

BRENT NONGBRI

Before Religion

A History of a Modern Concept

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seven THE MODERN ORIGINS OF ANCIENT RELIGIONS

Introduction

In broad strokes, the preceding two chapters have outlined how the category of religion came into being and how we have come to think of the world as being carved up into different World Religions. What remains to be discussed is exactly how this recent innovation has come to seem so universal, natural, and necessary. Many factors are at play, but the one I emphasize is the role of specialists in ancient history in producing and maintaining the category of religion. In Chapters 2 and 3, I critiqued translators of ancient texts for rendering ancient terms as “religion,” and I argued that descriptions of various ancient events as “the birth of religion” were problematic. Since religion is such a recent development, how and why we have come to speak so easily of ancient religions requires some explanation.

I shed light on these questions by undertaking three tasks in this chapter. First, I outline how, during the age of European colonial encounters with modern “pagans” and “idolaters,” the entities we now designate as Greek and Roman gods went from being demons in a biblical Christian system to being the central figures of what we now call “ancient Greek and Roman religions.” I then quickly trace the intertwined stories of Greek religion and Roman religion through the twentieth century to provide some background for the current state of affairs, in which most classicists, despite recognizing that the concept of religion is ill-suited to the materials they study, persist in speaking of ancient Greek and Roman religions. Second, I look at how a “new” ancient religion is constructed. That is to say, if the gods and cults of ancient Greeks and Romans had been known (at least in the guise of demons and satanic ritual) to Europeans continuously and were transformed into actors in these new entities, Greek and Roman religions, then what of the heretofore unknown gods and

rituals revealed by the discovery and deciphering of ancient texts from previously unstudied cultures? I explore the case of “Mesopotamian religion” to show how a new ancient religion comes into being, and again I follow this new invention through its twentieth-century incarnations. Finally, I consider some of the tensions involved in the study of these ancient religions. Many specialists recognize that religion is a troublesome concept when handling ancient evidence. Yet few scholars are willing to abandon the term. Instead, they have cultivated rhetorical devices to smooth over these conceptual difficulties and make religion seem timeless and universal. I conclude by briefly examining one of these rhetorical tropes, the notion of “embedded religion.”

The Origins of the Study of Greek and Roman Religions

Europeans have in some form or fashion been aware of the gods of Greece and Rome continuously from the time of the earliest Christians.¹ From the fifth century until the sixteenth century, most people who thought of Greek and Roman gods regarded them as demonic minions of Satan. This line of thinking dates back at least to the patristic writers. Thus Augustine declared that the Roman pantheon consisted not of “righteous gods” (*dii iusti*) but rather of “impious demons” (*daemones impii*) or “evil spirits” (*maligni spiritus*).² Among the more educated population, this view existed alongside (or intermixed with) two others. For some, the Greek and Roman gods were heroic humans of old who had come to be regarded as divine at a very early period (the so-called Euhemerist explanation of the gods, associated especially with Lactantius and Isidore of Seville).³ For others, the gods and their stories were simply harmless allegorical expressions of virtues and vices.⁴ Thus the Greco-Roman pantheon could safely adorn the art and architecture of public spaces (and even churches) throughout Europe, and Christian Neo-Platonists could with clear consciences freely employ deities of Greece and Rome in their symbolic speculations.⁵ With the increasing number of newly discovered classical manuscripts and the birth of modern archeology

from the time of the Italian Renaissance on came a growing interest in classical antiquity and its many gods. Yet even the great humanists rediscovering ancient Rome regarded its deities as something less than gods.

As we might expect from the preceding chapters, the beginning of critical reflection on these gods as parts of “religions” was tied to the colonial enterprises of European powers. As Europe’s reach across the world expanded, the data of explorers, travelers, and missionaries flowed back to Europe. While the focus of these descriptions of far-off peoples and places was their strangeness and difference, the accounts were full of comparisons and contrasts to more familiar concepts. Comparison of the new peoples’ beliefs and practices most often centered on how they resembled and differed from Christianity (since a looming concern for many European thinkers was the possibility of spreading the gospel to the New World). The gods of classical antiquity, however, also came to occupy an important place in these accounts, and, as historian Frank E. Manuel put it, “virtually any writing which shed light on ‘conformities’ between Greco-Roman ritual and the religion of contemporaneous heathen societies, whether people living in a state of civility—the Chinese, the Hindus, the Persians—or savage Negroes and American Indians, helped fashion [a] new view of ancient paganism. . . . To the business agents of the great companies native religious customs seemed important intelligence on the character of the inhabitants with whom they had to deal, and Greco-Roman illustrations were normal forms of communication with the educated directors in Amsterdam and London.”⁶

Authors of this type of communiqué presented both general observations about broad similarities between the new peoples and classical antiquity and parallels to specific practices. Such comparative activity went all the way back to the early Spanish explorers in the sixteenth century. I offer just a few examples. The Jesuit missionary José de Acosta gave a general description of the idolatry of the Mexicans in his widely read account from the late sixteenth century:

