Chapter 3: Religions of Antiquity

Chapter Overview

In chapter three on “Religions of Antiquity,” Michael Desrochers provides a concise summary of the religions of antiquity from their prehistory to highlighting similarities and differences across the following religious traditions: Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Iranian and Manichaean.

After defining antiquity and summarizing the prehistorical sites at Globekli Tepe, Catlhoyuk and Nabta Playa, Desrochers traces commonalities across the religions of antiquity, including: the attributes of the gods, namely, power, divine light, omniscience and immortality; the nature and purpose of myths, including *The Epic of Gilgamesh*; cosmogony (how the world originated); cosmology (how the world is structured); anthropogony (how humans came to exist) and anthropology (the conditions of the human life). Other similar features covered by Desrochers include the services to the gods, the use of temples, rituals, sacrifice, festivals, priests or priestess, and death.

Following a review of the shared features across the religions of antiquity, Desrochers advances detailed overviews of the aforementioned six religious traditions. Amongst the various topics discussed, the Mesopotamian tradition includes discussions of the *Sumerian King List*, *Gilgamesh*, and *Enuma Elish*. The Egyptian tradition includes a discussion of the *Book of the Dead* and the reforms of Akhenaten. In addition to taking note of Plato’s contributions such as *Republic, Phaedo* and *Laws*, Desrochers outlines the myths, mystery cults and Greek pantheon, therein including a document titled the “Hymn to Zeus”. Desrocher compares and contrasts the Roman and Greek pantheons, then summarizes the cult of Cesar, contributions of Cicero and the emergence of Neo-Platonism in the section on the Roman tradition. Desrochers includes a substantial outline of Zoroastrianism within the section focused on the Iranian tradition, which is one of the more notable religious traditions to have influenced Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the last section on the Manichaean tradition, Desrocher focuses on the Iranian prophet Mani, his teachings, and his legacy, up until the rise of imperial Christianity and the end of paganism.

In addition to addressing the status of women occasionally throughout the chapter, there is a brief section entirely devoted to women in the traditions of antiquity. Desrocher concludes with a few notes on the end of paganism, recent developments and a summary, wherein he asserts that the people of antiquity addressed every aspect of what most “laypeople today consider ‘religion’: a ‘belief’ in the supernatural, an effort to understand the interaction between the divine and human planes of existence, consideration of what makes people worthy of divine support, the ideal of conflict between good and evil, and contemplation of the ultimate end of material existence. The six traditions examined in this chapter all reached comparable conclusions.” The chapter concludes with brief commentary on the end of paganism concomitant with the reign of Emperor Constantine and the rise of imperial Christianity in the fourth century.

Learning Objectives are met when the student:

1. Outline and summarize the differences and similarities in practice, belief, rituals and myths across the religious traditions of “antiquity.”

2. Explains the significance of archeological sites (e.g., Gobekli Tepe and Catalhoyuk) from the prehistory period.

3. Outlines and describes the variegated nature and underlying purposes assigned to the myths (e.g., *Epic of Gilgamesh*) and the rituals of antiquity.

4. Summarizes key concepts, persons and issues in the following traditions: Greece; Rome; Zoroastrianism; Manichaean tradition, therein, paraphrasing key details related to their founders, teachings, structure and practices.

5. Distinguishes the various interpretations of the divine and expressions of religiosity in antiquity, and explain the collapse of ancient religions (e.g., Constantine and the Christianization of the Late Roman Empire) and their ongoing influence thereafter.

Study Questions

1. What is referred to with the use of the term antiquity?
2. What are three common features or characteristics of deities in the religions of antiquity?
3. What were the two analogical models of cosmogony used by the Egyptians? Provide a brief example on each model.
4. What are some of the prominent rites and teachings of the Eleusinian Mysteries?
5. Who was Mani and how did his religious teachings address the problem of evil?

Study Questions: Answers

1. The term “antiquity” refers to a specific geographical area. Two terms identifying this broad region known as “antiquity” are the “Fertile Crescent” for prehistory and then the “ancient Near East” for the historical era. “Antiquity” also refers to the Greco-Roman pre-Christian tradition due to the fourth-century CE Christian authors who employed the term *antiquitas* to disparage that tradition as “the mother of all evils.” (p. 78)
2. First, the core defining characteristic of the gods of antiquity was their power so that the more important the god the greater their power. Second, the gods of antiquity were characterized by their omnipresence. Third, divine light or brilliance that emanated from the gods was another common feature. (p. 85)
3. The first analogical model for creation was nature, as in the daily circuit of the sun or the annual changes of the seasons. Life in Egypt depended on the annual flooding of the Nile to irrigate the land, thus in one example, an Egyptian creation story envisioned an earthen mound with a lotus plant emerging from the receding primeval waters. The second analogical model for creation was human behavior. One Egyptian creation myth personified the undifferentiated waters as the androgynous primeval god Atum, whose name meant both nonexistent and completed. (p.88)
4. The Eleusinian Mysteries began with a procession from Eleusis to Athens in which time the priestesses carried sacred objects devoted to Demeter in containers secured with red ribbons. Five days later, the initiates paraded to Eleusis, where they fasted in anticipation of the secret rites held that night. Eventually, initiates could advance to gain knowledge of the “unrepeatable secrets” of the cult, which could never be revealed to another on pain of death. The ritual ended with dancing, a sacrifice of bulls, and libations to the dead. The Eleusinian Mysteries, which began in the eighth century BCE, ceased in 396 CE due to Christian encroachments. (p. 107)
5. Mani was born in 216 in south Mesopotamia, a meeting place of religious cultures. He experienced two epiphanies in which the “Living God” revealed the true origins and future of the universe. He found Manicheanism, then to address the problem of evil, Mani taught a dualism wherein creation produced two coeternal principles that existed separately from one another. The good (peace, justice, wisdom), which was God or “Father of Goodness” resided in the realm of light. Then, evil, labeled Satan or “matter,” inhabited darkness but later invaded the realm of light and imprisoned light within matter, thereby initiating the present age of human existence. (pp. 118–119)

