

THE MYSTERIES OF ORPHISM: THE PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT AND OVERCOMING EVIL

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Abstract

The article examines the enigmatic world of Thracian mythology and mysteries, immersing itself in hidden messages long shrouded in the mists of time. In this mystical world, the image of Orpheus shines with a magical enigma, concealing unsolved mysteries and hinting at its exceptional role in world history and the spiritual evolution of humanity. According to the Orphics, human nature is a combination of a divine soul and a mortal body, and through rituals and spiritual purification, immortality can be achieved. The purpose of the article is to analyze Orphism as an ancient mystical teaching and explore how it symbolizes the eternal struggle between light and darkness, Good and evil, and what its role is in the context of ancient culture, but also in our modern world. Orphism represents a profound synthesis of philosophy and religion, offering a model for understanding human existence and the contradictory nature of man. The philosophy of Good and evil, illuminated by Orphism, remains relevant today, expressing the eternal aspiration for moral and spiritual elevation.

Keywords: Orpheus, Good, Evil, Thracian Orphism

INTRODUCTION

In the depths of ancient Thracian mythology the mystery of Orphism unfolds - a mystical teaching revealing the deep connection between philosophy and religious practice. Emanating from the mysterious world of Orpheus, this ideology illuminates the eternal struggle between light and darkness, Good and Evil.

EXTRACT

The influence of Orpheus and Orphism runs deep into the past, immersing us in a world filled with mysterious and powerful forces. In this Ancient Realm of gods and demons, Orphism rises as a philosophical and religious teaching revealing the sacraments of existence. Orphic hymns and legends lead us along the paths of Good and Evil, intertwining them as eternal rivals in the struggle for the human soul. The forces of light and darkness, of life and death, compete for supremacy in this ancient saga.

At the heart of Orphism, mystical rituals and sacred symbols reveal the path to redemption and spiritual enlightenment, giving humans the opportunity to overcome darkness and discover the Divine Light.

According to Bogdanov, Orphism represents not only a religious literature of a theological nature, which includes mythological themes associated with figures such as Orpheus and Musaeus, but also a significant tradition extending back to the time of Neoplatonism. The author emphasizes that Orphism is also a religious doctrine that brings together various cosmogonic, theogonic, and anthropogonic ideas about the origins of the world, the gods, and human beings that differ from classical Hellenic religion. Orphism can additionally be described as a sect characterized by dogmatic teachings, personal faith, and mystery rituals. These features contrast it with the communal cult character of Greek religion, with the Orphics organizing closed religious communities.

Last but not least, Bogdanov defines Orphism as a specific way of life, including rules of conduct, prohibitions, and personal discipline, which links it to Pythagoreanism. Thus, the author considers Orphism as a complex phenomenon uniting literature, religious teaching, mystery rituals and a specific way of life [1].

In *Orphica Magica I*, Alexander Foll explores Orphism as an ancient Thracian mystical teaching that combines philosophical, religious and magical elements. In his view, Orphism was not simply a religious system, but a complex spiritual tradition that played an essential role in shaping Thracian culture and its influence on ancient European thought. A central figure in Orphic beliefs is Orpheus, through whom the connection between humanity and the divine world is realized. Foll emphasizes Orphism as a system of knowledge that not only reveals basic philosophical ideas about life, death, and immortality, but also includes mystical rituals and magical practices. Through the Orphic traditions is manifested the aspiration for moral purification and spiritual elevation, which reflects the main purpose of ancient spirituality and religious practices. The author emphasizes that Orphism was a "syncretic system" of ideas that shaped the worldview of the ancient Thracians and left its mark on the development of later cultures in the ancient world. He considers Orphic culture in the context of historically active behavioral patterns of non-literary societies in Southeastern Europe. The speech of Orpheus is not merely poetry; it is a vehicle of values and virtues expressing an oral doctrinal-ceremonial faith. The author concludes that the historical significance of Orpheus became apparent when various ethnolinguistic ideas began to take written form.

