

Keeping Secrets and Making Christians*

Catechesis and the Revelation of the Christian Mysteries

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“Let none of the catechumens be present; none of the uninitiated; none of those who are not able to pray with us. Take note of one another! The doors!”¹ This exclamation of the deacon marks a turning point in the fourth century version of the liturgy of St. James. With this cry, the public portion of the weekly service ended, and from that point on, only those who had been properly initiated into the church through catechism and baptism were allowed to remain. The *Apostolic Constitutions* urged the clergy to follow the proper procedure for ensuring the secrecy of the service after the uninitiated left: “Let the sub-deacons stand at the door of the men and the deacons at the door of the women, so that no one may depart and the door may not be opened at the time of the offering, even if it is for one of the faithful.”² In short, it was preferable to exclude fully initiated Christians from the secret portions of the service, rather than to run the risk of disclosing the mysteries even to catechumens, some of whom may have regularly attended the public portion of the liturgy for years. What could motivate such a rigorous exclusivity? The question is particularly interesting given the frequency with which Christians and their scriptures spoke in universal and inclusive terms about the availability of Christian salvation. In so far as fourth century Christian authors gave both the idea of secrecy and the idea of universality some of its fullest expression in the Late Antique period, they will provide the basis for the analysis of this development.

The question of Christian secrecy has long been the object of scholarly attention.³ Modern liturgists often label this idea that certain aspects of the

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¹ *Liturgy of St. James*, XVI (ANF 7:540).

² Marcel Metzger, ed., *Les Constitutions Apostoliques* (SC 320, 329, 336), VIII.11 (ANF 7:486).

³ For a summary of this literature, see Michel-Yves Perrin, “Arcana mysteria ou ce que cache la religion. De certaines pratiques de l’arcane dans le christianisme antique,” in *Religionen – Die Religiöse Erfahrung*, ed. Matthias Riedl and Tilo Schabert (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2008), 119–142; and Guy Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Tradi-*

Christian liturgy ought to be kept secret from those who have not received baptism the *disciplina arcani*, or the discipline of secrecy. The liturgical enactment of the discipline mentioned above provides the clearest expression of this Christian ideal. However, this was not simply a matter of worship in a narrow sense. As we will see below, Christian secrecy applied equally to the ritual performance of the sacraments and to some of the doctrines bound up with them. It is precisely this matrix of Christian secrets which occupied the catechetical instructors charged with initiating converts. The catechetical sermons of John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia in particular bear directly on the *disciplina arcani* in that they were the mechanism used in revealing the secrets of Christian doctrine and worship.

Yet with all of this emphasis on secrecy and the revelation of secrets, a number of significant sources suggest that the ideal of secrecy was not rigorously maintained. The question of precisely what the *disciplina arcani* may have meant to the church and its prospective members is an important one. Why did the church ritually enact the *disciplina arcani* every week during the liturgy? What place did the rhetorical maintenance of secrecy hold in Late Antiquity? How did the church go about revealing these secrets in the process of incorporating new converts? This ~~chapter~~ ^{XXXX} will address these questions by outlining the institution of the *disciplina arcani*, addressing the question of just how secret these secrets were, and finally considering how the clergy used catechesis to reveal the mysteries of the church to converts.

The *Disciplina Arcani*

The theme of secrecy plays a prominent role in many of the earliest Christian texts. The Gospel of Mark presents a prime example. Jesus responds to

tions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996). Stroumsa nicely treats the way in which scholars have focused on the ritual aspect of this secrecy and downplayed the doctrinal. In the first four centuries, a variety of so-called Gnostic groups claimed secret knowledge as an essential component of the way they understood salvation. Many mainstream Christians denounced this idea as an elitist restriction on the universal offer of salvation explicitly articulated in several esteemed Christian texts. Stroumsa traces the repetition of this idea into the modern period arguing that scholars have often simply accepted the idea that secrecy of worship was an acceptable Christian position, while secrecy of doctrine should be seen as a pagan or heretical error. One of his main objectives in his book is to emphasize the secrecy of doctrine in the works of Christians within orthodox traditions. In doing so, Stroumsa maintains a division between cult and doctrine, always stressing, against the prevailing interpretive traditions, that mainstream Christian secrecy in Late Antiquity pertained to doctrine as much as to worship. Several times in this work, however, Stroumsa suggests that these two might not be very easy to separate from one another. This essay develops Stroumsa's suggestion through a discussion of liturgical secrecy and demonstrates how doing so is important for understanding how late fourth century catechesis functioned as a type of revelation of Christian mystery.

the inquiries of his disciples, who want to know why he teaches in parables, with the famous saying, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order ‘that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.’”⁴ Gospels, canonical and non-canonical alike, depict Jesus as regularly teaching through parables which were difficult to comprehend and scholars have repeatedly wrestled with the significance of this gospel theme.⁵

Early Christians developed this and other themes from Christian scriptures in articulating a rather extensive maintenance of Christian secrecy.⁶ Already by the turn of the second century, the *Didache* cited the Gospel of Matthew as the impetus for preserving the secrecy of the Eucharistic meal.⁷ “Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.”⁸ Here the most cherished components of the Christian cult are the pearls and the swine of course are unbelievers. The author of the *Didache* expresses here the concern that unbelievers will mistreat the holy things of the Christian liturgy but also that they might use the knowledge of these things against believers in some unspecified way. Likewise, Athanasius used Matthew 7.6 to critique his so-called Arian opponents, writing, “And they are not ashamed to parade the sacred mysteries before Catechumens, and worse than that, even before heathens ... We ought not then to parade the holy mysteries before the uninitiated, lest the heathen in their ignorance deride them, and the Catechumens being over-curious be offended.”⁹ Others focused more on the harm that might come to one who learns about the Eucharistic meal without proper initiation.¹⁰ They appealed to Paul’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 11.29. In teaching about the Lord’s Supper, Paul warned, “For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.” The implication drawn from this passage was that the clergy had an obligation to keep the elements of the sacred

⁴ Mark 4.11–12, citing Isaiah 6.9–10, RSV.

⁵ Cf. William Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901); Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979); and A. Oepke, [χρῆματα], *TDNT*, 3:957–1000.

⁶ For a more comprehensive collection of second to fourth century texts assuming or advocating the maintenance of Christian secrecy, see Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the RCIA* (2nd ed., Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 54 ff.

⁷ *Didache* 9.5 (ANF 7:380).

⁸ Matthew 7.6, RSV.

⁹ Athanasius, *Apologia contra Arianos*, 11.2 (PG 25:267a; NPNF² 4:106).

