

SOCRATES AND JESUS

THE ARGUMENT THAT SHAPED WESTERN CIVILIZATION

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I. SOCRATES AND JESUS

Socrates and Jesus shared many qualities and experiences: their disinterest in material things, their electrifying influence on their immediate followers, their claims of inspiration, their attempts to define the moral life, their martyrdoms. Neither wrote down a single word that has survived and yet in terms of the degree of their influence on the future of Western civilization, they can be compared only to each other. But this essay argues that what was most important about them was their differences: their opposing definitions of the ultimate or the divine, their radically conflicting views of love and reason, their understanding of civil society and the role of laws, their epistemology (how we know), their eschatology (the ultimate purpose of the universe), and their fundamental understanding of how humankind could progress. The yin and yang of these very different approaches to truth has served as the main engine of Western history. It continues to do so today, as Western history and world history become increasingly intertwined.

Western civilization resulted from the confluence of Greek thought and Judeo-Christian religion that took over the Roman Empire, persisted in Western Europe through the Middle Ages, and extended itself to the Americas. It has dominated most of the globe for the last five centuries. The thesis that Western history comprises a compromise between the Greek philosophical tradition and Judeo-Christianity is nothing new. Scholars in every field have analyzed Western history and culture in terms of dualisms — faith and reason, classic and romantic, thesis and antithesis — all of which have their roots in the clash between Greek thought and Judeo-Christian belief. We will argue that exactly this clash explains why, for better or worse, Western civilization has emerged as uniquely contentious, propulsive, and inquisitive.

Although Socrates died almost precisely four centuries before Jesus' birth, we have more reliable historical information on him than we do on the life of Jesus. The two major sources on Socrates, Plato and Xenophon, studied with him and knew him well. While Plato clearly developed and modified Socrates' ideas in the process of constructing his own philosophical system, few scholars doubt that his early dialogues and the *Apology* capture the essence of Socratic thought. Xenophon's biography is the work of a thorough though limited historian. But we don't need to rely entirely on acolytes for our understanding of Socrates' biography and teachings; he is mentioned, described, and satirized in other contemporaneous literature.

Almost the opposite is true of Jesus. Most of what we know of his life comes from the four (or five, or more) *Gospels*, and was passed down orally for generations. By the time it was recorded, Jesus had become the object of a cult — really several cults, each of which had its own agenda. While Plato and Xenophon generally concur on Socrates' biography, his method, and (to a lesser extent) his message, the *Gospel* writers offer dramatically different and often factually conflicting portraits of Jesus, and there are no contemporary records that even confirm his existence. Very little is known of the years before his baptism by John around 30 CE. The reports of his resurrection are so shadowy as to fail any test but that of prior faith.

And yet there was clearly something profoundly inspiring and historically transformational about his work and personality. Many who knew him (and the evidence on this is strong) devoted the rest of their lives to propagating his message that something new had come into the world, as indeed it had. Socrates, of course, had a similar effect on his friends and students: they too became chroniclers, disciples, interpreters, and teachers of his vision. That Jesus did exist, and that we can generally understand his mission from those points on which the *Gospels* concur, is hard to doubt. But a recent conference of *New Testament* scholars could agree unanimously on the authenticity of only one phrase attributed to him: "Our Father." While we can reconstruct Socrates' life and teachings from reasonably reliable historical records, we must define Jesus' original message from what his followers and their immediate successors made of it.

Both these great men had progenitors, and the following chapters will discuss the forces that influenced them, how each transformed what he had inherited, and the crucial ways in which each shaped the future of Western discourse. Equally importantly, we will explore why their dialogue made European civilization uniquely dynamic in comparison to the great but more hierarchical and static empires of Asia and the Americas.

As Joseph Campbell (*The Masks of God*, New York, Viking Press, 1970) and others have convincingly demonstrated, "It was in the marvelous talent of the Sum-

erians for their extremely demanding divine play that civilization was born of an aristocracy of spirit” (419). This “play” aligned the chief figures of the government with the orderly movement of heavenly bodies, providing a perpetual refraction between the human and the universal. It also, in its early phases, involved literal human sacrifice, often of the whole court, at astrologically determined intervals such as periodically retrograde planets or the dark of the moon. The history of religion is the study of how this sacrificial bargain between humanity and the divine has been translated into metaphor.

Sumerian civilization provided a successful model that spread worldwide, arriving in Egypt about 2800 BCE, the eastern Mediterranean around 2000, China around 1500, and perhaps the Americas slightly before the Christian era, although there is debate about whether the Aztec and Inca systems arose entirely uninfluenced by the Sumerian model. Its system stressed a static, orderly hierarchy stretching from a divine priest-king down to the faithfully toiling mass of agricultural laborers, all working in harmony with the gods’ plans. Such a social order didn’t necessarily make for a disadvantage; China, for example, led the world technologically from the fall of the Western Roman Empire until about the fifteenth century. But Western Civilization has taken a different, more contentious and individualistic route.

In his recent comprehensive study of why Western civilization has become world-dominant, Jared Diamond (*Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Vintage Press, 2005) finds the explanation in the fact that Eurasia, especially the Fertile Crescent, was blessed in Neolithic times with an extraordinarily high number of cultivatable crops and domesticable animals. Such fecundity plausibly suggests why the state was invented in Sumeria: agriculture requires collective effort, a variety of skill-sets, and a controlling authority. It doesn’t explain, however, why of all these stratified and relatively static societies, Europe alone emerged as especially inquisitive, aggressive, individualistic, and democratic. While the Americas, sub-Saharan Africa, and Australia lacked this cornucopia of plants and animals, these resources were rapidly diffused across Eurasia. Diamond is reluctant to assign much historical causality to individual personalities, but I find a major cause in the debate between Socrates and Jesus. Is this true, and, if so, where is it likely to lead?

