have failed to receive the attention they deserve, and evidence that might help us add to or piece together the Orphic puzzle has been overlooked. Chapter IV will deal with these tasks.

Secondly, the analysis of the sources and contents of the Christian texts offers the materials to undertake an indispensable task: a systematic exposition of their strategies. This aspect of the study has, besides its direct usefulness for the analysis of the Orphic evidence, its own inherent value: Orphism is an excellent mirror within which the diverse Christian attitudes toward traditional Greek religion and culture are reflected. Chapter V thus amounts almost to a study in miniature of the Christian strategy in confrontation with the pagan world: it will show how different apologists act when confronted with

21 Cf. n. 15. The attempt by Ehrhardt 1951 to find an Orphic source in Paul on the basis of his mention of victory crowns (a very extended Greek notion) is clearly wrong and has had no success: Pfitzner 1967, 86f; Brändl 2006, 6, 231.

the same phenomenon – sometimes in unison and at other times with total divergence, spanning a range of attitudes that runs from total assimilation of Orphism to its most absolute rejection. It is not exceptional that both attitudes and diverse intermediate possibilities coexist in one single author. If Orphism is a flexible and often ungraspable category within the extremely fluid field of Greek religion, apologetics likes neat distinctions and firm boundaries: their mutual encounter provokes extremely interesting results. In modern bibliography, one frequently finds more or less accurate generalizations about a subject as ambiguous and diverse as the Christian reception of Greek culture.²² Orphism presents itself as a simplified testing-ground for research in this area, while remaining at the same time a topic broad enough to bring together and mobilize an array of characteristic Christian strategies that have to a large extent determined its transmission and reception up to our days.

Thirdly, the apologists²³ are an extremely authoritative source – if obviously a subjective and partial one – regarding the contested question of the similarities and differences between Orphism and Christianity. The perceptions of Christians themselves regarding which aspects of a living tradition in direct competition with their own were similar to or different from their practice – or which elements could be considered compatible with Christian teaching, and which were to be rejected out of hand – should be a guide of great value, if not of absolute accuracy, in reconsidering the question. Scant attention has been paid to the opinions of the Christians concerning whether, and to what extent, Orphism might be considered a proto-Christianity. Of course, the apologists will be the first to project Christian categories onto an Orphism defined by quite different parameters – and it is from these original projections that many of the modern ones are derived. Once conscious of this danger, however, and of the necessity of “de-Christianizing” the information they provide, direct interrogation of these authors’ works throws new light on the theological content and religious experience of Orphism. If an external assessment of a phenomenon necessarily distorts it to some extent, it may also be valuable for the new perspectives it is capable of opening up – perspectives which must be taken into account, and which have the potential to reveal points of detail and differentiation imperceptible from a purely internal viewpoint. This task will be attempted in chapter VI.

22 Among reference works on the topic, cf. particularly Jäger 1961, Daniélou 1961, Chadwick 1966, Wolfson 1970, Lane Fox 1986, Momigliano 1987, Stead 1995, Burkert 1996, Fitzgerald *et al.* 2003.

23 For the scope of this term I refer the reader to the beginning of Chapter IV.

2. -isms and their subjects: Christians, Pagans, “Orphics”

From its title through to its final chapter, this book uses a number of terms whose interpretation is not uncontroversial, and it should, therefore, be clarified from the beginning in which sense they are to be understood. The use of abstractions in order to understand better the phenomena under discussion is an entirely valid scholarly strategy. An extreme deconstructionism that leads us not to nuance our understanding of general terms, but rather to entirely deny their validity, sometimes simply paralyzes. It is also true, however, that abstract concepts, even as they organize the realities they denote, throw light upon some areas and leave others in darkness. There is also a degree of risk in the mutability of labels, which have the potential to shift in meaning depending upon who is using them, and when. If, however, some consensus can be forged concerning the basic meaning of terms in scholarly discourse, these dangers are minimized, and the advantage of such terms' use becomes obvious. This need is especially urgent in relation to our topic: to the question “What is Orphism?” some scholars have answered “everything,” and others have decided it is “nothing.” Echoing Sieyès, it would perhaps be better to find “something” in it that turns it into a useful concept.

A second danger is that of being carried away by the linguistic mechanism of supplying every identified ‘-ism’ with a group of followers usefully denoted by the suffix ‘-ist’ or its equivalent. One must avoid the comfortable symmetry of assuming for the sake of apparent consistency that there is a regular relationship between any abstract ideology and its followers and adherents. It is clear that to be a communist and to be a classicist are not existential choices of the same order. A similar disproportion can be found in relation to ancient Mithraism, Orphism, or Hermeticism – which, as we shall see, do not all define their followers in the same manner. It will accordingly be necessary to address also the problem of the so-called “Orphics.”

It is, however, desirable to extend the debate on the various -isms of antiquity no further than necessary. Some of these can be easily dismissed in favour of an obviously preferable alternative: for example, I will not use “Dionysism” because the expression “cult of Dionysus” expresses the reality in a much more concrete manner. Other terms, such as “Judaism” or “Gnosticism,” are taken in a general sense long sanctioned by academic tradition, and there is no cause to question them here, where they are not the core of the study. It will be sufficient to specify in what sense I use the three terms most fundamental to this inquiry: Christianity, paganism and, in particular, Orphism.

The mere contraposition of “Christianity” and “paganism” should arouse a certain fear in the breast of the experienced reader. The religious situation

of the Roman Empire was of such fluidity that any classification in terms of narrowly defined compartments betrays a bookish artificiality that hardly corresponds to the reality. The boundaries among orthodox Christianity, heretical and heterodox movements, the various branches of Judaism, the Gnostic movements, and the diverse array of Greek and Eastern cults were highly permeable. To say “Christianity” without further ado simplifies this complexity excessively. When theological ideas of Christian derivation are discussed, it is always necessary to indicate who it is that asserts or defends them, and when. Nevertheless, precisely because I am concerned not with the theological propositions made in Christian literature, but with its apologetic content and with the strategies this entails, the classification of the authors I will be discussing as “Christians” without further ado is here well warranted. For the purposes of this study, inquiry is focused not upon questions concerning orthodoxy or the Church as a whole, but on those thinkers whose writings on Orphism remain extant. A fundamental aim of the apologetic literature is to delimit clearly what Christianity is and what it is not. If we were to judge these authors by their theological ideas, the conception of Christianity would change according to each one. Some of the authors we are interested in were considered heretics by their contemporaries (for instance Tatian, Tertullian, and Hippolytus), while others supported ideas rejected by later orthodox belief (Origen). All of them, however, share the intention of establishing, in a free-flowing reality, a fixed and clear boundary between Christian truth (according to the more or less orthodox conception of each author) and “pagan” error.

