Religions of the Ancient World

a guide

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Epilogue

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A certain tension is manifest in the preceding articles of this volume, in which extremely knowledgeable specialists address issues of enormous complexity with a maximum of efficiency and economy. Being both learned and scrupulous, they struggle to select a few choice examples from the countless possibilities available to them, after which they are forced to abbreviate and simplify even these. Toward the end of their articles, as they move to summarize, generalize, and distill, they suffer once more as they sacrifice diversity, nuance, complexity, and prudent qualifications on the conjoined altars of the Big Picture and the Short Article. *Sic semper est* with encyclopedias, even the sainted Pauly-Wissowa. The problem is more acute still for one charged (or cursed) with writing the final article: summary of summaries, epitome of epitomes, thinnest, blandest, most superficial, most simplistic, and therefore inevitably—also, quite rightly—most open to objection.

Admittedly insuperable difficulties can be liberating, however, since one is free to err in the manner of one's choosing, all possible approaches being wrong. Accordingly, I will frame the following discussion with two broad sets of questions. First, what do we mean by "the ancient world"? What constitutes the ancient and separates it from that which follows (a category I will, for the sake of convenience and provocation, call the "post-ancient")? Second, what forms does religion take and what roles does it play in the ancient? In the post-ancient? And how do changes in the religious contribute to the change from one era to the other?

As an initial attempt to engage these questions—one that is admittedly inadequate and destined for further refinement—let me advance the proposition that "the ancient" is that situation in which religion is not one system of culture coexisting among many others, but occupies the central position and plays a unique role—informing, inflecting, integrating, stabilizing, even at times controlling and determining all others (a position that has had some currency at least since Fustel de Coulanges 1864). Such a formulation carries a Hegelian

danger, of course, threatening to turn into its opposite. For were religion to be found everywhere, there would be no borders to delimit and define it. Indeed, its very ubiquity might render it unrecognizable, rather like "culture" or life itself. That many, perhaps most ancient languages have no term to match the semantics of English "religion" (Latin is only a partial exception) lends support to this suspicion. It also raises the possibility that the emergence of the term and category "religion" is itself a product of the cultural transformation effected by the Reformation and Enlightenment, making this concept a particularly anachronistic instrument for understanding the situation of the premodern (compare the discussions of W. C. Smith 1963 and Asad 1993).

Although this argument has the merit of making us cautious, it errs by way of overstatement. To say that nothing in antiquity was free of religion—not war, disease, erotic love, science, the arts, poetry, or the state; not the landscape, the family, the meat on the table, or the fire on the hearth—is to say not that everything "was" religious, only that religious concerns were a part of all else, and a part that remains—to us, at least—analytically recognizable. Proceeding thus, we might theorize "the ancient" as that situation where, to cite just a few examples, one treats toothache by reciting the account of creation, reads the organs of sacrificial victims before waging battle, secures the verity of speech acts with sacred oaths, and conducts international diplomacy through appeals to mythic genealogy (Pritchard 1969, 100–101; Cicero, *On Divination* 1.95; Hesiod, *Theogony* 782–806; Herodotus 7.150, e.g.).

Scholars have often worked with such a model, although often it remains subtextual and implicit (Loew 1967, Eliade 1954, Frankfort 1948). Correlated with this model (whether as consequence or motive is hard to tell) is an understanding that "the ancient" ended with a "Greek miracle" that anticipated the Enlightenment by breaking with myth, tradition, and puerile superstition to achieve a critical view of religion (Nestle 1940, Cornford 1912, Vernant 1982). Xenophanes, Heraclitus, and Socrates are often singled out in this respect and accorded particular credit. Closer reading, however, makes clear that these thinkers were hardly critics of religion as such, but only critics of specific forms. Thus, for all that Xenophanes chided Homer and Hesiod for telling scandalous tales about the gods, and notwithstanding his sly suggestion that cattle imagined gods in bovine form, he also maintained, apropos of proper etiquette at drinking parties: "It is fitting, above all, for men of good cheer to hymn the god with well-spoken *mythoi* and pure *logoi,* having poured libations and prayed to be able to accomplish just things" (Xenophanes, DK 21B11 and 21B112; 21B15, cf. 21B16; 21B1, ll. 13–16). He made clear in the same passage, which represents the longest excerpt we have of his work, his concern that religion should promote decorum, well-being, grace, and harmony. As a negative complement, he did maintain "there is nothing useful" in beliefs that promote violent disorders *(stasias sphedanas),* but this is hardly a critique of religion *per se* (ll. 21–23).