¹⁰ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 10.25, 11.14. Cyprian, *Ep.* 9.2 (ANF 5:290) and 74.21 (ANF 5:395) express similar concern although not without developing the idea.

meal away from unbelievers because if they were to eat without “discerning” the body, they would run the risk of divine judgment.

John Chrysostom struggled to explain the meaning of 1 Corinthians 15.29 to his congregation without divulging the creedal formula used in the baptismal rite. He says:

But first I wish to remind you who are initiated of the response which on that evening they who introduce you to the mysteries bid you make; and then I will also explain the saying of Paul ... And I desire indeed expressly to utter it, but I dare not on account of the uninitiated; for these add a difficulty to our exposition, compelling us either not to speak clearly or to declare unto them the ineffable mysteries. Nevertheless, as I may be able, I will speak as through a veil.¹¹

Even the golden-mouthed preacher preferred this sort of inelegance to the premature disclosure of the church’s mysteries.

Cyril of Jerusalem urged caution with respect to matters of Christian theology. He warned the catechumens that it was unsafe to discuss the Father, Son and Holy Spirit with unbelievers because such ideas ran the risk of causing them harm.

The sun blinds people suffering from poor sight, and those with weak eyes are distressed and blinded by its light; not that the sun of its nature is blinding, but because the human eye cannot look upon it. Similarly, unbelievers, whose sickness is of the heart, cannot look upon the splendor of the Godhead.¹²

He even insisted that the baptismal candidates refrain from mentioning any of his instructions to the other catechumens.¹³ Theodore of Mopsuestia preached at length about the power of the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist. He explained how these sacraments joined a person to God and the Christian community. If a person had not been properly catechized, he or she would fail to understand the deeper meaning of the sacred meal and miss its significance to his or her detriment.¹⁴ Thus converts received warnings regarding the mortal danger associated with discussing secret matters with a person not properly prepared by catechesis.

Liturgical forms developed over time and by the fourth century came to include secret components beyond the celebration of the Eucharist. The public portion of the worship service contained a series of prayers, scripture readings, and the homily. Only after the dismissal of the uninitiated did the

¹¹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 40.2 (PG 61.347; NPNF¹ 12:244–45).

¹² Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis*, 6.29 (*Fathers of the Church* 61:165).

¹³ *Ibid.*, *Procatechesis*, 12.

¹⁴ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord’s Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist*, ed. Alphonse Mingana (Cambridge, U. K.: W. Heffer & Sons, 1933), 21–26. Augustine makes a similar point in his homily on the Gospel of John, 96.3–5 (NPNF¹ 7:372–373). See also, *Apostolic Constitutions* VII.25 (ANF 7:470).

recitation of the creed, the kiss of peace, and the Lord's Supper take place. The kiss of peace fell into this portion of the liturgy because it provided a liturgical enactment of unity and fellowship within the Christian community. One could not extend this gesture towards the uninitiated since proper affiliation with the church formed the basis of the Christian fellowship expressed through the kiss.¹⁵ Traditional practice and exegesis of the scriptural passages mentioned above served to keep the Eucharist in the restricted part of the service as well. The inclusion of the creed as an element of Christian worship to be kept secret comes from a later period, most probably from the fourth century when Christian creedal formulations became particularly contentious. Before this, a type of creedal statement occasioned baptism, developing out of the Trinitarian formula for the rite.¹⁶ The process by which the recitation of the creed and the baptismal liturgy came to be a part of the *disciplina arcani* is not entirely clear. Nevertheless, by the fourth century, clergy and theologians assumed that the doctrine encompassed all of these liturgical components.¹⁷

Those converting to Christianity in this period were expected to undergo a time of moral testing and doctrinal instruction as a part of the process of being initiated into the church. This probationary period usually lasted a year, with the bulk of the instruction taking place during Lent, and baptism being administered early on Easter Sunday morning.¹⁸ During this Lenten

¹⁵ In his study, *Kissing Christians: Ritual and Community in the Late Ancient Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), Michael Penn discusses the ways in which the ritual kiss created and reinforced community. Secondary functions of the ritual kiss, such as the demonstration of forgiveness given to a repentant sinner, served to add further meaning to the primary function of defining community.

¹⁶ C.f. Matthew 28:19; the *Didache* 8–10; the *Apostolic Tradition*, 3–4; and the Old Roman Creed. The details of this development are rather difficult to tease out. For a general study of the relevant sources and what they have to say on the topic see K. W. Noakes, "Initiation: From New Testament Times until St Cyprian," 112–127; Peter B. Cobb, "The Eucharist: The Liturgy of the Word in the Early Church," 228; both in *The Study of Liturgy* (rev. ed.; ed. Cheslyn Jones, et. al., New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Paul F. Bradshaw, "The Profession of Faith in Early Christian Baptism," *Evangelical Quarterly* 78.2 (April 2006): 101–102.

¹⁷ See in particular the catecheses of Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Sermons of Ambrose and Augustine show these preachers falling silent about the details of the mysteries if they happened to come across the topic during a homily. For a more comprehensive collection of third through fifth century sources which speak to the matter of the *disciplina arcani*, see Yarnold, *Awe-Inspiring Rites*, 55–9.

¹⁸ This presents the prescribed pattern but deviations from this norm are attested in the sources. A few examples will suffice. Cyprian advocates infant baptism in his *Ep.* 64, and numerous fourth century bishops comment on the baptism of infants. Their differing opinions of the practice confirm the fact that it was common enough to be a point of contention. Another baptismal option was the practice of baptism at a saint's shrine or a pilgrimage site associated with a holy man. Theodoret referred to this practice in discussing the throngs of Arab nomads who received baptism in the presence of Symeon the Stylite. Theodoret,

instruction the catechumens learned the creed, basic Christian theology, and in some cases, the meaning of the sacraments they were about to take part in for the first time.¹⁹

The Secrecy of the Mysteries?

Despite the fact that, at least from the beginning of the second century, Christians were being encouraged to maintain some sort of liturgical secrecy, the actual practice of the *disciplina arcani* is surprisingly difficult to determine. Liturgical scholarship has traditionally assumed that secrecy was diligently maintained.²⁰ Some have called this position into question by cataloging references in public sermons to the liturgical elements which were supposed to remain secret, concluding that “there can have been few secrets left for a fourth century catechumen as he commenced his instruction.”²¹

This latter position is bolstered when one looks at late Roman elites who were well positioned to have exposure to Christianity yet maintained the traditional cult. Several important examples illustrate the knowledge of the Christian mysteries among the uninitiated. In the early second century, Pliny derived a rudimentary sense of Christian worship, including the ideal of secrecy through interviewing Christians, or at least former Christians.²² Justin Martyr seems to have felt little reluctance in disclosing components of Christian worship in his defense of the faith to the emperor Antoninus Pius.²³ Origen’s refutation of the attack on Christianity by Celsus shows that at least this one critic knew the scriptures fairly well and was at least familiar with the practice of Christian baptism.²⁴

In the fourth century, as advocacy for the maintenance of the *disciplina arcani* reached a crescendo, even more evidence of lax enforcement appears. The anti-Christian treatise by the emperor Julian, *Against the Galileans*,

History of the Monks of Syria, 26.13. In such cases, catechetical instruction receives minimal attention in the sources.