The *Mexicaines* Idolatrie hath bin more pernicious and hurtfull then that of the *Inguas*, as wee shall see plainer heerafter, for that the greatest part of their adoration and idolatrie was employed to Idols, and not to naturall things, although they did attribute naturall effects to these Idolls, as raine, multiplication of cattell, warre, and generation, even as the Greekes and Latins have forged Idolls of *Phoebus*, *Mercurie*, *Iupiter*, *Minerva*, and of *Mars*. To conclude, whoso shall meerly looke into it, shall finde this manner which the Divell hath used to deceive the Indians to be the same wherewith hee hath deceived the Greekes and Romans, and other ancient Gentiles, giving them to understand that these notable creatures, the Sunne, Moone, Starres, and Elements, had power and authoritie to doe good or harme to men.⁷

Other authors noted more specific points of comparison. Bartolomé de Las Casas peppered his *Apologética Historia* of the New World (probably completed by 1560) with references to classical authors and patristic writers (especially Augustine) who wrote about the gods.⁸ His detailed classical learning colored his prose in interesting ways, such as in his description of a figure in a New World temple as “a Serapis.”⁹ In a work of the late seventeenth century, Richard Blome gave an account of the natives of “Mary-land” in America: “Their Idol they place in the innermost Room of the House, of whom they relate incredible Stories, they carry it with them to the Wars, and ask counsel thereof, as the Romans did of their Oracles.”¹⁰

For Blome and most of his predecessors, the “Idols” found in the Americas were diabolical. In describing the inhabitants of the island of St. Vincent, Blome wrote that they believed “that there are a number of Good and Evil Spirits, the Good being their Gods,” and “when their several Priests call upon their several Gods together, as they speak, these Gods, or rather Devils, rail, quarrel, and seem to fight with each other. These Daemons shelter themselves sometimes in the Bones of dead Men,” and “Persons of Quality and exquisite Knowledge, who have long lived in *St. Vincent’s Island*, do affirm, that the Devils do effectually beat them, and they show on their Bodies the visible marks of the blows.”¹¹ Yet, some writers were beginning to

offer different possibilities. Sabine MacCormack, for instance, has traced the transformation of the Incan deity Pachacamac. In 1533, Spanish invaders sacked the pyramid temple of Pachacamac near Lima, destroying the central cult statue and robbing the temple of its gold and silver. Contemporary Spanish reports of the incident focus on the issue of idolatry: “the Christians explained to the Indians the great error in which they had been enveloped, and that he who was talking in that idol was the devil.” The leader of the expedition, Hernando Pizarro, “broke the idol in the sight of everyone, told them many things about our holy catholic faith and gave them as armor to defend themselves against the devil the sign of the cross.”¹² Near the end of the sixteenth century, José de Acosta, while still firmly convinced of the activity of the devil and demons in the New World, observed that although the natives lacked a word for “god,” nevertheless “in trueth they had some little knowledge, and therefore in *Peru* they made him a rich temple, which they called *Pachacamac*, which was the principall Sanctuarie of the realme. And it hath beene saide, this word of *Pachacamac* is, as much to say, as the Creator, yet in this temple they used their idolatries, worshipping the Divell and figures.” Acosta reflected on the significance of this acknowledgement of a creator:

As it is therefore a trueth, comfortable to reason, that there is a soveraigne Lorde and King of heaven, whome the Gentiles (with all their infidelities and idolatries) have not denyed, as wee see in the Philosophy of *Timee* in *Plato*, in the Metaphisickes of *Aristotle*, and in the Aesculape of *Tresmigister*, as also in the Poesies of *Homer* & *Virgil*. Therefore the Preachers of the Gospel have no great difficultie to plant & perswade this truth of a supreame God. . . . But it is hard to roote out of their mindes, that there is no other God, nor any other deitie then one.¹³

Pachacamac had become for Acosta something quite distinct from the devil worshipped in his temple. In the early-seventeenth-century *Commentarios reales* of Garcilaso de la Vega, son of a Spanish conquistador and an Incan princess, Pachacamac found still another manifestation. Garcilaso noted that the Incas worshipped the sun and

their kings “with as much Veneration as the ancient Gentiles, such as the *Greeks* and *Romans*, did their *Jupiter*, *Mars*, *Venus*, &c.,” but at the same time, “they proceeded by the mere light of Nature, to the knowledge of the True Almighty God our Lord, Maker of Heaven and Earth . . . , which they called by the Name of *Pachacamac*, and is a word compounded of *Pacha*, which is the Universe and *Camac*, which is the Soul; and is as much as he that animates the World.” Writers who held that “they called the Devil by this Name” were thus quite mistaken:

Howsoever they are mistaken where they say that the *Indians* gave the name *Pachacamac* to the Devil, for whom they have another Word, which is *Cupay*, which when they utter, they spit, with other signs of Detestation. Notwithstanding this Enemy so far insinuated himself amongst these Infidels, that he caused himself to be worshipped by them by entering into all those things, which they called sacred, or Holy; for he spake to them in their Oracles, their Temples, and the Corners of their Houses, calling himself by the Name of *Pachacamac*, and by this subtilty the *Indians* worshipped every thing through which the Devil spoke, believing it to be a Deity; but had they believed it was the *Cupay*, or Devil, whom they heard, they would certainly have burnt the things through which he spoke.