Foll differentiates Ancient Greek and Thracian Orphism, emphasizing his thesis that "Orpheus is the embodiment of the attempt to acquire individual knowledge, Orphicus the bearer of this essay, uplifted and driven by the enlightenment of faith, and

Orphism a type of doctrinal behavior. While the orphism of the ethos is a complete worldview, the literary one is based on mythic authorship. It advocates an initiatory practice that was recognized at the time of its diffusion outside esoteric societies by educated Greek observers not only in ethnic Thracian communities but also in Greece. This practice is documented by the gold lamellae, inscriptions on vases, graffiti, the 'riddles' of Orpheus in the Derveni papyrus, and texts in the corpus of Plato" [2].

In addition to Orpheus, other key figures such as Musaeus and Epimenides are also mentioned in the text, contributing to convey the authenticity of Neo-Olympic religious ritualism. The authority of Orpheus and his followers is linked to the transmission of sacred knowledge, and the magical language used in rituals is important in revealing the unseen and in achieving individual knowledge of immortality.

On the other hand, according to Foll, Orphism is shown to be a system of beliefs and practices that profoundly influences the cultural and spiritual history of Antiquity, highlighting the importance of quests and rituals in the lives of the people of that era [3].

Originating in the 6th century BC in the Balkans and southern Italy, Orphism has a long tradition in Greco-Roman antiquity. According to Bogdanov, Orpheus is the subject of various theories, and the dispute over the origins of Orphism considers whether it was Greek or Thracian, with possible influences from pre-European and Mycenaean cultures. Some researchers believe that Orphism and the Dionysian religion originated in Thrace in archaic Greece, but interpretations are often influenced by non-scientific factors. Greek Orphism probably preserves ideas from the earlier Thracian form, and its marginality may suggest foreign origins. The better documented Greek culture helps to understand Thracian as a process of 'cultural expansion'. Bogdanov also describes Orphism as a literature with theological content, developing to Neoplatonism and

representing a religious belief uncharacteristic of classical Greek religion. Despite the uncertainty of the data on Orphic beliefs and rituals, it is assumed that the Orphics organized mysteries similar to those at Eleusine, Thebes, Samothrace, and Crete.

Orphic literature has been around since the 5th and 4th centuries BC and covers major themes such as cosmogony (the origin of the universe), theogony (the origin of the gods) and anthropogony (the origin of man), representing hidden content that is implicit in myths about the origin of the world and man. These ideas are dynamically expressed in the Orphic mystery rituals and practices that provide bliss for the soul in the afterlife.

According to the author, Orphism does not contain explicit sociological ideas about human society and culture that are more prominent in early Greek ideology and mythology. However, it is distinguished by its possession of a sacred word (*hieros logos*), although it is not entirely clear whether the Orphic theogonies represent the sacred word itself or merely its re-tellings.

Bogdanov concludes that compared to Hesiod's Theogony, the Orphic theogonies follow a more dogmatic theological model. The Orphic theogony has a specific structure in which Zeus is depicted as the beginning, middle and end of everything in the world. In early Orphic theogonic texts, this idea is usually presented towards the end, when order in the world is established. Before this, the events of world evolution and the struggle between divine powers for power are narrated until the supreme deity is reached, who establishes the only order. Unlike Hesiod's Theogony, which emphasizes the diversity of the world order, according to the author, the Orphic Theogony emphasizes the continuity and unity in the world wholeness [4].

In his book "Pagan Regeneration. A Study of Mysterious Initiations in the Graeco-Roman World", Harold Willoughby, like the previously mentioned authors, offers a thorough study based on a variety of sources. He argues that Orphism is not just a religious cult, but a complex philosophical

system that carefully traces the dynamic between good and evil in human existence. The classical texts of Aristophanes, Euripides, Plato and Pindar play a key role in his study, providing valuable insights into the religious and philosophical views of the ancient Greeks. For the author, archaeological finds, such as the Orphic tablets discovered in tombs in southern Italy and Crete, are also an important source of information. These artefacts, dating from the fourth century BC to the second century AD, contain instructions on conduct in the next world, confessions and directions for post-mortem ceremonial observances. They provide specific examples of Orphic beliefs and practices, serving as direct evidence of the ancient Greeks' preparations for life after death.