We will find the crux of the creative disagreement between Socrates and Jesus in their conflicting definitions of love. Socratic Heavenly Eros taught the existence of a continuum from the human to the ultimate, such that a fallible person who loved the good could proceed from the beauties of the perceptible world to the highest ideals. Jesus, in the Hebrew tradition of Agape, believed that irredeemably fallen man could be brought into contact with eternal truths only through the undeserved love of a remote and arbitrary although sometimes

forgiving God. We will see also why both these views, while apparently in stark opposition, are uniquely Western and share a common origin in the joint conviction that man is alienated from, and potentially in opposition to, his creator. The alternating dominance of Eros or Agape defines the stages of Western civilization, with the triumph of one always provoking the resurgence of its antithesis.

It would be easy to characterize the immensely creative debate between the Socratic tradition and Judeo-Christianity as a quarrel between science or reason and theology or faith. But Socrates had a spirit that occasionally whispered into his ear, and, granted his premises, Jesus could make a reasoned argument. This essay is undertaken in the spirit of Nobel Prize Winner Charles Townsend who wrote, echoing Einstein: “Understanding the order in the universe and understanding the purpose of the universe are not identical, but they are also not very far apart” (“The Convergence of Science and Religion,” 1966, the IBM journal *Think*).

In the opening chapter of his magisterial study *Mimesis: The Presentation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1976), Eric Auerbach contrasts two key scenes from the foundational documents of Western culture: Odysseus’ return to Ithaca after his twenty years of wandering from the *Odyssey*, and Abraham’s aborted sacrifice of Isaac from *Genesis*.

In the scene from Homer, Odysseus, who has returned in disguise, is having his feet washed by his old nurse, Euryclea, when she recognizes him by the scar on his thigh. Homer, with his usual amplitude and leisure, describes every detail of the scene: how Euryclea touches the scar, drops his foot into the water bucket, and is about to cry out for joy when Odysseus, who doesn’t want his wife Penelope to know yet that he has returned, restrains her with a combination of threats and endearments. Auerbach observes:

All this is scrupulously narrated ... There is room ... and time for orderly, well-articulated, uniformly illuminated descriptions of implements, ministrations, and gestures; even in the dramatic moment of recognition, Homer does not omit to tell the reader that it is with his right hand that Odysseus takes the woman by the throat to keep her from speaking, at the same time that he draws her closer with his left. Clearly outlined, brightly and uniformly illuminated, men and things stand out in a realm where everything is visible; and not less clear — wholly expressed, orderly even in their ardor — are the feelings and thoughts of the persons involved (*Mimesis*, 3).

But what particularly captures Auerbach’s attention is that at the moment of highest suspense — just when the housekeeper recognizes the scar — Homer interrupts the narrative with a seventy-verse description of how the scar originated at a boar hunt during a visit to Odysseus’ grandfather Autolycus. Homer takes the opportunity to tell us everything about Autolycus: his house, his degree of kinship, his touching reaction to the birth of his grandson, the details of the visit,

the banquet which welcomes Odysseus, the hunt, the wound, the recovery, his return to Ithaca, his parent's anxious questions. Auerbach continues:

The first thought of the modern reader — that this is a device to increase suspense — is, if not wholly wrong, at least not the essential explanation of this Homeric procedure. For the element of suspense is very slight in the Homeric poems; nothing in their entire style is calculated to keep the reader or hearer breathless. The digressions are not meant to keep the reader in suspense, but rather to relax the tension. The broadly narrated, charming, and subtly fashioned story of the hunt, with all its elegance and self-sufficiency, its wealth of idyllic pictures, seeks to win the reader over wholly to itself as long as he is hearing it, to make him forget what has just taken place during the foot-washing. But an episode that will increase suspense by retarding the action must be so constructed that it will not fill the present entirely, will not put the crisis, whose resolution is being awaited, entirely out of the reader's mind, and thereby destroy the mood of suspense; the crisis and the suspense must continue, must remain vibrant in the background. But Homer ... knows no background (*Mimesis*, 4).

Auerbach shows that this technique holds throughout all of Homer: every object, every character, every thought, every conversation, can be flushed into the light, and there is plenty of time to do it. Homer repeatedly interrupts his narrative to introduce a new character, his ancestry, his attitude towards the current situation, his position in the hierarchy. A crucial battle scene fades entirely from memory as we learn in intricate detail all the scenes depicted on Achilles' shield. Every time a god appears, we discover where she last was, by what route she arrived at the scene, all her thoughts and intentions. Auerbach notes: "[E]ven the Homeric epithet seems to me in the final analysis to be traceable to the same need for an externalization of phenomena in terms perceptible to the senses." Auerbach believes the original impetus for this tell-all technique "must have originated in the basic impulse of the Homeric style: to represent phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts, completely fixed in their special and temporal relations" (*Mimesis*, 6).

Everything in Homer, indeed everything Homer believes exists, occurs in the foreground. He could easily have inserted the story of the scar's origin two lines earlier and treated it as a recollection, but he does not, and for a reason essential to Homer's style, that is, his world view: "[A]ny such subjectivist-perspectivist procedure, creating a foreground and background, resulting in the present lying open to the depths of the past, is entirely foreign to the Homeric style; the Homeric style knows only a foreground, only a uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present" (*Mimesis*, 7).

Auerbach finds the exact opposite in the *Genesis* account of Abraham and Isaac. In the *King James* version, the story opens: "And it came to pass after these things that God did tempt Abraham, and said to him, Abraham! And he said, Behold, here I am." (*Genesis* 22:1) Here we are told almost nothing but the essential and startling initiation of dramatic action; we don't know where Abraham is, we

don't know where God came from; all details of the sensible world are absent. As Auerbach observes: "The concept of God held by the Jews is less a cause than a symptom of their manner of comprehending and representing things ... Abraham says indeed: Here I am — but the Hebrew word means only something like "behold me," and in any case is not meant to indicate the actual place where Abraham is, but a moral position in respect to God, who has called him — Here am I awaiting your command" (*Mimesis*, 8). Abraham's readiness to obey is all that matters; if he is in the foreground, God isn't just in the background; he is the background. Auerbach notes:

After this opening, God gives his command, and the story begins: everyone knows it; it unrolls with no episodes in a few independent sentences whose syntactical connection is of the most rudimentary sort. In this atmosphere it is unthinkable that an implement, a landscape through which the travelers passed, the serving men, or the ass, should be described ... A journey is made because God has designated the place where the sacrifice is to be performed; but we are told nothing about the journey except that it took three days and even that we are told in a mysterious way: Abraham and his followers rose "early in the morning" and "went unto" the place of which God had told him; on the third day he lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar (*Mimesis*, 10).