Similarly, Socrates claimed to have grounded his incessant critical activity on an oracle received from the Delphic Pythia, and he took pains to assure the

jury that tried him for impiety *(asebēia)* that he was incapable of this offense, since a personal *daimōn* supervised his conduct and he always heeded this deity's advice (Plato, *Apology* 20e–23c, 40a–c). Plato's valuation of reasoned knowledge *(epistēmē)* over faith *(pistis)* and opinion *(doxa)* also involved less criticism of religion than is normally supposed. Thus, he maintained that the philosophical disposition which makes it possible for a very small elite to acquire such knowledge is itself the product of postmortem experiences before the soul's reincarnation. In that heavenly realm, ultimate reality is revealed to all, but its true nature is remembered only by those who have cultivated exceptional powers of self-control by their prior training and *askēsis* (Plato, *Phaedrus* 246d–249d, *Republic* 614b–621d). Ultimately, Plato's epistemology is inseparable from his theory of the soul and its fate (psychology in the most literal sense and eschatology), also his metaphysics and soteriology. In a word, his philosophy incorporates and depends on religion, albeit a form of religion that eschews civic cult, while drawing on dissident strains of speculation current among Orphics, Pythagoreans, and others.

"The ancient" does break down, of course, but it does so gradually, not through any "miracle" (itself a surprisingly religious trope, as is that of "genius," which often attends it). Earlier, to characterize "the ancient," I cited a set of examples that gestured toward medicine (the Babylonian toothache charm), warfare (Roman divination before battle), law (Greek oaths), and diplomacy (Persian use of genealogies to court potential allies). Change, however, can be seen in all these domains, as when epilepsy ("the sacred disease") is said to derive from natural causes and when generals repeat divinatory consultations until they get the results they want or proceed in defiance of the readings (Hippocratic corpus, *On the Sacred Disease;* Cicero, *On Divination* 2.52). The same shift toward a "post-ancient" less thoroughly encompassed by religion can be perceived when statements are secured by signing a contract, rather than swearing an oath; or when threats and bribes, rather than invocations of shared ancestors, are used to enlist allies (Thucydides 5.89). Such changes come piecemeal, however, so that antiquity ends—if the model we are currently entertaining permits us to conclude that it ends at all—only in fits and starts. Indeed, the model allows the view that "the ancient" reasserts itself (or simply persists) whenever oaths are sworn in a court of law, wherever prayers are said for the sick or for soldiers in battle, and whenever nations make common cause on the basis of shared beliefs.

Our first attempt sought to resolve all problems at once by identifying "the ancient" with the omnipresence of religion, while paying no attention to complexities internal to the latter term. The result was a critical instrument too blunt for the Gordian knot. It is time to back up and seek a sharper blade.

a similarly transcendent status; (2) a set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by the religious discourse to which these practices are connected; (3) a community whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices; (4) an institution that regulates discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value (Lincoln 2003: 5–7). Accordingly, I would suggest that the transition from ancient to post-ancient might better be studied with reference to these four variables, rather than to the one that is their sum and product, "religion" *tout court.*

As a starting point, one might observe that the most authoritative discourses of antiquity tended to be acts of speech that understood—and represented—themselves to be inspired. Not simply human utterances, these were pronouncements in which some divine agency was felt to be at work, speaking through select human instruments and channels. Mantic, oracular, and prophetic speech regularly enjoyed such status, as did royal proclamations and poetic performance. Poetry was extraordinarily important, and the reasons for this must be assessed from two complementary perspectives, technological and ideological. Prior to the emergence of alphabetic script and the consequent spread of literacy, poetry was the most effective technique of memory. Any proposition or narrative that could be put in poetic language was thereby rendered more memorable than in any other linguistic form and therefore more likely to be transmitted across space and time. Such encoding was reserved for those cultural contents that were (or better: were judged and became, as a result of this judgment) most important. Reflecting and compounding this practical advantage was the claim of divine status that poets regularly made for themselves and their art. As Hesiod put it, the very breath with which he spoke—the material substance of his speech—was placed in his lungs by the Muses themselves, who were daughters of Zeus and Memory (Mnemosynē) (Hesiod, *Theogony* 31–32: *enepneusan de moi audēn thespin*). The Delphic Pythia, by contrast, gave oracles only in trance, when possessed by Apollo. The proof that the god spoke through her came not only from the state of her body and visage, but also because she spoke in perfect hexameters (Plutarch, *On the Obsolescence of Oracles*). Similar constructions of poetic discourse as sacred and of poets as "masters of truth" (Detienne 1996) are to be found among the Hebrew prophets, Vedic seers, Roman sibyls, and the hymns attributed to Zarathustra (Kugel 1990).

