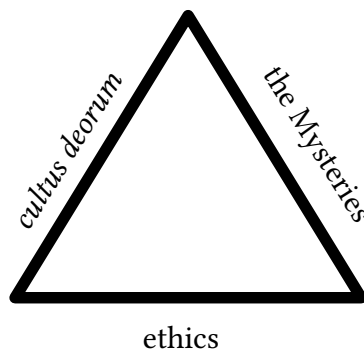


How Did We Get Here? — Religion

Merlin CCC, January 2024

I. Foundations in the Ancient World: Periphery and Common Ground

- Some etymologies:
 - “Religion” (Latin *religio*, *religionis*).
 - Holy fear, wonder, awe; leading to restraint or hesitation.
 - Compare Greek *eusebeia*, “reverence toward Gods or parents; worship”
 - Contrast between *religio* and *superstitio*.
 - “Atheist” (Greek *atheos*).
 - Originally: “impious” (frequent in the tragic plays).
 - Later: “denying the Gods, especially those recognized by the *polis*.”
- Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*:
 - Main elements of Roman religion: ritual (*sacra*) and auspices.
 - Philosophy and religion?
- Some contrasts:
 - The particular and the universal.
 - “Solon, Solon, you Greeks are always children!”
 - Iamblichus: “Change not the foreign names!”
 - When and where do “saviors” save (or preserve)?
 - Orthodoxy and orthopraxy?
 - Christian Creeds (Nicene, Athanasian).
- Other themes:
 - Philo of Alexandria: the polemic use of “polytheism.”
 - Tertullian: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”
 - Collapsing separate domains.



II. Western Europe & its Diaspora: Assimilating the Periphery

- The psychologizing turn.
 - Middle Ages to Renaissance:
 - “Paganism” for the natural world, in a subordinate place.
 - Transcendence and immanence.
 - Romanticism as an aesthetic sensibility.
 - Keats: “Glory and loveliness have passed away...”
 - William James: *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).
 - Rudolf Otto: *Das Heilige* (1917), trans. as *The Idea of the Holy* (1923).
 - Carl Jung: “archetypes.”
- From public to private.
 - Thomas Hobbes.
 - John Locke, “A Letter Concerning Toleration” (1689).
 - Three arguments:
 - The limits of government (given by God!).
 - True “inner persuasion” cannot be accomplished by force.
 - Epistemic humility and the likelihood of error.
 - But not for Catholics or atheists!
 - Contrast Plato’s proposed penalty for private shrines/sacrifices.
- Religion and “culture.”
 - Ficino: the *prisca theologia*.
 - Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (1871): the “evolution” of human cultures.
 - European encounters with India: foreign religions as “techniques.”
 - “One God, many cultures.”
 - “Accretions” (in culture, in texts, etc.).
 - The historical-critical method.
 - Modern academic disciplines: anthropology, philology, “religious studies.”

III. Up to the Present: Words from the Periphery

- Davi Kopenawa, *The Falling Sky*:
 - Interweaving shamanic/theurgic practice with the entire fabric of life.
 - An interpretive gloss on other traditions/practices, that is *sense-making* but *not totalizing*.
 - “Teosi” as one individual, among others.
 - Onondaga ceremony.
 - Holding up the pillars of the sky.
 - Something is amiss in Western society’s relations with the wider world.
 - Starting with the destruction of the Amazon.
 - Extending to the *entire* cosmos (land, sea, and sky; both visible and invisible).
 - Inviting “white people” to remember the wisdom and relations with the Gods/spirits (*xapiri*) of their own ancestors.

AESCHYLOS (c. 500 BCE) <i>Athenian playwright</i>	
PLATO (428–348 BCE) <i>Athenian philosopher</i>	
MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO (c. 106–43 BCE) <i>Roman statesman and orator</i>	
PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA (c. 13 BCE–c. 50 CE) <i>Jewish philosopher and theologian (in Alexandria, Egypt)</i>	Destruction of Second Jewish Temple (70 CE)
MARCUS AURELIUS (121–180) <i>Emperor of Rome (161–180)</i>	
TERTULLIAN (155–220) <i>Christian “father of the church” (in Carthage, now Tunisia)</i>	
IAMBlichUS OF CHALCIS (245–325) <i>Syrian philosopher and pagan priest</i>	Council of Nicaea (325)
ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA (c. 296–373) <i>Christian bishop and theologian.</i>	
JULIAN THE PHILOSOPHER (331–363) <i>Last pagan Emperor of Rome (361–363)</i>	Closure of pagan academies (529)
	“Conversion” of Iceland (1000)
	East-West schism (1054)
	“Conversion” of Lithuania (1387)
MARCELIO FICINO (1433–1499) <i>Florentine translator, magician, and Catholic priest</i>	Fall of Constantinople (1453)
THOMAS HOBBS (1588–1679) <i>English political theorist</i>	English Civil Wars (1642–1651)
JOHN LOCKE (1632–1704) <i>English political theorist</i>	
JOHN KEATS (1795–1821) <i>English Romantic poet</i>	
E.B. TYLOR (1832–1917) <i>English anthropologist</i>	
WILLIAM JAMES (1842–1910) <i>American psychologist and philosopher</i>	
RUDOLF OTTO (1869–1937) <i>German philosopher and theologian</i>	
CARL JUNG (1875–1961) <i>Swiss psychologist</i>	
DAVI KOPENAWA (born c. 1956) <i>Yanomami philosopher and shaman</i>	

Supplementary Quotations

(1) Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods (De Natura Deorum)*, bk. III, ch. 2 [the speaker is Cotta, a Roman pontiff]:

But before we come to the subject, let me say a few words about myself. I am considerably influenced by your authority, Balbus, and by the plea that you put forward at the conclusion of your discourse, when you exhorted me to remember that I am both a Cotta and a pontiff. This no doubt meant that I ought to uphold the beliefs about the immortal Gods which have come down to us from our ancestors, and the rites and ceremonies and duties of religion. For my part I always shall uphold them and always have done so, and no eloquence of anybody, learned or unlearned, shall ever dislodge me from the belief as to the worship of the immortal Gods which I have inherited from our forefathers. But on any question of religion I am guided by the high pontiffs, Titus Coruncanius, Publius Scipio and Publius Scaevola, not by Zeno or Cleanthes of Chrysippus; and I have Gaius Laelius, who was both an augur and a philosopher, to whose discourse upon religion, in his famous oration, I would rather listen than to any leader of the Stoics.