The few details we receive here serve not to embellish the story by developing the context — the sensory world — in which these events are happening, but rather to emphasize the dominance of the background — God's presence and command — over the foreground, the punctual obedience of Abraham.

God says, "Take Isaac, thine only son, whom thou lovest." We learn nothing from this about Isaac as a person; as Auerbach suggests, "Only what we need to know about (Isaac), here and now, is illuminated, so that it may become apparent how terrible Abraham's temptation is, and that God is fully aware of it." (*Mimesis*, 11) In Homer, all the foreground is provided at the expense of suspense, but here the suspense is all the more immediate and terrible due to the absence of foreground. Auerbach concludes:

I said above that the Homeric style was "of the foreground" because despite much going back and forth, it yet causes what is momentarily being narrated to give the impression that it is the only present, pure and without perspective. A consideration of the Elohistic text teaches us that our term is capable of a broader and deeper application. It shows that even the separate personages can be represented as possessing "background"; God is always so represented in the *Bible*, for he is not comprehensible in his presence, as is Zeus; it is always only "something" of him that appears, he always extends into depths. But even the human beings in the biblical stories have greater depths of time, fate, and consciousness than do the human beings in Homer ... Abraham's actions are explained not only by what is happening to him at the moment, nor yet by his character (as Achilles' actions by his courage and pride, and Odysseus' by his versatility and farsightedness), but by his previous history; he remembers, he is

constantly conscious of, what God has promised him and what God has already accomplished for him — his soul is torn between desperate rebellion and hopeful expectation; his silent obedience is multilayered, has background (*Mimesis*, 12).

The Greek tradition sees everything in the foreground, sensible and explicable. The Judeo-Christian tradition sees everything in the foreground as secondary to intrusions from a background that is absolute and ultimately unknowable. In the following essay, we will explore the profound implications that the clash of these two world-views — or styles, as Auerbach would rightly say — contains for the development of Western civilization.

6. THE ARGUMENT BETWEEN SOCRATES AND JESUS

The legends of Socrates and Jesus, rather than the historical characters themselves, went on to shape the central debate in Western Civilization. While the legends amplified, exaggerated, and even falsified elements of these two historical figures, they also preserved the radical originality of each.

Philosophers and theologians have made much over the last two millennia of the striking similarities between Socrates and Jesus. Both called their respective cultures to a higher ethical vision. Both refused to make distinctions among people on the basis of wealth, class, or ethnicity. Both believed they were acting under divine compulsion, lived extremely simple lives, taught for free, and accepted martyrdom as the final confirmation of their message. In his *Reflections on Jesus and Socrates* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996), Paul W. Gooch makes the case for important analogies between these two seminal geniuses:

[W]hen we have learned something of their stories, we find ourselves intrigued with parallels, as we might be struck by resemblances between two members of a family tree. Their fathers worked with their hands, the one a sculptor, the other a carpenter. They themselves spent their time among the tradespeople and common folk, but were known more for talk than manual work. Neither had any visible means of income; both seemed to hold money of little importance. Their teaching challenged received wisdom and upset religious authorities. Both argued against doing harm to one's enemies and emphasized the value of the soul above the body. Their manner of teaching, in paradoxes and aphorisms and parables, was similarly memorable. Disciples followed them but they also made determined enemies who set about to bring them down. Though innocent, they were both convicted and died a death of witness to the truth (13–14).

Advocates for both men have repeatedly tried to enlist the other in their causes. We have seen that as early as Paul and John, Christian apologists regularly borrowed Plato's imagery and eschatology to explain and justify Christ's message. Many of the Roman Church Fathers, most notably Augustine, attempted a grand reconciliation of Christian revelation and the pagan philosophy epitomized by Socrates. Thomas Aquinas' great compendium of Christian belief, the medieval *Summa Theologica*, depended heavily on Aristotle for its logical method and its proofs of the existence of God.

On the other hand, humanists have regularly tried to cast Jesus as a sort of peasant Jewish classical philosopher. By emphasizing his charity, his concern for the unfortunate, his forgiveness of sinners, his indifference to the social, material, and political distinctions of the world, philosophers from Roman times through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and to the liberal churches and theologians of our own day have portrayed Jesus as essentially a Socratic teacher of ethics.

But on close examination, these resemblances, though important, turn out to be merely superficial and biographical. The similarities between their narratives and many shared values explain why each man has held an enduring grip on the imagination of the Western world. But in fact they disagreed fundamentally on almost everything: the nature of the divine, the proper practice of reason, the definition of love, the well-spring of ethics, the role of the law, the origin and end of the world, and the proper relation of the individual to the larger political and social community. What is most remarkable, then, in comparing Socrates and Jesus, is how they arrived at similarly humane and world-transforming conclusions by means of radically different premises and methodologies.

Matthew Arnold, in "Hebraism and Hellenism" (*Culture and Anarchy*, Chapter IV, 1868) identified the Greeks and the Jews as the inventors of the two great Western ways of seeing the world rather than emphasizing their similarities. He credits each with creating a distinct vocabulary for understanding the forces that shape our world and calls them:

the two races of men who have supplied the most signal and splendid manifestations of [strategies to interpret reality], we may call them respectively the forces of Hebraism and Hellenism. Hebraism and Hellenism — between these two points of influence moves our world. At one time it feels more powerfully the attraction of one of them, at another time of the other; and it ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced between them.

Arnold from the outset sees Hebraism and Hellenism as different but of equal validity. He recognizes that at various times in Western culture, one or the other has predominated. He identifies them as the two poles of Western culture. And he clearly believes that Western culture is at its healthiest and strongest when their influence is equally balanced. He goes on:

The final aim of both Hellenism and Hebraism, as of all great spiritual disciplines, is no doubt the same: man's perfection or salvation. The very language which they both of them use in schooling us to reach this aim is often identical. Even when their language indicates by variation — sometimes a broad variation, often a but slight and subtle variation, — different courses of thought which are uppermost in each discipline, even then the unity of the final end and aim is still apparent.

