Chapter 2

Religions of Antiquity

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Chapter Overview

The second chapter of the text explores the religious traditions of antiquity: the cultures of the near-East, parts of Africa, and the Mediterranean as they existed from the fourth millennium bce to the middle of the first millennium ce. In the interests of clarity and concision Desrochers focuses our study upon four of the most prominent civilizations that thrived during antiquity: the Mesopotamians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Romans. However, prior to delving into the particularities of these great ancient cultures, Desrochers provides us with a sense of how the traditions of antiquity were themselves rooted in practices that pre-date written history.

As students of religion it is important for us to grasp the difference between pre-history and antiquity, as the evidence from each necessarily leads to different frameworks for theorization. Desrochers introduces us to the material evidence uncovered by archeologists at the site of Gobekli Tepe, in what is now southeastern Turkey, where structures that date from as early as 9500 bce provide evidence of human religious and symbolic behaviour. However, as the pre-historical period is, by definition, prior to recorded history, we are limited to offering informed speculation (our best guess) regarding the nature and meaning that the uncovered artifacts held for the people who made and used them. In contrast, the cultures of antiquity have bequeathed us a wealth of different forms of records which have allowed us to weave together a fairly well-informed body of scholarship regarding the cultural, political, and religious dimensions of these civilizations.

We can be very confident of one particular detail pertaining to religious practice during antiquity: what we refer to as “religious activity” was, for the ancients, a fully-integrated aspect of everyday life. It was not a separate sphere of activity, differentiated from those of government, work, play, etc. The ways in which religious practice was intertwined with various other aspects of ancient cultural life require us to develop both an overall picture of how these societies functioned, as well as how the component parts which fit our descriptive category of religious practice. Helpfully, Desrochers advances five main themes to help guide our study of what we understand to be the religions of antiquity:

1. The fundamental attributes of the religions of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome.
2. The nature and purpose of myth and ritual in these cultures.
3. Shared and conflicting interpretations of the divine.
4. The variety of ways in which ancient peoples expressed their religiosity.
5. The reasons for both the longevity of the ancient traditions and their ultimate breakdown.

Although each of the ancient cultures Desrochers examines possessed its own unique religious practices, several patterns allow us to study them in a comparative manner. Among these patterns is the prevalence of polytheistic, hierarchical conceptions of divinity; the importance of sacred sites and objects such as temples and statuary; the role of priests and priestesses as religious specialists tasked with caring for the deities, conducting rituals, and conveying sacred knowledge; and the importance of myth for understanding and negotiating human life. Desrochers details these patterns of involvement with the divine under the following four themes: understanding the world, negotiating the world, communing with the divine, and transcending the world.

Throughout the chapter Desrochers explores these themes as they manifested themselves within the traditions of the aforementioned civilizations of antiquity. Desrochers places special emphasis upon how myth and ritual occupied a central position within the lives of the peoples of antiquity. The comparative analysis of the various origin myths, sacrificial rites, modes of and motivations for divination, and concepts about the afterlife help us to assess the patterns of similarity across the different cultures of antiquity while commensurately keeping us attuned to their respective particularities.

Desrochers’ survey of antiquity provides a compelling description of both the character of religious practices native to antiquity, as well suggesting how these traditions exerted profound influences upon the monotheistic religions that came to dominate the Western imagination for centuries. At the conclusion of this chapter we come to see how within the religious practices of antiquity rest the basis for phenomena such as scriptural religion, prophetic religion, and indeed the idea of a monotheistic divinity itself. Desrochers also offers us much to think about concerning the drastic differences that gender roles played in ancient religious traditions (such as the veneration of female deities and the authority of women as religious specialists) in relation to the dominant ideas about gender that have become normative within the Abrahamic traditions.

In drawing connections between the religious practices of antiquity with those of the Abrahamic traditions, Desrochers succeeds in providing a nuanced sense of how the close of the end of “antiquity” does not mean the end of the religious ideas that provided so much of these civilizations’ cultural wealth. Furthermore, attentive students will undoubtedly draw connections between elements of ancient culture and features of our own modern culture, confirming how profoundly important this period of human history has been for charting our future.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you are encouraged to

* develop an awareness of the continuum of human cultural activity in the regions of the near east and the Mediterranean;
* differentiate between pre-history and antiquity and the different forms of evidence we use to support our theories about religious practice during these periods;
* develop a critical understanding of the ritual, conceptual, and material elements of religious practice that were central to the life of the peoples of antiquity;
* examine how aspects of these elements are still in currency today;
* consider the complexities of polytheistic worship and its parallels with ancient political and social order;
* recognize the importance of the emergence of writing and literature in recording and preserving religious traditions during antiquity; and
* examine how gender roles were played out during antiquity and draw contrasts with how gender roles are constituted in contemporary Western religious traditions.

