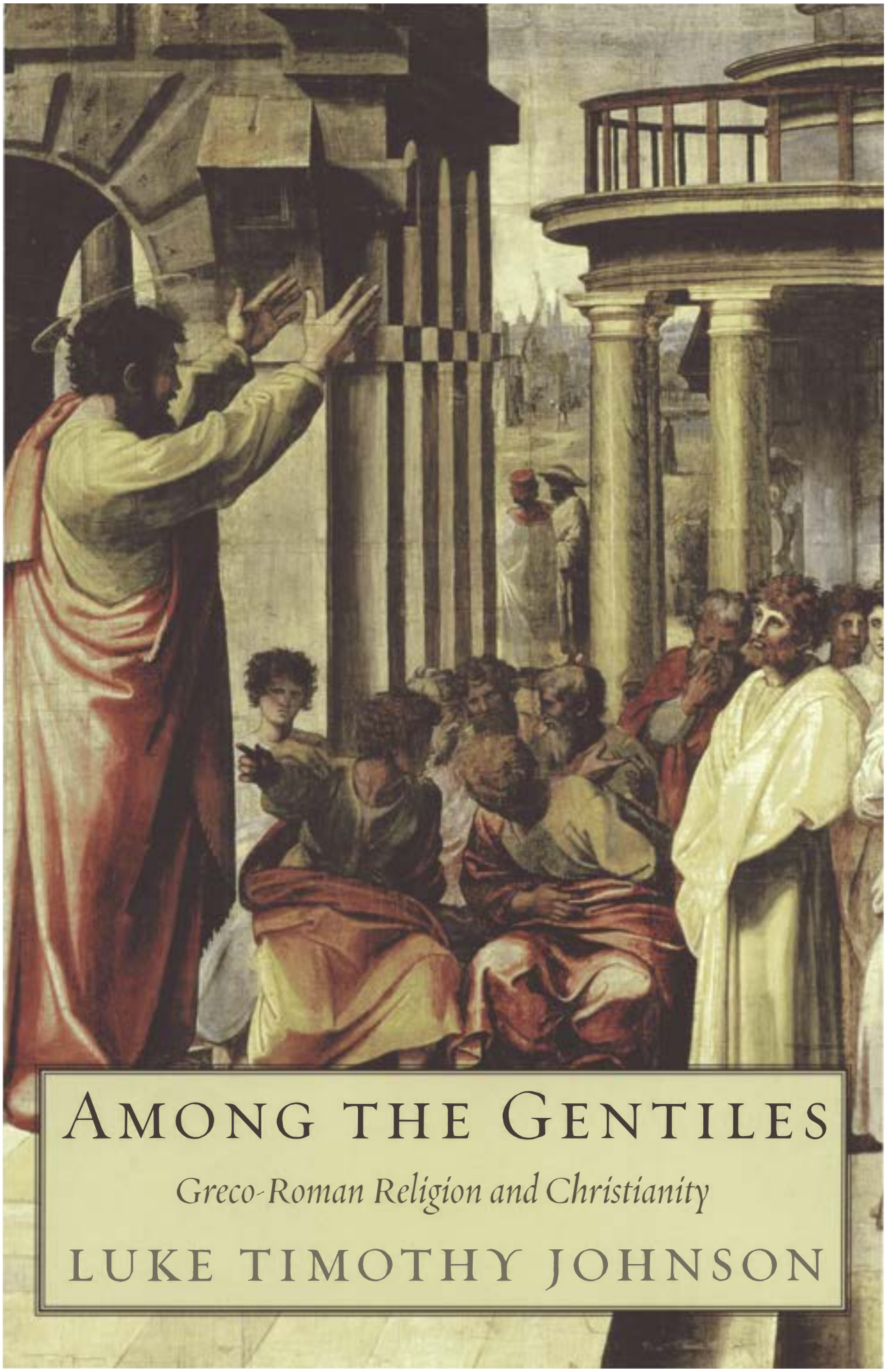

Among the Gentiles

Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity

LUKE TIMOTHY JOHNSON

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A Preliminary Profile of Greco-Roman Religion

