II. Late Antique and Byzantine Philosophy

Rival Redemption Doctrines: Nietzsche, Epicurus, and "Latent Christianity"

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Abstract

Despite the many references to Epicurus and to his philosophy in Nietzsche's writings, there has been relatively little scholarship devoted to his interest in Epicureanism. Moreover, no research has focused on what is certainly one of the most interesting themes within this larger topic; the invaluable opposition Epicurus and Lucretius are said to have offered to ancient mysticism and superstition in general, and superstitious beliefs surrounding death and immortality in particular. This paper partially redresses this trend by shedding light on Nietzsche's intriguing image of Epicureanism's struggle, not with mainstream Greco-Roman religion, but with what he considers to be the anti-pagan proto-Christian mysticism of Mediterranean antiquity's "mystery religions."

Keywords: Nietzsche • Epicurus • Greece • Rome • Mystery Religions • Mystery Cults • Christianity • Immortality • Death

1. Introduction

Dozens of references to Epicurus and his philosophy can be found in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900).[1] Surprisingly, there has been rela-

[1] According to Brobjer, there are thirty direct references to Epicurus (and four to his Roman disciple Lucretius) in Nietzsche's published works (Thomas Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Ethics of Character*, Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1995, pp. 347–348). Nietzsche's *indirect* references to Epicurus and his school are less easily quantified. A case in point is Vincenzo's article "Nietzsche and Epicurus" (Joseph Vincenzo, *Man and World*, vol. 27, n. 4, 1994), which devotes considerable

tively little scholarship devoted to this skilled classicist's interest in Epicureanism.[2] More particularly, with the apparent exception of an earlier paper of mine focusing on his middle-period work *Daybreak*,[3] essentially no research has examined what is certainly one of the most original themes within this larger topic, namely, the invaluable opposition that Epicureanism is said to have offered to ancient mysticism in general, and superstitious beliefs surrounding death, immortality, and divine involvement in human affairs in particular. To what extent this lack of scholarship can be attributed to Nietzsche's — especially the *later* Nietzsche's — often exaggerated and dismissive treatment of these matters, is an interesting question.

The purpose of this paper is essentially twofold. (1) To partially redress the comparative absence of scholarship in this area by closely examining several of the late-period Nietzsche's provocative treatments of these topics. (2) To employ post-Nietzsche scholarship on ancient Mediterranean religion to help us better understand the intellectual reality *behind* his intriguing image of the struggle of Epicureanism, not with mainstream Greco-Roman religion, but with the proto-Christian mysticism of Late Antiquity's secretive religious cults. I make the case that, while several of Nietzsche's end-of-career claims in this area are certainly overstated, they nonetheless reveal considerable insight into a fascinating aspect of Late Antiquity.

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attention to what its author takes to be allusions to Epicurus' philosophy in the section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* entitled "The Convalescent."

[2] See A. H. J. Knight's "Nietzsche and Epicurean Philosophy," *Philosophy: Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*, vol. 8, n. 32, 1933; Martin Heidegger's *Nietzsche*, trans. D. Krell, New York: Harper and Row, 1984, vol. 2, p. 52; Laurence Lampert's "Who is Nietzsche's Epicurus?" *International Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 24, n. 2, 1992; Joseph Vincenzo's "Nietzsche and Epicurus"; Marcin Milkowski's "Idyllic Heroism: Nietzsche's View of Epicurus," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, n. 15, Spring, 1998; Laurence Lampert's "Nietzsche and Plato," *Nietzsche and Antiquity*, ed. by Paul Bishop, Rochester: Camden House, 2004, pp. 210–211; and Morgan Rempel's "Nietzsche and the 'Happiness of Repose'," *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, vol. 9, n. 1, 2017.

[3] Morgan Rempel, "*Daybreak* 72: Nietzsche, Epicurus and the 'After Death'," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, vol. 43, n. 2, 2012.