Research Questions

1. What do we know about three of the earliest sacred sites, Gobekli Tepe, Catalhoyuk, and Nabta Playa? What could be learned, conjectured and argued concerning the earliest religious practices and traditions based on the contributions of research on these three sites?
2. After identifying the central purpose, underlying structure, genre and intended audience of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, provide an argument as to what could be learned about the religion and the culture of ancient Mesopotamia through a careful assessment of this epic poem.
3. Why were Isis and Hathor regarded as the two most important female deities in Egypt? What were the beliefs, rituals and any other notable features related to these two goddesses, which assist us in understanding their significance and the broader religious culture in Egypt?
4. Provide an overview of the general features of ancient cosmologies, then turning to the *Enuma Elish*, what are the distinctive and common features of this Babylonian creation myth? How do the teachings of this myth connect with the religious culture and teachings of Babylon?
5. Many ancient myths recognize that human beings are flawed creatures at the outset of creation. In particular, what is the overall content and structure of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and more specifically, what could be learned about his understanding of human nature through a reading of this Latin mythic poem?
6. How does Homer narrate and account for the fundamental flaws of human beings throughout his epic Greek poem *Odyssey*? How does Homer’s account of humanity reflect the underlying beliefs of his historical context?
7. What are the significant features of Akhenaten’s religious reforms? What are two disparate modern scholarly accounts of his religious reforms? What is your evaluation of these accounts?
8. Which teachings of Plato significantly shaped the subsequent philosophical and religious traditions? Identify two of his teachings, then provide an example for each teaching that illustrates the subsequent influence of Plato.
9. What are the historical origins behind the worship of the Magna Mater (“Great Mother”)? How did this cult spread and then become popularized in Greece and Rome?
10. What are the main themes embedded within the seventeen hymns that comprise the *Gathas* of the *Avesta*? How do these themes within hymns fit with and reflect the Zoroastrian tradition?

Reflection Questions

1. What are some underlying challenges and biases that we may need to be aware of when evaluating religions of antiquity? Do we tend to evaluate these religions of antiquity differently than the world religions?
2. What do the three main shared characteristics of deities in antiquity reveal about the people of antiquity? Are we moderns also enamored with any of these three characteristics whether they are expressed in our beliefs in deities or projected onto other people, communities, institutions, objects and so forth?
3. The basic and universal question of where did we come from is one that people past and present have answered by providing narrative accounts of the past, whether they be mythic, religious, theological, philosophical or scientific. Is use of narrative to explain the origins of humanity an absolute necessity? Is it possible to combine multiple narratives, such as the religious and scientific, into a cogent whole for us and our community?
4. Do you believe that religious traditions should provide an answer or some viable possible explanation to the problem of evil? What are your initial impressions of Mani’s dualistic worldview as an overarching explanation for the origin and existence of evil?
5. What are your reflections and responses to there apparently being this inextricable relationship between religious traditions/authorities and the political traditions/authorities, which extends as far back as to the religions of antiquity? What does this suggest about the relationship between the religious and political in the past and up to the present moment?

Additional Resources

1.Göbekli Tepe – National Geographic Documentary. 2010. 44m 59s. <http://naturedocumentaries.org/6200/gobekli-tepe/>

Fascinating documentary on the Gobekli Tepe from National Geographic. The site includes valuable links to articles by publications such as *The Smithsonian Magazine*, *Newsweek* and *The New Yorker*; link to the TedX talk by archeologist Klaus Schmidt (who discovered the archeological site); interview with anthropologist Ted Banning on *National Public Radio* who suggests the site was houses for people rather than a temple.

2. Mysteries of Egypt: Religion. Canadian Museum of History. <https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcr01e.html>

This website, maintained by the Canadian Museum of History, provides an overview with a number of links on religion in ancient Egypt and sections devoted to the following themes: myths; gods and goddesses; kingship; priests; mummification; the soul; life after death.

3. Mystery Cults in the Greek and Roman World. Kiki Karaglou, Department of Greek and Roman Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/myst/hd_myst.htm>

In this excellent resource on material culture, Kiki Karaglou, provides an introduction to the mystery cults along with links to corresponding images artifacts and links to related essays.