The more we learn about the ancient Mediterranean world, the more complex and sprawling the topic of Greco-Roman religion appears.[1] This preliminary profile attempts to provide some sense of the range of religious experiences, convictions, and practices in the early Roman Empire.[2] I make no effort to distinguish, for example, what is originally Greek and what is natively Roman in this religious world, or to develop stages of religion that unfold in evolutionary sequence or in response to spiritual crises.[3] Rather, I focus on the variety of religious phenomena observable across the empire and throughout the period when Christianity emerged.[4] I begin with the aspects of religion that are most visible and obvious, hoping that my broad generalizations will gain some depth and nuance from subsequent chapters. Even this preliminary discussion makes no pretense of comprehensiveness. My selection of topics and the way I discuss them is very much determined by the sort of conversation I want to develop between Greco-Roman religion and Christianity.

GENERAL FEATURES

I begin with a fairly safe set of observations about Greco-Roman *thrēskeia* or *religio* in the centuries immediately before and during Christianity's development. First, it was *pervasive*, touching peoples' lives in multiple ways that even the most pious of present-day Christians—unless they were Roman Catholics of a certain age—would find astonishing.[5] Signs of divine presence met a person on every side. Corresponding gestures of respect and gratitude to the *indigitamenta*—the gods who were associated or even identified with every place and activity—accompanied every daily activity: planting and harvesting,

preparing meals, practicing crafts and trades, embarking on journeys, entering houses or shrines or battle.[6] The promise of votive offerings to such gods and short prayers such as "if God wills it"—found in Judaism only where influenced by Hellenistic piety—were often on the lips.[7] Religion for Greeks and Romans was not something done only with a part of one's time, space, and attention. It demanded attention in virtually every time and space, because every time and space was potentially an opening to a divine presence and power.

Greco-Roman religion was, therefore, not simply personal and private but had a genuinely *public* character. Understandings of religion as essentially individualistic and personal are Western and recent—as are the notions of privacy and individualism themselves. Greeks and Romans lived lives that were public in every sense of the word.[8] To be isolated and alone was for them the worst of fates, and full humanity was always a matter of "being with" others, whether family, friends, fellow citizens, or personal slaves.[9] Religion was correspondingly woven into the social fabric from top to bottom, rather than, as so often in contemporary Christian and post-Christian countries, relegated to interior dispositions and an occasional and relatively anonymous Sunday worship service.

Public time and public space alike were religiously organized. The calendars determined by priestly study were posted publicly to alert the populace concerning which days of a month were *Fasti*, and therefore available for markets and for public assemblies, and which were *Nefasti*, dedicated to the festival of a god and therefore sacred in character (making them dangerous for secular activities).[10] A given month was punctuated by the festivals that created pauses in profane activity and enabled communion among gods and humans through rest, ritual, and public feasting.[11] Temples and shrines were omnipresent and served multiple functions: they were sanctuaries for the pursued and prosecuted, and they served as repositories of wealth and administrative archives.[12] The gold of Athens was placed at Athena's feet in the Parthenon, and the shrine of Apollo at Delphi financed wars against the Persians.[13] As places where public sacrifices were performed, temples could also serve as the source of meat for households.[14] The link between the domestic and the civic can be shown by the piety that attached itself to the family hearth—the fire was never extinguished—and that connected to the cult of the Vestal Virgins, who oversaw the sacred and indistinguishable flame that protected the entire Roman *oikoumenē*.[15]

Holidays and festivals were, like periodic athletic contests, celebrations of and with the gods. Patron deities were invoked not only at the meals of religious associations (*thiasoi*) explicitly devoted to their cults, but were also greeted enthusiastically at the common meals of *collegia* and trade associations, funerary societies, and philosophical schools, whose drinking parties (*symposia*) under

the aegis of Dionysius (Bacchus) inspired the table talk, both solemn and silly, that was recorded across the more than 500 years separating Plato and Plutarch, and that in many ways was the real gift of such gathering and drinking.[16] It was also in the name of the gods that such groups collected funds from members and held them in common for the support and mutual benefit of members.[17]