2. *Antichrist*, §. 58

Nietzsche's most forceful treatment of this theme is to be found at *Antichrist*, §. 58, written near the close of his career. Speaking of the corrosive effect of Christianity on the Roman Empire, Nietzsche writes:

> …gloomy concepts such as Hell, such as the sacrifice of the innocent, such as the *unio mystica* in blood drinking… *that* is what became master of Rome, the same species of religion on whose antecedent form Epicurus had already made war. One must read Lucretius to understand *what* it was Epicurus opposed: *not* paganism, but "Christianity," which is to say the corruption of souls by means of the concept of guilt, punishment and immortality. — He opposed the subterranean cults, the whole of latent Christianity — to deny immortality was already in those days a real redemption — And Epicurus would have won, every mind of any account in the Roman Empire was an Epicurean: *then Paul appeared*… Christianity as the formula for outbidding all the subterranean cults, those of Osiris, of the Great Mother, of Mithras for example — *and* for summing them up…[4]

A notebook entry of the period refers to burgeoning Christianity's adaptation "to the needs and the level of understanding of the religious masses of that time," suggesting that:

> … those masses which believed in Isis, Mithras, Dionysus, the "Great Mother" … desired of a religion: (1) hope of a beyond, (2) the bloody phantasmagoria of the sacrificial animal (the mystery), (3) the redemptive deed, the holy legend, (4) asceticism, world-denial, superstitious "purification" … In short: Christianity accommodated itself to already existing and established anti-paganism, to the cults that had been combated by Epicurus — more precisely, to the religions of the lower masses, the women, the slaves, the non-noble classes.[5]

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[4] Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, and *The Antichrist*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968.

[5] Notebook entry dating from Nov. 1887–March 1888, in F. Nietzsche, *Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe (KGA)*, Hrsg. von Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1967, Abt. 8, Bd. 2 [295]. See also *Will*

Before turning to this recurring image of Epicureanism's struggle against the "anti-paganism" of antiquity's "subterranean cults," an introduction to the cults in question is necessary.

3. The Mystery Religions

The cults such passages hold up as both Epicureanism's enemies and early Christianity's progenitors are, of course, the foreign "mystery religions" or "mystery cults" that existed alongside the state religions of Ancient Greece and Rome. The excerpts above refer to the cults of Isis, Osiris, Mithras, Dionysus, and the Great Mother. Elsewhere Nietzsche speaks of the cults of Eleusis and Orpheus.[6] It is believed that dozens of foreign mystery cults existed in the Greco-Roman world between the seventh century BC and the fifth century AD. The origins and beliefs of these cults were by no means uniform,[7] and significant gaps exist in our knowledge of their rituals and practices.[8] Nonetheless, a number of common themes — several of which were touched upon by the later Nietzsche — emerge from their study.[9]

> (1) Congregations of the mystery religions tended to be populated largely by members of Mediterranean antiquity's *least powerful* groups: women, merchants, low-ranking soldiers, slaves, freedmen, etc.
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> (2) Initiates of the mystery religions typically placed great emphasis on *secrecy* with respect to their meetings, rituals, and beliefs.

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to Power, §. 196, in Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Random House, 1967.

[6] See, for example, sections 1, 12, & 19 of *The Birth of Tragedy*, in Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. by W. Kaufmann, New York: Random House, 1967.

[7] The origins of the Mithras cult are Iranian; the cults of Isis, Orpheus, and Eleusis are Egyptian; and that of the Great Mother, Turkish.

[8] Philologist Franz Cumont describes the striking scarcity of original source material concerning the mystery cults as "the most regrettable one in the great shipwreck of ancient literature" (Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 66).

[9] For more on Nietzsche's interest in the religious cults of Mediterranean Antiquity, see Morgan Rempel, "Nietzsche, Mithras, and 'Complete Heathendom'," *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, vol. 2, n. 1, 2010.

(3) Access to, and union with, the divine are recurring themes among the mystery cults.

(4) Followers of the mysteries commonly hoped to transcend death via the performance of specific rituals of initiation and purification.