The use of the latter term is the lesser evil. It is true that “paganism” is a construction of apologetics, whereby the term is employed to designate anything that is neither Christian nor Jewish, nor even heretical – in general terms, then, the traditional Greek and Roman religions and the new cults that had arisen in the Hellenistic age. “Paganism,” in other words, denotes a variety of cults and trends that seem too heterogeneous to be adequately comprehended under a common term. We will see in Chapter V the central role that the Orphic tradition played in the creation of this concept by the apologists. Attention will also be paid to the role of Orphism in the syncretic and unifying tendencies seen in the traditional Greek and Roman religions themselves – tendencies which accelerate in the Imperial age, in part because of gathering resistance to Christianity. In any case, the term “pagan” is inherently biased, as it is an entirely Christian formulation. But its use, if the negative undertones it may have had in the past are set aside, remains much simpler than the lengthy periphrases that would be necessary were it banished – e.g. “an adherent of any non-Jewish, non-Christian sect in the

Greco-Roman world.” Other terms used by the Christians themselves, such as “Gentile” or “Greek,” are if anything even more biased. Once note has been taken that the notion of “paganism” is a late artifact of apologetic rhetoric, there is no excessive risk in using the terms “paganism” and “pagans,” and qualifying these more precisely where necessary.

Nevertheless, such reductive terminology is far less appropriate with regard to the problem of Orphism, concerning which, for over a century now, there has raged one of the most impassioned debates in the history of Classical Studies, almost comparable to the Homeric Question in its intensity and duration. As was explained in the previous section, only its relation to Christianity brought forth a long and intense debate between scholars of many different countries and orientations. Before explaining in what sense I think the term may be used appropriately, it will be necessary to dedicate a few paragraphs to the succinct exploration of the traditional understanding of the term “Orphism,” and some of the issues that surround it.

In its nineteenth-century reconstruction, Orphism²⁴ emerged as a religious movement born in the sixth century BC under the authority of the mythical singer Orpheus. It is supposed to have arisen as a reform of the traditional cult of Dionysus, whose orgiastic and ecstatic aspects would have been redefined by a minority group in mystical and eschatological terms. This trend is held to introduce for the first time in Greece the idea that the soul is enclosed in the body as punishment for a primordial fault – specifically, the crime committed by the Titans, the ancestors of mortals, when they tore to pieces and devoured Dionysus, son of the supreme god Zeus and Persephone. As a result, the soul is condemned to suffer a cycle of reincarnations from body into body, as well as torments in the Afterlife, until it expiates its ancient fault and can thereby enjoy the happy everlasting life to which its immortal nature aspires. Salvation is achieved by obtaining Persephone’s forgiveness through participation in the Bacchic rites (*teletai*) and the observance of conduct that assures purification: an Orphic life (*orphikos bios*) demands – in addition to some imprecise references to justice – observance of a series of dietetic and clothing taboos, including, most importantly, a strict vegetarianism derived from the belief in reincarnation. The followers of this doctrine, transmitted in poems attributed to Orpheus, who practise the rites supposedly founded by him, and who observe an Orphic lifestyle, might thus be termed “Orphics.”

24 The term “Orphism”, only sporadically attested in the first half of the nineteenth century (e. g. E. G. Faber, *Horae Mosaicae*, 1818, 203), becomes very popular in the second half, when scholarship progressively abandons the cautious Latin *Orphica*.

Leaving aside the excesses of pan-Orphism, which have been previously discussed, such a reconstruction remains the classic image of Orphism that, with a number of variations, remains current today. It is based on extant fragments of Orphic poetry and on the information about Orpheus and his rites transmitted by diverse authors in Antiquity. There is also some papyrological and epigraphic evidence associated with these references – in particular, the gold tablets found in tombs that instruct the soul in how to reach salvation in the Afterlife. All these pieces of evidence have been collected in the last two centuries in various philological editions of *Orphica*, which, very different though they are, have all departed from the picture of Orphism described above, and they have contributed to fixing it in place by transmitting the remains of an Orphic corpus that, it is implied, would have been much broader.²⁵ The most careful and balanced portrait of the classical reconstruction of Orphism is owed to W. K. C. Guthrie, whose *Orpheus and Greek Religion* continues to be widely read, translated and influential today²⁶.

Against this reconstruction, the aforementioned “Orpheosceptical” reaction arose – and still retains its credibility in Anglo-Saxon and German circles. Apart from denouncing the projection of Christian categories, as we have seen, its main arguments were two.²⁷ First, there is no proof of the existence of any religious group known as the “Orphics” in the Classical period. The only witnesses who use the term *orphikoi* to refer not to Orphic poets, but to believers who describe their religious affiliation in these terms, are the Neoplatonists, who suppose these beliefs to have inspired Plato; and this is clearly no proof of their existence one thousand years earlier.²⁸ Second, it is maintained that under the label of “Orphism” scholars have gathered into a single artificial *constructum* a series of late testimonies of Orphic

25 *Orphica* have been edited by Hermann (1805); Lobeck (1829); Abel (1885); Kern (1922) and now Bernabé (2004–2006), whose Teubner edition includes all the new testimonies and reorders Kern’s fragments. Cf. Edmonds 2008 for a critique of the way in which editors of fragments impose their interpretation as a system.

26 Guthrie 1935 (=1952²). Cf. the preface of L. J. Alderink to the English re-edition (1993). Guthrie’s moderation compared to his predecessors may have come from the influence of A. D. Nock, which is repeatedly acknowledged (1952, 271ff): Nock is very cautious about Orphism in all his works. The long article by Nilsson 1935 also offers a balanced approach.

27 Cf. n. 17 for the early sceptics. More recently, see also West 1983, Brisson 1992, and now Edmonds 1999 and 2004, pp. 37–46.

28 Representative of this sceptical view is the dismissive observation of Wilamowitz (1931 II, 197): “Die Moderne reden so entsetzlich viel über die Orphiker. Wer macht das in Altertum?”. The Olbia inscription (*OF* 463) was discovered only thirty years ago.

poems; theological and anthropological ideas, whether of general circulation or derived from Plato, arising in Hellenistic times, or even in Christian and Neoplatonic writings; and a number of ritual rules associated with the name of Orpheus, but with nothing to indicate that they are intended to form a coherent system. In the sceptical view, there is in fact no Orphic reality separable from such well-known and documented phenomena as Pythagoreanism, the cult of Dionysus, or the Eleusinian mysteries, with which the figure of Orpheus has sometimes been linked. A vague and inconsistent relationship with some particular mythical character is not sufficient to give unity to all the material claimed for it. Taken at face value, as the most penetrating of the sceptics observed, the contemporary reconstruction of Orphism would appear to subsume “the entire religion of teletae and mysteries.”²⁹ The label, it was felt, was so general that it had become empty of meaning, and ought to be abolished.

