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A Review of Ancient Religions II

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Religion of the Greeks and the Romans. The religion of the Greeks and Romans may be treated under one head, since the Romans largely derived their religion from the Greeks, and the Greek religion in turn was greatly influenced by contact with the Egyptians. Many of the Greek philosophers—teachers of religion to their countrymen—traveled into Egypt where they gathered all the notions then current concerning the gods, the transmigration of souls, a future state of existence and other points, which they modeled into a system that was afterwards enriched and adorned by all the charms of embellishments that poetry and art could furnish. Thomas Dew, in his *Digest of Laws, Customs, and Manners and Institutions of Ancient and Modern Nations*, says on this matter of Greek religion being derived in great measure from the Egyptians: “Still a large portion (i.e., of the Greek religion) was of Greek origin, and that, even though taken from Egypt became Grecian in character.”^a

The Greek and Roman deities are distinguished into three classes, namely the superior gods, the inferior gods, and the demigods. The superior gods, otherwise called the *Dei Majorum Gentium*, that is gods

In this chapter, Roberts summarizes materials which are more fully presented in his *Seventy's Course in Theology*: Greek and Roman religion, *Seventy's Course in Theology* 3:69–86; northern European paganism, 3:87–92; and Islam, 3:105–11.

^aThe exact nature of the relation between Greek, Roman, and Egyptian religion is debated among modern scholars. Much of the syncretism between the three religions took place following the Greek conquest of Egypt (332 B.C.) and the Roman conquests of Greece and Egypt. It is thus a secondary development, rather than a primary relationship. For general background on Greek and Roman religion, see “Greek Religion,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* 6:91–118, and “Roman Religion,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* 12:445–71. For a brilliant history of this period, see Peter Green, *Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). For general background and bibliography on Greek and Roman civilizations, see John Boardman and others, *The Oxford History of the Classical World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

of the superior house or families, answering to the patricians or the nobility of Rome, were so named because they were believed to be immanently employed in the government of the world. They were also styled the “select gods,” of whom twelve were admitted into the council of justice (the supreme court), and on that account denominated “consentes.” The images of those twelve gods were first in the forum of Rome, six of them being males and six females. These twelve gods were supposed to preside over the twelve months, to each of them was allotted a month.

The inferior gods comprehended what Ovid called the celestial populace, answering to the plebeians among the Romans, who had no place in heaven. These were called the Penates-Lares—rural deities. The third class, or demigods, was composed of such as derived their origin from a god or goddess and a mortal; or such as by their valor and exploits had raised themselves to the rank of immortals. Some mention a fourth class, called novensiles, they were the least of all that were reckoned among the gods. They were the deities by whose help and means, according to Cicero, men are advanced to heaven, and obtain a place among the gods!¹

Ontology of the Greek and Roman religions. By both Greek and Roman account of origins, chaos (void space) was first, then came into being “broad-breasted earth,” the gloomy Tartarus and Love. Chaos produced Erebus and Night, and this last bore to Erebus Day and Ether.

According to the history of the early tribes who settled in Italy, the Etruscans, the following is the account of the creation: God created the universe in six thousand years, and appointed the same period of time to be the extent of its duration. In the first part of the thousand years God created the heavens and the earth; in the second, the visible firmament; in the third, the sea and all the waters that are in the earth; in the fourth, the sun, moon, and stars; in the fifth, every living soul of birds, reptiles and quadrupeds which have their abode either on the land, in the air, or in the water; and in the sixth, man alone.² The close adherence of this order of creation with Genesis would naturally lead to the conclusion that this notion of creation was derived from **Genesis**: that Hebrew source.^b

¹Crabb, *Mythology*, 6-7.

²Crabb, *Mythology*, 8-9.

^bThis account of Etruscan mythology derives from *Suidas (Souda)*, a tenth-century Christian lexicon and encyclopedia. See Alexander P. Kazhdan and others, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3:1930. To the extent that his account of Etruscan mythology is in fact at all accurate, the apparent parallels to the Genesis account of creation are thus probably due to Christian interpolations.

The sects of the Greek and Roman cultus. The religion of both the Greeks and the Romans gave rise to a multitude of deities, mostly identical in character, but under different names, and by both Greeks and Romans were worshipped but indifferently, a tone of insincerity running through the whole cultus. The followers of religion and philosophy—for the two were closely blended by these ancient peoples—were mainly grouped into three sects, or schools: The Stoics, Epicureans and the Academicians. All three schools existed before the opening of the Christian Era.