4. Guilt, Punishment, and Immortality

As Nietzsche's references to "superstitious purification," "guilt, punishment, and immortality" indicate, the avoidance of post-mortem punishment and the pursuit of a favorable personal immortality were central to the beliefs and practices of the mystery religions. According to Manfred Clauss, the "mystery-cults shared the conviction that deliverance and salvation are the aim of all human existence on earth [and] that one could only attain the desired salvation once one had been initiated."[10] Practitioners of the various mysteries believed that their performance of specific rituals of initiation and purification would result in the forgiveness of their sins and the favor of the deity in question. The result hoped and prayed for was their avoidance of the frightening post-mortem fate said to await the uninitiated, and the initiates' *new* birth into a blessed immortality. To that end, Roman devotees of the Mithras cult, for example, would re-enact their god's celebrated slaying of a bull. Followers of Mithras — but not only of Mithras[11] — believed that their bathing in the

[10] Manfred Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p. 14.

[11] Speaking of the rituals of the cult of Meter, Walter Burkert describes the *taurobolium*: "where the initiand, crouching in a pit covered with wooden beams on which a bull was slaughtered, was drenched by the bull's gushing blood" (Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, p. 6). Initiates of the cult of the "Great Mother" — mentioned by Nietzsche at *Antichrist*, §. 58, and notes of the period — likewise crouched in a pit "flooded with 50 liters of blood from the bull agonizing just above" (Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, p. 98). Smith notes that the Mithras cult's "expiatory blood baptism" rituals were likely inherited from the cults of Attis and Cybele (Jonathan Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 95). Such blood soaked purification rites are surely what the later Nietzsche has in mind when he speaks, in the context of the continuity of ideas between the mysteries and

blood of the slain animal and consumption of the sacred meal helped cleanse them of impurities and prepare them to be "born again [and] rendered immortal."[12] Similar connections between rituals of purification and hopes of immortality can be found in the cults of Isis, Orpheus, Attis, Cybele, and Eleusis. Indeed, Plato's *Republic* refers to the belief that, while "terrible things" and "evil" lie in store for those *not* purified and initiated into the Orphic mysteries, "remission of sins" and "true life" beyond the grave were promised to the properly initiated.[13]

This notion of the absolute necessity of the "forgiveness of sins" before one can access the god and hope to receive divine blessings — ideas Nietzsche insists were utterly foreign to *traditional* Greek sensibilities and suitable primarily for slaves[14] — is a recurring theme in the foreign mystery cults. As Nietzsche was acutely aware, this very human longing for a path to personal immortality finds expression in the mystery cults and, later, in Christianity, to a degree that is quite foreign to the more traditional religions of Athens and Rome. Unlike the mystery religions' vision of the "terrible" fate awaiting the unredeemed and the blessed condition awaiting the initiated after death, the Hades of more conventional Greco-Roman tradition —

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early Christianity, of "the bloody phantasmagoria of the sacrificial animal (the mystery)" (Nietzsche, *KGA*, Abt. 8, Bd. 2 [295]; see also *WP*, §. 196).

[12] An excerpt of an ancient Roman Mithras liturgy reads: "I, a man … born of a mortal womb … having been this day born again by thee, out of so many myriads rendered immortal in this hour by the good will of God in his abounding goodness" (Albrecht Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie*, Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1910, p. 12).

[13] *Republic*, 364e–365a (Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by Desmond Lee, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987).

[14] While ritual purification and the resulting remission of sins were considered absolutely necessary by initiates of a number of the foreign mystery religions in order to gain access to the god, Nietzsche famously contends that the *very* notion of "sin" was foreign to classical Greek thinking. At *Gay Science*, §. 135, Nietzsche insists that sin was a "Jewish feeling and a Jewish invention," and that "Greek antiquity" was "a world without feelings of sin." This passage further maintains that the familiar notion, "only if you *repent* will God show you grace" — an idea central to both the mystery cults and emerging Christianity — "would strike a Greek as ridiculous and annoying. He would say: 'Maybe slaves feel that way'." (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by W. Kaufmann, New York: Random House, 1974).