This abolition was in fact achieved for almost four decades, until new discoveries in the second half of the century disproved some of the sceptical theses. The *Derveni Papyrus* – a document serendipitously preserved when it fell off a funeral pyre and was dried rather than consumed by the flames – demonstrates the existence in the Classical period of Orphic theogonies evidently taken as authoritative in connection with mystery rituals. Newly discovered gold tablets reveal a perceived connection between hopes for the happiness of the soul in the Afterlife and the Bacchic mysteries. A bone tablet found in Olbia (Crimea) with the inscription ΟΡΦΙΚΟΙ seems to testify to the existence of a Dionysian thiasus of Orphics in the fifth century BC. All this new evidence shifted scholarly trends. The endorsement of Walter Burkert and his followers, along with the Italian school of historians of religion and lately the Spanish school formed around Alberto Bernabé’s edition, has restored “Orphism” as a respectable and academically accepted term.³⁰

Apart from the new evidence, new approaches replaced dogma and Christianity as the main focus of scholarly interest in religion. Social questions were asked where the influence of Marxism, of 1968, or of post-colonial anthropology was evident. Orphism was now interesting not as a forerunner of Christianity, but as a protest movement of deviation, repressed by a monolithic polis. The Parisian school has been particularly incisive in this approach³¹. Neither has the long tradition of oralist approaches to early

29 See the whole citation in n. 37 below.

30 Cf. Burkert 1977, 1982, 1999; Riedweg 1987, 1993; Graf 1974, Graf-Johnston 2007; Sabbatucci 1965; Bianchi 1974; Casadio 1997; Bernabé-Casadesús 2008.

31 Detienne 1975 and 1977.

Greek poetry in the United States left the Orphic material untouched: notions like “competing traditions” and “performance” have made a startling appearance in the old discussions.³² However, if such perspectives have found new interest in Orphism, there have also been forceful reactions against its coming back onto the stage. On the one hand, traditional philology proudly maintains a purist distrust of any construction that does not spring directly from the text, preferably a written one.³³ On the opposite side of the picture, the post-modern taste for deconstruction recovered the sceptical arguments in order to fight against an “–ism” instinctively seen as a distorting modern construct.³⁴ To be sure, the debate is not focused on just one matter, whether Orphism existed or not. There are many different interpretations of each set of evidence (the gold leaves, the myth of the Titans, the reconstruction of the theogonies, etc.). Yet each position on any of these subjects relies heavily on a particular approach to the broader Orphic question.³⁵

The use of the term “Orphism” has, therefore, become popular again, if with widely varying interpretations and with much greater nuance than before. Terminology has been refined, and comparisons are made with extreme care. The overlap of Orphism with Dionysiac cult, the Eleusinian mysteries, and Pythagoreanism is insistently underlined, as is the lack of any central governing authority that defined doctrine or ritual practice. Emphasis is placed on the open, uncanonical character of Orphic literature, the itinerant diffusion of Orphic cults, and their evolution under the influence of individual and local circumstances and interests.

Too often, however, this praiseworthy insistence on methodological rigour is confined to prologues and introductions, and is shortly abandoned in favour of again discussing Orphism as though it were a coherent system into which all our scattered pieces of evidence may neatly be fitted, as if a central authority, whose existence is emphatically denied, had disposed them somehow – the very image of Orphics living an Orphic life and performing a few standardized rituals in accordance with doctrines transmitted by the Orphic poems seems to exert an irresistible fascination on the scholarly imagination, not least due to the preexistent Christianizing pattern according to which the Orphic evidence is semiconsciously classified. I cannot pretend to be entirely free from this fault, so congenital to the scholars of Orphism, and it is possi-

32 Nagy 2001, Martin 2001.

33 West 1983.

34 Edmonds has raised the loudest protests against the recovery of Orphism as a valid category (1999, 2004, 37–46, 2008). Cf. also the objections of Calame 2001.

35 Parker 1995 presents a good state of the question on “Early Orphism”. Cf. Bernabé-Casadesús 2008 for a complete bibliography.

ble that an attentive reading of this book will detect several stumbles into the old traps. Nonetheless, I hope at least to delineate clearly herein the distinction between my ideas of Orphism and either its traditional reconstruction or pure scepticism.³⁶ I will, in other words, attempt to outline as simply as possible what I consider to be the most plausible path between an *ars nesciendi* that refuses to elaborate the data in order to render them comprehensible and a comfortable adherence to a long-falsified construction.

Three previous warnings, however, are relevant here. First, the following reflections do not attempt to collect and analyze the entire corpus of evidence, but only to justify the use of terms foundational to this study – although they do provide a preliminary sketch of the portrait that will be developed in the following chapters. Second, I will be dealing now only with the Orphism of the Classical period, reserving discussion of its evolution as a tradition in the Hellenistic and Imperial age for later in the book. Third, it will be necessary for the sake of clarity to discuss first the nature of Orphic myths and ideas, deferring for the moment consideration of the existence of the Orphics, more tied to the problem of the rites.

I begin by accepting the minimal definition at which Linforth arrived after an exhaustive examination of the material known in 1941: Orphism is the theology of the mysteries.³⁷ However, this broadness of reference, which for the American philologist was proof of the term's uselessness, is instead taken here as indicating its centrality as a spiritual and intellectual phenomenon in Classical Greece – and hence in Western culture. To borrow Ugo Bianchi's expression (1978), Orphism represents the earliest stage of Greek mysteriosophy. It is the theological elaboration of the mythical and ritual elements, as well as of the experience, of the traditional Greek mysteries: an intellectual process, which finds its expression in poems, rites and beliefs governed by this speculation. It is a mediate theorizing of immediate experience, which does not fall like a meteor upon traditional Greek religion, but arises from it as a strange but natural fruit. That the mystery cults of the Classical period were focused primarily not on doctrinal content, nor even upon eschatological hope, but on the experience that the special relation-

36 The following reflections are heavily indebted to long debates with Alberto Bernabé and Renaud Gagné.

37 Linforth 1941, 173: "If we must call something Orphism, it must be the entire religion of teletae and mysteries with their magical ritual, the poems of Orpheus and others in which their sacred myths are told, and the ideas concerning god and man which were inherent in poems and ritual. The ancients did not call this religion Orphism, but they said what is in effect the same thing, in the Greek manner, when they said that Orpheus was the inventor and founder of it".

ship to the worshipped god prompted *hic et nunc*, is well established in the secondary literature (e.g. Burkert 1987). It is evident, however, that some of the initiators, and perhaps also those to be initiated, turned their minds not only to consideration of the ritual acts themselves, but to theological and anthropological questions perceived to be implicit in them. It is important to bear in mind the spatial and temporal coincidence of Orphism with Presocratic philosophy – with which it exhibits multiple correspondences and links, though differing from it in its preservation of traditional moulds and its reluctance to create new forms of literary and ritual expression³⁸. This restriction both marks its cultural limits and, at the same time, confers upon it a cultural authority derived from the prestige of its supposed antiquity. The maintenance of traditional cultural forms is to be expected of speculation arising from the mysteries themselves, as is the attribution of these to Orpheus, poet and cult-patron. The existence of a written transmission, another of the distinctive features of Orphism, however, allows this speculation to innovate, sometimes with considerable audacity, on the basis of this traditional anchorage.