¹⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose, and John Chrysostom waited until after baptism and the first communion to do this. Augustine writes his *On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed* without any reference to the mysteries; apparently he is also in the same tradition as Cyril and Ambrose. Theodore of Mopsuestia instructed catechumens in the sacraments before they experienced these rites. The apparent difference between Chrysostom and Theodore, both of whom likely delivered their sermons as priests in Antioch within a few years of each other, is rather striking.

²⁰ Edward Yarnold, *Awe-Inspiring Rites*, 55 ff.; and *The Study of Liturgy*, 141–2.

²¹ See in particular, Juliette Day, “Adherence to the *Disciplina Arcani* in the Fourth Century,” *Studia Patristica* 35 (2001): 266–270.

²² Pliny, *Letters*, 1.10.96–97.

²³ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 61, 65–7 (ANF 1:183–185).

²⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 40, 44, 46 (ANF 4:413–416).

offers a strong case for the disclosure of Christian mysteries. Julian quoted several times from the first chapter of the Gospel of John and then concluded, "But if the only begotten son is one thing and God the Word something else, as I have heard it said by some of the members of your sect, then it seems that not even John was foolish enough to declare that [Jesus was God]." ²⁵ While Julian did not reveal the wording of the creed, he did mention some of the central sticking points in the fourth century controversies over the incarnation of Christ.

Julian also disclosed information about the secret rites of the church. He ridiculed the doctrine of baptism, first quoting Paul and then arguing for its utter foolishness.

"Do not be deceived, for neither idolaters nor adulterers nor homosexuals, nor sexual libertines nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor extortionists shall inherit the kingdom of God. And of this you are not in ignorance, brothers, because you were these things; but you washed yourselves and you were sanctified in the name of Jesus." [1 Corinthians 6.9–11] Do you not see that he admits the men he addresses *were* these things, and then he says they were "washed" and they were "sanctified," as though water itself had acquired the power to cleanse and purify not the body only, but even the soul! But baptism does not take the sores away from the leper, or the scabs and boils, the wens and disfigurements, or gout or dysentery or dropsy, or a whitlow – in fact, [water] takes away no disorder of the body, however great or small: so shall it then do away with adultery, theft, and all of the sins of the soul? ²⁶

Julian again appeals to scripture in his critique of Christian practice. He simply mocks the idea that baptism removes sin. If its cleansing ability cannot even remove one of a whole range of skin diseases, which afflict only the surface of the skin, how could it possibly reach down into a person's soul and cleanse the heinous sins which so stain it?

The Eucharist also came under Julian's attack. He touched on this Christian practice while criticizing Christians for their failure to maintain the ancient performance of sacrifices, either pagan or Jewish. ²⁷ The Christians had so rejected the Jewish cult that they even refused to observe the Jewish feasts.

²⁵ *Contra Galilaeos*, 225, in *Juliani imperatoris librorum contra Christianos quae supersunt*, ed. C.J. Neumann (Leipzig: Teubner, 1880); trans. Joseph Hoffman, *Julian's Against the Galileans*, (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2004), 127. Cf. also Libanius, *Orationes*, 18.178, Libanii Opera, vol. 2, ed. Richard Foerster (Lipsiae: Teubner, 1904), 313–314; (Norman, LCL).

²⁶ *Contra Galilaeos*, 109; trans. Hoffman, *Against the Galileans*, 124.

²⁷ The resumption of sacrifices was one of Julian's main aims. He actively promoted pagan sacrificial cults which he felt had been neglected and attempted to restore the Temple in Jerusalem. See Sozomen 5.22 (*NPNF*² 2:343–344), Socrates 3.20 (*NPNF*² 2:89–90), Theodoret 3.15 (*NPNF*² 3:103), and G.W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 88 ff.

And the Galileans say, "But we cannot keep the rule concerning the feast of unleavened bread, the Passover. For [we believe] Christ was sacrificed for our sake once and for all." Indeed, and did he then command you himself not to eat unleavened bread? With the gods as my witnesses I count myself among those who avoid the festivals of the Jews. But I venerate without hesitation the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, [for they were] members of a sacred race, the Chaldeans, learned in the arts of divination, who became acquainted with the rite of circumcision during the time of their wandering among the Egyptians.²⁸

Julian suggests that he honors the ancient cultic traditions of the Jews better than do the Christians. How he does this is not entirely clear. Perhaps he refers to his attempts to rebuild the temple of the Jews in Jerusalem. He may also be suggesting that both he and the Jews follow their ancestral cult, whereas the Christians worship in a way that is unprecedented. He clarifies this point later in the context of discussing Jewish sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem. "You have invented a whole new way of sacrificing that does not need Jerusalem."²⁹ Julian's critique focuses on the charge of Christian innovation. However, in the process of criticizing them, he mentions that Christians have a sacrifice of their own, one that does not need the temple of Jerusalem.

Gregory of Nazianzus indicates that Julian had been baptized and was not simply a catechumen; indeed, he even served as a reader in the church.³⁰ Furthermore, Constantius II, Julian's cousin and predecessor as emperor of the western half of the empire, saw to it that he received a Christian education under Eusebius, the bishop of Nicomedia.³¹ His knowledge of the Christian scriptures, evidenced even in the few quotations discussed above, confirms this training. Thus it is no surprise that Julian possessed ample material for the critique he leveled against Christianity, including the details of Christian liturgy.

Not only did Julian know these things, he publicized them in his attack against the Christians. Since the majority of the literary manuscripts we

²⁸ *Contra Galilaeos*, 230; trans. Hoffmann, *Against the Galileans*, 139.

²⁹ *Contra Galilaeos*, 219; trans. Hoffman, *Against the Galileans*, 130.

³⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes*, 4.52 (SC 309:154–156); *Julian the Emperor*, ed. C. W. King, (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1888). "For no sooner had he inherited the empire than he publicly professed his impiety, as if ashamed of ever having been a Christian, and on this account bearing a grudge against the Christians in whose name he had participated: and the very first of his audacities, according to those who boast of his secret doings, into which details am I forced to enter! with unhallowed blood he rids himself of his baptism, setting up the initiation of abomination against the initiation according to our rite, "a swine wallowing in the mire," according to the proverb; and he unconsecrates his hands by cleansing them from the bloodless sacrifice by means whereof we are made partakers with Christ, both in His sufferings and in His divinity."

³¹ *Ibid.*, *Orationes*, 4.23. For a fuller discussion of Julian's education see Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate*, 23–30.

have from this period were at one point copied by a churchman or monk, it is no great surprise that this attack on the church does not have a strong manuscript tradition. In fact, what we know about the content of this text comes mostly from refutations of it.³² Thus it is difficult to determine just how wide a circulation this text would have had. That Libanius' funeral oration for Julian mentions the work, suggests that it was something that his contemporaries would have at least known about.³³

Nevertheless, one would likely err in concluding that Julian's diatribe against the Christians was widely disseminated or broadly known, even among the relatively small literate portion of the population. Julian was not a particularly well-liked emperor and one can imagine his written work failing to captivate his subjects. The significance of this text for us here is that it supplies an example of the mysteries being disclosed to an uninitiated audience. One can imagine this happening on a much smaller scale with some frequency. Julian was not the only apostate after all.³⁴ A person might leave the church and as a result lose the desire to keep the mysteries a secret. Others may simply not have been as concerned as the clergy who stressed secrecy.³⁵ One only needs to read a few sermons by a preacher like John Chrysostom to learn that his congregation frequently failed to live up to the high ethical standards he set for them.

Furthermore, the council of Nicaea and the creed promulgated after 325 had become a hugely contentious matter affecting the whole empire. Numerous clergy were exiled and recalled repeatedly throughout the fourth century. The creed itself, particularly the precise terminology of the text, stood at the very heart of the matter. Through all of this, the church recited the creed within the secret portion of the liturgy, and clergy often warned catechumens not to reveal it to outsiders, even to other catechumens who had not yet been accepted to receive baptism. However, a matter of such importance for imperial politics would not escape the attention of administrators for long. Interested parties could have hardly failed to know at least the basic issues at stake, the idea that the controversy dealt with the person of Christ and how Christians were to understand him in relationship to God.

One prominent example of this can be found in the works of Themistius, a fourth-century pagan philosopher and rhetor who acted as an advisor to

³² Julian, *Against the Galileans*, 76–77.

³³ Libanius, *Orationes*, 18.178 (Norman, LCL): "As winter lengthened the nights, besides many other fine compositions he attacked the books in which that fellow from Palestine is claimed to be a god and a son of god." There is a brief discussion of this in Julian, *Against the Galileans*, 75.

³⁴ See Julian, *Epistle* 79 for the case of a former Christian bishop recruited by Julian to serve as a local pagan priest.

³⁵ Ambrose lists four faults which result in the revelation of the mysteries: flattery, avarice, boastfulness, and incautious speech (*Expositiones in Psalmos*, CXVIII.2.26).

most of the eastern emperors who held the throne during his adult life.³⁶ His orations contain several references to Hebrew and Christian scriptures.³⁷ These references, focusing primarily on political life and statecraft, usually remain rather vague. Nevertheless, they bear witness to Themistius as the sort of interested individual who did not convert but had considerable professional motivation to maintain an awareness of Christianity.

Particularly relevant for the discussion of Christian secrecy is the fact that Themistius also showed an understanding of some of the issues at stake in the theological controversy over the incarnation. His Oration 1 was addressed to Constantius and delivered in Ancyra in the year 350. The oration took up the topic of *philanthrōpia*, the love of humankind. In the relevant passage, Themistius sought to explain how it can be considered good for either God or an emperor to condescend in showing love towards the mass of humanity. In this context, Themistius stated:

But, as I said, while we consider these names to be unworthy of God as too trifling or inferior for Him, we are not ashamed to call Him a lover of mankind. And this is why. Man's intelligence naturally considers everything inferior to Him which it is able to find in any of the things which derive from Him. Thus intelligence ascribes to the source of all things being beyond being, and Power beyond power, and goodness beyond goodness, hesitating, however, and moreover being cautious in the association of the terms.³⁸

The idea that anything that is not God derives from him and is, as a matter of necessity, lesser than God, coincides nicely with Constantius' theological inclinations.³⁹ Furthermore, commentators agree that this passage very likely refers directly to the contemporary controversy over the Christian understanding of the relationship between God and Christ.⁴⁰ Themistius

³⁶ John Vanderspoel, *Themistius and the Imperial Court: Oratory, Civic Duty, and Paideia from Constantius to Theodosius* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

³⁷ For a discussion of these references see Glanville Downey, "Themistius and the Defense of Hellenism in the Fourth Century," *The Harvard Theological Review* 50 (1957): 262–3; and "Allusions to Christianity in Themistius' Orations," *Studia Patristica* 5 (1962): 480–488.

³⁸ Themistius, *Orations*, 1.8b, trans. Peter Heather and David Moncur in *Politics, Philosophy, and Empire in the Fourth Century: Select Orations of Themistius* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), 85. See also, note 34 above and the brief quotation from Libanius' *Orations*, 18.178. Even Libanius' casual comment about Julian's attack on the Christians references at least a vague understanding of the two affirmations which led to the disagreements regarding the person of Christ, namely that he was understood as "god and the son of god." Thus even Libanius, who is well known for studiously avoiding references to Christianity, knew something about the theology of the new religion.

³⁹ Heather and Moncur, *Politics, Philosophy, and Empire*, 48 ff.

⁴⁰ Downey, "Allusions to Christianity," 484. Also see Heather and Moncur, *Politics, Philosophy, and Empire*, 85–6, n. 115 as well as 57 ff. All agree that Themistius references the Christian theological debates of the fourth century. However, where Downey concludes that Themistius is being sarcastic and effectively mocking the debate, Heather and Moncur see it as the sincere application of Themistius' philosophical assumptions to the debate. I incline

clearly had some understanding of the contentious theological issues which focused on the supposedly secret doctrines of the creed. This awareness is further evidenced by comments made in speeches to Jovian⁴¹ in 365 and to Valens⁴² in around 375. In each case, Themistius urged the emperor to adopt a policy of religious toleration in dealing with the various Christian factions within the empire.⁴³ Themistius clearly had substantial, even if not comprehensive, understanding of important points of Christian difference.

