



MYSTERY CULTS AND SCHOLARSHIP

LANNOY (A.), PRAET (D.) (edd.) *The Christian Mystery. Early Christianity and the Ancient Mystery Cults in the Work of Franz Cumont and in the History of Scholarship*. (Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 81.) Pp. 335. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2023. Paper, €60. ISBN: 978-3-515-13197-1.

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In late 1949 a young student at the Crozer Theological Seminary in Upland, Pennsylvania, took a class on Greek religion. For this they wrote two papers: ‘A Study of Mithraism’ and ‘The Influence of the Mystery Religions on Christianity’. They concluded that:

To discuss Christianity without mentioning other religions [i.e. mystery cults] would be like discussing the greatness of the Atlantic Ocean without the slightest mention of the many tributaries that keep it flowing.

The student was clear as to where they drew much of their inspiration for these papers: ‘the magnificent work of Cumont’. That the work of Franz Cumont (1868–1947) made such an impression on this student – none other than Martin Luther King Jr. – is a testament to the reach of the great Belgian scholar. King’s conclusion is also notable, given that Cumont largely avoided addressing the relationship between early Christianity and contemporary ‘mystery cults’ directly. Clearly, what Cumont did say was enough to lead King, along with many others, to conclude that the ‘mystery cults’ of the Roman Empire had a formative impact on early Christianity.

It has now been over a century since the publication of Cumont’s seminal works on the Mithras cult and other religious movements in the Roman Empire. In the decades since his death, Cumont’s belief that the Roman Empire witnessed an influx of ‘oriental cults’, including the Mithras cult directly from Persia, has been subject to much criticism and has been largely discredited; yet studies of Roman religion, particularly that of the Mithras cult, still frequently refer to him. It is also worth remembering that, with their copyright having long since lapsed, Cumont’s works now freely circulate on the internet. Today, Cumont’s views on ancient religion can be easily accessed, read and digested without any awareness that they have long since been superseded. Consequently, an understanding of Cumont and his scholarly milieu remains as pertinent to the field as ever. Thus, the present volume is a welcome study that seeks to contextualise the works of Cumont within the debates occurring in both religious and academic institutions at the turn of the twentieth century and to discuss how Cumont and his contemporaries approached the relationship between early Christianity and Graeco-Roman ‘mystery cults’.

The volume is divided into four sections: the introduction, Part 1 ‘Franz Cumont’s Thought on Early Christianity and the *Religions orientales*’ (Chapters 1–3), Part 2 ‘Contemporaries of Cumont on Early Christianity and the Ancient Mystery Cults’ (Chapters 4–9) and Part 3 ‘New Approaches to Early Christianity and the Ancient Mystery Cults’ (Chapters 10–11). The introduction by the editors Lannoy and Praet situates Cumont and his works not only in the scholarly landscape of the early twentieth century but also in relation to contemporary debates between conservative and modernist factions in the Catholic and the Protestant Churches. For those unfamiliar with the details regarding these debates this section provides an accessible and detailed overview of the world in which Cumont operated. It is also refreshing to see that, while there is much to laud

Cumont for, the editors are not unwilling to be blunt in their criticism of him, even going so far as to note Cumont's blatant lies in his correspondence with Alfred Loisy (p. 24).