Thus, the most characteristic and famous ideas of Orphism – the “drops of foreign blood” whose origin has often been sought in some source other than “the veins of the Greeks”³⁹ – are actually a theologizing reading of notions inherent to the mysteries, rather than the result of different Eastern influences. That the soul must be purified of an original fault inherited from the cosmic ancestors, the Titans, is an elaboration of a central concern with the faults of human ancestors whose punishment the descendants inherit, unless they are purified of them.⁴⁰ The ascetic prescriptions believed to constitute the *orphikos bios* – that is to say, to refrain from shedding blood, eating certain foods, wearing certain clothes, and perhaps from sexual intercourse, along with a commitment to just behaviour – are precisely the same ritual requirements inscribed upon temples for cultic practitioners before their approach to the deity. Orphism simply extends to the practitioner’s entire life the ritual and/or moral purity that were

38 Bernabé 2004, Finkelberg 1986.

39 Rohde 1907, 338 coined the oft-quoted expression. Cf. Parker 1995 on the diverse foreign roots proposed.

40 Cf. Dodds 1951, 135–179, and Gagné’s forthcoming monograph on ancestral fault in ancient Greece. The evolutionary transference of guilt from human ancestors to cosmic ancestors (Titans) is seen vividly in the Orphic *telete* of *P. Gurob* (*OF* 578), the first preserved line of which reads (with supplements) “receive my gift as compensation for the injustices of my forefathers” (δῶρον δέξ[ατ’] ἐμὸν ποινὰς πατ[έρων ἀθεμίστων): it is impossible to clarify whether the faults in question are of the human or the cosmic ancestors, since the formulae would be the same in both cases. Cf. Edmonds 2008 on this line.

only temporarily and momentarily necessary in cultic worship.⁴¹ The hope of religious fulfilment in the Afterlife, with the revaluation of the soul over the body and the future life over the present, looks like the result of theorizing about, and an attempt to explain, the experience of momentary ecstasy attained in ritual – in particular, in the cult of Dionysus – with the aim of rendering permanent its breaking of spatial and temporal limits.⁴² In the Afterlife as described by the gold tablets (and by Plato *more orphico*), Memory guarantees immortality, and Oblivion means death, and the sources of memory and of oblivion appear in the oracle of Trophonius, with multiple echoes in the mysteries. But even beyond the religious sphere, both concepts played a central role in the immortality attained in epic glory, from which Orphism seems so removed at first sight: in epic, the hero must be remembered in order to survive, while in Orphism he must remember to be saved.⁴³ The notions are opposed (from being the object to being the subject of memory), but the formulae to express them are similar, because this speculation develops Greek traditional ideas not only compatible with the cults of the mysteries, but in fact latent within them. The theory of reincarnation, according to which particular bodies are irrelevant to the identity of a soul that bears the imprint of its divine lineage (*genos*), revives and reinterprets the conventional Greek understanding whereby the life or death of individual generations do not matter, and stable identity is found instead in the continuity of the family *genos*.⁴⁴ From the traditional pessimism that finds its archetypal expression in Theognis' *gnomai* that the best possible fate is never to have been born, there is only a short step – if one of enormous importance – to the Orphic slogan *soma-sema* (the body is the prison of the soul), and this is its elaboration in speculative terms. In effecting this transfer from traditional wisdom to innovative cosmo-theology, the Orphic theologian-

41 Parker 1983 is the standard work on contamination (*miasma*) and purification.

42 Cf. Eur. *Ba.* 402 (ἰκοῖμιν ποτὶ Κύπρον): in their ecstasy, the Bacchants wish to reach the ideal and unattainable land of Cyprus; this impossible spatial transfer is deferred to the temporal transfer in the next life, which thus becomes feasible (e. g. *OF* 493a: “send me to the thiasoi of the initiates”, cf. Bernabé-Jiménez 2008, 158). Turcan 1986 on the sense of permanence conveyed by the perfect tense *bēbakkheumenos* in the funerary inscription of Cumas (*OF* 652).

43 Cf. Vernant 1969 on the role of memory, and Bonnechère 2004 on the oracle of Trophonius.

44 For example, Glaucos' famous claim (*Il.* 6.145ff), saying that human generations do not matter in comparison with the deeds of one's family. Questioned about his identity, he does not give his name, but his lineage (cf. also *Il.* 20.213–241 and 21.153–160), as the initiate does in the *lamellae* (*OF* 474.10: “I am the son of Earth and starry Sky”). Glaucos uses the same image of the botanical cycle that will be later used to describe reincarnation (*OF* 438).

poets cultivate traditional genres, such as the theogony, the hymn, and the *katabasis*, albeit freighting them with new theological messages.

The list of traditional religious conceptions elaborated and theologized by Orphism could be greatly extended, but these examples will be sufficient. Orphism attains a general language higher than concrete particularities, overcoming the local and ethnic divisions so deeply rooted in all Greek cults, be they mystic or not. In the same way that personal identity is established in terms of a celestial lineage (*genos ouranion*) beyond the barriers of family *genos* or of the polis, the main divinities of Orphism do not have local character either: Dionysus, Persephone, Zeus, and their myths and theologies are not centred, unlike in other cults, upon a local sanctuary. On the contrary, such pan-Hellenic deities tend to be united within overarching theogonies that serve to elide local variations and specificities. The explicit or implicit identification of superficially distinct gods with each other in the Orphic hymns and theogonies reinforces this henotheistic tendency, which purports to find within diverse cults indications of a sole and unique divinity who dominates the cosmos as a whole.⁴⁵ Orphic theological speculation, then, not only is pan-Hellenic, but also stretches beyond the boundaries of Greece and Greek culture, to attain an all-embracing perspective that facilitates the evident Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Persian influences on Orphic thought.⁴⁶

Who could be a better patron of this trend than Orpheus? Himself not Greek, but a Thracian of divine lineage whose figure no local cult could appropriate as its sole right, his mythical experiences as poet, traveller to distant lands, voyager into Hades and founder of religious cults gave him special authority to stamp his imprimatur on poems and rites. The common ascription of these to his figure is, for the sceptics, the only factor that unites them all, whereas supporters of the existence of a unified Orphism believe that such attributions occur because of their common ideological background. The absolute lack of a closed canon or of a central authority could not help but lead to an open tradition spreading out in multiple directions. But leaving aside works in minor genres, such as astrology or botany, that were attributed to Orpheus in later times, the main points of focus in Orphic speculation are three: theo-cosmogony, eschatology, and anthropology. Let

45 This tendency is clearly seen in the Derveni Papyrus (Betegh 2004). Six hundred years later we find it quite unchanged in the *Orphic Hymns* (Morand 2001, Ricciardelli 2000). Cf. Herrero 2009a.