All of this strongly suggests that people, particularly those who would have cared to discover it, would likely have had access to much of the basic information about the secret matters of the church: a statement of faith regarding the divinity of Christ, a ritual bath meant to purify a person from sin, and a ritual meal or symbolic sacrifice. Nevertheless, calls for secrecy and the liturgical practice of secrecy were a regular occurrence in this period.

Revealing the Mysteries

Following the Edict of Milan and the conversion of Constantine, the position of the church in the empire began to change. It certainly changed a lot more slowly than the church historian and biographer of Constantine, Eusebius of Caesarea, would have liked his audience to believe. Nevertheless, the new licit status granted Christianity and the lure of following the emperor into his new religion certainly increased interest in Christianity. By the end of the fourth century, when John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia were training catechumens, the number of Christians in the empire had grown considerably and Christian institutions had become increasingly prominent politically, culturally, and architecturally throughout the cities of the empire. Such growth played into the hands of bishops and theologians who joined Eusebius in dreaming of a triumphant Christian empire. However, this sort of growth also presented problems for the same bishops, who recognized a need to integrate converts into Christian communities. They insisted that converts needed more than to have their names

towards the latter interpretation. However, either reading substantiates the point advanced here.

⁴¹ *Orationes*, 5.69c.

⁴² This is the lost *Oratio ad Valentam*. For the evidence that the Latin oration is a Renaissance forgery, cf. R. Foerster, "Andreas Dudith und die zwölfte Rede des Themistios," *Neue Jahrbücher für Pädagogik* 6 (1900): 74–93. However, a summary of the speech is contained in Socrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 4.32.

⁴³ For a fuller discussion of Themistius' desired religious policy, see Lawrence J. Daly, "Themistius' Plea for Religious Tolerance," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 12 (1971): 65–79.

placed on the rolls of the church. They needed education and orientation towards Christian worship. Catechesis provided the answer to this problem.

Occasionally, a source offers a glimpse of the way catechesis could captivate the group of catechumens being initiated. The pilgrim Egeria noted in her travel log that baptismal candidates in Jerusalem in the middle of the fourth century received their catechetical lessons with a great deal of enthusiasm: “The bishop relates what has been done, and interprets it, and, as he does so, the applause is so loud that it can be heard outside the church.”⁴⁴ Even if this detail is something of an exaggeration, it strongly suggests a significant response, and likely a rather emotional response. Such a clamor surely requires a crowd and the communal nature of catechesis must not pass unnoticed in this context. Catechumens underwent initiation in groups and with the assistance of a previously initiated layperson. The formation and strengthening of these communal ties clearly played a significant role in the impact of this rite on those undergoing it. Nevertheless, if the mysteries were not really all that secret, why did the clergy of the fourth century place such emphasis on the *disciplina arcani*? How did they maintain the belief and expectation that catechesis would reveal deep truths and function as an efficacious rite in itself?

Answers to these questions can be found by a study of the catechetical programs of the late fourth century clergy. The clergy used the elaborate process of catechesis as an opportunity to take stock of the morality of catechumens and to teach them about Christian doctrine and practice. Doctrine, worship, and ethics each played an essential role in the catecheses of Chrysostom and Theodore. However, these catechists each took their own distinctive approach to the presentation of this material and the rhetorical structures of their sermon collections bear the marks of the homilists’ particular circumstances and concerns.

Chrysostom frequently instructed his catechumens in the doctrine of the Nicene Creed during their catechetical training. However, his primary strategy was to enfold them in a definitively Christian moral world. Chrysostom addressed in detail how Christians should perceive things such as jewelry, spectacles, oracles, drunkenness, leisure, and worldly goods, to name but a few topics of moral concern. In his tenth baptismal instruction, Chrysostom was about to instruct the catechumens in the mysteries of the Christian church when he broke off mid-thought to return to the theme which had dominated the previous sermon, the swearing of oaths. “Therefore, I wished to initiate you in all these matters today. But what is happening to me? My concern over your oaths – a concern that makes my soul waste away – does

⁴⁴ *Itinerarium Egeriae*, 47.2 (SC, 21); trans. John Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels* (London: SPCK, 1971), 47.2.

not let me go.”⁴⁵ His audience apparently found his concern tiresome,⁴⁶ nevertheless, he proceeded to warn them against the error of making oaths.

A number of Chrysostom’s moral precepts would have been shared by his contemporaries outside the church, particularly Stoic philosophers. Whatever similarities may have existed between Stoic and Christian ethics, however, Chrysostom emphasized the uniquely Christian nature of proper behavior. The moral conduct of the believer ought to flow from Christian theology and a desire to relate rightly to the God of the creed. For Chrysostom sound ethics had their beginning and end, as well as their means, in Christ.

Such proper conduct required nothing shy of open combat with the devil, and a bold confrontation of the *daimones* which inhabited the world.⁴⁷ God provided baptism as a cleansing from sin, and anointing with oil as a sign and seal to protect the Christian from diabolical temptations. However, Chrysostom was convinced that full appropriation of these gifts required catechesis. An uninitiated Christian baptized on his deathbed, who then went on to recover, would lack necessary training. In his first homily on the Acts of the Apostles, in the midst of a lengthy discourse on avoiding post-baptismal sin, Chrysostom argued concerning such a person, that “if he recovers from his illness, [he] is as vexed as if some great harm had been done to him. For since he has not been prepared for a virtuous life, he has no heart for the conflicts which are to follow, and shrinks at the thought of them.”⁴⁸ Chrysostom firmly believed that sound catechesis prepared candidates to pursue a proper Christian life. Furthermore, by cultivating this sense of danger surrounding baptism, Chrysostom elevated the importance of both the rite itself and the preparation for the rite, each of which the catechumen needed to experience in conjunction with the other and only within the proper context of the church.

By contrast, Theodore of Mopsuestia gave only minimal attention to instructing the catechumens in Christian ethics. The vast majority of his moral instruction appears in his commentary on the Lord’s Prayer. He repeatedly urged his audience to be the kind of people who could pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven ...;” who could pray, “give us this day our daily bread ...;” and who could pray, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive

⁴⁵ John Chrysostom, *Catechesis de iuramento*, 156; trans. Paul W. Harkins, *John Chrysostom’s Baptismal Instructions* (New York: Newman Press, 1963), 10.3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* As if responding to a groan from the crowd, he said, “And I know that many of you condemn the excess in my language, because you heard me say that my concern makes my soul waste away.”

⁴⁷ John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions*, 9.29. See also, Dayna Kalleres, “Exorcising the Devil to Silence Christ’s Enemies: Ritualized Speech Practices in Late Antique Christianity” (Ph.D. Thesis, Brown University, 2002).

