

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

Post by “Peter Konstans” of February 1, 2024 at 11:28 AM

[Quote from Eggplant Wizard](#)

[Quote from Peter Konstans](#)

Has anybody ever experimented with the idea of Epicureanism as a formal spiritual identity capable of defining entire communities? What would Epicureanism look like if it wasn't merely a brotherhood of friends discussing philosophy but was also a sort of quasi religious worldview with its own intricate rituals, symbols and ceremonies covering every aspect of life?

Like I talked about at length in another thread, I think if Epicureanism had persisted through late antiquity, it could easily have developed overtly "religious" tendencies rivaling the theurgic neoplatonism of Iamblichus, Emperor Julian, Proclus, etc. This is because Epicurean piety already had certain concepts that anticipated the theurgists: understanding that the gods do not exhibit favor or wrath toward mortals, but that mortals' own attitudes toward them can engender good or bad effects; that the gods are not pleased by sacrifice but that this benefits the worshiper by drawing them closer to the gods; that popular religious rites are in fact appropriate expressions of piety; that only a purified mind can receive accurate impressions from the gods. And while the theurgists' gods, unlike the Epicureans' gods, did actively govern the world, they did so in a detached, effortless way, like the sun shining. If one takes seriously the idea that the [Epicurean gods](#) are constantly emitting a stream of subtle images that reach earth, then it could easily be inferred that these images are all-pervasive and that various means can be sought to perceive, channel, or embody them.

The theurgists of Late Antiquity (Neoplatonists and their ilk) wanted to defend traditional polytheism in the face of new monotheistic challenges. They felt that philosophy could enable them to cleanse traditional polytheism of its childhood diseases and stupidities. Thus cleansed, polytheism could transform itself into something new and great. Well, that didn't work out at all. But since much of Christian theology is rooted in ancient philosophy it is not surprising that ancient attempts to defend paganism focused a great deal on reclaiming 'true' philosophy.

Epicurus spoke of 'true philosophy' too but it is doubtful that he would have found common ground with half-schizoid people like Julian the Apostate, Iamblichus or Plotinus. My view is that

Epicurus' portrayal of the gods as part of the natural world was an elegant way to answer why the hell the whole of mankind believed and worshipped them. Even today we are not quite sure why people made up religion. In view of modern scientific progress it is extremely difficult to argue today that the ontological existence of divinities or immaterial beings is likely.

So modern scientists are almost universally atheist i. e. they believe that gods, magic etc. are completely made up and have absolutely no basis outside of human psychology. But then nobody has worked out a generally accepted scientific theory about how and why religion was developed by humans. The theology of Epicurus was an attempt to answer why people are clinging onto something that doesn't contribute to pleasure, worldly success or salvation from evils and which instead often causes psychological distress, confusion and pain.

Other philosophers before Epicurus (almost none of which - contrary to some puerile Neoplatonists of later centuries - was inclined to take popular religion the least bit seriously) had their own theories about this important theological issue. But Epicurus had to find an answer in alignment with his own views about the nature of the universe (his cosmology), the nature of man (his anthropology) and the strategy for success and happiness (his deontology).

In terms of methodology Epicurus had a similar view about philosophy as Helmuth von Moltke the Elder had about strategy. The latter once remarked, "The theory of strategy scarcely goes beyond the first principles of common sense." Epicurus applied this 'common sense' in cosmological and theological matters too. For example, fires seen a distance are more or less what they appear to be so the sun must be the same. Since a tiny lamp can light up an entire room, why assume that the sun is larger than the earth we tread on? In antiquity it was rational to suggest this given the profound ignorance of the times.

Despite this ignorance it was rational to posit - correctly - that the world is made up of atoms somehow. And since gods are universal across cultures it was rational to assume that they really do exist somehow. So why not explain the visions of the gods as transmissions of their sublime atoms to the attuned souls of happy and blessed people? After all, from an Epicurean point of view, happiness (eudaimonia) is what makes god-like. In other words Epicurean theology was useful because it served the purposes of Epicurean ethics.

I am not sure that my interpretation is correct. We are in a similar situation in respect to Epicurean teachings as Epicurus and his contemporaries were in respect to the natural world. Maybe the optimal approach is to imitate Epicurus and, like him, opt for the simplest possible explanations when interpreting him.