Garcilaso concluded that in worshipping Pachacamac, “it is evident that the *Indians* held our invisible God to be the Creatour of all things.”¹⁴ Thus over the course of roughly a century, and in comparative conversation with the old classical deities, Pachacamac transformed from a demonic idol into the one true Christian god. And Pachacamac would undergo a further change in the eighteenth century, becoming simply the central figure in “The Religion of the Peruvians” in handbooks such as Bernard Picart’s *Ceremonies and Religious Customs*.¹⁵

Related transformations of the ancient pagan gods were occurring simultaneously. As Frank E. Manuel has noted: “With the accumulation of voyage literature and missionary relations and commercial reports, the documents of the ancient world ceased to be mere book learning or source material for theological disputation among rival

Christian sects which vilified each other as heathens. Pagan religion became a living flesh-and-blood reality which was mirrored in contemporary barbarism. . . . The parallel always worked both ways: it infused meaning into the savage rites in the new world, and at the same time it became the key to a reinterpretation of the spirit of the ancients.”¹⁶ The close juxtaposition of the classical pantheon and its cults with modern non-Christian worship brought about a more concrete understanding of the ancient deities. The new peoples Europeans encountered had the effect of making the gods and odd worship practices of classical literature seem more like “real options”; Europeans were able to imagine into existence ancient Greeks and Romans acting in ways not unlike these new, contemporary pagans. Just like “Hinduism” and “African religion,” then, ancient Greek and Roman “religion” in Europe emerged out of this mix of colonial and missionary interests.¹⁷

In some ways, the individual Greek and Roman gods were for a short period dissolved into the general “pagan religion” that authors such as Edward Lord Herbert of Cherbury used as the basis for theorizing about the origins of “religion.” For example, in Alexander Ross’s *Pansebeia*, both “The Religions of the Romans” and “The Religions of the Grecians” are subject headings, but both are judged to be part of “the same Paganism” present in the rest of the ancient world.¹⁸ More erudite students of ancient Greece and Rome in fact left the discussion of the gods to such cross-cultural compilers and theorists.¹⁹ In his widely read handbook on ancient Rome, *Romae Antiquae Notitia: Or, The Antiquities of Rome*, which was first published in 1696, Basil Kennett included a section dedicated to “the Religion of the Romans.” Kennett covered the topics of priests, sacrifices, and festivals, but he sidestepped any discussion of the gods: “For it would be very needless and impertinent to enter into a Disquisition about the Deities, a matter that, having its very Foundation in Fiction, is involv’d in so many endless Stories, and yet has employ’d several Pens to explain it.”²⁰ What was central about Roman religion to Kennett was its utility in governing: “That Religion is absolutely necessary to the establishing of Civil Government, is a truth far from being de-

nied by any sort of Persons.” He began his discussion of religion by quoting Machiavelli with approval: “For Religion, saith he, produc’d good Laws; good Laws good Fortune; and good Fortune a good end in whatever they undertook. And perhaps he hath not strain’d the Panegyrick too high, when he tells us, That for several Ages together, never was the Fear of God more eminently conspicuous than in that Republick.”²¹

In the eighteenth century, such positive valuations of the role of Roman religion in statecraft generated comparisons with Christianity, further contributing to Greek and Roman “religion” coming into being as objects of study. For Enlightenment thinkers put off by the Christian bickering that surrounded them, Greek and Roman “religion” could be shaped into “a self-consciously pagan counter-position to Christianity.”²² The second chapter of Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, for example, celebrated the tolerant religious practices of the Romans in contrast to the hard-headed intolerance of the Christians. The enlightened skepticism Gibbon attributed to the Romans would shape discussions of Roman religion for two centuries: “The devout polytheist, though fondly attached to his national rites, admitted with implicit faith the different religions of the earth.” A footnote followed that specifically contrasted this outlook with Christian attitudes.²³ Gibbon went on to discuss the viewpoint of “the philosophers” of Rome:

In their writings and conversation, the philosophers of antiquity asserted the independent dignity of reason; but they resigned their actions to the commands of law and custom. Viewing, with a smile of pity and indulgence, the various errors of the vulgar, they diligently practised the ceremonies of their fathers, devoutly frequented the temples of the gods; and sometimes condescending to act a part on the theatre of superstition, they concealed the sentiments of an Atheist under sacerdotal robes. Reasoners of such a temper were scarcely inclined to wrangle about their respective modes of faith, or of worship.²⁴

In contrast to this serene picture, Gibbon depicts the “inflexible, and, if we may use the expression, the intolerant zeal of the Christians.”²⁵