⁴⁸ Chrysostom, *Acts of the Apostles*, 1 (PG 60.25; NPNF¹ 11:10).

those who have trespassed against us ...⁴⁹ His position with respect to morality was firm, but ultimately very simple and rather understated.

Theodore sought instead to enmesh his catechumens in a different sort of Christian world from that urged by Chrysostom. He wanted to make them full participants in the believing community at worship. In a sense his whole catechetical program was liturgical. He began with ten sermons in which he gave a detailed analysis of the creed, followed this with his one sermon on the Lord's Prayer, and concluded with a thorough treatment of the baptismal and Eucharistic liturgies in five sermons.

Each of these three sets of sermons corresponded to elements of the liturgy: creed, communal prayer, and sacrament. Theodore wanted Christians to know what the creed meant when they recited it with their fellow believers. He also wanted them to worship God rightly. He offered detailed instructions about each component of the sacramental liturgy; what each participant, word, and gesture meant in relation to divine reality. He repeatedly stressed for the catechumens that they participated in such a reality when they received the elements of the Eucharist. Theodore preached:

As often, therefore, as the service of this awe-inspiring sacrifice is performed, which is clearly the likeness of heavenly things and of which, after it has been perfected, we become worthy to partake through food and drink, as a true participation in our future benefits – we must picture in our mind that we are dimly in heaven, and through faith, draw in our imagination the image of heavenly things, while thinking that Christ who is in heaven and who died for us, rose and ascended into heaven and is now being immolated.⁵⁰

Furthermore, he suggested that the way for a person to assent to and appropriate the complex and technical aspects of Nicene orthodoxy was to join the community in the liturgy in all of its facets but particularly in reciting the creed and taking the Eucharist. Theodore's idea of Christianity centered on the lived experience of the earthly community regularly encountering the person of Christ in the course of corporate worship. This notion drove his catechetical program.

Each of these collections of sermons accomplished far more than simply furnishing baptismal candidates with information regarding Christological particularities, moral precepts, or the content of the liturgical mysteries. Rather, these preachers carefully crafted comprehensive curricula for initiation into the Christian church. Chrysostom's emphasis may have been

⁴⁹ *Catechetical Homilies*, ed. Alphonse Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist*, Woodbrooke Studies VI (Cambridge, U. K.: W. Heffer & Sons, 1933), 6–13.

⁵⁰ *Catechetical Homilies*, ed. Alphonse Mingana (Woodbrooke Studies VI) 83; and *Les Homélie Catéchétiques*, ed. Raymond Tonneau and Robert Devreesse (Vatican City: Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 1949), 125, recto.

ethical, and Theodore's may have been liturgical, but each of these sets of sermons aimed at a holistic approach to catechesis and initiation. Any sustained attempt to maintain a real distinction between doctrine and cult breaks down in this context. The preachers structured their catecheses to affect the entirety of the candidates. They aimed to instruct the thoughts, words, and actions of those seeking initiation into the church. They insisted that catechumens needed more than information about the mysteries, even more than the experience of the mysteries. They maintained that candidates needed the preacher to reveal to them, through catechesis, the nature of the Christian life in a controlled and systematic way. Maintaining the rhetorical efficacy of secrecy allowed the clergy to heighten the gravity and profundity of initiation, to punctuate the experience and the material taught, and to do all of this within the structured community of the church.

Whatever information a disgruntled former Christian or a loose-tongued practitioner of the faith may have made public, the uninitiated individual who heard it still would not have been incorporated into the church community by the proper clerical authorities. In this way, it did not matter if the person coming for catechesis knew much or only a little about the mysteries of the Christian church. The clergy made every effort to present catechetical instruction, and the faith to which it introduced a person, as a proper initiation and incorporation into a life centered on Christ in heaven and the church. What Theodore and Chrysostom revealed to the catechumens was not primarily the cognitive content of Christianity, but the catechumen's approaching position in an idealized image of a body of Christians directing their lives towards Christ in the course of corporate worship.

What we see in these examples from Theodore and John Chrysostom then are two possible rhetorical strategies for dealing with the transition from an outsider's knowledge of the Christian mysteries to an insider's. In each case, however, the catechist used bold and emotional language to stress the idea that the baptismal candidate was moving into a radically different stage of Christian experience. He or she was leaving behind the other catechumens and fully joining the Christian community. Though the rigid boundary between members of the church and unbaptized catechumens was liturgically enacted at every Eucharistic service with the removal of the uninitiated, the boundary was sometimes very publically shown to be porous. Consider the example of Ambrose's acclamation as bishop when he was yet unbaptized.⁵¹ Though he had to undergo the rites before he could assume his episcopal position, he had clearly come to hold a position of prominence within an important Christian family in Milan which allowed his dramatic elevation. Similarly, Constantine and Constantius engaged

⁵¹ Rufinus, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 11.11.

with the formation of Christian doctrine at the highest levels, yet without receiving baptism.

Here again we see the need for preachers, in this case catechetical preachers, to emphasize the boundary by presenting catechesis and baptism as a radical break. In doing so, these preachers sought to give their audiences a theological vision of Christianity and their future place within it. Not all of the imaginative tools passed on to catechumens through the catechetical process pertained to the *disciplina arcani* and secrecy was not the most important matter. Offering ways of thinking about the world and the place of the Christian within it were. Two brief examples from catechetical contexts will help to elucidate this point.

The first comes from Augustine's *On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed*. The text is actually a letter of Augustine to a young deacon in Carthage named Deogratias. He has been given the charge of teaching catechumens and expresses to Augustine considerable concern regarding his abilities. He fears that he bores his students although his reputation as a good teacher has already reached Augustine. Augustine offers a warm response full of encouragement and recommendations for how to approach the process of teaching those uninstructed in Christian doctrine. These were not baptismal candidates, rather, they were catechumens who wanted instruction in the faith as a way to help them make the decision to seek acceptance into the rank of the *competentes*, those immediately preparing for baptism.⁵² Augustine offers two different ways to address the catechumens based on their level of education and knowledge of pagan as well as Christian literature. Though the two approaches are distinct, they develop out of the same basic approach. Augustine urges Deogratias to begin the education of his catechetical students with biblical history. In each case the scheme of creation, fall, God's covenantal faithfulness, and the advent of Christ gives structure to the lessons he advocates. In this way, the catechumens will encounter all of human history as oriented towards God and in particular the coming of Christ for the purpose of redemption.⁵³ For Augustine, the biblical history necessary for teaching catechumens comprises an account of God's redemptive work from the beginning of time. This story encompassed all of human history. If rightly taught and understood, Augustine believed it would make clear the right choice and urge the catechumens to seek baptism, to secure their position in God's redemptive work. The aim was to present a powerful mental image of a thoroughly Christian past, present, and future.