46 On Middle Eastern connections of Orphism, cf. West 1983; Casadio 1986 (sceptical, as is Bremmer 2002); Burkert 1992, pp. 9–41, 125–127, and 1999; Bernabé 1997 and 2006a, Herrero 2009b.

us examine briefly each of these fields, postponing for later consideration the crucial question of their mutual relationship.

The first quotations of Orphic poetry come from theogonies in the same tradition as Hesiod's, but with significant variations. The Orphic poets maintain the same general outline with regard to the primordial gods and to the myth of Olympian divine succession, but the traditional theogonic images (sexual generation, gulping up as means of engendering) are here used to express new conceptions, which seem to be the theogonic parallel to the monism expressed in prose by Presocratic philosophers such as the Ionians or Anaxagoras, who are free from the bounds of poetic forms and images. The theogony of the *Derveni Papyrus* – dated approximately in the 5th century BC – depicts Zeus as the god who “became the only one” (μοῦνος ἔγεντο), becoming pregnant with the entire cosmos and the gods after devouring everything into himself, and then subsequently “conceiving it” again, so that Zeus becomes “the first, the last and the middle one.”⁴⁷ The author's fidelity to the theogonic images, which are polytheistic by nature, tortuously complicates the expression of a monistic vision. Orphic theogonies, nevertheless, enjoyed surprising success, giving rise, as we shall see, to variants, imitations, and applications in a wide array of contexts.

At the other end of the spectrum of Orphic speculation lies eschatology. One recurrent element in Orphic sources is to locate in death the key to true life – an inversion more extreme than that found in the traditional mysteries, which are less marked by the hope of an Afterlife. As a consequence, depiction of the blessings and punishments of the next world seems to have been a favorite topic of Orphic poets. A poetic tradition about the descent to Hades (*katabasis*) was attributed to Orpheus, which in itself is hardly surprising, since according to the myth Orpheus went down to the kingdom of the dead in search of his wife Eurydice. Though very little of these poems has been preserved, we have a certain idea of their contents. Plato's eschatological myths are very probably inspired by Orphic eschatology. The most valuable testimonies, however, are the gold tablets, the hexametric lines of which are probably derived from a poem narrating the descent of the soul to the other world, followed by an ascent to the realm of the blessed. Probably the voice in which these verses are sung is that of Orpheus (which other poet had experience of Hades?); but this is not necessary to establish a relationship with Or-

47 OF 12–14. Cf. Betegh 2004, 112–122 for a discussion of the *aidōion* that Zeus swallows in order to gulp up the entire cosmos, and pp. 278–306 for the comparison of the poet and of the commentator with Anaxagoras.

phism, since their correspondences to other Orphic witnesses are very clear.⁴⁸ These poems represent a theological version of the traditional genre of the hero’s descent into the underworld (that of Heracles, for instance), in order to rescue another from death by avoiding the dangers posed by the infernal realms and persuading Hades and Persephone to relinquish their captive. Now, however, the soul is the hero that, in a similar way – if under very different circumstances – must find his own salvation.

At a midpoint between the distant domains of theogony and eschatology stands the famous myth of Dionysus’ sacrifice by the Titans. Dionysus, as offspring of the incestuous union of Zeus and his daughter Persephone, is directly linked to the contents of the Orphic theogonic traditions; on the other hand, at least in some versions, mortals sprang from the ashes of the Titans when they were thunderstruck by Zeus, which has fundamental anthropological implications intimately connected with eschatology. If the life of the soul in the body is expiation for the primordial fault of the cosmic ancestors of mankind, only after death can this atonement come to an end. There may, of course, have been divergent versions and interpretations of the myth of the Titans. However, in spite of sceptical doubts, it seems clear that the anthropological implications derived from it date back to the Classical period.⁴⁹ It is tempting to see in the myth of the Titans the cornerstone that gives unity to the whole Orphic building. Such temptation not only exists for us. It is very probable that the *Rhapsodies* – a collection of the Orphic theogonies compiled in the first century BC – outlined a path from the theogonic origins of the cosmos up to the eschatological destination of the soul, the two being linked by means of the myth of the Titans⁵⁰. Nevertheless, it is necessary to

48 See Bernabé/Jiménez 2008 and Graf/Johnston 2007 on the *lamellae*. Riedweg 2002 reconstructs the structure of the *katabasis* of the soul that inspires them. See also Kingsley 1995 on the presence of Orphic eschatology in Platonic eschatological accounts. In Herrero 2007c I synthesize the nature and evidence of Orphic eschatology.

49 Brisson 1992 maintains that the double (i. e., both Titanic and Dionysiac) nature of humans, as progeny of the Titans who ate Dionysus, is an idea of Neo-Platonist origin and does not derive from ancient Orphism. Edmonds 1999 makes it an invention of nineteenth-century scholarship. However, cf. Bernabé 2002a for a recent and convincing demonstration of the existence of the myth and its anthropological implications in Classical times (in spite of Edmonds’ response in 2008).

50 Edmonds 2008 objects that the systematicity of the *Rhapsodies* is an invention of modern editors (and of West 1983) and that they could have been a messy compilation of disparate materials. But many references to the *Rhapsodies* call it a theogony, and there are allusions to particular episodes in specific places (cf. Bernabé 2004, 97–101). In this case over-scepticism constructs from a preconceived idea an image of messy disorder without proofs and against the evidence.

exercise caution in supposing that all Orphic poetry followed the apparently tidy structure of this late compilation.

The connection between cosmogony and eschatology is a *desideratum* of modern scholarship, reluctant to conceive of a religious doctrine that is not systematic. Yet such connection is far from assured. A wide array of theogonies and eschatological claims circulated under the name of Orpheus, and not all were compelled to follow the same arrangement. Undoubtedly, there exist some lines of continuity between theogonic interests and Orphic eschatological concerns: theogonies were sung in rituals, the focus of which can be supposed to be the salvation of the soul, and some cosmogonic Orphic accounts may have had eschatological import. But not all Orphic poetry had to deal with anthropogony and eschatology, and not even all Orphic anthropogony had to originate in the myth of the Titans.⁵¹ There are no indications – though the possibility cannot be completely ruled out – that the Derveni theogony continued up to the destruction of Dionysus, since the extant papyrus ends with Zeus's recreation of the universe. Nor should it necessarily be taken for granted that works of theo-cosmogony, anthropology, and eschatology were invariably ascribed to Orpheus. The *katabasis* of the soul that underlies the texts of the tablets may be Orphic, but its attribution to Orpheus is no more than a supposition, and nothing connects it, in any case, with the theogonic poems. In addition, there is no explicit link between Orpheus and the myth of the Titans before the Hellenistic Age.⁵² The testimonies adduced to prove that by the Classical period Orpheus was already the obvious poet of the myth are not wholly conclusive, while Plato's attitude, which seems to accept the myth and many other elements of Orphism while deriding and mocking the figure of Orpheus himself, seems to indicate that the two were readily dissociable.⁵³