The Christians were, to be sure, less obstinate and zealous than the Jews, from whom they inherited such characteristics, but nonetheless Gibbon's fifteenth and sixteenth chapters (the last two chapters of the first volume) portrayed early Christianity as a kind of antithesis to the benevolent skepticism and open-minded religious atmosphere of the early Roman empire, and not just "native" Roman religion.²⁶ Indeed, for Gibbon, it was "the aspiring genius of Rome" to be able to absorb the worship practices of foreigners.²⁷

The detection of a close relationship between "religion" and the "essence" of a people was a trend that only intensified during the rise of Romanticism and the growth of nationalism in Europe during the nineteenth century, though the nativist element absent in Gibbon would make a strong revival. A renewed European interest in mythology fueled (and was itself fueled by) nationalist concerns.²⁸ This situation increased interest in ancient "religion" while at the same time provoking a distinct change in attitude toward classical antiquity that favored Greece at the expense of Rome, since the Greeks of antiquity were thought to have a much richer store of mythology (and hence a much richer national spirit) than the ancient Romans.²⁹ This philhellenism saturated classical studies, particularly work on Greek and Roman "religion," since many thinkers regarded "religion" as especially embodying the "spirit" of a given people (*Volksgeist*).³⁰ In Hellenic studies, the works of Karl Otfried Müller in the first half of the nineteenth century and Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries illustrate some of the range of Germanic philhellenism of that era.³¹ Müller's *Prolegomena zu einer wissenschaftlichen Mythologie*, published in 1825, along with his *Handbuch der Archäologie der Kunst* (1830), linked the production of Greek art (and *not* Roman imitations) with the particular characteristics of Greek religion, which were expressed especially in mythology.³² In *Der Glaube der Hellenen*, the second volume of which was published posthumously in 1932, Wilamowitz emphasized continuities between the universalisms of Greek religion and Christianity, linking what he judged the best parts of Christianity with Greek precursors, again taking Greek

mythology as the key datum. Unearthing early, or “original,” Greek myths became in the nineteenth century an important preoccupation of classicists, one that would persist well into the twentieth century.

In this atmosphere, Roman “religion” suffered in comparison to Greek “religion.” For classicists of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, Roman “religion” of the historical era consisted merely of borrowed Greek myths and copious external rites devoid of any actual, genuine beliefs, aside from those borrowed second hand from “Oriental religions.” The easy tolerance Gibbon had celebrated, these later scholars condemned. The nineteenth century’s most acclaimed historian of ancient Rome, Theodor Mommsen, falls into this group.³³ Mommsen admired early “Latin religion” along with Greek religion in the first volume of his monumental *History of Rome*, but his treatment of Roman religion in the subsequent volumes describes a decay of the “pure” and “simple” older “faith.” The following sentiments are representative: “The ancient Italian popular faith fell to the ground; over its ruins rose—like oligarchy and despotism rising over the ruins of the political commonwealth—on the one side unbelief, state-religion, Hellenism, and on the other side superstition, sectarianism, the religion of the Orientals.”³⁴ This type of thinking reached its apex in the work of W. Warde Fowler, who traced how a “natural and organic” early Roman household religion, which “in its peculiar way was a real expression of religious feeling,” disintegrated through foreign contamination by the time of the Roman republic into an empty formalism and obsession with ritual more dismal even than “the legalism of the Pharisees.”³⁵

The intense, sometimes obsessive, interest in origins continued to thrive through the close of the nineteenth century. Several landmark studies appeared in the space of little more than a decade. The first edition of J. G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* was published in 1890.³⁶ The early twentieth century brought the first edition of Georg Wissowa’s *Religion und Kultus der Römer* in 1902 and Jane Harrison’s *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* in 1903.³⁷ All these works still display a passionate concern for the “original” form of the given

“religion,” but Wissowa and Harrison together marked a shift that began to see cult and ritual as the central features of “religion” in the classical world.³⁸

The mid to late twentieth century marked a period of transition in the study of Greek and Roman religions. The concern for the “original” and “pristine” forms of classical religions perhaps hit its high point with the work of Georges Dumézil, *La religion romaine archaïque*, in 1966, in which this scholar of ancient Indo-European cultures attempted to isolate the most archaic (and thus, of course, most genuine) form of Roman religion.³⁹ It is, however, the interest in ritual that became fruitful in studies of the later twentieth century. One result of the newfound centrality of ritual in Greek and Roman religions was the more vehement distancing of classical “religions” from Christianity, which was (when distilled into an ideal Protestant form) much more concerned with belief than ritual. Recent classicists have thus, in a way ironically similar to Gibbon, consciously constructed Greek and Roman “religions” as everything that Christianity was not. The historian Moses Finley provides a representative comparison: “How fundamentally alien Greek religion was (to our eyes) is most easily shown by a simple listing. . . . Greek religion had no sacred books . . . , no revelation, no creed. It also lacked any central ecclesiastical organization or the support of a central political organization . . . there could, strictly speaking, be neither Greek orthodoxy nor Greek heresy.”⁴⁰ The list of differences could go on, and the outlook is perhaps best summed up by the classicist Paul Cartledge, who wrote that “Classical Greek religion is ‘other,’ desperately foreign to (in particular) post-Christian, monotheistic ways of conceptualizing the divine.”⁴¹ I find much of this recent classical scholarship very useful. Its honesty about just how much the ancient Greek and Roman worlds differed from our own has helped me to think in new ways about the ancient world. Yet, such statements of the sheer difference of Greek (and Roman) religion from popular understandings of religion also raise the central question: If these configurations are so utterly different from modern “ways of conceptualizing the divine,” if the things that modern people conceive of as