Though slightly more modest in the expanse of its vision, a similar attempt to articulate a palpably Christian world view can be found in Cyril of

⁵² Augustine, *De catechizandis rudibus*, 26.50 (NPNF^I 3.312).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 3.6 (NPNF^I 3.285–286).

Jerusalem's catechetical sermons. A theme emerges in these sermons which ties in with a major emphasis of Cyril's episcopate. Jerusalem was ecclesiastically subordinate to its coastal rival Caesarea, and Cyril actively promoted the elevation of Jerusalem as the preeminent see of Palestine. To this end, he focused attention on the biblical history of Jerusalem, the fact that James the brother of Jesus became the first Christian bishop in Jerusalem, and most especially the presence of the true cross in this city.⁵⁴ Cyril also promoted Jerusalem's central role in the eschatological future of the church as the place where Christ would come again.⁵⁵ Cyril imagined a Jerusalem that held a place of central importance in the Christian story, even to the point of being the center of the world.⁵⁶ His promotion of this image featured prominently in his catechetical homilies as well.⁵⁷ "Yet one should never grow weary of hearing about our crowned Lord, especially on this holy Golgotha. For others merely hear, but we see and touch."⁵⁸ Cyril singles out the catechumens of Jerusalem as having pride of place. Their relationship to Golgotha and the cross of their messiah should act as a special reminder of the truth of their faith. Golgotha itself offered an apologetic for Christ's death and resurrection against anyone who might doubt. "For if I should now deny it, Golgotha here, close to which we are now gathered, refutes me; the wood of the Cross, now distributed piecemeal from this place over all the world, refutes me."⁵⁹ Cyril made every attempt to use the presence of the cross in Jerusalem and the spiritual topography of the city for the education of the baptismal candidates. Jan Willem Drijvers is right to point out the political motives of Cyril's attempts to promote Jerusalem.⁶⁰ But that should not diminish our attention to the means he used to accomplish this goal. By stressing the holiness of sites around Jerusalem and their value as mnemonic devices, Cyril presented an image of his catechumen's immediate surroundings that forcefully declared the validity of Christianity. The success of his

⁵⁴ Jan Willem Drijvers, *Cyril of Jerusalem: Bishop and City* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 153 ff.

⁵⁵ *Epistula ad Constantium imperatorem*, 6; Drijvers, *Cyril*, 161–2.

⁵⁶ Cyril, *Catechesis*, 13.28. For more on this topic see Philip S. Alexander, "Jerusalem as the Omphalos of the World: On the History of a Geographical Concept," in *Jerusalem: Its Sanctity and Centrality to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Lee I. Levine (New York: Continuum, 1999), 104–119.

⁵⁷ John Baldovin counts 67 references to the holy sites of Jerusalem in Cyril's catechetical sermons; *The Urban Character of Christian Worship: The Origins, Development, and Meaning of Stational Liturgy* (Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987), 15.

⁵⁸ Cyril, *Catechesis*, 13.22; trans. Leo P. McCauley and Anthony A. Stephenson, *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, vol. 2, (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1969), 19.

⁵⁹ Cyril, *Catechesis*, 13.4; trans. McCauley and Stephenson, *The Works of Saint Cyril*, vol. 2, 6 (translation slightly modified).

⁶⁰ Drijvers, *Cyril*, 157–59.

approach can be discerned in the esteem given to Jerusalem at the Council of Constantinople in 381, where it was declared “the mother of all churches.”⁶¹

Thus we see a great variety of approaches in the presentation of Christianity to catechumens. Ethics, worship, redemptive history, and sacred geography could each be used in different circumstances to promote a Christianized image of the world.⁶² Though a range of rhetorical strategies were employed to present to catechumens a discourse of Christian supremacy and their relationship to it, the sources show a strong inclination toward the dramatic and the participatory. Chrysostom and Theodore’s repetition of the term awe-inspiring (Gk., *phrikotos* or *phrikōdēs*; Syr., *dhl*) captures this nicely.⁶³

This discussion of highly emotional language, dramatic rites, and a cloak of secrecy strongly suggests the sort of experience one would have encountered in connection with contemporary pagan rites of the so-called mystery cults.⁶⁴ These cults urged personal experience of a divine entity through elaborate participatory rituals. What we do know of these sometimes enigmatic cults whose secrets were rather well maintained is that a common feature found among them is the concern for personal transformation.⁶⁵ Apuleius’ *Metamorphosis* takes its name from the transformation experienced by the protagonist Lucius. While dabbling in magic he had been turned into an ass. Eventually moved by the devotion of Lucius, the goddess Isis freed him from this fate and transformed him back into a human. This act of divine intervention precedes the further metamorphoses Lucius would experience as an initiate into the cult of Isis. These successive metamorphoses coincide with sacred rites honoring the goddess.

Women, resplendent in their white robes, happily carrying different kinds of emblems and decked in spring flowers, strewed the ground with blooms, drawn from their breasts, along the path that the holy company trod; other women held shining mirrors behind their backs, facing towards the goddess as she advanced, to show their devotion to her; others, carrying ivory combs, waved their arms and twisted their fingers as if they were combing and styling the queen’s hair.⁶⁶

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 176. Of course, Cyril’s catechetical material was simply one portion of this project. For a full account of Cyril’s efforts to elevate the position of Jerusalem, consult the whole of chapter 6 in Drijvers, *Cyril*.

⁶² This list is of course not intended to be exhaustive. Numerous additional rhetorical strategies can be found in these and other catechetical literature.

⁶³ *Phrikotos* and *phrikōdēs* both denote something that causes a person to shiver. Lampe, 1490; and Yarnold, *Awe-Inspiring Rites*, 60. Various forms of the Syriac root *dhl* recur throughout Theodore’s catechesis where they refer to the awe associated with proper worship. R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), 862 ff.

⁶⁴ Yarnold, *Awe-Inspiring Rites*, 59–66.

⁶⁵ Mary Beard, John A. North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 287.

⁶⁶ *Metamorphosis*, 11.9; trans. Mary Beard, John A. North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 135.

This text depicts the ritual enactment of a theophany in which the devotees of the goddess ministered to her needs. The description of the rite then rose to a crescendo with entrance of the members of the cult.