We can quarrel with Arnold on this point: Greek perfection and Judeo-Christian salvation are very different things, as we will find in the following discussion. He wrote at a time when to equate Greek Eros and Christian Agape as pursuing equally valid ends was still a controversial position to take in a formally Christian country, and so he is concerned at some level to make their eschatological purposes ultimately identical. But he is very acute on the differences between their methods or approaches to the ultimate good:

Still, they pursue this aim by very different courses. The uppermost idea with Hellenism is to see things as they really are; the uppermost idea with Hebraism is conduct and obedience. Nothing can do away with this inef-faceable difference. The Greek quarrel with the body and its desires is, that they hinder right thinking; the Hebrew quarrel with them is, that they hinder right acting.

At the bottom of both the Greek and the Hebrew notion is the desire, native in man, for reason and the will of God, the feeling after the universal order — in a word, the love of God. But, while Hebraism seizes upon certain plain, capital intimations of the universal order, and rivets himself, one might say, with unequalled grandeur of earnestness and intensity on the study and observance of them, the bent of Hellenism is to follow, with flexible activity, the whole play of the universal order, to be apprehensive of missing any part of it, of sacrificing one part to another, to slip away from resting in this or that intimation of it, however capital. An unclouded clearness of mind, an unimpeded play of thought, is what this bent drives at. The governing idea of Hellenism is *spontaneity of consciousness*; that of Hebraism, *strictness of conscience*.

Self-conquest, self-devotion, the following of not of our own individual will, but the will of God, *obedience*, is the fundamental idea of this form, also, of the discipline to which we have attached the general name of Hebraism.

Arnold is right to emphasize the wide gulf between the Hebraic focus on “capital imitations of universal order” and the Hellenic focus on “the whole play of the universal order.” For the Hebrew, God is all, and his various manifestations in the universe are often distractions or worse, occasions for sin. For the Hellene, the play of the universal order in all its manifestations is the point, evidence, increasingly pleasurable steps on the quest towards the Divine. Arnold takes refuge here in an important ambiguity that furthers his goal of equating the two systems as equally valid: the “love of God” can mean either man's love for God or God's

love for man, a fundamental difference between the two systems that Arnold fudges. He goes on:

Both Hellenism and Hebraism arise out of the wants of human nature, and address themselves to satisfy those wants. But their methods are so different they lay stress on such different points, and call into being by their respective disciplines such different activities, that the face which human nature presents when it passes from the hands of one of them to the other, is no longer the same. To get rid of one's ignorance, to see things as they are, and by seeing them as they are to see in them their beauty, is the simple and attractive ideal which Hellenism holds out before human nature; and from the simplicity and charm of this ideal, Hellenism, and human life in the hands of Hellenism, is invested with a kind of aerial ease, clearness, and radiancy; they are full of what we call sweetness and light. Difficulties are kept out of view, and the beauty and rationalness of the ideal have all our thoughts.

It is all very well to talk of getting rid of one's ignorance of seeing things in their reality, seeing them in their beauty, but how is this to be done when there is something which thwarts and spoils all our efforts?

This something is *sin*; and the space which sin fills in Hebraism, as compared to Hellenism, is indeed prodigious. This obstacle to perfection fills the whole scene, and perfection appears remote and rising away from earth, in the background. Under the name of sin, the difficulties of knowing oneself and conquering oneself which impede man's path to perfection, become, for Hebraism, a positive, active entity hostile to man, a mysterious power which I heard Dr. Pusey the other day, in one of his most impressive sermons, compare to a hideous hunchback sitting on our shoulders, and which it is the main business of our lives to abhor and oppose. The discipline of the Old Testament may be summed up as a discipline teaching us to abhor and flee from sin; the discipline of the New Testament, as a discipline teaching us to die to it. As Hellenism speaks of thinking clearly, seeing things in their essence and beauty, as a grand and precious feat for man to achieve, so Hebraism speaks of becoming conscious of sin, of waking to sin, as a feat of this kind.

Socrates would say, of course, that what the Hebrews define as sin is in fact ignorance or error, acts against our own self-interest, and a profound chasm lies between these two perspectives. One invites us into the joys of the sensual world, the other warns us against them in horror. Arnold does not resolve these contradictions. He is determined to assign equal value to both systems and in any case the only possible solution is not to assert a false equivalence (though he does in the end), but rather accept a dialectical interaction. Still, he does great service to the effort to understand how Hebraism and Hellenism have served as the alpha and omega of Western culture, the two poles between which it finds itself oscillating, constantly suspended.

To get to the crux of the fundamental disagreement between Socrates and Jesus which has been so fruitful for the subsequent development of Western

civilization, we must start with each teachers' view of the essential nature of the universe, that is, the relation between humanity and the eternal as facilitated by Love. For Socrates, coming from the Greek pantheistic tradition, the ideal was immanent in the material world, intermittently approachable through reason, and mediated by Eros: love defined as the connective attraction that binds everything from the slime to the divine. The divine or ideal was accessible through methods of inquiry available to human beings, and Eros, or attraction, was the glue that bound this unitary world together. For Jesus, coming from the Jewish tradition of God's radical Otherness, so absolute a divide existed between the material and the divine that humankind could not feel or reason its way to ultimate things. As fallen (rather than fallible) creatures, people were utterly cut off from any knowledge of God other than his Agape: an unconditional love bestowed for miraculous reasons on a totally unworthy object. For Socrates, wisdom comes largely from the application of reason and inquiry — though he allows for moments of inspiration such as the words whispered in his ear by his daimon. For Jesus, wisdom consists in submitting oneself entirely to an intrusion of revelation from the divine. In the Socratic system, man finds his way towards God. In Christianity (and the Judeo-Christian tradition in general) God finds his way towards man.