In Chapter 1 the editors elucidate Cumont's position regarding the relationship between early Christianity and mystery cults. This is followed by L. Dirven's discussion on Cumont's thoughts on similarities between Christian and Mithraic art. In Chapter 3, F. Massa addresses Cumont's decision to add an appendix on the cult of Bacchus to the fourth edition of *Les Religions Orientales dans le Paganisme Romain*. Moving on to Part 2, Chapter 4 provides a good steppingstone from Part 1 with a discussion by A. Klostergaard Petersen of Cumont's relationship with the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*. Chapters 5 and 6 then focus on Cumont's contemporaries Richard Reitzenstein and Prosper Alfaric respectively. In the former N. Kalospyros discusses Reitzenstein's belief that there was considerable Gnostic influence on both Hellenic Judaism and subsequently early Christianity. In the latter C.J.T. Talar traces how Alfaric's belief in a hypothetical Gospel authored by Simon the Magician led him not only from the priesthood to atheism, but to a complete denial of a historical Jesus. In Chapter 7 the discussion turns to the study of a particular text, the apocryphal *Acts of the Apostle Philip*. F. Amsler argues that it is unfortunate that various generations of scholars have ignored this text, which was written sometime in the fourth to fifth centuries, as it provides evidence for Christian interaction with the cult of Cybele in late antique Hierapolis. Chapter 8, by J.-P. Schreiber, returns to Cumont, although the primary focus is the politician and professor Eugène Goblet d'Alviella. Goblet was a supporter of Cumont and took a particularly strong interest in the parallels that appeared to exist between Freemasonry and the Mithras cult. Goblet, who was himself a Grandmaster of the Grand Orient of Belgium, came to believe that Freemasonry derived from the Mithras cult and drew on Cumont's descriptions of the cult to reform his own Masonic Lodge. Chapter 9, by N. Spineto, turns to 1920s Italy, a period when the works of Cumont, Loisy and others began to disseminate among Italian scholars. As Italian scholars such as Raffaele Pettazoni, Ernesto Buonaiuti and Luigi Salvatorelli sought to move beyond the scholarly limitations that had previously been imposed on them by the dominance of the Catholic Church, they developed a variety of models to explain the relationship between early Christianity and Graeco-Roman 'mystery cults'.

There is much to be gained from these chapters, although, given their breadth of focus, what is gained will undoubtedly vary greatly among readers. For myself, the insights provided into Cumont's relationship with Freemasonry via Goblet were of particular interest, along with the discovery upon reading Chapter 1 that Cumont's father was a Freemason. One wonders how much of this was known to dedicated Freemason Rudyard Kipling, who developed a fascination with Cumont's works and drew on them when writing several short stories that featured the cult of Mithras. The relationship between the works of Cumont and the Scottish anthropologist James George Frazer was also of great interest, given that one of the foremost British historical novelists of the twentieth century, Rosemary Sutcliff, was an ardent fan of both Frazer and Kipling and included the cult of Mithras in many of her works. This provides tantalising prospects for a broader network analysis tracing the wider impact of Cumont and his contemporaries.

In Part 3 P. Borgeaud addresses perceptions of the *galli* (priests of the Mother Goddess) among Christian writers. Borgeaud draws attention to what Europeans considered 'les hommes-femmes' among Native Americans, as discussed in the work of Joseph-François Lafitau, and how a comparative approach might help provide a more nuanced understanding of Christian references to the *galli*. A. Mastrocinque concludes the volume with a welcome deconstruction of the various superficial similarities between the Mithras cult and Christianity, although the author suggests the possibility that, as with (some) Christians,

Mithraic adherents believed in a Trinity and that there were Mithraic ‘prophecies’. While these final two chapters are interesting, they feel somewhat out of place with the rest of the volume, which is more historiographical in nature. One must also be familiar with Mastrocinque’s previous work to understand the basis for some of the observations made here, particularly his hypothesis that the cult of Mithras was developed as an arm of imperial ideology under Augustus. Moreover, this chapter provides a fascinating discourse on the textual evidence for the possibility of Mithraic prophecies and a Mithraic Trinity. However, for those who reject the notion of ‘Mithraism’ and instead view the Mithras cult as a series of connected, yet highly variable communities it remains difficult to accept some of the arguments. For instance, while Aion makes up a third of Mastrocinque’s Mithraic trinity, images or references to this deity have been found in only a very small number of *mithraea* (and the identification of those that have been found remains debatable). Indeed, aside from Dirven’s chapter, material culture does not feature much across the volume, leaving readers unclear as to how new archaeological approaches and discoveries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries impacted on the thoughts of Cumont and his contemporaries.

These quibbles aside, the book provides a fascinating insight into the environment in which the modern study of ancient ‘mystery cults’ first developed, particularly that of Mithras. It will also be of interest to those with broader interests in how the study of religion in the Graeco-Roman world evolved, including the place of Judaism in these discussions. I would urge any scholars exploring such topics to engage with this book alongside their inevitable forays into the works of Cumont, so that they are equipped with a better understanding of the context from which his ideas emerged. Moreover, as noted above, there is a rich array of information here that raises further questions for future studies.

Newcastle University

DAVID WALSH
david.walsh@newcastle.ac.uk