“religious” were not so conceived in the ancient worlds and vice versa, then how and why are ancient practices to be recognized as “religion” at all? Before I answer this question, I broaden the scope of the discussion by turning to the invention of Mesopotamian religion.

*A Formula for Creating a New Ancient Religion:
Mesopotamian Religion*

The amalgam described as “Mesopotamian religion” provides an excellent example of the birth and growth of a new “ancient religion.” While some of the gods of the ancient Near Eastern world were known by name from the Bible, there was nothing akin to the recovery of classical sources for Greek and Roman gods that had occurred during the Italian Renaissance. Nevertheless, the notion of “ancient Mesopotamian religion” was already beginning to form in the seventeenth century. It existed as a kind of shell, a basic outline that could not really be filled out largely because of a lack of evidence. The situation is evident in the sprawling book of Alexander Ross already mentioned, *Pansebeia*, which was first published in 1653. Ross has a short section devoted to “The Religions of the Ancient Babylonians,” which proceeds in his typical question-and-answer format: “*What kinde of Religious, or rather, Superstitious Government was there among the Ancient Babylonians? They had their Priests, called Chaldeans, and Magi, who were much addicted to Astrology and Divination. . . . They worshipped divers Gods, or Idols rather; the two Chief were Belus, or Bel, or Baal, by whom they meant Jupiter; and the other was Astaroth, or Astarte, by which Juno was understood.*”⁴² Ross continues for another page in this mode of equating the various gods. At the close of his discussion of the topic, he cites his sources: “See Diodorus, Philostratus, Eusebius, Scaliger.”⁴³ That is, the sources were classical and patristic authorities along with the work of Joseph Justus Scaliger, the sixteenth-century polymath who had coordinated and synthesized the calendrical systems of different ancient cultures. Even though firsthand knowledge of Mesopotamian sources was almost totally lacking, these classical sources and the

emerging framework of World Religions allowed the basic contours of what would become “Mesopotamian religion” to be set in place. It was immaterial whether or not the primary source evidence that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would show that such a category was native to ancient Mesopotamian civilizations. Mesopotamian religion as a concept had been created, and it was only a matter of time until data would be provided to fill in the blanks.

European travelers and missionaries in the seventeenth century had begun to send artifacts from Mesopotamia back to Europe.⁴⁴ By the early eighteenth century, cuneiform inscriptions were beginning to be published in learned journals, but no one was able to read them. The academic discipline of Assyriology, then, did not emerge in Europe until the middle of the nineteenth century when systems of cuneiform writing began to be decoded and systematic excavations commenced in the Middle East. The actual decipherment of Assyrian cuneiform is generally credited to Henry Creswicke Rawlinson, a British lieutenant serving with the East India Company.⁴⁵ Having learned Persian, Arabic, and Hindi in the course of his service in India, Rawlinson was in 1835 sent to act as a military advisor to the Persian government. During that year, he began to study cuneiform inscriptions, including the trilingual Behistun Rock Inscription. Over the next decade, and in the course of military exploits in Afghanistan and elsewhere, Rawlinson managed to decode the Old Persian portion of the Behistun Inscription, paving the way for understanding the use of the cuneiform in other languages.⁴⁶ Also in the early 1840s the French and British began systematic archeological expeditions in the region of present-day Iraq. A wealth of new material made clearer the relevance of Mesopotamian culture for the understanding of biblical narratives, which in turn increased philanthropic financial support for further archeological excavations as well as the creation of professorships in Assyriology at major universities.

As is clear from Rawlinson’s story, the development of Assyriology was subject to its own set of colonial dynamics. The raw materials

upon which the discipline was built (cuneiform tablets and other inscribed artifacts) needed to be excavated and removed from sites in Mesopotamia. From 1850 to 1950, institutions in Europe and the United States sponsored archeological expeditions that brought (literally) tons of texts into Western libraries and museums. As these newly discovered artifacts were interpreted, a vocabulary and conceptual apparatus were already established, including the concept of “Mesopotamian religion,” such that ancient data could simply be slotted into place. Again, I mean this quite literally. At the British Museum, for instance, cuneiform tablets were labeled with a system of letters to identify their contents (H for history, R for religion) and filed away accordingly.⁴⁷