With the spread of literacy and alphabetic script, written prose gradually displaced oral poetry as the most effective mnemonic technique, and widespread cultural changes followed (Havelock 1963, Goody 1987, Ong 1982). In the realm of religion, sacred books came to enjoy higher status than did inspired utterances. Growing awareness that the latter might not be what they claimed and were open to manipulation by their human agents also served to undercut their authority. This authority might be preserved, however, when the utterances in question were textualized and reconstituted as revealed scripture, as in the case of the biblical prophets and the Sibylline books.

So bibliocentric (initially in the broad, and later in the narrow sense) did religious discourse become that the danger emerged of excess production and oversupply. To control this danger, priestly bodies assumed the power to impose limits through canon formation and the closure of prophecy, sometimes with the backing of state power, as when Augustus had the Sibylline Books collected, purged of suspicious content, and placed in the temple of his patron deity, where they were kept under lock and key, accessible only to authorized priests (Suetonius, *Augustus* 31.1). Similar processes, if less dramatic and under less direct state control, elsewhere produced restricted bodies of scripture that were invested with authoritative status. Energies were directed toward the interpretation of these texts rather than the production of new ones. Reading rather than speaking became the privileged moment of religious discourse, and innovation no longer came through the claim of inspiration, but through the practice of shrewd hermeneutics. To put it in slightly different terms, as Jeremiah yielded to the rabbis, John the Baptist to the Church Fathers, Muhammad to the *qadis* and *ulama,* one can see not only Weber's routinization of charisma, but also the historic shift from a prophetic ethos associated with orality to the scholarly ethos of the text.

Religious practices also changed significantly from the ancient to the post-ancient. Two sorts of practice fell into relative desuetude, both of which purported to mediate between the sacred and profane in direct, material fashion. The first of these was a whole complex of behaviors involving the statues of deities. Most commonly, the presence of such statues in temples constituted the sanctuaries as the site of a god's residence on earth, thereby cementing the relation of a specific city and people to a specific deity. Thus, to cite but one example, the statue of Marduk in the temple Esagila at Babylon marked the city as this god's special domain and the god as this city's patron, also as the dominant member of the pantheon when the city's power expanded. For as was true with other Mesopotamian cities, when the Babylonians were victorious in warfare, they often captured (the statues of) other cities' deities as tokens of subordination and risked similar capture of their own god should they in turn be conquered. The priests of this temple were charged with the care, feeding, decoration, and worship of Marduk's resident statue, which is to say his virtual, palpable presence. This was not mere servitude, however, since deity and people were engaged in an ongoing mutually beneficial exchange. The flow of benefits to humanity was particularly dramatized at the *Akitu* (New Year) festival, when the king clasped the hands of Marduk's image and thereby had his legitimacy and power renewed by the god himself, with consequences for the

> [May] your heart [be sympathetic] to whoever seizes your hands.
> "Temple Program for the New Year's Festival at Babylon," ll. 396–400, trans. A. Sachs, in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 334

Other peoples developed different practices. Sometimes access to the statues was restricted to the priesthood or its high-ranking members. Sometimes worshippers were permitted to make contact by entering an inner sanctum of the temple where the statue/deity was housed. In other cases, images were brought forth to outer chambers on festal occasions or even paraded through the streets of the city. Some of the statues represented benevolent, nurturing deities who brought blessings to their people; others were demanding and jealous figures, who threatened those they found inadequately devoted or attentive. But in all instances, these blocks of material substance were the site where relations between the human and the divine were transacted, the point of conjuncture between sacred and profane.