Key Terms

anthropomorphism The attribution of a human form or character to non-human phenomena. (p. 33)

*Book of the Dead*A New Kingdom collection of spells (based on the earlier Coffin Texts) designed to ensure the resurrection of the dead and their security in the afterworld. *Book of the Dead* is a modern designation; the actual title translates as “the coming forth by day.” (p. 28)

Coffin TextsTexts (essentially spells, based on the earlier Pyramid Texts) inscribed on the coffins of non-royal elite Egyptians during the Middle Kingdom, intended to protect the dead traversing the netherworld and to secure an afterlife comparable to that of the (divinized) dead rulers. (p. 40)

cult A synonym for “ritual worship.” (p. 27)

*Enuma Elish* The Mesopotamian creation epic, written in the first millennium bce, in which the Babylonian hero-god Marduk triumphs over the forces of chaos, ‘creates’ and orders the universe, and becomes ruler of the Mesopotamian pantheon. The title (literally, ‘When on high’) comes from the first two words of the composition. (p. 34)

netherworld Also known as the afterworld or afterlife, the netherworld was the region which the spirits of the dead entered. While ‘netherworld’ envisions the land of the dead as lying beneath the earth, the land of the dead could also be located in the heavens. (p. 77)

Pyramid Texts Incantations (literally, “utterances”) originally carved on the walls of the royal burial suites of several late Old Kingdom rulers; recited by priests during the burial ritual and later funerary cult rituals, to guarantee the resurrection and well-being of dead rulers. (p. 47)

Sumer/SumerianThe urban civilization of southernmost Mesopotamia (Sumer) in the late fourth millennium bce; Sumerian religion was the substratum of Mesopotamian religion. (p. 77)

Study Questions

See below for answers with page references.

1. Desrochers prefaces his examination of antiquity with a brief survey of some theories about pre-historical human symbolic behaviour. What differentiates the pre-historical period from later periods of human activity?
2. What is the theory of syncretism as it pertains to the study of religions?
3. Who and/or what was the Magna Mater?
4. What was significant about the concept of the divine advanced by the Greek philosopher Xenophanes?
5. What is Derochers referring to when he uses the phrase “the democratization of the afterlife”?

Reflection Questions

1. What do you think when you encounter the term “ancient”?
2. What concerns addressed in the religious practices of antiquity echo concerns in contemporary culture?
3. What ritual activities can you observe in your own society?
4. What do you think of the *carpe diem* ideology expressed in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*?
5. How has studying the religions of antiquity changed your concept of what can be included and documented under the category of “religion”?

Research Paper Topics

1. How have the religious practices associated with antiquity been portrayed, historically, by the Abrahamic traditions? Describe and analyze the possible motivations underlying these representations.
2. Discuss the variety of different interpretations of the term “religion.” Focus your analysis on the differences between what counted as religion during antiquity compared to the use of the term in the modern West.
3. On what grounds can religious scholars advance the claim that the roots of scriptural religion rest in antiquity? Describe the importance of textual records for the study of ancient religions.
4. In what ways did the portrayal of deities in ancient civilizations mirror the social structure itself? Offer a coherent argument as why this mirroring may have been important.
5. Describe and analyze how the themes expressed in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* might resonate with modern audiences. Provide an analysis of how this may, or may not, present a concern regarding a relativistic approach to the story by modern readers.
6. In what ways were gender roles represented in the religious practices of antiquity? Analyze how these representations compare to the representation of gender in the Abrahamic traditions.
7. Describe and analyze the creation, dissemination, and reception of myths in the religious traditions of antiquity. Advance a comparison with how myth works in modern cultures (if at all).
8. What roles did divination play in the religious practices of antiquity? Compare and contrast how divination can offer insight into the different concerns of various social groups in ancient societies.
9. Advance a comparative analysis of the various theories regarding the place and character of sacrifice rituals in ancient religious traditions.
10. How does Desrochers characterize the end of Antiquity? What, if any, elements of modern religious practice in the West can be said to exhibit a resonance with ancient practices?

Additional Resources

*Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* is a source for scholarly articles concerned with the subject material of this chapter.

Ehrlich, Carl S., ed. 2009. *From an Antique Land: An Introduction to Ancient Near Eastern Literature*  
Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, US): The Rediscovery of Classical Antiquity is available at <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/clan/hd_clan.htm>

The Ancient Egyptian Site, a popular Internet resource, is available at <http://www.ancient-egypt.org/index.html>

*The Histories of Herodotus* is available through the Internet Classics Archive at <http://classics.mit.edu/Herodotus/history.html>

Study Questions: Answer Key

1. The primary scholarly differentiation separating the pre-historical from subsequent periods of human activity is the lack of documentary evidence from the pre-historical period. In the absence of any records pertaining to the actual beliefs and worldviews expressed by the peoples themselves, we are left with only the fragmentary material artefacts which we recover through archeological projects. Consequently, our theories pertaining to pre-historic human culture will remain conjectural at best. (p. 30-31)
2. Some scholars postulate that as imperialistic civilizations, such as those of Babylon and Rome, expanded throughout the ancient world, the goddesses and gods of both the conquering civilization and those of the conquered peoples became subject to a genre of fusion. This process, which could also occur through more mundane contact between cultures (e.g., trade) lead to the identification, or synchronization, of deities across different cultures. From a scholarly point of view syncretic religion is hybrid and thus an interesting expression of a new framework born of older separate traditions. (p. 36)
3. The Magna Mater, or “great mother,” was a goddess figure whose cult rose to prominence during the seventh century bce in Phrygia; however, the origins of the Magna Mater are thought to stretch back even further. The cult practices associated with the Magna Mater spread far beyond Phrygia and her sanctuaries could eventually be found across the ancient world, from Rome to Afghanistan. (p. 63)
4. Xenophanes advanced a somewhat radical, early monotheistic theory of the divine. In the sixth century bce, Xenophanes criticized the anthropomorphic representations of deities and proposed instead a supreme universal god, totally separate from human beings, and human traits. (p. 61)
5. The notion of a “democratization of the afterlife” refers to the idea of a gradual opening up of a divine afterlife to Egyptian elites other than the rulers themselves; as had previously been the tradition in the period of the old kingdom. In this transition the religious focus shifted from the veneration of Ra to that of Osiris, as devotees believed that they would have to stand in judgment to gain entry into Osiris’ realm. (p. 47)