By 1898, Professor of Semitic Languages Morris Jastrow could write a synthetic work, *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria*, which ran to 701 pages, plus bibliography and index. The book made impressive use of the new textual discoveries and archeological reports. It was divided into three sections (gods, religious literature, and religious architecture) followed by an assessment of “the influence exerted by the religion of Babylonia and Assyria,” said to be measured in three areas: “doctrines, rites, and ethics.”⁴⁸ Thus in the early twentieth century, the study of “Mesopotamian religion” was on its way to gaining a footing equal to that of the other major religions. *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria* was part of a series, of which Jastrow himself was the editor, called “Handbooks on the History of Religions.”⁴⁹

The continued study of “Mesopotamian religion” in the twentieth century can helpfully illustrate what often counts as “advances” in the study of an ancient religion. Such studies tend to change as popular notions of religion change. While Jastrow’s “Mesopotamian religion” consisted of gods, religious literature, religious architecture, doctrines, rites, and ethics, later treatments of the topic would keep pace with the growing interest in “religious experience” heralded by studies such as those of William James and Rudolf Otto already mentioned. The Assyriologist Niek Veldhuis has recently discussed the use of “religion” in the field of Mesopotamian studies

by contrasting the approaches of two highly influential Assyriologists of the twentieth century, Thorkild Jacobsen and Leo Oppenheim.⁵⁰ Veldhuis's main goal is to stress the differences between the two, and he is surely justified in doing so: Jacobsen had no qualms about reconstructing complex Mesopotamian religious systems, whereas Oppenheim's view was summarized in his chapter subtitle "Why a 'Mesopotamian Religion' Should Not Be Written."⁵¹ What I want to point out, however, is that despite their different approaches, Jacobsen and Oppenheim shared some very basic assumptions about "religion." In keeping with popular twentieth-century characterizations of "religion," both focused on religion as individuals' personal experiences, and both saw religion as a matter of "feelings." Because Jacobsen and Oppenheim are often seen as representing diametrically opposed approaches to Mesopotamian religion, the demonstration of their shared assumptions helps to show the rather narrow confines that the concept of religion establishes for the interpretation of ancient evidence.

Oppenheim and Jacobsen do not frequently appear in each other's footnotes, but each was well aware of the other's work. The two had a tumultuous working relationship for more than a decade at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute during the production of the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary. One can get the flavor of their rapport from this excerpt from a statement of Oppenheim to the Oriental Institute in 1959: "Dr. Jacobsen loves to profess—and that at [*sic*] nauseam—that my scholarly thinking is not as deep as his, nor is, for that matter, anybody else's. This, I have found out, means in simple terms that Dr. Jacobsen considers his arguments so wonderful and convincing that he expects all his colleagues to accept them as the only and ~~god-revealed~~ divinely inspired truth" (strike-out in the original).⁵² That the scholarship of the two should be in opposition at a rhetorical level is thus not surprising, but their mutual animosity renders their similarities all the more interesting.

I begin by briefly summarizing the approaches of these two scholars. Jacobsen unapologetically began his book-length treatment of

Mesopotamian religion with an appeal to the universality of religion as described by Rudolf Otto's notion of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.⁵³ Very similar appeals to Otto and William James introduce the substance of his programmatic essays on Mesopotamian religion.⁵⁴ This opening statement from *The Treasures of Darkness* is characteristic of the way Jacobsen wrote about "religion": "Basic to all religion—and so also to ancient Mesopotamian religion—is, we believe, a unique experience of confrontation with power not of this world. Rudolf Otto called this confrontation 'Numinous' and analyzed it as the experience of a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a confrontation with a 'Wholly Other' outside of normal experience and indescribable in its terms."⁵⁵ According to Jacobsen, Mesopotamian religion was just like "all religion"; it consisted of the individual's experience of "the Numinous," which is, by definition, indescribable. Jacobsen followed this statement with an extended account of the development of Mesopotamians' changing reactions to "the Numinous" from the fourth millennium through the second millennium B.C.E.⁵⁶ It is a grand synthesis. For my purposes, however, most intriguing are his reflections on his own project. He claimed that he wanted to isolate "the forms of approach to 'the Numinous' generally available" at a given time.⁵⁷ To take but one example, Jacobsen argued that during the fourth millennium, since Mesopotamians were principally concerned with the rhythms of rural life and staving off famine, the experience of "the Numinous" consisted of worship of Dumuzi and other gods as providers and gods of fertility. During the third millennium, the dramatically increased importance of the "secular" office of king opened up a new form of "approach" to "the Numinous" for Mesopotamians: "this new concept of the ruler, though purely secular in origin, actually provided an approach to central aspects of the Numinous which had not been readily suggestible before: the aspects of *tremendum* as 'majesty' and 'energy.'"⁵⁸ So, for Jacobsen, "the Numinous" is always and everywhere the same; it exists outside all cultural contingencies.⁵⁹ In his reading, religion involves an ever-present and unchanging "Numinous" to which

humans react. His book and essays trace the changing human reactions to this universal, unchanging, and indescribable thing. His sweeping descriptions of these personal experiences are what constitute “Mesopotamian religion.”