Since both Socrates and Jesus saw the adhesive force of the universe in what we call "love," nothing can be more instructive in exploring their differences than to compare Eros and Agape, and we depend heavily here on the magisterial work of the Swedish scholar Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (New York, Harper and Row, 1969).

EROS

The doctrine of Eros originated in the ancient mystery religions and achieved its definitive formulation in the dialogues of Plato, especially in the *Symposium*. For the Greeks, the Orpheus cycle explicated the beauty and danger of Eros. Zeus had decided to give his son Dionysus, god of wine, sensuality, and frenzy, rulership of the world. But while Dionysus was a child the Titans, the primitive gods overthrown by the Olympians, lured him into their power, killed him, and devoured him. In revenge, Zeus destroyed the Titans with a thunderbolt and constructed the race of men from their ashes. Henceforth, humankind was double natured: of the earth because of its Titanic component, but with a spark of divinity from the god the Titans had consumed. Dionysiac cults with their attendant orgies and drug-induced ecstasies proliferated in pre-classical Greece, often against opposition from more conservative and decorous religious traditions.

Orpheus came to embody the Dionysus legend because he at first opposed the cult and in consequence was torn to pieces in a Dionysiac outburst by the women of Thrace. His dismembered head, still singing, washed out to sea and landed on the island of Lesbos, giving birth to music and poetry. Subsequent Orphic cults, somewhat domesticated, found homes in the classical Greek polises, especially

Athens, and presided over many major religious and cultural events. Greek tragedy evolved directly from the responsive chanting that was the centerpiece of Athenian Orphic festivals. Nygren writes:

The circle of ideas in which we now find ourselves is by no means confined to Orphism, but appears with insignificant variations wherever we turn in the world of ancient Mystery religions. There is in man a Divine essence which is held captive contrary to its nature in the fetters of sense ... It is this immortal, divine, essential being of man that the Mysteries [such as the annual initiations at Eleusis near Athens] seek to redeem ... Man is the offspring of God; the rational part of his nature is a fragment of the Divine cosmic reason. What he needs, therefore, is to be made aware of the degradation of his present state, put off the earthly trappings that prevent his true nature from coming to light, and being thus purified ascend to his heavenly home ... Even though ancient Mystery-piety is vividly conscious of the human soul's ... need of help, its cardinal assumption is none the less always the original Divine dignity of the soul. This is the presupposition which alone makes possible man's ascent to the divine sphere; there is no insuperable barrier between the human and the Divine, because the human soul is fundamentally a Divine being (*Agape and Eros*, 165).

Significantly, Plato does not attribute his definition of Eros directly to Socrates, but rather has Socrates report what he has heard from Diotima, the prophetess of Mantinea, thus maintaining the link back to the original Orphic cults. Plato's innovation in the *Symposium*, crucial to the whole future of Western thought, consists in his assertion that the path from corrupt matter to divinity is a continuum within each individual, and that it can be followed largely by means of reason, that is, philosophy. Here he creates a bridge between the ecstatic revelation of the Mystery religions and rational observation of the sensual world. Plato describes his key parable, the story of the Cave, in the seventh Book of the *Republic*. Although Nygren's argument is building towards the climactic resurgence of Agape in the Protestant Reformation, he does justice to Plato:

Our position in the sense-world is there compared to that of men sitting in an underground cave, able to see only the shadows on the cave wall. Those who have never seen anything else but these shadows believe them to be the true reality. But the philosopher, who has got rid of his chains, climbed out of the dark cave, and ascended from the gloom of the sense-world to the brightness of the Ideas, knows that true reality is only to be found in this upper world and that the sense world shows us only the shadow of real being (*Agape and Eros*, 171).

Thus, for Plato, Eros can be considered a rational doctrine of salvation. If we direct our love to its appropriate object, the real things, the Forms or Ideas, we move out of the shadows and into the light. But, and this is crucial, we can become aware of the light at first only by paying careful, rational attention to the shadows. Plato achieves his most mature definition of Eros in the *Symposium*:

The right way of Eros ... whether one goes along or is led by another, is to begin with the beautiful things that are here and ascend ever upwards

aiming at the beauty that is above, climbing, as it were on a ladder from one beautiful body to two, and from two to all the others, and from beautiful bodies to beautiful actions and from beauty of actions to beautiful forms of knowledge, till at length from these one reaches that knowledge which is the knowledge of nothing other than Beauty itself (*Symposium*, 211).

Plato could not make it clearer that Eros stirs first in sensual attraction. This premise distinguishes Eros decisively from Judeo-Christian tradition, rooted in *Genesis*, which sees sensuality as punishment for the original sin of disobeying God. It also explains the erotic in Eros: because each individual consists of a continuum from dust to divinity, all sensory — and sensual — experiences and attractions (the adhesive nature of love) can foreshadow — and point the way toward — the Ideal. The love of beauty, sexual desire, the aesthetic perfection of an athlete, art object, or idea, all, experienced sensually and rationally examined, can lead us to the divine. Here we find the essence of Erotic love.

Norman O. Brown, in his bravura attempt to psychoanalyze history (*Life Against Death*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut, 1985) traces sublimation — the redirection of sexual energy to external objects of increasingly spiritual value — to the shamans of ancient mystery cults, and claims that Socratic philosophy owes much to them:

Sublimation thus rests on a mind-body dualism, not as a philosophical doctrine, but as a psychic fact implicit in the behavior of sublimators, no matter what their conscious philosophy may be. Hence Plato remains the truest philosopher, since he defined philosophy as sublimation and correctly articulated as its goal the elevation of Spirit above Matter. But, as Frazer showed, the doctrine of the external or separable soul is as old as humanity itself.

The original sublimator, the historical ancestor of philosopher and prophet and poet, is the primitive shaman, with his techniques for ecstatic departure from the body, soul-levitation, soul-transmigration, and celestial navigation. The history of sublimation has yet to be written but ... it is evident that Platonism, and hence all Western philosophy, is civilized shamanism — a continuation of the shamanistic quest for a high mode of being — by new methods adapted to the urban life. The intermediate links are Pythagoras, with his soul-transmigrations, and Parmenides, the great rationalist whose rationalistic vision was vouchsafed to him by the goddess after a ride through the sky to the Palace of Night (157–8).