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- 51 Cf. Hdt. 1.132 on theogonies sung in rites, as seemingly suggested by the first columns of the Derveni Papyrus, which describe rites before interpreting a theogony. As Seaford 1986 notes for Empedocles, the four cosmic elements may have an eschatological role in Orphic contexts, like fire (Betegh 2004, 325–348) and wind: cf. Gagné 2006, who notes that the Orphic *Physika*, a poem of Classical times, proposed the Tritopatores, and not the Titans, as forefathers of humans.
- 52 The earliest pieces of evidence are the sources of Diodorus (cf. Bernabé 2000 and 2000b) and Clement (cf. Herrero 2007a), which can be traced back to the third century BC. Fragmentary quotations of Callimachus (fr. 43.117 Pfeiffer) and Euphoriion (fr. 92 Van Groningen) allude to the myth but without mention of Orpheus.
- 53 Plat. *Euthyphr.* 5e, Isocr. *Busir.* 10.38, grouped under *OF* 26. In both cases, the reference to untellable, terrible and extraordinary things does not have to be necessarily to the myth of Dionysus. In the first passage, moreover, Orpheus is not mentioned, and in the second, his death as a Dionysiac punishment (told by Aeschylus

The same lack of systematization can be found in other areas of Orphic theological speculation. Vegetarianism, belief in reincarnation, and the assertion that the soul’s fundamental flaw arose with the rebellion of the Titans, for example, were independent elements that on occasion might be presented in a coherent and interrelated fashion – but they did not always have to be so presented. The gold tablets, for example, appear to allude to the myth of the Titans, but contain little indication of an interest in reincarnation, the only exception being an ambiguous reference to a cycle in one of them⁵⁴, and it would certainly be arbitrary to conclude that the users of the tablets were vegetarians. The appearance of a new tablet containing the name of Orpheus would in fact add very little to what we know of the theological constructions they reflect. Any construction – as for instance Empedocles’ poems – will necessarily privilege certain elements from within this broad range of speculation and reject others, or at least pass over them in silence.

The attempt to define a coherent Orphic ideology “from creation to salvation,”⁵⁵ then, is doomed to failure not only for lack of proof, but because it fails to take into account the dispersed and always isolated contexts in which our information appears. We are dealing with an array of speculations containing many common elements, but which remains unorganized except for the particular systematizations imposed by particular individuals, as in the case of Empedocles and certain Pythagoreans. Why, then, does so loosely defined a process of speculation deserve to be called Orphism?

The question is whether a phenomenon including elements as diverse as the theogony of the Derveni Papyrus and the gold tablets, lacking any obvious relationship between them, deserves a unitary and unifying label. And the response is in the affirmative, because both, like the rest of Orphic speculation, are attempts to create an abstract and non-local language departing from traditional cultural forms such as the *katabasis* and theogony, in order to express speculative insights arising from the religious experiences of the traditional Greek mysteries. The directions taken by these theological speculations are diverse, and their conclusions cannot necessarily be deduced from one another; but their concerns are not incompatible, tending as they do to converge in line with their common inspiration and method of inquiry.

in the *Bassarides*) does not have to be necessarily linked to the content of the myths told by him. Cf. Bernabé 1998 on Platonic treatment of Orphism.

54 A tablet from Thurii mentions (*OF* 488) “liberation from the cycle of deep grief”. Cf. Bernabé/Jiménez 2008, 117–120, for the various interpretations of this line.

55 As Alderink 1981 does in his analysis of Orphism as a general systematic doctrine. This endeavour leads him to (wrongly) exclude texts that mention reincarnation because he finds them incompatible with others not mentioning it.

One of the points of convergence (the clearest and latest being the compilation of the *Rhapsodies*) is the name of Orpheus, to whom is attributed much of the theology of the mysteries.

“Orphism,” then, is a conventional label that ought to be kept because of the lack of any feasible alternative and because it has been consecrated by academic tradition. Though it will be necessary to qualify the term in many cases – to refer specifically, say, to Orphic eschatology or anthropology – it is possible to claim without valid objection that all these areas are related to Orphism and to investigate such general features as are common to the whole field of study and the diverse particular elements that it comprehends, some of them key to Western spiritual history. It is true that the term has behind it an entire history of misunderstandings, but the word remains useful, when employed with caution, to describe a cultural phenomenon that demands some sort of denomination. Dodds’ purposefully anachronistic “Puritanism” is more vague, and Bianchi’s “mysteriosophy” is broader in scope, since it includes later stages like Hermeticism and Gnosticism, while reductionist terms such as “Bacchic mysteries” or “Pythagoreanism” can exclude indispensable testimonies. On the other hand, the restriction of sources to testimonies authorized by the name of Orpheus, along with other, clearly connected phenomena such as the tablets, may ignore some evidence that could be intimately related to them, and perhaps it may include some other pieces that are only superficially linked to the general phenomenon. But the portrait of the process of theorization and intellectual unification of the mysteries will be trustworthy in its general lines.

As a process of speculation arising from the experience of the mysteries, Orphism is at the same time something more and something less than this experience: Aristotle said (fr. 15 Rose) that one became initiated in order not to learn (*mathein*) but to experience (*pathein*). From the evidence we have, it appears that Orphism placed more emphasis on the former than on the latter: it is sufficient to observe that in such clearly ritual-related evidence as the tablets, the knowledge that the initiated should possess is much more important than any ritual action undertaken. The consequences are clear: a group brought together by intellectual speculation – even supposing that several people take part in it – is far less stable and characterized by less tight bonds of belonging than a group defined by the celebration of a ritual and the shared experience this produces.⁵⁶ Such considerations raise in turn the question of the “Orphics.”

56 Cf. for example Rudhardt 1958 and Burkert 1983, who from very different perspectives on ritual, and particularly on sacrifice, agree on the power that ritual has to make the group cohesive.