The Stoics. Zeno was the founder of the Stoics. He lived in the third century B.C.,^c and taught at Athens in a public porch (stoa in Greek) from which came the name applied to his followers. The Stoics inculcated virtue for its own sake. They believed—and it would be difficult to frame a better human creed—that “man’s chief business is to do his duty.” They schooled themselves to bear with composure any lot that destiny might appoint; any sign of emotion on account of calamity was considered unmanly. Thus a certain Stoic, when told of the sudden death of his son is said merely to have remarked: “Well, I never imagined that I had given life to an immortal.” The Stoics believed (1) that there were gods; (2) they undertook to define their character and nature; (3) they held that the universe is governed by them; (4) that they exercise a superintendency over human affairs. The evidence for the existence of the gods they saw primarily in the universe itself. What can be so plain and evident, they argued, when we behold the heavens and contemplate the celestial bodies as the existence of some supreme, divine, intelligence, by which these things are governed. Of the nature of the deity, they held two things: first of all, that he is an animated though impersonal being; second, that there is nothing in all nature superior to him. “I do not see,” says one versed in their doctrines, “what can be more consistent with this idea and preconception than to attribute a mind and divinity to the world the most excellent of all things.”

The Epicureans. The school of the Epicureans was founded by Epicurus (379-341 B.C.). He taught somewhat in opposition to the Stoics—that pleasure is the highest good. He recommended virtue indeed, but only as a means for the attainment of pleasure, while the Stoics made virtue an end in itself. In other words, Epicurus says, be virtuous, because virtue will bring you the greatest amount of

^cZeno (335-263 B.C.) was born in Cyprus but was ethnically Phoenician. For general background and bibliography on these philosophical movements and religions, see A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 1974); and Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

happiness. Zeno said, be virtuous, because you ought to be. Epicurus had many followers in Greece, and his doctrines were eagerly embraced by many of the Romans during the later corrupt period of the Empire. Many of his disciples carried the doctrines of their master to an excess, allowing full indulgence to their appetites, for the whole philosophy was expressed in the proverb: "Let us eat, and drink, for tomorrow we die."³

The Epicureans held that gods existed, they accepted the fact from the constant and universal opinion of mankind, independent of education, wisdom or law. It must be necessary, so they said, that this knowledge is implanted in our minds, or, rather, is innate in us. Their doctrine was that the opinion respecting which there is a general agreement in universal nature, must necessarily be true; therefore it must be allowed that there are gods. Of the form of the gods they held, that because the human body is more excellent than that of other animals, both in beauty and for convenience, therefore the gods are in human form. Yet these forms of the gods were not "body, but something like body"; nor do they contain blood, but something like blood; nor are they to be considered as bodies of any solidity; nor is the nature or the power of the gods to be discerned by the senses, but by the mind. They held that the universe arose from chance, and the gods neither did nor could extend their providential care to human affairs. The duty to worship the gods was based upon the fact of their superiority to man.⁴

The Academicians. The Academicians can scarcely be regarded as a school of *religion or* philosophy, though they refer their origin to Plato.⁵ Their name stands for a method of thought rather than for a system of truth. They had no philosophy but rather speculated about philosophy. They advocated nothing; they were the agnostics of their time. That is, they were people "who did not know," and like our modern agnostics, had a strong suspicion that nobody else knew. They represented merely the negative attitude of mind of their times, but numbered in their following some of the most *considerable* men of Rome, Cicero being among the number. The Academy is said to have exactly corresponded to the moral and political needs of Rome in the days of Cicero,⁶ which means that most men in the empire at that

³In these remarks on both these schools, I follow Myers, *General History*, 184–86 [source not found].

⁴See Cicero, "Nature of the Gods," 266–68. I commend to those who would have from first hand information on the religion of the Greeks and the Romans, these Disputations.

⁵See Smith, *Student History of Greece*, 596.

⁶See *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed., s.v. "Academy."

period were in a state of doubt in respect of God and of all human relationship to him.

The religions of northern Europe.^d Turning from the south of Europe to the northern regions among the Scandinavian and Germanic tribes, there was held a shadowy, and not well understood belief in the existence of an all pervading influence or spirit; a supreme being to whom the people of those lands gave the name of “Alfader,” meaning the father of all; yet, strange to say, they paid him no divine honors, gave him no worship, but conten[t]ed themselves in worshipping inferior divinities, their old war heroes in the main, whom they had apotheosized; and who represented the national quality of the people of northern Europe at that time. To this “Alfader” they attributed infinite power, knowledge and wisdom, and forbade any representation of this being under a corporeal form, and enjoined the celebration of his worship in consecrated woods. Under the “Alfader” they recognized a number of inferior divinities who were supposed to govern the world and preside over the celestial bodies. The doctrine of a future state formed an important part of the mythology of these people, but as to the state of the soul after the death of the body there was a diversity of beliefs. Their fundamental maxims were to serve the deity with sacrifice and praise, to do no wrong to others, to be brave and intrepid. That they worshipped the sun and moon, may be inferred from two days in the week being sacred to them, “Sonndag” and “Mondag,” that is Sunday and Monday. The heaven of these northern tribes was in the highest regions of the earth, and consisted of two abodes, namely, Valhalla, or Hall of Odin, where warriors only were admitted; and a higher abode called Gimle where the good and virtuous in general were to be admitted. They also had two abodes for the wicked, namely, Niflehein or Evilhome, and Nastrond, the shore of the dead.⁷

The Mohammedan religion.^e Mohammed, the son of Abdallah and Amina, was born in Mecca, 569 A.D. It was not until he was forty years

^dFor a modern discussion and bibliography on pagan northern European religions, see Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1988).