Then the crowds of those already initiated into the sacred mysteries poured in, men and women of every rank and every age, shining in the pure whiteness of their linen robes. The women had swathed their hair, dripping with perfume, in transparent veils. The men had shaved their heads completely to leave a glistening pate. All together they shook their sistrums, that were bronze, silver, even gold, to make a piercing rattle. And the terrestrial stars of the great religion joined in too ...⁶⁷

The rite amounted to an absolute sensory overload. The jostling surge of the crowd, the smell of perfume, the deafening rattle of the sistrums, all contributed to the intense atmosphere. How could the stars have failed to join such a celebration?

This fictional account of a mystery cult in action clearly resonates with other practices of Greco-Roman mystery cults. Among these are the Mithraic rites, carried out in dark man-made caves where worshippers encountered an elaborate set of cosmological symbols and the dramatic image of the god Mithras slaying a bull.⁶⁸ The rites that took place in these Mithraea led devotees through the grades of ‘raven’, ‘male bride’, ‘soldier’, ‘lion’, ‘Persian’, ‘sun-runner’, and ‘father’, with each successive elevation affecting a new personal transformation.⁶⁹ Where the Mithraic rites arose toward the end of the first century C.E., the cult of Demeter dated back to the eighth century B.C.E. The Eleusinian mysteries were a fertility cult celebrated annually in the city of Eleusis, just west of Athens. A pair of powerful priestly families in Athens administered the cult but anyone who was not ritually impure and could afford the fees could be initiated into the cult.⁷⁰ This would allow participation in the annual cult which sought to ensure the return of fertility following the infertility of winter. The rites associated with initiation to the cult seem to have included the ritual search for the goddess Persephone. This act entailed a personal quest for the goddess with the results often described as dramatically transformative: “Blessed are earth-bound mortals who have seen these rites, but the uninitiated, who has no share in them, never has the same lot when dead in misty darkness.”⁷¹

⁶⁷ *Metamorphosis*, 11.10; trans. Beard et al., *Religions of Rome: A Sourcebook*, 135.

⁶⁸ Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 102–4. For photographs of the cave of Mithras at S. Maria Capua Vetere see Beard et al., *Religions of Rome: A Sourcebook*, 89–90.

⁶⁹ Beard et al., *Religions of Rome: A History*, 285.

⁷⁰ George E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 229–37.

⁷¹ *Hymn to Demeter*, 480–482; trans. Diane J. Raynor, *The Homeric Hymns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

Blessed happiness, particularly in the afterlife appears consistently in the claims of the initiated: “Beautiful indeed is the Mystery given us by the blessed gods: death is for mortals no longer an evil, but a blessing.”⁷² Finally, there is the dramatic participatory rite of the *taurobolium* associated with the worship of Magna Mater.⁷³ In this rite, the celebrant was concealed in a pit in the ground covered with perforated boards onto which a bull was led. “When the beast for sacrifice has been brought into position here, they pierce his breast with a hunting spear consecrated to the gods; the vast wound pours forth a stream of steaming blood, and over the bridge of planks below a reeking river gushes out and seethes all around.”⁷⁴ What the Christian Prudentius describes here with derision, participants in the rites understood as a ritual of death and rebirth.⁷⁵ When the celebrant emerged from the pit, as from a grave he was a transformed person, born again into the world as a new man.

At this point, discussions of Christian worship and the mystery religions often turn towards comparison.⁷⁶ Rather than get tangled in questions of influence, genealogy, or even syncretism, we would do well simply to note instead some of the similarities present in our sources. Transformative language exists throughout the discussions here. The expectation of personal interaction with the divine as well as the efficacy of that interaction is also highlighted. Furthermore, the use of highly emotive language and rites to punctuate these divine encounters bears much similarity throughout a broad range of religious groups. We are witnessing here a variety of phenomena emerging from a cultural *milieu* with an apparent consensus regarding religious participation. Any self-respecting religion would guard its central practices from those outside of it. This habit could even serve a proselytizing function, increasing interest by insisting that one has something worth hiding. Furthermore, if secrecy was important, then the disclosure of those secrets should be profound and the experience of the divinity in the rites dramatic. These expectations extend to literary sensibilities which tended

⁷² Inscription found at Eleusis, trans. Samuel Angus, *The Mystery-Religions and Christianity: A Study in the Religious Background of Early Christianity* (London: J. Murray, 1925).

⁷³ For an account of the rite see Prudentius, *Peristephanon*, 10.1006–1051. For a detailed discussion of the *taurobolium* with a particular interest in its evolution prior to this description by Prudentius, see Robert Duthoy, *The Taurobolium: Its Evolution and Terminology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969).

⁷⁴ Prudentius, *Peristephanon*, 10.1026–1030; trans. Beard et al., *Religions of Rome: A Sourcebook*, 161.

⁷⁵ The *taurobolium* could also function as a civic rite performed for the benefit of the emperor. See Beard et al., *Religions of Rome: A Sourcebook*, 162.

⁷⁶ See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). This slightly dated work provides a thorough overview of many of the methodological problems which have recurred in the study of early Christianity since the Reformation.

toward the ornate,⁷⁷ as well as public displays of state power presented in similar terms.⁷⁸ Thus the common thread which united the religious groups discussed is one of context and cultural expectation rather than one of evolution or influence.

Finally, let us conclude by returning to the topic of revelation. According to the catechetical evidence which has been preserved, there is no suggestion that catechesis contained even an implicit claim to being divine revelation. Indeed, Late Antique catechists would have bristled at the idea that their lessons might be considered revelation on a par with acknowledged Christian scripture. Nevertheless, catechesis was clearly understood as more than a means of simply disclosing secrets. Precisely because the *disciplina arcani* was in many ways an open secret, the emphasis could not be on the conveyance of information. This would have been far from sufficient in order to accomplish what was required of catechesis. This information had to come through the proper channels. Gossip, hearsay, and textual references to the mysteries were not enough. The candidate had to encounter both the theology and the rites within the context of the believing community. This included interaction with the initiated laity and the hierarchically structured clergy of the Christian church which vigorously defended its unique status as the body able to represent God on earth. Through these channels, catechesis offered the authoritative word on Christian teaching. The rhetorical emphasis on the secrecy of the Christian mysteries thus provided an important means of discipline for the clergy. Furthermore, this communal initiation, including the hierarchical subordination it entailed, was precisely what the candidates sought. To hear the real content of the faith expounded by the clergy of the church engaged the catechumens and allowed for the enthusiastic response which we saw earlier in the account of Egeria. The impulse to maintain the exclusivity of this matrix of community, creed, and cult came from the top and the bottom alike, in order to insist on the unique position of catechesis in revealing the Christian mysteries.

⁷⁷ Michael Roberts, *The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

⁷⁸ Sabine MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).