Because religion was public, it was also necessarily political in character. Matters of religion were also matters of state. Membership in colleges of priests came about through election or selection by political bodies and officers, and the priestly works of determining sacred days, organizing the *leitourgia* of the great festivals, carrying out sacrifices, and, above all, ensuring through the *auspices* that circumstances were favorable for the initiation of any great venture, such as going to war, were matters of critical importance for the political order.[18] The selection of whom held such offices was therefore also a matter of political concern, and serving as Augur or Pontifex was a significant item in the *cursus honorum*. Such positions were eagerly sought and gladly administered, for they placed men (and, in the case of the Vestals, women) so elected into positions of enormous prestige and real power.[19] The same was true in the provinces as in the city: holding priestly offices both effected and expressed political power.[20]

The proper regulation of religion was considered essential for the stability and safety of the state—and this conviction was as strong during both the Republic and the Principate. Although Rome was generally hospitable to new cults, if for any reason a practice was regarded as inimical to the established order, it could be suppressed, not only for the good of the state but also, since they went together, for the health of religion. The eastern cult image (a black stone) of the Great Mother was welcomed because the Sybil declared that her presence would secure Rome's safety.[21] The cult of Dionysius, in contrast, was repressed because it was perceived as threatening traditional order.[22] Plutarch's most serious charge against the Epicureans was that their denial of the gods (that is, the denial of the presence and power of the gods to ensure the populace's well-being) was expressed by a deliberate withdrawal from active participation in the life of the *polis*.[23] The Epicureans saw this as a legitimate search for a quiet life.[24] Plutarch, and with him the rest of the philosophical tradition, saw such withdrawal as a threat to the security of the civilized order.[25] The charge of atheism made against both Jews and Christians, likewise, was connected to the charge of *amixia* (failure to mingle, or participate), which was tantamount to *misanthrōpia* (hatred of humanity).[26]

The public-political character of Greco-Roman religion can be misunderstood in three ways if approached from the perspective of a developed Christianity. First, the entire system of festivals and auguries and sacrifices might be

dismissed as relatively otiose because they are not discussed extensively in our extant religious literature. The opposite, however, is the case: what extant literary and archaeological evidence points us to is the realm of that which need not be discussed because it belongs to the realm of "what goes without saying" because it is so customary, so deeply entrenched in the culture. The inscriptional evidence pertinent to religious associations makes clear how socially enmeshed and interconnected were priestly and political offices.[27]

Second, one could assume that the public and political character of religion made it an "official" rather than a popular religion, an activity reserved for the elite rather than the masses. But although it is true that elements of class entered into matters like priestly elections, it is also the case that the round of festivals and sacrifices were "popular" precisely in the sense of inviting the participation of the populace as a whole.[28] The evidence does not suggest any sense of alienation from public religion, probably because, from the start, it was so consistently in line with domestic piety and so constantly reinforced a social cohesion that transcended lines of class and wealth. This may be the place to mention that neither was there a sharp line drawn on the basis of gender. While many religious responsibilities were assigned to males, there is abundant evidence for the activity of females in cultic settings, both in Greece and Rome. The full extent of their activity is, to be sure, obscured by the androcentric bias of the sources.[29] Third, it is important not to assume a dichotomy between formal religion and religious sincerity. The offering of incense to the image of an emperor was no less personal or meaningful for the Romans than voting in an election in which one's own candidate cannot win for those living in a democratic society.[30]

I have spoken of Greco-Roman religion during the late Republic and early Principate as pervasive, public, and political. It was also pious and pragmatic. The public religion of the people was an expression of *pietas*—the filial disposition of reverence and respect for one's ancestors (the *lares* both of the hearth and of the *oikoumenē*), for the laws, and for those who administered the laws in the city-state—and was intimately, indeed inextricably, linked to reverence and respect toward the gods.[31] Greco-Roman religion in this period was also practical more than it was theoretical. It was not a matter of theology but of properly negotiating the relationship among humans and gods, and in such negotiations, pragmatism was all-important.[32] If the proper conditions for sacrifice were not met, the sacrifice was postponed or repeated until performed correctly.[33] If the name of a god governing some place or activity was not known, then "whatever god might be here" was invoked.[34] Religion was very much a matter of what worked in the everyday world inhabited by gods and humans.