At least equal in importance was the practice of sacrifice, the most common and also the most significant form of ritual among virtually all ancient peoples. Countless theories of sacrifice have been offered (W. R. Smith 1889, Hubert and Mauss 1964, Burkert 1983, Thieme 1957, Detienne and Vernant 1989, Girard 1977, Grottanelli 1999) and the practice itself could be infinitely varied in its performance. Ordinarily, it involved the immolation of an animal or vegetable offering (much more rarely a human victim), the spiritual portion of which was believed to pass to the divine, while the material portion became the basis of a feast enjoyed by the human performers, with the gods as their honored guests, thereby restoring a commensality lost in the mythic primordium. All details of the performance could be invested with symbolic content—for instance, the division of the victim's body might provide analysis of the categoric distinctions between divine, human, and animal levels of existence (Vernant 1989, Grottanelli and Parise 1988)—or the ritual might replicate events recounted in cosmogonic myth that homologize the body to the world as microcosm to macrocosm (Lincoln 1986). Sacrifice also provided a means to invest bloody and violent acts with sacral significance and avoid the charge that one killed just to obtain food. Rather, one assumed the burden and awesome responsibility of caring for the gods and the cosmos, which meant performing each minute part of the action in perfectly controlled, symbolically appropriate fashion. Preparation of the feast and disposal of the remains, no less than actual dispatch of the victim, were subject to the same regulation and scrutiny, since all aspects of sacrificial ritual were "good to think" and therefore subject to symbolic elaboration.

Destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE made it impossible for the priests of Israel to continue their performance of sacrifice. The resulting reorganization of cult and thought led to the emergence of that which we know as Judaism(s). In other traditions, no such dramatic events were responsible, but over time sacrifice and the use of statues ceased to form the center of ritual practice, and material mediations of every sort diminished in their import. They were

displaced—although never completely—by practices that relocated the prime site of interest and action inside the human subject. Prayer; the cultivation of certain valorized dispositions, sentiments, and states of being; the habit of monitoring one's progress toward these ethical and existential ideals; and reporting flaws and slips to spiritual advisors, while submitting to their guidance and discipline, became privileged aspects of religious practice with the move toward the post-ancient.

Clearly, these developments correlated with shifts in the nature of religious community. In the ancient, religion was a shared concern of groups existing at familial, civic, ethnic, and national levels of integration. The collective identity of such groups was strongly overdetermined, being based simultaneously on territory, language, polity, kinship, and laws, as well as the religion that members held in common and that, in turn, held them. One's neighbors were thus one's fellow citizens and also one's co-religionists, who spoke the same language, shared the same norms, celebrated the same festivals, and worshiped at the same altars, seeking favor of the same gods for the group of which they were all a part. The post-ancient, by contrast, saw the emergence of communities based primarily—and also most explicitly and emphatically—on religious considerations, integrating persons who might be divided by geography, language, culture, or citizenship.

This development had begun as early as the 6th century BCE with the Pythagoreans. Among its contributing factors was the formation of great empires that brought disparate populations into a single political entity and tax structure, but left subject peoples only very imperfectly integrated by religion and culture. At the same time, expanded trade and improved communications permitted relatively wide circulation of religious tenets, texts, and teachers, all of which gradually refashioned themselves in broader, less localized idioms as they engaged—and absorbed feedback from—a disparate international audience (Grottanelli 1982). At times, imperial powers sought to introduce aspects of their native religion to the provinces, or at least to the elite strata therein (e.g., Seleucid policy at the time of the Maccabean revolt). At other times, the imperial center imported religious forms from the periphery as a conscious policy (e.g., the Roman *evocatio* ritual that appropriated gods of conquered enemies); as a means to indulge growing taste for the exotic (e.g., the introduction of Isis and Cybele at Rome); or as part of the backwash that inevitably accompanies conquest (e.g., Mithraism). The diaspora of various groups (such as the Magi and the Jews) and the proselytizing activities of others (the missions recounted in the Acts of the Apostles and related apocrypha) also contributed to the de-territorialization of religious community characteristic of the

