

Name: _____

Paul in Athens
“Religion” in the Graeco-Roman World: An Investigative Exercise

I. What is religion?

a. From your experience, list five things that come to mind when you hear the term “religion.”

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

b. Reflect on three items above. Why do you associate these with “religion”?

c. Many scholars have attempted to define “religion.” Clifford Geertz (1966) takes religion to be:

“(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating **conceptions** of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these **conceptions** with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”

How does this definition compare with your above reflections above? What fits your experience; what doesn't fit?

The word “conceptions” is the only term that appears in the definition twice; explain its importance to Geertz. What does it leave out?

d. Compare the above definition with the one produced by Bruce Lincoln (2006):

“(1) a discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status, (2) a set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by a religious discourse to which these practices are connected, (3) a community whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices, and (4) an institution that regulates religious discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value.”

What phrase is repeated three times in this definition? How does that compare with Geertz?

II. Graeco-Roman *religio* in the Days of Paul

Watch the film “Paul in Athens” and list 10 elements that relate to the ancient religion(s) of Paul’s time (it could be anything featured in the movie: concepts, places, artifacts etc.)

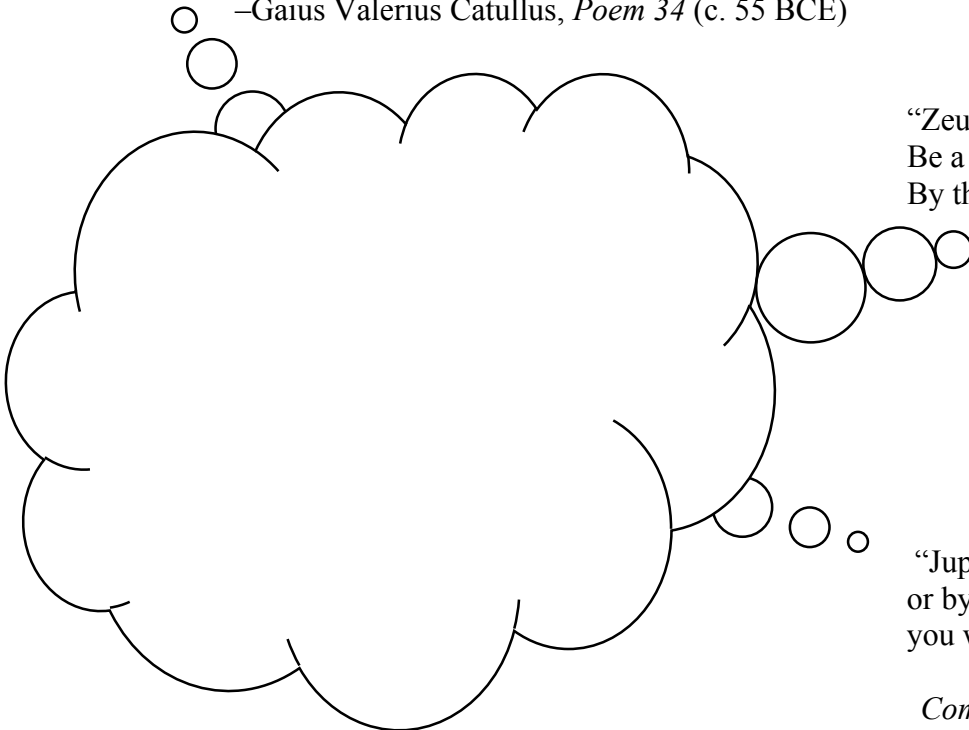
- 1.
- 2.
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- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

a. Ancient Prayer

1. Read the three ancient prayers below, all from Graeco-Roman texts. In the cloud, list common elements.

“We upright maids and youths are in Diana’s care...
You are called Juno Lucina by women in childbirth,
you are called nightly Trivia, and Luna
Whose light is not your own...
By whatever name you please, be hallowed,
and cherish, with your good aid, as you are accustomed,
the ancient race of Romulus.”

○ –Gaius Valerius Catullus, *Poem 34* (c. 55 BCE)



“Zeus, whoever He is, if this
Be a name acceptable,
By this name I will call him”

○ –Aeschylus,
Agamemnon, 160–2
(c. 458 BCE)

“Jupiter Optimus Maximus
or by whatever other style
you wish to be addressed”

○ –Maurus Servius,
Commentary on the Aeneid,
II, 351 (late 4th CE)

2. What terms are repeated in these texts? How do they help us understand the state of mind of the person praying?

3. Can you discern a particular emotion behind the common elements of these prayers?

b. Ancient Sacrifice

This marble cut relief (122–115 BCE) comes from the base of an altar that once stood in the Temple of Neptune in Rome.



©Livius.org; Altar of Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus; Louvre

1. Describe the details of this relief; pay close, meticulous attention to the people and livestock, and to the scene taking place on the right.

