

Epicureanism as the spiritual essence or 'religion' of an entire community

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What did I mean when I said something like 'the Epicureans were the first cult to try to imagine an ideal community without political mediations'? It simply means that Epicureanism was only one of several schools that dreamed of a better social co-existence between humans. But the other schools had strong political flavors whereas Epicureanism didn't.

Here we find another affinity with radical Judaism and to illustrate that we can use an example from what Jesus himself (who was in reality merely the leader of one of many unorthodox Judaist sects of that time) allegedly did.

According to the gospels when Jesus encountered a Roman centurion he was friendly to him and congratulated him because he saw that the centurion's wisdom exceeded that of the children of Israel. Jesus didn't tell him 'you are a filthy pig and you need to get away from the holy country of Israel' which is what an orthodox Jewish priest would have done. He didn't tell him that being a soldier is evil and that he should get another job as the modern Nietzschean caricatures of Christianity would imagine Jesus doing.

Elsewhere in the gospels Jesus says 'give unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give unto God what belongs to God'. So it's clear that Jesus was apolitical and also not a moralist in the traditional sense. He didn't care that you weren't a Jew. He didn't care about your private life being pure, he didn't care what worldly regime existed in his time. The only thing he cared about was to bring everybody into salvation. Just as Epicurus was called a 'soter' (savior) so did Jesus understand himself as a savior. And Jesus was interested in saving everybody who wanted to be saved, not just the Jews and not just the virtuous people. So here we observe an implicit denigration of popular virtue in Christianity. Jesus spends much time in the gospels condemning the hypocrisy of orthodox Jews precisely because he is not impressed by popular virtue.

Jesus was also clearly a pacifist even though he lived in a country under foreign occupation. Epicureanism also has this aspect. Remember the anecdote where an Epicurean demonstrates to Pyrrhus of Epirus that his conquests are just a folly and that harming people is the wrong way to pleasure.

So summing up radical Judaism was apolitical (the only state that mattered was the kingdom of heaven) it was cosmopolitan in its vision ('there shall be no Greek and no Jew'), it was pacifist in a country that cried for blood (and would soon get it) and it completely lacked elitist tones so that even prostitutes could be redeemed. In the staunchly patriarchal and zero-jokes world of antiquity prostitutes were regarded not as 'sex workers' but as something like a doll invested with filthy flesh, a pseudo-human form of life. So the radicality of Jesus in the context of Judaism

should not be underestimated, it was this radicality that got him killed after all. So Jesus was definitely not a 'pathetic victim'. He was an unorthodox figure who firmly stood up for what he believed and paid the ultimate price. This is hell of a lot more than most modern political warriors would have done if they were up against real pressures.

The radicality of Epicurean egalitarianism in the context of the Greco-Roman world should also not be underestimated. Once again I wish to remind people that wealth inequalities were intense to the effect that religious sacrifices contributed significantly to valuable nutrition for the masses. Religion didn't just feed people's illusions. It also fed them literally. This was not a world where criticism of popular religion was a harmless thing to do. Epicureans are known to have faced expulsions for their beliefs.