The feature of Greco-Roman religion that enabled both a remarkable diversity of expression and an impressive social cohesion is that it was polytheistic, the religious system of all ancient peoples except the Jews and (in a more ambiguous fashion) the Christians.[35] Polytheism conceives of the divine *dynamis/virtus* ("power") as personal but also as diffused through an elaborate extended family of gods, whose respective influence was exercised over the diverse domains of natural and human life. Much in the manner that Mediterranean culture ran on a complex system of patronage and honor that enabled intercourse between the lower and higher elements of society, so did the gods provide benefits to those who honored them.[36] Thus, there was a multiplication of minor deities (*indigimenta*) who controlled every sort of human activity (waking, sleeping, eating, planting, sailing); thus also, the intensely practical character of piety—the point was to honor the god who actually exercises power in a particular realm; thus, finally, the capacity of polytheism to provide social cohesion—it corresponds precisely to Greco-Roman social arrangements and dynamics, extending to the gods the same combination of hierarchical structure yet interdependent activity found among humans.

The realm of the gods did not simply mirror the world of humans. The membrane separating the human and the divine was permeable, with traffic moving in both directions. Nowhere is this more consistently or impressively displayed than in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a Latin rendering of shared Greco-Roman myths that portrays gods and humans in a constant change and exchange of forms.[37] The gods can make themselves immediately present in human form, as when Zeus and Hermes visit the aged Phrygian couple Baucis and Philemon.[38] Humans can also enter into the extended divine family through extraordinary wisdom or valor, transformed like the prototypical hero Herakles into a "son of god" through ascension or apotheosis.[39]

Polytheism is, in this sense, a generous and capacious religious system. There is always room for another member of the extended divine family. The early Christian proclamation of Jesus as a son of god in power through resurrection from the dead (Rom 1:4) would not have sounded nearly so strange to Gentiles as it did to Jews. For Gentiles, however, the designation would also not have carried with it any claim to uniqueness. They could (and did) question, furthermore, whether a human who died the way Jesus did—abandoned by followers, wracked with fear—could be considered worthy of a place among the immortals.[40]

If humans could in principle and sometimes in practice—as often occurred with emperors and even imperial favorites[41]—be elevated to the status of the divine, so could the gods worshipped by other peoples be included in the im-

perial pantheon. Rome adopted and extended the practice of religious syncretism initiated by the Hellenistic empire.[42] Syncretism involved the recognition of gods who operated under different names but with similar functions, as well as the adoption of foreign deities in subordinate positions. The most obvious case is the Roman adoption of virtually the entire Greek Olympic family (Zeus=Jupiter, Hera=Juno, Hermes=Mercury, etc.), but the same instinct enabled more complex adaptations and accommodations. It was, in fact, part of Rome's political genius to allow conquered peoples not only to continue to worship their native gods but also to join in the worship of the gods who truly ran the world.[43]

Polytheism's intrinsic permeability and expansiveness made the emperor cult not only intelligible but logical. If divinity is revealed through effective presence and power, then those who exercise imperial rule over the entire *oikoumenē* are truly *theoi phenomenoi* ("visible gods").[44] Rome itself was relatively slow to accede to the worship of living rulers, but under the influence of the Greek provinces, where obeisance to rulers had begun already in the time of Alexander,[45] the Principate gradually overcame its republican scruples—the Consul was elected by the Senate, but the *Princeps* exercised rule dynastically—and adopted the practice, which in Asian provinces eventually included the entire imperial family.