In contrast to Jacobsen’s presentation, Oppenheim’s approach seems much more restrained. Oppenheim claimed that a systematic account of the type that Jacobsen offered was simply not possible. As we will see, however, his reasoning for not wanting to write a “Mesopotamian religion” was based on a concept of “religion” quite similar to that of Jacobsen—a focus on individual “experience.” Oppenheim demurred from the project of writing a “Mesopotamian religion” for two reasons: “the nature of the available evidence, and the problem of comprehension across the barriers of conceptual conditioning.”⁶⁰ On the first point, he argued that the surviving evidence does not provide data for “religion.” For instance, the many extant Mesopotamian prayers “contain no indication of an emotion-charged preference for a specific central topic such as, for example, the individual in relation to spiritual or moral contexts of universal reach, the problem of death and survival, the problem of immediate contact with the divine, to mention here some *topoi* that might be expected to leave an imprint on the religious literature of a civilization as complex as the Mesopotamian.”⁶¹ Thus, his problem with the evidence was not so much its fragmentary nature as its failure to answer the questions raised by the modern notion of religion (note the assumption that “religious literature” was presented as a self-evident category). Oppenheim “expected” religion in “a civilization as complex as the Mesopotamian,” but he was disappointed that the extant evidence simply did not give him insight into the particular Mesopotamian manifestation of the universal religious experience of the “common man.”⁶² He saw a similar problem with using Mesopotamian “myths” as evidence for “religion” because they did not directly express the “religious experience” of individuals. He wrote that Mesopotamian myths “form something like a fantastic screen, enticing as they are in their immediate appeal, seductive . . . but still a screen which one must penetrate to reach the hard core of evidence that bears directly

on the forms of religious experience of Mesopotamian man.”⁶³ Again, it is not the case that religion was an invalid category for Oppenheim. Rather, religious experience, “the hard core of evidence” in his terms, was just too difficult for modern scholars to reach.

Oppenheim’s second reason for shying away from a “Mesopotamian religion” is summed up in the phrase “conceptual difficulties.” It is not polytheism in and of itself, said Oppenheim, that constitutes the unbridgeable gap between our world and that of ancient Mesopotamians. Rather, the problem was the “plurality of intellectual and spiritual dimensions” of “the higher polytheistic religions”: “This conceptual barrier, in fact, is more serious an impediment than the reason usually given, the lack of data and specific information. Even if more material were preserved, and that in an ideal distribution in content, period, and locale, no real insight would be forthcoming—only more problems. Western man seems to be both unable and, ultimately, unwilling to understand such religions except from the distorting angle of antiquarian interest and apologetic pretenses.”⁶⁴ For Oppenheim, “Mesopotamian religion” was an entity “out there” in antiquity; it is just that scholars lack either the conceptual tools or the willpower to excavate it properly.⁶⁵ Oppenheim, then, did not oppose writing about “Mesopotamian religion” on the grounds that the category of religion is inappropriate for the culture he studies. Indeed, in 1950, he wrote a synthetic piece titled simply “Assyro-Babylonian Religion” for a collection on “forgotten” and “living primitive” religions.⁶⁶ Instead, he was concerned that modern investigators cannot accurately grasp a polytheistic religion. He was, moreover, just as interested in “religious experience” as Jacobsen. To be sure, the two men had reached radically different conclusions about Mesopotamian religious experience. The following two quotations highlight those differences. Oppenheim, in the context of discussing Mesopotamian prayers, had concluded that

the influence of religion on the individual, as well as on the community as a whole, was unimportant in Mesopotamia. No texts tell us that ritual requirements in any stringent way affected the individual’s physiological appetites, his psychological preferences, or his attitude

toward his possessions or his family. His body, his time, and his valuables were in no serious way affected by religious demands. . . . He lived in a quite tepid religious climate within a framework of socio-economic rather than cultic co-ordinates. . . . Manifestations of religious feelings, as far as the common man is concerned, were ceremonial and formalized rather than intense and personal.⁶⁷

Compare Jacobsen's formulation:

The religious framework thus affected and conditioned life in ancient Mesopotamian society intensely and on all levels. It may be assumed that, as in most societies, the majority of men in ancient Mesopotamia had normal aptitude for, and sensitivity to, religion and religious values. Occasional individuals lacking in such normal sensitivity, who could see in religion only meaningless restrictions on their personal inclinations, will of course have been found, perhaps especially among the slaves and brutalized poor. To balance them the civilization seems to have had an unusually large number of highly sensitive minds, religiously creative poets, thinkers, and priests. Mesopotamian religious literature at its best is the literature of a people highly gifted in religion, capable of profound religious insights and of finding profound and moving expression of them.⁶⁸

Despite these drastically different takes on the evidence, both Jacobsen and Oppenheim center on individuals' "religious experience" or "feelings" as the locus of "Mesopotamian religion." This focus on interiority and personal experience is a distinctly modern take on the ancient evidence.⁶⁹ Like Greek and Roman religions, ancient Mesopotamian religion turns out to be very much a modern entity.