How could modern Western reason have been born from a Mystery cult? This question obsessed Nietzsche, and he offers an appropriately paradoxical and poetic hint in the opening paragraph of *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (New York, Random House, 1956, trans. Francis Golffing):

Much will have been gained for esthetics once we have succeeded in apprehending directly — rather than by merely ascertaining — that art owes its continuous evolution to the Apollonian–Dionysiac duality, even

as the propagation of the species depends on the duality of the sexes, their constant conflicts and periodic acts of reconciliation. I have borrowed my adjectives from the Greeks, who developed their mystical doctrines of art through plausible embodiments, not through purely conceptual means. It is by those two art-sponsoring deities, Apollo and Dionysus, that we are made to recognize the tremendous split, as regards both origins and objectives, between the plastic, Apollonian arts and the non-visual art of music inspired by Dionysus. The two creative tendencies developed alongside one another, usually in fierce opposition, each by its taunts forcing the other to more energetic production, both perpetuating in a discordant concord that agon which the term art but feebly denominates: until at last, by the thaumaturgy of an Hellenic act of will, the pair accepted the yoke of marriage and, in this condition, begot Attic tragedy, which exhibits the salient features of both parents.

Nietzsche makes his devotion to Eros clear from the start. He approvingly quotes Plato via Schopenhauer: “Men of philosophical disposition are known for their constant premonition that our everyday reality, too, is an illusion, hiding another, totally different kind of reality. It was Schopenhauer who considered the ability to view at certain times all men and things as mere phantoms or dream images to be the true mark of philosophic talent” (*Birth*, 20) — a perception that couldn’t be more Platonic.

Nietzsche believed that the Apollonian structure of reason, symmetry, and classical beauty presented to us by Greek culture was erected upon a foundation of grave dread; he quotes Dionysus’ companion Silenus, who when trapped by King Midas and asked what he considered man’s greatest gift, laughed shrilly and said: “Ephemeral wretch, begotten by accident and toil, why do you force me to tell you what it would be your greatest good not to hear? What would be best for you is quite beyond your reach: never to have been born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best is to die soon” (*Birth*, 29). Here Nietzsche — and the shadow of Dionysus — warns that all the trappings of rational culture and esthetics are a beautiful illusion erected over a seething swamp of chaos, horror, and death: random nature. Apollo personifies the *principium individuationis* — the integrity of the individual personality. Dionysus personifies the periodic need to escape the chains of individuation and sink back into the primal One (what Freud called the “oceanic” feeling). Eros is the Greek’s answer to this conundrum: by yoking Apollo and Dionysus they preserve in dynamic tension the two poles of human life — transience and a connection to the eternal. The result is a compelling, livable, progressive narrative.

Nietzsche argues that the strain of maintaining the Apollonian illusion (Plato’s “Ideal”) tries individuality beyond endurance, and that only periodic submersion of the self in the sensual Dionysiac chaos offered by Orphism can “tear asunder the veil of Maya, to sink back into the original oneness of nature....” (27) As Nietzsche famously asked, “How else could life have been borne by a race so hypersensitive, so emotionally intense, so equipped for suffering?” (30) Nietzsche

concludes that the prodigious contributions of the ancient Greeks to the arts and science were possible precisely because they had built into their society, through their religious ceremonies and tragedies, periodic release valves in the form of exposure to raw Dionysiac despair, pansexuality, and redemption by Orphic ecstasy. Eros provides an ultimately spiritual connection between the slime and the ideal, and a way for fallible human beings to negotiate the journey both ways.

Analyzing Nietzsche via Freud, Norman O. Brown observes:

Apollo is the god of form — of plastic form in art, of rational form in thought, of civilized form in life. But the Apollonian form is form as the negation of instinct. “Nothing too much,” says the Delphic wisdom; “Observe the limit, fear authority, bow before the divine.” Hence Apollonian form is form negating matter, immortal form, that is to say, by the irony that overtakes all flight from death, deathly form... (He) is also the god who sustains “displacement from below upward,” who gave man a head divine and told him to look upward at the stars ... As Nietzsche divined, the stuff of which the Apollonian world is made is the dream. Apollo rules over the fair world of appearance as a projection of the inner world of fantasy; and the limit which he must observe “that delicate boundary which the dream-picture must not overstep,” is the boundary of repression separating the dream from instinctual reality.

But the Greeks who gave us Apollo also gave us the alternative, Nietzsche’s Dionysius. Dionysius is not dream but drunkenness; not life kept at a distance and seen through a veil but life complete and immediate ... The Dionysian “is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art” (*Life Against Death*, 174).

Artists who create poems, paintings, sculptures, or great architecture are by these terms not works of art because they are sublimating their fantasies into things of beauty, an Apollonian projection. Human beings become works of art when they dance, act, make love, or otherwise overflow with a life force that breaks free of the Apollonian ego. Individuals open to the Dionysian, as Rilke tells us, do not “die with un-lived lines in their bodies.” But individuals who give in to the Dionysiac impulses unreservedly, and without the protection of a proven ritual that guarantees a return to the Apollonian ego, become monsters, or are torn apart like Orpheus.

Nietzsche’s insistence on the antiquity and centrality of Orphism frightened and repelled most classical scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who were determined to see Greek culture as unique, original, and entirely Apollonian. This was all of a piece with the same scholars’ attempts to suppress the central role of homoeroticism in Greek philosophy. But a recent study by Walter Burkert, *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2005) decisively demonstrates that Herodotus and Nietzsche were right: Orphism had its origins in Persia and especially in Egypt and supplied a dominant component of Greek culture from its origins. In any event,

the idea that classical Greece sprang full-blown from the head of Zeus underrates its real achievement: the transformation of its Eastern and Egyptian sources into something wonderful and new, Western civilization, by the yoking of Dionysius and Apollo.