a handful of exceptions notwithstanding[15] — is not conventionally portrayed as a place particularly concerned with posthumous punishment or reward. As Alice Turner, pointing to the suffering of Orestes and Oedipus, rightly emphasizes: "punishment for wrongdoing in the old Greek stories, though it may be supernaturally administered … was not generally an after-death affair."[16] Moreover, unlike the bifurcated view of the afterlife typical of the mystery religions, the Hades of Greco-Roman convention was generally conceived as the shadowy ultimate destination of virtually *all* mortals, regardless of whether they were good, bad, righteous, sinful, initiated, or not.[17] Unlike the blessed *life* said to await the initiate of the mysteries, mere *existence* better describes the lot of those who find themselves in the Hades of tradition.[18]

Of course, punishment and reward were *very much* "after death affairs" among the mystery religions. Indeed, for the Orphic cult, at least, "simple justice" required "the souls of the dead to live on in order to receive reward or punishment."[19] And, as we have seen, the all too human desire to *influence* after-death accounting was fundamental to the beliefs, practices, and rituals of the mysteries.

5. Granters of Immortality

Closely related to the matters of posthumous reward and punishment is the fact that, unlike Isis, Mithras, Orpheus, *et al.*, the more traditional

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[15] Turner characterizes Tityus — said to have vultures feed forever on his ever-regenerating liver in the underworld — for example, as "one of a handful of imaginatively punished celebrities" (Alice Turner, *The History of Hell*, Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993, p. 27).

[16] Turner, *History of Hell*, p. 28

[17] Stories of happier destinations of the departed, such as the Elysian Fields, were by no means unknown to more traditional Greek religion. Such notions, however, were typically associated with semi-divine heroes rather than average men and women of faith.

[18] Speaking of the fate of the dead in official Greek religion, Guthrie deliberately speaks, not of "life" but of "existence": "The dead exist indeed, but they are strengthless, witless wraiths, uttering thin bodiless shrieks as they flit to and fro in the shadowy house of Hades" (W. K. C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, London: Methuen & Co., 1952, p. 149).

[19] Turner, *History of Hell*, p. 29.

deities of Greece and Rome were not generally regarded as granters of immortal life. Indeed, it has long been observed that the more conventional religions of Mediterranean Antiquity offered very little to satisfy man's powerful desire for immortality. Samuel Angus, for example, characterizes classical Greek religion as "almost dumb as to a hope beyond death," and emphasizes that: "*di immortales* of Rome were never considered by their worshippers as conferring immortality."[20]

Greco-Roman devotion to foreign mystery cult deities, however, was inextricably bound up with their ability to confer immortality. That Isis had delivered Osiris from death to eternal life was a central belief of initiates of her cult who prayed and performed rites so that the goddess would do likewise for them. Followers of Orpheus, meanwhile, believed that their deity, who had already "shown himself capable of melting the hearts of the powers below … might be expected to intercede on their own behalf if they lived the pure life according to their precepts."[21] If classical Greek religion was "almost dumb to a hope beyond death," the mystery cults, notes Walter Burkert, "were meeting practical needs even in their promises for an afterlife."[22]

6. Religions of the "Lower Masses"

Nietzsche is also right to underscore the particular demographic appeal of the mystery religions. His notebook reference to the "religions of the lower masses, the women, the slaves, the non-noble classes" is both deliberate and justified.[23] Among Roman followers of Isis, for example, were significant numbers of women and slaves.[24] Worshipers of Mithras, meanwhile, tended to be drawn largely from slaves, merchants, and legionaries (many of whom were exposed to novel foreign deities during eastern campaigns). Clauss points out that "the cult of Mithras was not accepted by the ruling elite of the Roman Empire" and notes that "it is

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[20] Samuel Angus, *The Mystery Religions: A Study in the Religious Background of Early Christianity*, New York: Dover Publications, 1975, pp. 13 & 231.

[21] Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, p. 29.

[22] Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, p. 23.

[23] Nietzsche, *KGA*, Abt. 8, Bd. 2 [295]; see also *WP*, §. 196.