*Making Something New Old Again; or, Why Religion
Seems Like a Natural Category*

Like Jacobsen and Oppenheim, the overwhelming majority of scholars in ancient history simply assume the universality of religion. Yet as I pointed out at the beginning of Chapter 2, many specialists working on a variety of ancient cultures are well aware that religion was not a concept native to the cultures they study. As we saw earlier

in this chapter, many scholars of classical Greece and Rome have recently come to stress the great differences between typical modern conceptions of religion and what went on in the ancient Mediterranean world. For the most part, though, even these historians still write as though religion was in fact a concept native to the ancient world. How and why do they do so?

One of the dominant means of talking about “religion” in ancient Mediterranean cultures is through the use of the terminology of “embeddedness.” It is quite common to read that religion “was embedded in all aspects of ancient life.”⁷⁰ Indeed, this trope of “embedded religion” is ubiquitous in recent studies of ancient “religion.” The authors who employ it argue that the behaviors modern people generally collect under the heading of “religion” did not compose a well-defined category in ancient Mediterranean antiquity. Rather, “religion was embedded” in many or all aspects of ancient cultures. The use of this notion of embeddedness is salutary insofar as it helps to emphasize that categories post-Enlightenment thinkers often regard as distinct (such as politics, economics, and religion) were *not* distinct in the ancient world. Yet, such terminology also presents problems. I want to emphasize that I do not see the following critique as overturning or dismissing the important work of the scholars who have employed such tropes. Instead, I would argue that the following observations carry these scholars’ insights to what I view as their logical conclusions. With that caveat in mind, it is useful to recall the discussion of descriptive and redescriptive uses of “religion” from Chapter 1. The authors who use the trope of “embedded religion” generally write in a descriptive register (they present themselves as giving an accurate account of an ancient culture). Yet, their use of the idea that “religion was embedded” in the social structures of the ancient world suggests that “religion” is in fact a redescriptive term (ancient people did not recognize religion as a distinct sphere of life). The trope of “embedded religion” can thus produce the false impression that “religion” is a descriptive concept rather than a redescriptive concept for ancient cultures (that is, there really is something “out there” in antiquity called “Greek religion” that scholars are simply describing rather

than creating). By permitting this slippage between descriptive and redescriptive uses of “religion,” the rhetoric of “embedded religion” allows historians to have their cake and eat it, too. They can (correctly) recognize that religion was not a concept in ancient cultures, but they can continue speaking as if it were. The result of such techniques for speaking about antiquity is the reinscription of religion as something eternally present in all cultures.⁷¹

Conclusion

Although the Greeks, Romans, Mesopotamians, and many other peoples have long histories, the stories of their respective “religions” are of recent pedigree. The formation of “ancient religions” as objects of study coincided with the formation of religion itself as a concept in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It thus makes a good deal of sense that some of these “ancient religions” have come to seem strangely foreign to modern notions of religion. Even in the face of this growing sense of discomfort with the concept of religion, the vast majority of scholars continue discussing “ancient religions.” I suspect this persistence is due to their unwillingness or inability to contemplate certain kinds of difference. The cultural critic Russell T. McCutcheon has aptly summarized the state of affairs:

Just as the concepts nation or nation-state—let alone individual or citizen—are today so utterly basic, even vital, to many of our self-understandings and our ability to self organize that we routinely cast them backward in chronological time and outward in geographic space, so too it is difficult *not* to understand, say, ancient Romans or Egyptians as having a “religion.” After all, common sense tells us that religion is a human universal. But . . . there is something at stake in so easily projecting, in this case, backward in history or outward in culture our local classification, for along with its ability to organize certain sets of human behaviors comes attendant socio-political implications. By means of such projection we may be doing something more than neutrally or passively classifying the world around us; instead, by means of such classifications, we may very well be actively presenting back to ourselves the taxonomies that help to establish our own contingent

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and inevitably provincial social world as if their components were self-evident, natural, universal, and necessary.⁷²

It is hard to overstate the importance of this point. If we want to go on talking about ancient Mesopotamian religion, ancient Greek religion, or any other ancient religion, we should always bear in mind that we are talking about something modern when we do so. We are not naming something any ancient person would recognize. In our current context, we organize our contemporary world using the concepts of religious and secular. Furthermore, we carve up the religious side of that dichotomy into distinct social groups, the World Religions. Intentionally or not, when we bring this vocabulary to ancient sources, baggage comes along with it. I am advocating that we admit to and embrace this fact. Religion is a modern category; it may be able to shed light on some aspects of the ancient world when applied in certain strategic ways, but we have to be honest about the category's origins and not pretend that it somehow organically and magically arises from our sources. If we fail to make this reflexive move, we turn our ancient sources into well-polished mirrors that show us only ourselves and our own institutions.