The religion of the Roman people comprises ritual, auspices, and the third additional division consisting of all such prophetic warnings as the interpreters of the Sybil or the soothsayers have derived from portents and prodigies. Well, I have always thought that none of these departments of religion was to be despised, and I have held the conviction that Romulus by his auspices and Numa by his establishment of our ritual laid the foundations of our state, which assuredly could never have been as great as it is had not the fullest measure of divine favour been obtained for it. There, Balbus, is the opinion of a Cotta and a pontiff; now oblige me by letting me know yours. You are a philosopher, and I ought to receive from you a proof (*ratio*) of your religion, whereas I must believe the word of our ancestors even without proof.

(2) Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 10.24 (trans. Gregory Hays):

People ask, “Have you ever seen the Gods you worship? How can you be sure they exist?”

Answers:

- i. Just look around you.
- ii. I’ve never seen my soul either. And yet I revere it.

That’s how I know the Gods exist and why I revere them — from having felt their power, over and over.

(3) Philo of Alexandria, *On the Confusion of Tongues*, 144:

Those who ascribe to existing things a multitude of fathers as it were and by introducing their many Gods (*to polytheon*) have flooded everything with ignorance and confusion, or have assigned to pleasure the function of being the aim and end of the soul, have become in very truth builders of the city of our text and of its acropolis. They pile up as in an edifice all that serves to produce that aim or end and thus differ not a whit to my mind from the harlot’s offspring, whom the law has banished from the divine assembly (*ekklēsias theias*) ...

(4) Philo of Alexandria, *On the Change of Names*, 204–205:

... those others who do not hear with honest mind the holy instructions, whom Moses absolutely forbade to resort to the assembly of the Ruler of all (*ekklēsian tou panhēgemonos*). Such as in their pride extol their own mind and senses as the sole causes of all that happens amongst men—these are they who have spiritually lost the organs of generation by crushing or complete mutilation; such again as the lovers of polytheism (*polytheias*) and those who pay honour to that fellowship of Gods (*polytheon thiason*)—these are the children of the harlot who knows not the one husband and father of the virtue-loving soul,—are not all such with good reason expelled and banished?

(5) Tertullian, *Prescriptions Against the Heretics*, chapter 7:

From philosophy come those fables and endless genealogies and fruitless questionings, those “words that creep like as doth a canker.” To hold us back from such things, the Apostle testifies expressly in his letter to the Colossians that we should beware of philosophy. “Take heed lest any man circumvent you through philosophy or vain deceit, after the tradition of men,” against the providence of the Holy Ghost. He had been at Athens where he had come to grips with the human wisdom which attacks and perverts truth, being itself divided up into its own swarm of heresies by the variety of its mutually antagonistic sects. What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic? Our principles come from the Porch of Solomon, who had himself taught that the Lord is to be sought in simplicity of heart. I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic or a dialectic Christianity. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research.

(6) John Keats, “Dedication, to Leigh Hunt, esq.” (*Poems*, 1817):

Glory and loveliness have pass'd away;
For if we wander out in early morn,
No wreathed incense do we see upborne
Into the east, to meet the smiling day:
No crowd of nymphs soft voic'd and young, and gay,
In woven baskets bringing ears of corn,
Roses, and pinks, and violets, to adorn
The shrine of Flora in her early May.
But there are left delights as high as these,
And I shall ever bless my destiny,
That in a time, when under pleasant trees
Pan is no longer sought, I feel a free
A leafy luxury, seeing I could please
With these poor offerings, a man like thee.

(7) Plato, *Laws*, book X (910c):

There is to be no possession of shrines to the Gods in private homes. If someone is to be found possessing shrines and worshipping in rituals other than the public ones, and if the man or woman possessing them has committed none of the great and impious sorts of injustice, the one who discovers this is to report it to the guardians of the laws; they are to command that the private sacred things be carried away to the public shrines, and those who disobey are to be penalized until they are carried away.

(8) H.S. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods* (Brill, 2011), page 436 [italics in original]:

[I]f the Greeks should be ‘desperately alien’ they are not so in that having so many gods they must do without the notion of theological omnipotence, but in that *they have so many omnipotent gods*. Or rather—to sugarcoat the pill for the sceptics—because any of their many gods may have his/her share in omnipotence whenever the occasion requires it. One amazing testimony is that even in a marginal private cult in a grotto on the isle of Crete the very humble local variant of the least godly of all gods, Hermes, can be addressed as *pantokrator* [i.e., “ruler of all”]. If this seems paradoxical to us, that is *our* problem. We try to smooth over the problem by ignoring, denying or eliminating unwelcome Greek expressions, for instance by classifying them as rhetorical, hence refusing them access to the debate on Greek theology. Greeks, on the other hand, elegantly coped with the apparent paradoxes by means of that virtuoso winking process that enabled them to deftly keep apart the various types of discourse with their often contradictory expressions but which all shared one quality, namely a common rhetorical nature.