⁷See Crabb, *Mythology*, 165–67; also Burder, *History of All Religions*, 525–26; Dobbins, *Story of the World’s Worship*, 88; and Draper, *Intellectual Development of Europe*, 240.

^eSee generally Frederick Mathewson Denny, *An Introduction to Islam* (New York: Macmillan, 1985). For a brief biography, see Michael Cook, *Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). The standard biography in English remains

of age, however, that he began delivering his message to the world, and this after a long period of communing with his own heart in the silence of the mountains, himself silent, open to the still small voices which he claimed to hear and the visitation of super-natural appearances, the voices often accosting him as the prophet of God, “even the stones and trees joined in the whispering” until he suspected himself as becoming insane. Then a happy interpretation by his wife, Cadijah, of these mysterious voices and appearances, declaring them to be good spirits and angels, threw a note of optimism into his gloomy meditations and the career of the prophet began. Since those days to the present, it is estimated that “nine thousand millions <9,000,000,000> of human beings have acknowledged him to be a prophet of God.”⁸

The creed of Islam.

There is no God but God, the living, the self-subsisting: he hath sent down unto thee the book of the Korân with truth, confirming that which was revealed before it; for he had formerly sent down the law, and the gospel, a direction unto men; and he had also sent down the distinction between good and evil. Verily those who believe not the signs of God, shall suffer a grievous punishment; for God is mighty, able to revenge. Surely nothing is hidden from God, of that which is on earth, or in heaven: it is he who formeth you in the wombs, as he pleaseth; there is no God but he, the mighty, the wise. . . . It is God who hath created you, and hath provided food for you: hereafter will he cause you to die; and after that will he raise you again to life. Is there any of your false gods, who is able to do the least of these things? . . . It is God who sendeth the winds, and raiseth the clouds, and spreadeth the same in the heaven, as he pleaseth; and afterwards disperseth the same: and thou mayest see the rain issuing from the midst thereof; and when he poureth the same down on such of his servants as he pleaseth, behold, they are filled with joy. . . . It is God who created you in weakness, and after weakness hath given you strength; and after strength, he will again reduce you to weakness and grey hairs: he createth that which he pleaseth; and he is the wise, the powerful.⁹

William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953) and *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956). Roberts exaggerates the role of “voices” in Muhammad’s early life. Also, following standard early-twentieth-century practice, he sometimes refers to Islam as “Mohammedanism,” and to Muslims as “Mohammedans.”

⁸Draper, *Intellectual Development of Europe* 1:330–31.

⁹Al Koran, 35, 333–34. As announced in the Koran, the syllable “al” in single quotations in the word “Al” Koran, sometimes written Al Coran, is the Arabic article signifying “the,” and ought to be omitted when the English article is prefixed, hence “the Koran” of the text. See Sale, *Alcoran of Mohammed*, 40.

“The creed of Mohammed,” comments Claybourn [Gibbon],

is free from suspicion and ambiguity, and the Koran is a glorious testimony to the unity of God. The prophet of Mecca rejected the worship of idols and men, of stars and planets, on the rational principles that whatever is corruptible must decay and perish. In the author of the universe his rational enthusiasm confessed and adored an infinite and eternal being, without form or place, without issue or similitude, present to our most secret thoughts, existing by the necessity of his own nature, and deriving from himself all moral and intellectual perfection. These sublime truths thus announced in the language of the prophet, are firmly held by his disciples and defined with metaphysical precision by the interpreters of the Koran.¹⁰

The acceptance of other prophets than Mohammed. Mohammed allowed of inspiration in other teachers than himself, who had preceded him; from Adam to his own time there had been hundreds of inspired men. “The authority and station of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Christ, and Mohammed rise in just gradation above each other; but whosoever hates, or rejects any one of the prophets is numbered with the infidels.” For the author of Christianity, the Mohammedans are taught by the prophet to maintain a high and mysterious reverence. Verily Christ-Jesus, son of Mary, is the apostle of God, and his word, which he conveyed unto Mary and the spirit proceeding from him honorable in this world, and in the world to come, and one of those who approached near to the presence of God.

These elements of truth in the doctrine of Mohammed together with his zeal against idolatry in all its forms, constituted the strength of that faith which at one time menaced even Christian Europe with a seemingly all-conquering front. It had a mighty strength in it, this faith of the Arabian prophet: “*Allab akbar*, God is great.” And then also the other part of the faith, which so influenced the lives of so many of God’s children: “Submit [the will] to God.” Carlyle best stresses this for Islam: “Our whole strength lies in resigned submission to Him, whatsoever He do to us. For this world, and for the other! The thing He sends to us, were it death and worse than death, shall be good, shall be best; we resign ourselves to God.”¹¹

¹⁰Gibbon, *Decline and Fall* 1:223–26 [Bury, ed., 1946, p. 1737].

¹¹Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 52.

Further references recommended by Roberts for this lesson include Browne, *This Believing World*; Clarke, *Ten Great Religions*. Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations* was especially recommended.