[24] Sharon K. Heyob, *The Cult of Isis Among Women in the Graeco-Roman World*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975, p. 87. See also Eric M. Orlin, *Foreign Cults in Rome: Creating a Roman Empire*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 206.

striking that there are virtually no senators among the dedicators of inscriptions and reliefs."[25]

Scholarship in this field underscores the ancient distinction between "*religio*," the typically cool, respectable, state religion, and the more emotional "*superstitio*" of the foreign mystery cults. Treading a path mapped decades earlier by Nietzsche, Angus, for example, characterizes "the rise of *Superstitio* or religiosity as a species of nonconformity against *Religio*," and emphasizes that one must always be careful to "distinguish the state religion, the religion of the educated, and popular superstition."[26] Alice Turner, also sounding very much like Nietzsche, observes that, from the perspective of the powerful and educated, the formal state religions of Greece and Rome were simply "the religion that decent people believed in … anything else was considered archaic, anarchic, exotic, barbaric, or radical."[27]

Clearly, Nietzsche is not alone among classicists in distinguishing sharply between the beliefs and practices of the mysteries and those of more traditional Greco-Roman religion. And while his characterization of the beliefs of the mystery cults as "superstitious … absurdities" believed by "the lower masses" perhaps lacks subtlety,[28] it is apparent that significant insight lies behind Nietzsche's seemingly flippant remarks. We have thus far examined three elements:

(1) the focus on post-mortem punishment and reward,

(2) the hope that the god will grant immortality to those who worship correctly, and

(3) the demographic of believers.

What is especially noteworthy about these is that the foreign mystery cults have more in common with emerging — or soon to emerge — Christianity than with more traditional Greek and Roman religion. Nietzsche's keen awareness of this continuity is underscored by the intriguing characterization of the "subterranean cults" as forms of "latent Christianity" in *Antichrist*, §. 58. Understanding the extent to which

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[25] Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, p. 33.
[26] Samuel Angus, *The Mystery Religions*, p. 33.
[27] Alice Turner, *The History of Hell*, p. 20.
[28] Nietzsche, *KGA*, Abt. 8, Bd. 2 [295]; see also *WP*, §. 196.

many of the beliefs, hopes, and characteristics of the mystery cults find resonance with early Christianity helps us better appreciate Nietzsche's suspicion with respect to the origins of the latter. Moreover, according to the Nietzsche of 1888, not only does the "same species of religion" underlie both the mystery religions and early Christianity, but it is precisely this anti-pagan species of religion that Epicureanism explicitly "opposed" and "combated."[29]

7. Epicureanism: Redemption Doctrine of the Pagan World

One of the hallmarks of Epicurean philosophy is its single-minded commitment to promoting human tranquility and lessening mental suffering. So it is that Nietzsche refers to Epicurus (341–270 BC) as "the soul-soother of later antiquity" and characterizes his philosophy "the redemption doctrine of the pagan world."[30] As Nietzsche was well aware, much of the redemptive strategy of this practical Hellenistic philosophy centered on dispelling fear-inducing superstitions in general and unsettling beliefs surrounding human mortality and divine involvement in human affairs in particular. Indeed, the first two precepts of Epicureanism's famed *fourfold remedy* are: "God presents no fears, death no worries."[31]

8. The Finality of Death

Epicurus and his followers, acutely aware of the anxiety associated with death and the question of post-mortem survival, devote significant attention to these matters; with Epicurus famously concluding that "death is nothing to us."[32] As is his wont, Epicurus' teachings on these themes are designed to lessen suffering and to do so in a manner capable of benefiting a wide audience. Accordingly, his soul-soothing teachings on the fi-

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[29] Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, §. 58; Nietzsche, *KGA*, Abt. 8, Bd. 2 [295]; see also *WP*, §. 196.

[30] Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, Book 2, Part 2, n. 7; Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, §. 30.

[31] Philodemus, *Against the Sophists*, 4.9–14, in Long & Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Volume 1*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 156.