For a broader expression of Orphic theology, the author turns to the corpus of Orphic literature. Various poems attributed to Orpheus existed as early as the time of the Pisistratids in Athens. These were quoted by Plato and other authors, but their authenticity was later challenged by Aristotle and Herodotus. However, under the hands of the Orphics a vast literature has grown around this nucleus. Willoughby attributes particular importance to the hymns, which represent the developed state of Orphic theology and have the tone, according to the author, of mystical monotheism.

Willoughby's study provides valuable insight into the perception of Good and Evil in Orphism.

The myth of Dionysus Zagreus, recreated in the Exhortation to the Greeks by Clement of Alexandria and confirmed by Diodorus, is based on lost Orphic poems. According to Clement's version, Persephone bore Zeus a bull-shaped son called Dionysus Zagreus. He was destined by Zeus to become ruler of the universe, but the Titans, driven by Hera's jealousy, baited him with toys, tore him to pieces, and ate the pieces. Athena, however, saves the heart of Zagreus and gives it to Zeus, who destroys the Titans with lightning bolts. From the heart of Zagreus, devoured by Zeus, the new Dionysus is born.

The author emphasizes that this story is closely related to the ritual of eating raw flesh, which symbolizes the dismemberment and devouring of the god, giving divine sanction to the ritual. Thus arises the legend of Dionysus Zagreus, who becomes a central figure in the Orphic cult. Willoughby emphasizes the importance of this narrative, since in Orphic thought it explains the origin and nature of man.

According to Orphic beliefs, the human was created from the ashes of the Titans, who had previously devoured Zagreus, possessing divine vitality. From this perspective, Orphics perceive human nature as a combination of two parts: one Dionysian and immortal, and one Titanic and mortal. The soul is considered divine, while the body is its prison. This clear dualism between body and soul is essential to Orphic theology. Although the body is seen as something evil, the soul remains divine and immortal. On one of the plaques from southern Italy, the soul is described as a child of the Earth and the starry sky, but originating in Heaven, emphasizing its divine origin.

On the other hand, according to Willoughby, the process of salvation in Orphic theology is not simply a purification from bodily contamination. The problem is much deeper and more complex. Orphics seek not only deliverance from the evils of their current life, but also from the torments of a series of reincarnations. The first Orphics, and later the Pythagoreans, believed in the transmigration of souls from one body to another, the soul passing into a new body, whether that of a human or an animal, at each death. This series of reincarnations continues until the soul is completely purified. The Orphics moralize the idea of transmigration by making it a cycle of purifications. The goal is to free the soul from bodily contamination and attain the pure heavenly self. Willoughby views Orphic and Platonic theology as a long and complex process of purification and liberation of the soul [5].

According to Plato, the soul must pass through three periods of a thousand years each, at the end of each period drawing lots and choosing its next incarnation. Er's account of the afterlife is presented at the end of Plato's dialogue *The State*. Er, a warrior from Pamphylia, dies on the battlefield, but after twelve days he is resurrected and tells what he saw in the afterlife. He describes the journey of souls after death - how good souls go to heaven where they experience reward for their virtuous lives, and bad souls fall into underworld torment. After experiencing their reward, souls have the opportunity to choose a new body for their next life.

In this account, Orpheus, now a soul, is said to be terrified at the thought of returning to human form because of the suffering he endured when he was torn apart by women in his previous life. Instead, he chooses a quiet life as a swan to avoid human torment again [6].

This story related to Orpheus reflects both the theme of the cycle of rebirth in Orphism and the importance of choice and the consequences of actions in the afterlife.