A purely intellectual and literary tradition may broaden the domain of thought and speculation, but it does not create stable groups around this domain. The case of ritual traditions, however, may be different. From Herodotus up to the end of Antiquity references to Orphic rites occur, and possibly many of the later ones allude to rituals that exist only in the imagination of those who mention them (Chapter II). However, authentic proofs of the celebration of rituals under the auspices of Orpheus in the Classical period do exist, as it would be only logical to expect: if Orphic speculation arises from the experience of the rites, it also, in turn, has the potential to generate other rituals – as attested by the presence of Orphic verses in the tablets or in the Gurob Papyrus (*OF* 578), which documents a *teletē*. *Legomena* and *dromena* go hand in hand in these cases. The question is whether these rituals possessed a certain degree of uniformity, referred to the same myths and ideas, and implied similar prescriptions and ritual actions – that is to say, whether groups of people with more or less common beliefs gathered around them, in order to fulfil similar rites. In this case they could appropriately be called “Orphics,” whether or not this was the name they gave to themselves.⁵⁷ A relative ideological and ritual uniformity allows one to speak with confidence about the beliefs and rites of “the initiates of Isis or Mithra” despite the absence of any term such as “Isiacs” or “Mithraics.” On the other hand, the rites associated with Hermetic literature are so vaporous and changeable that one cannot speak of “Hermeticists.”⁵⁸ There are Orphic rites, but is it possible to talk about “Orphic mysteries”?

The fact is that proofs of the existence of such ritual and ideological uniformity are nearly non-existent, and many indications point entirely in the other direction. The only clear reference to doctrinal or ritual uniformity, the mention of an *orphikos bios*, the “Orphic life,” by Plato, occurs in the plural, and is used to denote some imprecise lifestyle that existed in a remote period, the precepts of which do not differ from those of the well-known Pythagorean life.⁵⁹ Plato’s statement, then, hardly demonstrates the existence

57 Denomination of religious movements may vary depending on the adoption of an external or an internal perspective (Mormons= Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints). Cf. Casadio 1997, 22.

58 Burkert 1987 on mysteries of Isis and Mitra; Fowden 1987, 187–192 on Hermeticism and its followers.

59 Plat. *Leg.* 782c: “those of yore lead certain so-called Orphic lives (Ὀρφικοί τινες λεγόμενοι βίοι), since they took from all not animated beings and kept away from all the animated instead”. The only feature of this *orphikos bios*, the principle of vegetarianism, is the most famous of the *pythagorikos bios*. The plural, “certain” and “so-called” denote a certain indetermination. Note, moreover, that its practice is placed in a distant past, in the same tone as *Leg.* 713e: “the so-called

of a uniform doctrinal formulation of Orphic rules. Instead, the sources do depict the social reflection of Orphic rites, involving two types of agents. On the one hand, there existed itinerant priests who conducted initiations in their *teletai* with varying degrees of sincerity and commitment – morally exemplary specimens of this group being in rather short supply, according to the critics who caricature them.⁶⁰ Burkert's classic 1982 study demonstrated that these initiators were very far from attaining the organisational level of, say, a *collegium*, approximating more closely to the model of a loose guild or craft than to that of a sect – in contradistinction to, for instance, the Pythagoreans.

The other aspect of involvement relates to the recipients of these initiations, who might be individuals or even “entire cities,” according to Plato's account. In the latter case, the city is not a community formed around that specific rite, but rather already exists as a group when it decides to accept joint initiation, as did Athens when it decided to undergo Epimenides' collective purification after the murder of Kylon by the Alkmaionids.⁶¹ As for the individuals who underwent these purification rites, they do not seem to have formed stable groups, self-conscious *thiasoi*, among themselves. In fact, the only group initiated as such and that retained a stable existence afterwards was the family – which as a unit exists obviously prior to and independently of Orphic initiation. Funeral rites tended to be administered within the family environment, and in addition there exist numerous references to the initiation of close relatives. That leads one to conclude that the family is the area of social shaping and of transmission of Orphic rites.⁶² But

life under Cronus”. The Golden Age (celebrated maybe in some Orphic poem of Pythagorean inspiration) was not a real fact contemporary to Plato. The choir in Euripides' *Cretans* (fr. 472 Kannicht: *OF* 567) speaks about a holy life (ἁγνὸς βίότης) with elements related to Orphism, but its practice is also situated in a remote place and time (Minos' Crete), and its principles seem to stem rather from a poet's imagination, hence mixing hardly compatible ritual elements, such as omophagy and vegetarianism.

- 60 Plato, *Resp.* 364e and *Leg.* 909a, 933a. Mocking references to the celebrants of Orphic *teletai* made by Theophrastus, Plutarch and Philodemus (*OF* 653–655) seem to derive from an archetypical character like those of the New Comedy. The insult of Theseus to Hippolytus (Eur. *Hip.* 952ff) seems aimed at comparing him with this type of priest (Burkert 1982, 11).
- 61 *Resp.* 364e; cf. *P. Derv.* XX.1, with similar wording; Aristot. *Ath.* I on the purification of Athens by Epimenides. The city also could adapt mystic initiation to its own institutions, as shown by the Eleusinian mysteries in Athens, which integrated Orpheus and his eschatological poetry (Graf 1974).
- 62 A shield from Olbia (*OF* 564) bears an inscription referring to a mother and a daughter, both initiated. Plato (*Resp.* 363c) portrays parents threatening their children (Platonic critique of the educator) with the punishments of the Afterlife

the family, just like the city, does not become aware that it is a group by the fact of burying its dead or initiating its members in Orphic rites; on the contrary, it buries and initiates as a group precisely because it already exists as a social unit. Orphism is like a dye extending over an already-existing social fabric; it creates neither a new social environment nor a self-conscious sense of belonging to a defined and distinctive group.

It is true that both the itinerant character of the initiation rites and the universalizing theology of Orphism in themselves tend to elide the structures imposed by family and polis to focus attention upon the community of all men. The well-known Orphic saying that “many carry the *thyrsos*, but only a few are *bacchoi*” (*OF* 576) seems to transcend familial, *polis*-based, and even ethnic distinctions. But union with other *mystai kai bacchoi*, as promised by the Hipponion tablet (*OF* 474.15–16), individuals other than those already known by an initiate through his own political or family community, appears to have been reserved for the other world. The similarity among tablets from very far-flung locations does not prove anything but the expansion of the poetic and ritual tradition into widely separated areas, and any concern for uniformity, and with it a sense of community, is absolutely absent from the tablets and from our other evidence. The *bacchoi* look more like an imaginary spiritual community⁶³ than a social grouping, unless this might have arisen within a family context. There is no proof of the existence of any Orphic *thiasos* which would have blurred the boundaries of the family, and even less of the polis, in sharp contrast with Pythagorean or primitive Christian communities.

Only one, very exceptional, testimony raises the possibility that Orphic rites produced at a given time a stable thiasos conscious of its own differentiated identity: in Olbia appears the word – of doubtful reading in its last part – ΟΡΦΙΚΟΙ⁶⁴. However, even accepting in good faith that the bone

described by “Musaeus and his son”, who promise happiness for the initiated and their descendants as well; Demosthenes (*De Cor.* 18–19) describes Aeschines and his mother taking part together in rites with clearly Orphic elements; Theophrastus (*Charact.* 16.11) presents a gullible character taking all his family, with the nanny if the mother is not available, to visit the celebrant of Orphic *teletai*; Plutarch (*Cons. ad. uxor.* 10) reminds his wife about the Bacchic initiation they attended together. It could be inferred from the decree by Ptolemy Philopator (*OF* 44) that the craft of itinerant priest was also passed down from parents to children (Burkert 1982). Paus. 9.27.2; 9.30.12 presents the Lykomids preserving and transmitting Orphic poems at the sanctuary of Phlya.