It is polytheism that enables the complex interconnections of sacred time and space within the life of the people. Because there are many gods, there are also many temples and shrines, each with its statue symbolizing the divine presence, each with its altar where the sacrifice of animals serves to honor the deity and provide *koinōnia* ("fellowship") for the worshippers who share in the meat of the sacrifice.[46] And since every household also had its *lares* and *penates*, similarly recognized and honored by portions of grain and fruit that formed the individual family's food,[47] the entire *oikoumenē* was bound together by a cuisine of sacrifice that simultaneously bound humans to the gods and humans to each other. Because there are many gods, likewise, time itself was divided into days that were *fasti* or *nefasti*, depending on the obligation to sacrifice and celebrate in honor of some deity or another.[48]

Polytheism as a religious system had both positive and negative aspects. Positively, it maximized the diversity of divine presence—any spot or time could become sacred through encounter with a god or even through the sacrifice to a god—while also diffusing the burden of theodicy throughout the entire system. One god or goddess may take offense and bear a grudge against a human, but just as in human patronage, there is always another god or goddess to whom one can turn for help.[49] The very anthropomorphism that made the gods so

available to humans, an extension of society's own system of patronage and honor, however, had the negative aspect of revealing the gods to be as petty, corruptible, and even immoral as humans themselves. The myths that the Romans took over from Hesiod, Homer, and the Tragedians exposed the Olympian gods in particular as driven by unseemly passions.

Some thoughtful Gentiles tended to view the Olympians much as the British do the equally fractious and embarrassing royal family—helpful and even necessary as societal glue but not much use for actual governance. Connected to this perception were two responses that in many ways were interconnected. Some sober-minded moralists like Cornutus, Heraclitus, and Plutarch strove to save the ancient traditions of the Greeks and a morally responsible piety by rendering the sometimes scandalous stories of the Olympian gods as allegories containing profound moral and spiritual truths. The development of allegorical interpretation enabled young people to read and learn from the classic texts that shaped their world, while understanding that what they were really about was not lust and adultery and rage, but the desire for wisdom and virtue.[50] Both Jews and Christians would, in turn, learn from such hermeneutical precedents and turn the same interpretive techniques to their own deeply problematic scriptures.[51]

A second response was to imagine a stronger, more unitary, and directing divine power superior to the many gods on display in the world. When viewed positively, such a governing power could be construed as providence (*pronoia*).[52] Some writers were confident that such divine providence worked for the reward of the good and the punishment of the wicked, giving polytheism a level of moral discourse that was otherwise only a minor element.[53] The language used in discussions of providence, sometimes associated with the personal name of *Zeus* or *Dios*, comes remarkably close to a functional and in some cases even a reflective monotheism (or, in some cases, pantheism).[54] Defenders of providence faced the same challenges as did the defenders of God's justice within monotheistic systems, namely, the evidence to the contrary suggesting that the evil go unpunished and that the good do not prosper.[55] When the writer's outlook was more grim, or the circumstances more dire, the limits imposed on gods and humans alike could be designated as *moira* ("Limit") or *heimarmenē* ("Fate"), an inexorable and relentless boundary against which there could be no appeal.[56] If circumstances were particularly capricious, the controlling divine force could also be personified as *Tyche* or *Fortuna* ("Chance" or "Fortune").[57]

Both allegorical interpretation and the search for an ordering principle superior to the anthropomorphic gods, however, remained within the framework

and depended on the normative status of polytheism. They did not represent a rejection but rather a refinement of the religious system that pervaded Greco-Roman culture and gave it definition. That system, in all its manifestations, was about negotiating the divine *dynamis* in a manner beneficial to humans and to the social order.

SPECIFIC RELIGIOUS PHENOMENA

The assumption that the divine *dynamis* was accessible to humans for their benefit was operative not only in the ordinary round of domestic and civic observance but also in manifestations of piety that sometimes demanded great effort and the dislocation of everyday life. Five examples are of particular pertinence to a comparison with early Christianity: prophecy, healing, initiation into Mysteries, pilgrimages, and magic.