Plato's mature summary of Eros, predominantly in the *Phaedrus*, gathers together all these strands of Eros into a doctrine that could as well be called religious as philosophical, although the distinction was fluid in his time. Adopting the Orphic assumption that each soul has a divine spark that exists in eternity, Plato extrapolates that in a pre-existent state the soul must have been exposed to the pure ideals of beauty, truth, and good. This explains Socrates' interrogatory method: every individual has within his or her self the memory of these divine things and needs only to examine her conventional prejudices and false assumptions for this inner light to become clear. Plato also believes that the "divine spark" of the soul survives into other individuals or states, although his version of the afterlife is much vaguer than Jesus'. As Nygren says, "Just as the stone in virtue of its nature is attracted downward, so the soul in virtue of its divine nature is attracted upward.... This upward attraction of the soul is Eros" (*Agape and Eros*, 172).

Eros can be kindled by esthetic beauty or sensual attraction because they are the shadows of Heavenly Eros or union with the divine. This characteristic of Eros tells us something important about the gods, for one can desire only what one doesn't have. Since the gods have everything, their function is to be the object of Eros, not subject to it. They dwell in a state of ideal bliss that every wise man aspires to acquire through love of the good.

AGAPE

If Eros is all about man's love for the gods, Agape is all about God's love for man. As fallen creatures, the Jews of the *Old Testament* were separated from God not by gradations of reality that might be ascended through disciplined wisdom, but rather by a vast gulf, an utter difference in the nature of being. This gulf could not be crossed from man's side but only by a gift of revelation from God. For the Jews of Jesus' day, God's love, Agape, had been granted in the form of the Law, which allowed its observers to live in consonance with God's wishes.

Jesus adopted this cosmology but at the same time transformed it. Because the Law was God's Word to man, Judaism had become extremely legalistic: the righteous obeyed God's law and those who did not were sinners. The *Old Testament's* essential plot is the story of the Jews being specially chosen as God's people, departing from His Law, suffering terrible retribution for doing so, and returning to it with fear and trembling. Jesus did not overthrow the God of the *Old Testament*; his revolution consisted in saying, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." Jesus implied strongly that one could obey the Law perfectly and still be a sinner. All humankind was equally fallen and unworthy in God's eyes; the radical gap between God and man could be overcome only by a spontaneous

outpouring of love from God that included all people equally. He “fulfilled the Law,” in other words, by saying that God’s love, and the salvation it promised, applied equally to all men. Agape fuels many of the most beautiful passages in the *Old Testament*, especially the *Psalms*. Jesus — or at least, in his name, Paul — makes Agape absolute and apocalyptic.

God had invited all humankind into a fellowship with him and Jesus was the messenger of that good news. This vision opened the way for Paul’s mission to the Gentiles and made Christianity, unlike Judaism, a serious candidate to become a universal religion. Paul seized this opportunity and indeed created the foundation for a catholic — or all-inclusive — church. And no formulation of God’s Agape is more rigorous or anti-Erotic than Paul’s. Man’s role in this drama, then, was simply to accept God’s love and join in fellowship with Him.

Nygren stresses the essential features of Agape:

“Agape is spontaneous and unmotivated.” God’s love is not a response to man’s worthiness but despite his unworthiness. In this sense, it is the exact inverse of Eros both in its direction (God to man rather than man to God), and in its miraculous lack of self-interest (since while man has much to gain in approaching God, God has nothing to gain in saving man). In Nygren’s phrase, “Agape is indifferent to value.”

“Agape is creative ... The man who is loved by God has no value in himself; what gives him value is precisely that God loves him. Agape is a value-creating principle.”

“Agape is the initiator of a fellowship with God.” Since there is no way from man to God, Agape is God’s way to create a community with humankind (*Agape and Eros*, 77–81).

As Agape is “spontaneous and unmotivated, uncalculating, unlimited, and unconditional,” so must the individual who has received this divine gift love God and love his neighbors — including his enemies. As Jesus said to his disciples, “Freely you have received, freely give.” God’s Agape creates adhesion among mankind and between man and God, the new thing, the spontaneous forgiveness and fellowship, the community of the forlorn and oppressed, that came into the world in Jesus’ teachings and helps explain the extraordinary success of primitive Christianity.

EROS AND AGAPE

We can now fully identify the fundamental contrasts between the teachings of Socrates and the teachings of Jesus:

1. Socrates taught that the universe was of one substance, a continuum from the material to the divine. Primitive Christians taught that there was a radical disjunction between the material and the spiritual, man and God.
2. Consequently, Socrates professed a higher pantheism: that the divine is inherent in the material, and that the gods, or Ideas, are knowable, if only im-

perfectly. Christians taught the world was worthless except insofar as it could — and would — be redeemed by the arbitrary act of an inscrutable God.

3. Socratic philosophy implied that history was perdurable, perhaps cyclical, and that its end could not be known. Christianity taught that history had a beginning (the Creation), a middle (the advent of Jesus), and an end (the Last Judgment).

4. While Socrates' philosophy included the prospect that an individual could receive inspiration from a higher source, his primary tool for interpreting reality was reason. While Jesus could use techniques of logical argument, his sole method for interpreting ultimate things was faith.

5. Socratic ethics derived from the natural acquisitive instinct to better the self by seeking out the good. Christian ethics derived from faith that God had spontaneously summoned mankind to a higher order of behavior in the person of Jesus.

6. Eros, based on attraction to material things insofar as they were reflections of ultimate things, valued sexual energy in many forms. It could create an erotic bond between student and teacher that stimulated education and tenderness — even if it was not acted upon physically; the chief evidence of Socrates' remarkable self-control was that he did not sleep with the willing and beautiful Alcibiades. Desire for a lover could train the soul in how to seek out a higher good, and in fact could light up the beauty of the world, providing evidence of an even higher ideal Eros-object. There is no credible evidence that Jesus ever had sex, and much suggesting he did not, although there is an erotic tinge to the descriptions of his relationship with the "beloved" disciple John. In any event, his immediate disciples, prominently Paul, saw sexual love as a curse inflicted by man's fallen state.

7. Because he did not expect an abrupt and imminent end to this world, Socrates took great interest in politics, that is, the proper relation of the individual to the state. Because he believed his Second Coming in glory was imminent, Jesus displayed little interest in social or political relations beyond the interpersonal love and fellowship of believers that God had commanded.