Willoughby comments on "palingenesis" as a term used by the Orphics for the rebirth of souls into human bodies. These physical reincarnations are perceived by the Orphics as the evil they most wish to escape. The main purpose of their efforts is to break this tiresome and painful cycle.

Thus, according to the author, Orphism represents a unique view of human existence, offering deliverance from the cycle of physical rebirth through sacred rituals and mysteries. Orphics believe that only through the successful completion of initiation rituals can liberation from the evils of the material world be achieved.

In his study, Willoughby examines homophagy, the celebration of raw flesh that serves as both communion and commemoration. By eating the flesh of the sacrificial bull, symbolizing the god Zagreus, the Orphics receive a divine substance that strengthens their immortal

soul. The ritual re-creates the myth of the killing of Dionysus by the Titans and represents a symbolic act of spiritual purification. These practices are an important element of the initiation, designed to free participants from the physical stains of existence.

The author examines the religious rituals through which Orphism directs its teachings toward spiritual liberation and purification achieved through an ascetic lifestyle. Initiation and homophagy mark the beginning of the process of salvation followed by the rigorous "Orphic life." This style of life includes ceremonial purity, abstinence from animal food, and the observance of spiritual purification rituals. The Orphics shared these practices with the Pythagoreans, united in their quest for spiritual sanctity and the removal of evil left by the Titans. Their asceticism involves dressing in pure white, symbolizing their spiritual purity and devotion to Orphic ideals.

Additionally, Willoughby notes that Orphism has had a significant impact on people's moral lives, offering religious rituals that encourage abstinence from violence and promote peaceful existence. From Pindar to Aristophanes, ancient writers viewed Orphism as a doctrine of purity and spirituality, linking moral behavior to rituals and eschatology. Orphism developed a complex theological system based on Dionysian practice and experience. It deals with the problem of the dual nature of man: the soul is divine and immortal, while the body is evil and mortal. Religion offers two main ways to overcome this dichotomy: physical reincarnation and a long process of self-discipline and spiritual restoration that leads to salvation and assimilation to the divine.

Willoughby summarizes that Orphism is not limited to a single event such as a new birth in life unless initiation is taken proleptically. Instead, the religion promotes a regenerative process that begins with initiation and ends with the salvation of the soul after death. Orphism teaches that

regeneration is an ongoing path to happy immortality, and the belief in this is a key element of the concept of Good and Evil in life and beyond [7].

CONCLUSION

Orphism presents a profound and complex view of the nature of good and evil, viewing human nature through the prism of dualism. In this philosophical tradition, the soul is sublime, divine, and immortal, while the body is titanic, evil, and mortal. In this context, evil is not merely seen as a consequence of human actions or unfavorable circumstances; it possesses deep cosmological roots related to man's titanic nature and demonic influence that are embedded in universal reality.

In the mythological world of the Orphics, the Cosmos is the arena of the eternal confrontation between Good and Evil, order and chaos, which constitute the basis of the natural cosmic order. The Orphics believe that evil can be overcome through rituals of initiation, spiritual purification and regeneration. The process of initiation and spiritual development is aimed at liberating man from his titanic nature and transcendence beyond the evil deeply woven into the essence of human existence.

Orphism opens a path to achieving spiritual purity and exaltation, offering methods for overcoming evil and integrating the divine aspect of existence. In this sense, rituals are not merely practices but means of transformation that lead to liberation and enlightenment.

It is interesting how this ancient view resonates with contemporary scholarship in philosophy of religion and psychology, which also considers human nature and moral conflicts in the field of deeper cosmic and existential questions.

Despite the abyss of time and cultural change, Orphism not only retains its unique identity and practices, but also continues to influence other religions and philosophies, including Pythagoreanism, Hermeticism, and Christianity. Thus, it does not only stand as a philosophical and religious

phenomenon, but also offers a unique view of existence that explores the human soul and its relationship to the divine. This fact underlines the ability of Orphic ideology to integrate itself into different cultural and religious environments throughout the ages, while at the same time preserving its uniqueness and timeless identity that reaches us today.

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