PROPHECY

Prophecy is sometimes thought to be a distinctive feature of "biblical" religion, but it is widely attested in other traditions and is a conspicuous feature of Greco-Roman religion.[58] The fundamental element in prophecy is communication from gods to humans, which may but need not (and often does not) involve prediction of the future. In this root sense, prophecy and revelation are closely aligned. In Greco-Roman religion, prophecy took several forms. Most common and routine were the various kinds of divination that accompanied the initiation of important actions, from sacrifices to war. This sort of technical prophecy (or augury) studied celestial and animal phenomena in order to determine divine favor of a specific undertaking.[59] Such auspices were the work of priests appointed to the task and were taken with great seriousness.[60] For example, if an animal brought to sacrifice did not signify its agreement to being slaughtered by shaking its head up and down when sprinkled with water, then the sacrifice must be postponed.[61] If the study of sacrificial entrails yielded evidence that was not positive, human plans must be deferred.[62] Similarly, meteorological events were taken as signs and portents indicating divine pleasure or displeasure at a plan of action.[63]

More highly esteemed by some—including Plato—were forms of prophecy called *mantic* (from *mania*=frenzy, madness), which was understood as the physical possession of the human psyche by the divine *pneuma* to create an altered and heightened state called *enthusiasmos*, which enabled the possessed to see and speak beyond normal human capacity.[64] The orgiastic ravings of the goddess Cybele's eunuch priests as described by Apuleius may be an example of

such mantic prophecy—in their case apparently generated by rituals of dance and self-flagellation.[65] Much quieter and routine were the oracles delivered by the god Apollo at Delphi, where a woman seated on a tripod above a declivity in the earth, from which arose vapors, enunciated strange messages that required decipherment by the shrine's professional *prophētai*.[66]

Also associated with the god Apollo were the Sibyls—the most famous of whom spoke from a cave in Cumae—whose declarations were written in the *Sibylline Books*.[67] Her pronouncements were taken with great seriousness: the introduction of the cult of the Great Mother (*Magna Mater=Cybele*) from Asia into Rome came about because of a crisis in the war with Carthage and in response to a prophecy in her books, confirmed by the oracle at Delphi.[68] The connection of this form of prophecy with Apollo was confirmed by the placement of the *Sibylline Books* in the Temple of Apollo on the Palatine in 12 BCE.[69]

In his work, *On the Obsolescence of Oracles* (early second century CE), Plutarch—himself a priest of Apollo at Delphi—reports a conversation with friends in which deep puzzlement and dismay are expressed because Delphi no longer seems to speak oracles.[70] The dialogue offers a variety of scientific and theological explanations for the cessation of oracles. But the sense of dismay at the stoppage testifies to the premise that Plutarch shared with the less sophisticated, namely, that in one way or another the divine *pneuma* could seize hold of humans and use them to communicate truths not otherwise available to them. Greece's early history could be told, and, in fact, was told by Herodotus, at least partly in terms of the seriousness with which the Delphic oracles were taken in matters both private and public.[71] Here is an example of life organized around what is perceived as transcendent power: people traveled to the shrine, heard the divine message, and then lived their lives in response to what they heard, sometimes even engaging in war in obedience to what they considered the god was telling them. This is serious revelatory religion.

HEALING

The divine *dynamis* could also break through in acts of healing. There are occasional stories of curative or exorcistic powers worked by an emperor like Vespasian or a philosopher like Apollonius of Tyana as demonstrations of power operative in *theioi andres* ("divine men").[72] Of more religious importance, however, were the shrines of healing (*asclepeia*) dedicated to the god Asclepius, which combined the arts of medicine with the worship of the god; especially through divine visitations during sleep in the temple precincts (incubation), suppliants were led to physical restoration.[73] The cult began in Greece, and sanctuaries were found at Epidaurus, Cos, and Pergamum. The extant inscrip-

tions from Epidaurus (dating from the fourth century BCE) bear eloquent testimony to a religious sensibility that regarded the entire elaborate process of medical and divine therapy as the work of the god in response to the faith of those who came with broken limbs and lives.[74] Followers returned to their homes, leaving behind in the sanctuary votive offerings in the form of casts of healed limbs and organs, as well as testimonies—in the form of vivid vignettes—to the wonders worked by the god. In response to a severe plague in their city (in 293 BCE), the Romans vowed in 292 to construct a temple to Asclepius after consulting the Sibylline Books. An embassy was sent to Epidaurus, and according to custom for such new foundings, a huge sacred snake was brought to Rome; when it swam to the Tiber Island, the omen indicated that the new Asclepium should be built on that spot. The temple was erected in 291 BCE, and its presence was credited with stopping the plague.[75]