2. In your own words, try to explain what the people are doing. What are they trying to achieve?

3. Watch the video [souvetaurilia](#). Write the Latin name of each animal represented above.

c. Divination and Auspices: the gods talk-back

This stone relief is from the Forum of Trajan, an emperor of Rome from 98–117 CE. Examine the scene depicted in this carving.

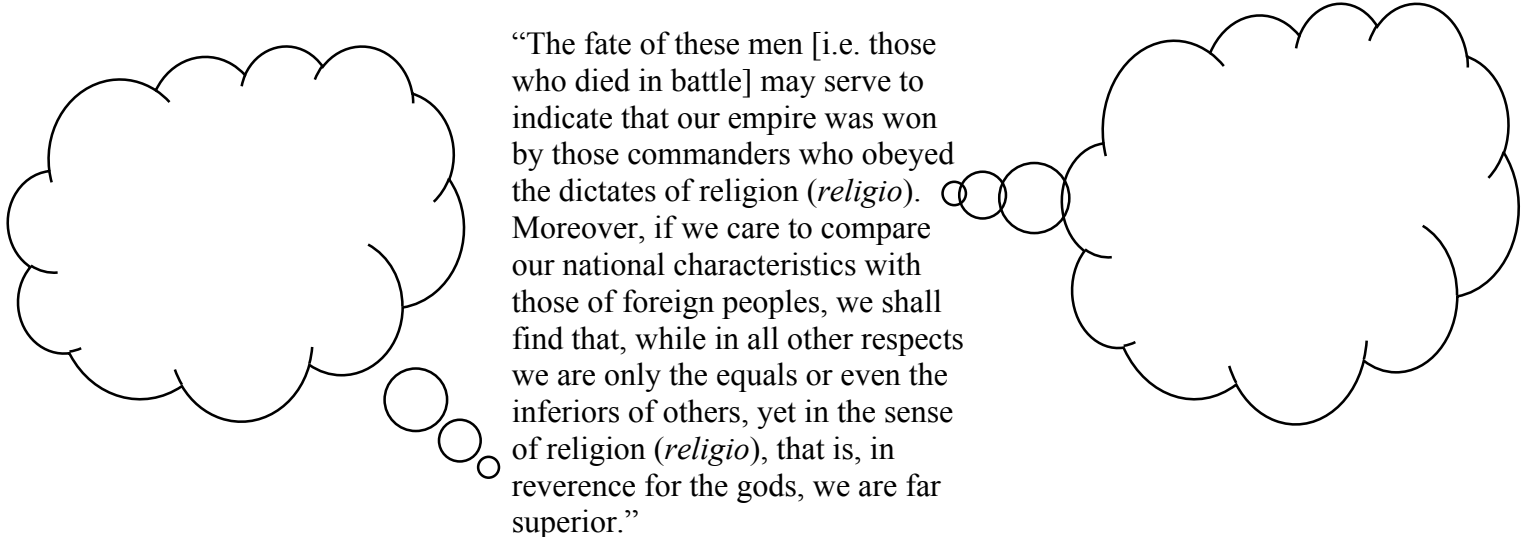


© 2012. Photo: I. Sh. Haruspex; stone-relief in the Louvre; Inv. No. MR 737 (MA 978).

1. Do you think the bull is dead or alive?
2. Describe the people standing over the bull. What are they holding in their hands?
3. Roman *religio* was a bloody business. The scene above depicts *haruspicy*, a divination ritual. A person officiating the ritual was a haruspex. What did a *haruspex* hope to accomplish?

IV. Ancient *religio*: Definitions

One of the earliest discussions of *religio* is found in the writings of Cicero, a famous senator and philosopher of the Roman Republic (106–43 BCE). In the following passage, jot down the words or ideas that Cicero associates with *religio*.



– Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, 2.8–9

1. What reason does Cicero give for the success of the Romans?
2. In what way does Cicero consider the Roman people superior to other nations?
3. How do the elements from previous sources (e.g., prayer, sacrifice, divination) fit into Cicero’s description?

V. Paul and Graeco-Roman Religion

While in Athens, Paul interacts with Graeco-Roman religious practices and beliefs. The Book of Acts 17:19–33 reports:

19 So they [Athenians] took him and brought him to the Areopagus [hill beneath the Acropolis] and asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.”

22 Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23 For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. 26 From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, 27 so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. 28 For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ 29 Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. 30 While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

1. List the elements of Graeco-Roman religion mentioned in this text that Paul encountered in the city.

2. After watching the movie “Paul in Athens,” what is Paul referring to in verse 31?

3. Verses 24–25 capture Paul’s reaction to Graeco-Roman religion – what is his criticism? Does that apply only to Graeco-Roman religion or to his own Jewish religion as well?

VI. Summary

In one paragraph, try to summarize the differences between modern “religion” and ancient Graeco-Roman *religio*. You might draw on the ideas of Geertz, Lincoln, and Cicero.

Further Research:

Graf, Fritz. "What is Ancient Mediterranean Religion?" Pages 3–16 in *Ancient Religions*. Ed. Sarah Iles Johnston. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007.

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