8. Socrates and Jesus profoundly and importantly disagreed on the source of evil in the world. Socrates simply and elegantly equates evil and wrongdoing with ignorance because he believed a fully informed person who "knew himself" would naturally pursue the good out of enlightened self-interest. Jesus and his interpreters, by contrast, believed that evil came naturally to fallen man and that only the unmerited Agape of a fathomlessly generous God could redeem humankind into his fellowship. Since explaining the existence of evil and suffering lies at the core of every philosophical and theological system, these radically opposed teleologies defined the agenda for the future of Western thought in ethics, politics, literature, religion, and popular culture.

9. Socrates and Jesus held antithetical views of how human beings could be encouraged to live ethical lives: shame versus guilt. Classical morality was enforced largely by shame: standards of right behavior had been illustrated in Homer's great epics and elaborated by the philosophers; every educated Greek knew them by heart, and failure to abide by them would be punished by public humiliation (Pericles defines this process exactly in his great Funeral Oration cited earlier). In theory, therefore, one could live a perfectly ethical life, and most of his successors believed Socrates had done so. By contrast, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition, all humankind had been born guilty, so the struggle to live a moral life occurred within the individual, rather than between the self and its social context. What mattered was not what others thought of you; it was what God thought of you. Hence Christ had died to redeem the otherwise unforgivable guilt of all humankind.

Capturing something essential about Eros, Camille Paglia in *Sexual Personae* (New York, Random House, 1991) writes, "Paganism is eye-intense." She goes further:

[T]he eye is the avenue of Eros.... Judeo-Christianity has failed to control the pagan Western eye. Our thought processes were formed in Greece and inherited by Rome ... Intellectual inquiry and logic are pagan. Every inquiry is preceded by a roving eye, and once the eye begins to rove, it cannot be morally controlled. Judaism, due to its fear of the eye, put a taboo on visual representation. Judaism is based on word rather than image. Christianity followed suit, until it drifted into pictorialism in order to appeal to the pagan masses (32-33).

Paglia distills the debate between Socrates and Jesus: the first believed we could approach the purpose of the universe through analysis of the visible world; the second believed we must turn away from it to apprehend ultimate truths.

To summarize:

EROS	AGAPE
Material-divine continuum	Material-divine divide
Pantheism	Monotheism
Man seeks God	God seeks man
Humankind partly divine	Humankind entirely fallen
History ongoing	History about to end
Reason	Faith
Sensual	Anti-Sensual
Secular government	Theocracy
Evil equals ignorance	Evil man's natural state
Shame	Guilt

Eye	Ear
Immanence	Transcendence
Classic	Romantic
Right thinking	Right acting
Foreground	Background

The struggle between these two systems of ultimate value has generated the history of the Western World. Virtually everything progressive and reactionary, creative or destructive that has characterized European, and later, American, history, has resulted from the struggle between them. Eras of Western history over the last twenty-five hundred years have been characterized by periods of Socratic dominance — Hellenism, the early Roman Empire, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment — periods of Christ's dominance — the late Roman Empire, the early Middle Ages, the Reformation — and the intervening eras in which some synthesis of the two defined prevailing values and behavior.

The debate between Socrates and Jesus explains why Western culture has, with the intermission of the Middle Ages, consistently run ahead of other great civilizations scientifically, economically, politically, and socially in terms of including the largest proportion of its people in governance and in giving them the widest scope to explore their individuality. One can argue whether this is a good thing: Marx and many others have; but the fact is indisputable. Other great cultures had their yins and yangs (feminine and masculine principles); China for example alternated between the influences of Confucius and Lao-tze, and South Asian civilizations between Hinduism and Buddhism. But these pairings were on the same continuum, matters of emphasis, rather than being mortal enemies at their cores.

What made the interaction between Socrates and Jesus unique? All meaning beyond raw fact must be contained in metaphor, and Joseph Campbell offers a suggestive clue in his examination of primitive mythologies. After exploring how all cultures share a bedrock of myth based upon the human life cycle combined with variations adapted to local circumstances, he writes: "We observe, for example, that whereas in the Greek and Hebrew versions man is split in two by a God, in the Chinese, Hindu, and Australian it is the God who divides and multiplies" (*The Masks of God*, 109).

Socratic and Judeo-Christian tradition agree that god(s) created man from the slime. In the Greek tradition, man arises from the Titans of the earth who have consumed the divine Dionysus. According to Plato's development of the myth, based on ancient sources, the gods originally created humans doubled: man joined to man, man joined to woman, and woman to woman. Realizing the great power of these new creatures, the gods split them so that ever after each

mutilated being must go through life seeking out its other half. In the Hebrew version, God creates an androgynous Adam out of earth also, and then splits him into the sexes by molding Eve out of his rib. Both Western traditions show divine forces shaping humankind from muck and then fragmenting it into contending parts.

By comparison, in the Hindu creation myth:

The universal self becomes divided immediately after conceiving and uttering the pronoun "I" (Sanskrit *aham* or Om). This illustrates the fundamental Indian conviction that a sense of ego is the root of world illusion. Ego generates fear and desire, and these are the passions that animate all life and even all being; for it is only after the concept of "I" has been established that fear of one's own destruction can develop or any desire for personal enjoyment (Campbell, 109).

Most great civilizations have been based on attempts to flee the ego, while Western civilization has uniquely fled towards it, which may be why the great religious figures of the East are usually portrayed as wise, serene, and joyous, while those of the West often appear angry and judgmental. It is another signifier of problematical Western dynamism.

A vast gulf lies between the eastern conceptions of man as fragments of a broken God that can at least theoretically recover its original unity and the Western formulation in both Greek and Jewish thought that man's nature is essentially different from, and potentially opposed to, God. In eastern cultures divinity is attempting to reassemble itself, while in Western civilization man is striving with divinity for dominance, and flirts as often with the concept that man created God as with the belief that God created man. This dualism, and the further dualism between Socrates' and Jesus' versions of how the God-man battle is ultimately to be settled, has provided the energy driving Western civilization.