tion of post-ancient religious communities was held together not only by shared symbols, beliefs, and practices, but also by itinerant leaders and mobile texts such as the epistles of the New Testament, the polemic exchanges among Church Fathers, the corpora assembled at Qumran and Nag Hammadi, or the rabbinic responsa. Inclusion or exclusion in such amorphous communities was not ascribed by birth in a given place, lineage, or social stratum, but was elective. One joined by conversion, that is, by accepting the beliefs, practices, texts, and leadership that constituted the group and were central to their self-understanding. The promise of salvation provided a prime inducement to convert and the conviction that one's faith offered salvation to others (whose contributions would sustain and renew the group) provided a prime motive to proselytize. Soteriological concerns thus figured prominently in the life of post-ancient religions, whose members sought—and promised others—escape from a world they experienced as hostile, bewildering, and finite to an alternative realm of eternal bliss. Such escape was prefigured by the move from one social group, identity, and set of loyalties to another: abandoning one's family, for instance, to join one's new brothers-and-sisters-in-Christ (Matthew 10.37, Luke 14.26). This shift further correlates to a change from "locative" worldviews concerned with the proper emplacement of all things and persons (since being-in-place is what renders them sacred) to "utopian" orientations that valorize mobility as transcendence and liberation (J. Z. Smith 1978).

One final point about religious community in the post-ancient context: In groups that made shared beliefs and practices their chief criteria of inclusion, deviation from these had serious consequences and could provoke not only debate and discussion, but also power struggles and schism. Accordingly, issues of heterodoxy and orthodoxy, heteropraxy and orthopraxy, heresy and heresiology all rose to prominence, along with the institutional means to frame and resolve them—and also to enforce the hierarchic elevation of victors over vanquished.

This brings us to institutions. In the ancient, specifically religious institutions—priesthoods, temples, cult sites, and so on—were typically subordinate to institutions of the state, be these civic, national, or imperial, democratic, oligarchic, or royal. Smaller and weaker than their political counterparts, religious institutions served and were dependent on them for protection, financial support, and personnel. As examples, consider Athenian interest in Eleusis, the temples of the Acropolis, and the Panathenaea; the haoma sacrifices at Persepolis (Bowman 1970); or the integration of priestly and magisterial offices in the Roman *cursus honorum*. Only in a very few cases, where religious institutions possessed extraordinary prestige and authority such that they attracted an international clientele and rich contributions, were they able to sustain themselves and achieve a situation of relative autonomy. Delphi is the paradigmatic case, alongside only a handful of others.

In the post-ancient, some religious institutions such as the rabbinate attained

a certain measure of autonomy from the states to which they were subject, but from which they maintained a cautious distance. In other situations—Byzantium and the Islamic caliphate, in particular—religious and political organizations and concerns interpenetrated each other so thoroughly as practically to merge. The most dramatic development, however, occurred in the West, where events beginning with the conversion of Constantine and the Edict of Milan (313 CE) produced a centralized, well-staffed and well-funded, hierarchic religious establishment that became the senior partner in the collaborations of church and state subsequent to the fall of Rome (476 CE). In all these forms and locales, however, religious bodies secured considerable control over such vital arenas of activity as education (general and professional), social welfare (charity and counseling), record keeping, rites of passage (the crucial moments of subject and family formation), and moral scrutiny and control (through preaching, confession, absolution, and pastoral care). Gradually, they perfected the ability to extract revenue from the faithful through a variety of mechanisms. Thus, in addition to contributions (tithing, *zakkat*) that were often voluntary in name only, bequests intended to secure salvation were also an important source of income, as was commerce in spiritual goods and services of varied sorts: blessings, indulgences, relics, charms, mystic knowledge, magic formulas, and so forth.

As ancient religion gave way to post-ancient, a discourse based on canonic corpora of sacred texts displaced inspired performances of sacred verse; practices of prayer, contemplation, and self-perfection displaced mediations through sacrifice and statues of the deity; de-territorialized elective communities constructed on the basis of religious adherence displaced multi-stranded groups within which ties of geography, politics, kinship, culture, and religion were all isomorphic and mutually reinforcing; and institutions that, with some exceptions, had better funding, a wider range of activities, and more autonomy from the state displaced their weaker, more localized predecessors.

Although these sweeping generalizations call for extended treatment that would attend to the nuances and particularities of a thousand specific cases, the constraints of a concluding article point in the opposite direction, toward a summation whose oversimplifications serve chiefly to prompt objections, further inquiry, and debate. And so, here it is: The transition yields Christianity. Or, to put it a bit more cautiously, the ancient ends and the post-ancient begins with Christianity(ies), Judaism(s), and Islam(s), with the westernmost form of Christianity as the extreme case.

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