4. Walter Burkert. *Greek Religion*. 1987. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. This is one of the most highly regarded works on Greek religion, it is highly readable and clearly organized, provides an exceptional account of the Greek religion.

1. Theoi Greek Mythology. <https://www.theoi.com/>

This is a well-organized website that provides one of the more comprehensive (site contains over 1500 pages) free reference guides to the gods, spirits, creatures and heroes of ancient Greek mythology and religion. The site contains over 1200 images spanning ancient Greek and Rome including sculptures, mosaics, vase paintings and frescos.

1. The Zarathushtrian Assembly. <http://www.zoroastrian.org/>

This is the website of the Zarathushtrian Assembly, a non-profit and non-political religious corporation incorporated in California (1990) for “studying and disseminating information on the Divine Message of Zarathustra and promoting the Zarathushtrian Fellowship.” The site contains articles covering the range of Zoroastrian teachings and translations of the Gathas (hymns of Zoroaster).

1. Hugh Bowden. 2010. *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World.* Princeton: Princeton University Press. In this book, Bowden provides one of the most comprehensive scholarly accounts of world’s mystery cults.
2. Egyptian Sacred Texts. <https://www.sacred-texts.com/egy/index.htm>

The Internet Sacred Text website contains a wide range of ancient Egyptian texts such as *The Pyramid Texts*, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, *Legends of the Gods*, *The Burden of Isis* (hymns to the goddess) and a select scholarly publications.

1. Avesta – Zoroastrian Archives. <http://www.avesta.org/avesta.html>

This website provides an exceptional amount of material on Zoroastrianism including: the extant complete *Avesta* (oldest Zoroastrian scripture); overview of history, teachings and practices; links to scholarly articles; links to rituals; books; glossary of terms; and more.

1. *The Seven Tablets of Creation.* 1902. Leonard William King. <https://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/stc/index.htm>

This link provides the etext of Leonard William King’s authoritative translation of *Enuma Elish,* the Babylonian creation myth, along with the complete introduction and other accounts of the history of creation.

Field Work Guidelines

If you are interested in doing fieldwork, you need to plan and organize your fieldwork experience as thoroughly as you can. Generally, you can divide your fieldwork experience into three stages: Planning, during, and after your fieldwork.

Planning Your Fieldwork

*Research:* Begin by researching the individual, group, or place you would like to do work on or with. Visit websites if available, and read any available scholarship.

*Make Contact:* Contact the person, group, or administrators of the place you would like to research. Give as much information as possible about your project so that your contact can guide. Often your contact will be able to help you understand the rules for conduct that will be needed during your fieldwork. Remember to be polite and courteous.

*Questions:* Based on your research and interests, create a set of questions you would like to answer during the course of your fieldwork.

*Ethics Approval:* Some projects need to have ethics approval, especially if your research involves people. The guidelines for applications for ethics approval may differ depending on the organization or university you work with; thus, please contact your organization or university to find out more about this process.

During Your Fieldwork

Often, there are specific rules for conduct when you visit sacred spaces and/or interview people, and usually, these rules can be seen before you enter a site, or spoken about before you interview people. It is best to find out about these rules before you begin your fieldwork. There are some general rules that should be followed at all times: Always be polite and courteous, dress modestly, and participate where appropriate.

*Be polite and courteous:*

1. Introduce yourself. If you are visiting a sacred site or a worship centre, you will be able to find people who are either there to meet you specifically, or would like to help you during your visit.
2. Leave your camera, phone, notebook, or laptop in a bag or even at home unless you have received prior permission to use these items.
3. Be aware of signs. Signs have important information about the place you are in, thus, look for the signs and the information they give.
4. Be respectful of the people and your surroundings. Do not disturb the rites or the privacy of the people. While there are times when you may be invited to participate, please remember that if you are not invited, you should keep a respectful silence and distance from the rite. Also, people may be curious about why you are visiting or conducting your research. Try to answer their questions as best you can. They may be able to provide you with additional information and further help.

*Dress modestly:*

1. Rules for appropriate dress are often important when visiting a place or a group. Please follow these rules if you have been given them.
2. For synagogues or Jewish sacred sites, these rules usually mean that knees and shoulders should be covered for both men and women. Men may also need to cover their heads. Often, if you are not dressed appropriately, you may be given appropriate attire, or you may not be allowed into a site.

*Participate Where Appropriate:*

1. If you have been invited to participate, please do so!
2. Generally, follow the guidelines that have been given to you, or the people around you. The best tip: Stand when people stand, and sit when people sit.
3. Ask questions. If you are not sure what to do, ask the people around you. Most people will be happy to help you out.
4. If you are interviewing a particular person or people, make notes on the questions that you ask, and answer any questions that you are asked as well.

After Your Fieldwork

1. Make a comprehensive set of notes on your experience as soon as you are able. The better your notes are, the more you will be able to draw on later.
2. Thank anyone who has helped you with your experience, and acknowledge their help in the written version of your work.
3. Follow up with the people or the place that you have visited. If you have used information from any interviews, offer to send a copy your work to the place or the people you have met.