MYSTERIES

The topic of "Mystery religions," as we have seen, dominated earlier discussions of Greco-Roman religion (see Chapter 1).[76] The Mysteries are indeed of importance, but not more so than the other aspects of Gentile religion I am describing. Five clarifications are helpful from the start: (1) the Mysteries are not distinct "religions" in the modern sense that they provided alternatives to the overarching Greco-Roman religious world; rather, they fitted perfectly within that world, being distinguished mainly by the requirement of initiation for participation in the cult; (2) they were not "secret" in the sense that they were clandestine, but only in the sense that the details of initiation were restricted to the initiated; (3) they were not recent innovations; some Mysteries (like that of Eleusis and that dedicated to Dionysius) were features of Greek religion from antiquity; (4) a claim associated with at least some Mysteries is comfort concerning the afterlife for those initiated;[77] (5) the popularity of the Mysteries has much to do with a love of association and a desire for status enhancement through multiple initiations.[78]

Part of the fascination of the Mysteries is their elusiveness. We know remarkably little about them. The practice of the *disciplina arcana*—maintaining secrecy about what was revealed through initiation—was so strict that it became proverbial for keeping silence.[79] Information about the Mysteries that comes from Christian critics needs to be carefully assessed for bias.[80] Our fullest information concerns the ancient rituals at Eleusis devoted to the goddess Demeter, which celebrated the pattern of the death and renewal of the earth.[81] The Eleusinian Mysteries remained resolutely and exclusively local in character, and their prestige was so great that even emperors traveled to the sacred place in

order to be among the initiates.[82] But even in the case of Eleusis, the precise elements of the ritual and myth remain obscure, although they were enacted in the presence of thousands.[83]

Mysteries progressively became part of Roman religion at least partly as a function of syncretism; gods originally native to Egypt and Syria were brought more fully—and not always without struggle—within the religious life of the empire. Now cults devoted to Cybele and Attis, Isis and Osiris (Serapis), and Mithras find a larger space within the expansive world of Greco-Roman polytheism. As stated earlier, Cybele was formally invited to Rome under the title of Magna Mater in 204 BCE. Adjacent temples dedicated to Isis and Serapis were constructed in Rome around 43 BCE.[84] The Persian cult of Mithras arrived in Rome in the late first century BCE and expanded rapidly through the empire.[85]

Our best source for the religious sensibility connected to the Mysteries comes from Apuleius' picaresque novel, *Metamorphoses*.[86] It tells how the dabbling in magic of a young man named Lucius caused the goddess Tyche ("Fortune" or "Chance") to change him into an ass. Wearing the form of that animal, Lucius passes from one stage of alienation and degradation to another, ending up as a participant in a sexual sideshow. But one night on the beach at Cenchrae (the port for the city of Corinth), he has a vision of the goddess Isis.[87] She reveals herself to him as queen of the gods and supreme authority, capable of restoring him to his humanity in exchange for his devotion.[88] Lucius is promptly initiated into her Mystery,[89] finding in it participation in divine power, the restoration of his human form, and a hope for immortality. More than that, he gains greater success in his career as a lawyer. The novel makes clear that initiations into the Mysteries were multiple, for after a period of time, Lucius was initiated as well into the cult of Osiris, the consort of Isis.[90]