[32] Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, pp. 124–126, in Long & Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Volume 1*, p. 149.

nality of death are remarkably straightforward and can be summarized in four basic points:

> (1) Everything in existence is composed of atoms and "void" (the space between atoms).
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> (2) All collections of atoms are impermanent.[33]
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> (3) The human soul, like the human body, and every other collection of atoms, is impermanent.[34]
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> (4) The idea that a person — an aggregate of material body and material soul — or a human soul alone, can survive physical death; can remain in existence permanently and be subject to eternal post-mortem reward or punishment, is irrational and fundamentally contrary to our experience of every other thing in existence.[35]

Simply put, one of the central pillars of Epicureanism is that nothing bad can befall you after death, because after your death, there is no longer

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[33] Gods are apparently the sole exception to this general rule. Epicureanism seemingly maintains *both* that the gods (a) are composed of "countless atoms" (Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, 1.49, in Long & Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Volume 1*, p. 142) and (b) "enjoy immortal life in perfect peace" (Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. by M. F. Smith, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2001, 2, p. 648).

[34] According to Epicurus, the soul — and its member components, the mind and spirit — is composed of especially fine and smooth atoms. The soul, in concert with the body's sense organs, plays a crucial role in sense perception (*Letter to Herodotus*, 63–65, in Long & Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Volume 1*, p. 65). Epicurus insists that the fine atoms that compose the human soul are soon dispersed if not contained by the human body (*Letter to Herodotus* 65, in Long & Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Volume 1*, p. 65). Speaking of the fundamental connection between body and soul, Lucretius writes: "the two are twined together by common roots and evidently cannot be disentangled without being destroyed" (3, 328–330).

[35] Epicurus dismisses the concept of an *immaterial* soul as fundamentally unintelligible and impossible: "But it is impossible to think of the incorporeal *per se* except as void. And void … merely provides bodies motion through itself. Consequently, those who say the soul is incorporeal are talking nonsense" (*Letter to Herodotus*, 67, in Long & Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Volume 1*, p. 66).

a *you*. As Epicurus' Roman disciple Lucretius (99–55 BC) makes clear, properly understood, this gospel of the finality of death and the corresponding limit to human suffering is capable of neutralizing the full gamut of "terrors" so often linked with beliefs in post-mortem existence and immortality. Tragically, though, minds clouded by fear, guilt, and superstition too often fail to recognize the genuine redemption that comes with recognizing that "death is nothing." Speaking of such a troubled mind, Lucretius laments: "It fails to see how there can be an end to its afflictions, or a limit to its punishment; Indeed, it is afraid that its sufferings may increase in death. In short, fools make a veritable hell of their lives on earth."[36] As the Epicureans well understood, and as we have seen with respect to the mystery cults, it is this irrational and often intractable fear of death that spurs anxious souls to appeal to the gods for intervention.

9. Divine Indifference

In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche offers a glowing account of Epicureanism's simple teachings concerning the matter of divine indifference to human affairs: "Epicurus, the soul-soother of later antiquity, had that wonderful insight … that to quieten the heart it is absolutely not necessary to have solved the ultimate and outermost theoretical questions. Thus, to those tormented by "fear of the gods" it sufficed him to say: "if the gods exist, they do not concern themselves with us."[37]

As Nietzsche is well aware, Epicurus' "wonderful insight" *vis à vis* the gods' lack of concern with human affairs was intended to soothe the anxious, superstitious masses of the Hellenistic era. And, like his teachings on the finality of death, Epicurus' philosophy of divine indifference can be summarized in a few simple points:

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[36] Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 3.1020–1023. Lucretius surveys a number of Greek myths involving post-mortem punishment for wrong-doing, including those of Tantalus, damned to spend eternity under a huge suspended rock (3.980) and Tityus, condemned to having vultures feed forever on his liver (3.984). Lucretius observes that, while Epicurus has shown us that such frightening suffering cannot possibly await one *after* death, men can and do fill their *pre*-mortem lives with hellish suffering by harboring needless fears and false beliefs concerning death and immortality.

[37] Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, Book II, Part 2, Section 7.