63 As the *συνετοί* or *οἷς θέμις ἐστί* from *OF* 1 (cf. Henrichs 2003).

64 *OF* 463. Herodotus’ tale (4.79) of the Scythian Scylas, who took part in the Dionysiac thiasos in Olbia, seems to imply that some groups of initiates on the borders

tablet proves the existence of some self-styled “Orphic” in fifth-century-BC Crimea (that is to say, on the very margins of Hellenic civilisation), this does not allow us to generalize concerning the rest of Greece. There, the pressure of official, public cult as the focus of religious identity did not encourage the creation of alternatives. It is possible – even probable – that the circulation of itinerant rites gave rise to stable groups of initiates in certain contexts. Instances of the spontaneous formation of a thiasos – crystallizations of the process of ritual diffusion – whose similarity to other groups would be at best haphazard, are, however, adventitious developments, an accidental side effect rather than the driving force of the process. If “Orphics” of this kind existed, they are far less important than the Orphic poets and theologians who led the intellectual process just described. Their disappearance without a trace is the best proof of their scarce relevance.

Thus, to turn these self-conscious “Orphics” (or in the most extreme formulation, the archetypal “Orphic”) into the protagonists of the intellectual process described above heavily distorts its reality, and tends to turn Orphism once more into an organized ideological system, according to the false social portrait drawn of it. Burkert’s 1977 outline of Orphism, wherein it is visualized as a circle superimposed over three different fields, better reflects the situation: there were Pythagoreans, there were initiates of the Eleusinian mysteries, and there were practitioners of Dionysiac cult. Orphics did not exist – or at least, were of marginal importance – as anything distinct from these three spheres. Instead, within these areas, Orphism spread to a greater or lesser degree. To focus the debate on whether the commentators of the *Derveni Papyrus*, the users of the tablets, various Pythagoreans, or even Empedocles, were or were not – or worse, did or did not call themselves or others – “Orphics” prevents us from attending to a question of much greater interest: which elements of Orphism were integrated into each of these systems. This study, therefore, will discuss Orphism, the Orphic tradition, Orphic cosmogony, anthropology and eschatology, Orphic poets and theologians, and Orphic rites, but it will never speak of “Orphics”.

of the Greek world may have crossed traditional ethnic and political boundaries, though not without resistance (cf. Hartog 1984).

II. Orphic religious presence in the Imperial Age

One of the many paradoxes of the study of Orphism is that, although most of our preserved Orphic testimonies and fragments date from the Imperial period, research has been focused primarily upon its early existence in Classical times, when its originality as a distinctive movement is greater. From the Hellenistic period onwards, the novelties that Orphism had once introduced in the world of the classical polis, like the concern for the soul, were spread all over by new philosophical and religious movements – Stoicism, Platonism, Neo-Pythagoreanism, new mystery cults. The images and ideas once propagated by Orphism for a few select individuals became common currency, and their increasing public visibility was due not so much to Orphic poems or rites as to the much more powerful and prestigious philosophical schools and organized religions. At the same time that the Orphic literary tradition is establishing itself as an achieved fact, however, ancient Orphic rites – for example, the use of the gold tablets – start to disappear, and by the end of the Hellenistic period Orphism seems to be no more than a literary memory.

Yet from the second century AD, there are signs of Orphism emerging afresh within different religious cults, and the Orphic literary tradition increases its prestige as a source of divine revelation. The resurgence of Orphism is surprising, and can only be explained by a re-evaluation of its religious contents within certain contexts. In addition, since Classical Orphism has been reconstructed in great part from late testimonies, the identification of the common threads linking one period to the other remains an important task. This question, however, must be approached with extreme caution: if early Orphism was never a cohesive, doctrinal movement, systematically defined by a series of intellectual oppositions and complementarities, it was even less so in the Imperial period, when the dispersion of materials is geographically even wider. Literary testimonies that may reflect a simply bookish or antiquarian tradition should be separated from those indicative of actual ritual practice. Following the usual procedure, I will first examine the forms of Orphic literary tradition and then its traces in ritual practice. While late Orphic literature has received no little attention, evidence regarding its ritual practice – from inscriptions, papyri, and external references – has not been studied systematically before. Here, however, the latter will be the

main object of our interest, in order to to ascertain the religious value of Orphism during the Imperial period.

1. Orphic literature

From the Hellenistic period onwards, the number of poetic works attributed to Orpheus increases drastically – some being directly related to the Orphic poems of earlier periods, with others retaining only certain characteristics of style and the name of Orpheus to connect them to the rest of the Orphic tradition. Despite this diversity, the most important genres to invest Orpheus with significant authority since Classical times remain theogonies, hymns and tales of descent to Hades (*katabasis*).¹ Before effective analysis of these genres can proceed, however, let us say a word about the authorship of the Orphic poems. It was by no means uncontested, and many were aware that at least some of the poems attributed to the mythical Thracian bard had actually been written by another – and much later – hand.² This uncertainty, however, did nothing to diminish their perceived religious value. Rather, what we call Orphism nowadays was sanctioned by the name of “Orpheus”; that is, by accepting a conventional attribution of a work, it was assumed that such work possessed particular poetic and religious characteristics. Pausanias, for example, believed the *Rhapsodies* to be the work not of Orpheus, but of Onomacritus. Nevertheless, he invests them with the same authority as he does those *hieroi logoi* whose authenticity is unquestionable. Jewish and Christian apologists would adopt a similar attitude in claiming the authority of Orphic poems that at least some of them suspected were not composed by the mythic singer. It is not as much a question of cynicism or propaganda as a question of the value placed on a poetic tradition, which surpassed by far individual authorship.

The most significant part of the Orphic corpus, both in quantity and in quality, is constituted by the THEOGONIES³. The poem commented on in

1 Other Orphic literary works in Late Antiquity are the *Orphic Argonautica* and poems on astrology, botany, and the magical use of stones (*Lithica*). Cf. West 1983 and Bernabé/Casadesús 2008.

2 Epigenes (*apud* Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 1.21.131) attributes Orphic works to various Pythagoreans; Cicero (*ND* 1.107) endorses this opinion and supports Aristotle’s idea that Orpheus never existed; Pausanias (9.30.12, 8.37.5) follows the biased opinion of the Lycomidai according to which only the poems sung by them in Phlya were authentic.

3 Detailed studies of theogonic Orphic poems are to be found in West 1983, Brisson 1995 and Bernabé 2003a.