(1) The most blessed human condition is one characterized by *ataraxia*; the absence of physical and mental perturbation.[38]

(2) It would be unreasonable to conclude that the gods do not also enjoy such serenity.[39]

(3) The idea of the gods exhibiting concern and effort with respect to the affairs of humanity is incompatible with a life of blessed tranquility, and therefore contrary to the very notion of divinity itself.[40]

Epicurus insists: "First, think of god as an indestructible and blessed creature … and attach to him nothing alien to indestructibility or inappropriate to blessedness."[41] This passage goes on to characterize the belief that "the greatest harm from the gods [comes] to bad men and the greatest benefits" to the good as a prime example of a widespread belief that, upon reflection, seems "repugnant" to divine blessedness. In the words of Lucretius: "free from all distress, free from peril, fully self-sufficient, independent of us, they are not influenced by worthy conduct nor touched by anger."[42] Epicurus' *Principal Doctrine* #1 distills the matter thusly: "That which is blessed and imperishable neither suffers nor inflicts trouble, and therefore is affected neither by anger nor favour. For all such things are

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[38] This serene condition of *ataraxia* is characterized by Epicurus thusly: "For the steady observation of these things makes it possible to refer every choice and avoidance to the health of the body and the soul's freedom from disturbance, since this is the end belonging to the blessed life. For this is what we aim at in all our actions — to be free from pain and anxiety. Once we have got this, all the soul's tumult is released" (*Letter to Menoeceus*, 128, in Long & Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Volume 1*, p. 113).

[39] "Surely, if man can attain to happiness, so can the gods; and that which constitutes happiness for humans must also be the substance of the happiness enjoyed by the gods" (A. J. Festugière, *Epicurus and His Gods*, New York: Russell & Russell, 1969, p. 57).

[40] In Book Two of *On the Nature of Things*, Lucretius speaks of "the sacred, peacefully tranquil minds of the gods, who pass placid days and a life of calm" (1093–1094).

[41] *Letter to Menoeceus*, 123, in Long & Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Volume 1*, p. 140.

[42] Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 1, 47–49.

marks of weakness."[43] For the Epicureans, no ritual, no sacrifice — not even of "*thousands* of oxen" — alters the divine nature.[44]

Clearly, the widespread notion that a precise series of prayers, sacrifices, or rites of initiation can so please a deity that he or she will bestow immortal life upon the initiate is *doubly* at odds with Epicurus' philosophy insofar as it violates two of his foundational teachings. Understanding this fundamental opposition between Epicureanism and the central beliefs and practices of the mystery religions (and later, of Christianity) helps us understand Nietzsche's intriguing image of the Epicureans bravely struggling, *not* against traditional paganism, but against the same *anti-pagan* "species of religion" he discerns in the mysteries and in Christianity.[45]

10. Rival Redemption Doctrines

As a disappointed Nietzsche observes in *Antichrist*, §. 58, Epicurus' fear-dispelling ideas *almost* "won" their world-historic struggle for the hearts of the Roman Empire. Indeed, in a patent overstatement, Nietzsche insists that, had it not been for Pauline Christianity's calculated mystery religion inspired appeal to the Empire's "lower masses,"[46] "Epicurus would have won" the struggle, as "every mind of any account

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[43] Epicurus, in Long & Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Volume 1*, p. 142.

[44] Festugière (p. 65) cites a remarkable letter fragment — likely originating with Epicurus himself — wherein the writer, perhaps alluding to the bloody animal sacrifices widely practiced by the mystery cults, emphasizes the necessary indifference of the gods to human affairs: "For indeed, in the name of Zeus (as men affect to say) what have you to fear in this matter? Do you believe that the gods can do you harm? Is not that, on any showing, to belittle them? How then will you not regard the Divinity as a miserable creature if it appears inferior in comparison to yourself? Or will you rather be of the opinion that by sacrificing thousands of oxen you can appease God if you have committed some evil deed? Can you think he will take account of the sacrifice and, like a man, remit at some time or another a part of the penalty?"

[45] Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, §. 58.

[46] For a thorough discussion of what Nietzsche takes to be Paul's deliberate "outbidding" of the rival mystery religions of the day for the hearts and allegiance of the Empire's downtrodden masses, see Chapter Six of Morgan Rempel, *Nietzsche, Psychohistory, and the Birth of Christianity*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003.

in the Roman Empire was an Epicurean."[47]

Epicureanism's thoroughgoing victory in Rome, however, was not to be. Noteworthy supporters notwithstanding, its superstition-dispelling teachings on death, immortality, and divine involvement in human affairs, ultimately proved no match for the rival doctrines of the day. In the bustling ancient Mediterranean marketplace of ideas, religions teaching that a *new* life of eternal reward or punishment follows one's physical death; that gods *do* take an active interest in the affairs of humanity, and may in fact be persuaded to bestow immortality upon the properly initiated, found far more followers than Epicurus' rival gospel.

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[47] Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, §. 58. While certainly an exaggeration, the Roman "minds" Nietzsche is alluding to here are well known. The Stoic philosopher, statesman, and advisor to Emperor Nero, Seneca (c. 4 BC–65 AD) — considered by some "the real master of the world" — displayed great enthusiasm for Epicureanism (see Campbell's "Introduction," *Seneca's Letters From a Stoic*, trans. by R. Campbell, London: Penguin Books, 1969, 10). His celebrated *Letters* contain many Epicurean slogans as advice for his *protégé* Lucillius. In *Letter* VIII, he writes: "It is likely that you will ask me why I quote so many of Epicurus's noble words instead of words taken from our own school. But is there any reason why you should regard them as sayings of Epicurus and not common property?" (Seneca, *Epistles I–65*, trans. by R. Gummere, Cambridge, Mass: Loeb Classical Library, 1917, pp. 36–41). While belonging to the pre-Imperial period, Nietzsche is surely also referring to the Roman poet Lucretius (99–55 BC), whom he calls "the gloomy and yet enlightened disciple of his [Epicurus'] teaching" (Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 72). Farrington calls *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius's ebullient tribute to Epicurus and Epicureanism, "the greatest philosophical poem in the world" (Benjamin Farrington, *The Faith of Epicurus*, New York: Basic Books, 1967, p. 136). Nietzsche likely also has in mind Virgil (70–19 BC), "by most accounts a great admirer of the character of Epicurus and his Garden school" (Richard Hibbler, *Happiness Through Tranquility*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984, pp. 78–79) and Cicero (106–43 BC), who studied under the Epicurean Phaedrus and was a notable supporter of the school as a young man. Cicero later became an outspoken critic of the Garden philosophy. Eight decades after Nietzsche's insistence that "every mind of any account in the Roman Empire was an Epicurean" (*A*58), Farrington similarly concludes: "It is not too much to say that the impact of Epicureanism transformed the cultural life of Rome" (*The Faith of Epicurus*, p. 136).

Whether in the hands of a priest of Isis, Mithras, or Christ, Nietzsche concedes that it is *this* "species of religion," *this* "anti-pagan" assemblage of ideas that finds lasting favor with the masses of Late Antiquity. While one can readily appreciate the all too human hopes expressed in such ideas, what Nietzsche recognizes, like Lucretius before him, is that, in a world awash in teachings not just of post-mortem reward but also of post-mortem suffering in beliefs in man's ability to anger and please the gods, the *real* "redemption doctrine of the pagan world"[48] was Epicurus' straightforward denial of all such ideas.

11. Conclusion

Like so much of the writings from the last year of his career, Nietzsche's reflections on Epicurus' lonely, almost-successful fight against the "superstitious … absurdities" believed by "the lower masses" attracted to the mystery cults,[49] are full of bravado and highly prone to exaggeration. That his musings on this topic are lacking in twenty-first century political sensitivity, is also clear. I suspect that such considerations may partly explain the marked lack of scholarship on this aspect of his philosophy. It is my hope, however, that this paper's examination, aided by post-Nietzsche scholarship, of the ideas *behind* Nietzsche's provocative remarks on this topic, partially fills this lacuna and serves as testimony to his impressive insight into the religious and philosophical traditions of Mediterranean Antiquity. Indeed, his unconventional image of Epicureanism's struggle, not with mainstream Greco-Roman religion, but with the "latent Christianity"[50] of Late Antiquity's mystery religions, offers a fresh perspective on an intriguing and still relevant constellation of ideas.

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[48] Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, §. 30.
[49] Nietzsche, *KGA*, Abt. 8, Bd. 2 [295]; see also *WP*, §. 196.
[50] Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, §. 58.