PILGRIMAGE

Implicit in the practices just described is the theme of religious pilgrimage, although it is not made thematic in the sources.[91] In polytheism, the divine power is distributed and most often local. The gods of one household could not simply be exchanged with those of another household; they needed to be honored at one's own hearth and table. One could pray to Minerva (that is, Athena) anywhere as patroness of crafts, but to offer her sacrifice one had to go to her temple on the Aventine hill. One could presumably seek guidance from Apollo anywhere, but to receive an oracle from Apollo, it was necessary to make the difficult trek to Delphi. Similarly, the healing power of the god Asclepius was exercised in a specific fashion in the temples dedicated to him in specific places. In order to be initiated into the cult of Demeter in Eleusis, one was re-

quired to travel to Athens, gather below the Acropolis in the *Eleusinion*, and then move with a great throng of people in solemn procession to Eleusis itself. The willingness to disrupt one's life to go to the place of power reveals both religion's ability to "organize life around itself" and how Greco-Roman religion in all these manifestations truly was about access to a divine power that could benefit humans in specific ways.

It is important to note that these modes of accessibility to divine power were not, either in theory or practice, mutually exclusive. Devotion to Asclepius or Apollo was by no means incompatible with initiation into the Mystery of Isis and Osiris. There is evidence not only for multiple initiations within cults but for pious people seeking initiation in multiple Mysteries.[92] Participation in Mysteries, furthermore, in no manner blocked full participation in the ordinary round of civic feasts and festivals in honor of the gods nor did it relieve devotees of the obligation of honoring the *lares* and *penates* of their own household. The point in all Greco-Roman religion was not correct doctrine and certainly not exclusive devotion. The point was the experience of power, and in that respect, Greco-Roman polytheism was a generous, cooperative, and noncompetitive religious system.

MAGIC

Precisely because access to transcendent power for human benefit was the point of Greco-Roman religion, it is necessary to at least acknowledge here the difficult issue of magic. Discussions of magic in the ancient as well as the contemporary world are complicated because of the social dynamics involved.[93] The charge of magic often serves a majority tradition to marginalize and discredit a tradition that, when viewed from within, considers itself as authentically "religious" as the regnant tradition. In antiquity, the charge of being a magician (*magos*) was frequently combined with that of being a charlatan (*goēs*) and is found in the polemic of opposing groups.[94] Nevertheless, magic was practiced in the Greco-Roman world, vigorously and often.[95] Its forms were various, but they all shared the use of powerful objects (such as amulets) and the casting of spells (using the names of gods).[96] There is some validity to the classic distinction between religion and magic as the difference between being acted on by divine powers and seeking to control divine powers (the difference between prayer and a spell). The more closely we examine all the forms of Greco-Roman religion, however, with its constant concern for access to power that benefits humans in the here and now, the hazier that distinction becomes.[97] In this sense, magic in the Greco-Roman world may be viewed as an extreme manifestation of a pervasive religious orientation.

WAYS OF BEING RELIGIOUS

If this catalog of religious phenomena in the Greco-Roman world could be extended almost indefinitely—and it could—the question grows more pressing: is there any meaningful way of organizing the data that threaten to overwhelm us? I have already suggested that analysis according to time periods or stages of development is not helpful: the mix of perceptions and practices is so complex that it is impossible to mark clearly defined epochs correlated to social or political factors, nor are there clear lines of internal development.[98] I have also stated that imposing categories drawn from Judaism or Christianity is inappropriate: we find no clash of theologies, no demands for exclusive loyalty, no competition for status as a uniquely true or uniquely effective manifestation of the divine.

In this book, I offer for consideration another way of giving some shape to and making some sense of the constant metamorphoses that make up Greco-Roman *thrēskeia*, namely, distinct ways of being religious. My focus is not only on the forms of religion but even more on the forms of religious sensibility. In my view, this approach not only clarifies aspects of Greco-Roman religion but makes possible a more meaningful set of comparisons to ancient Judaism and Christianity. These modes of religiosity involve distinct perceptions concerning divine power and corresponding responses to such perceptions. But before I sketch the four options that I have discerned (there may, indeed, be more), I must make one more preliminary point as vigorously as possible, namely, that despite the pervasively public character of Greco-Roman religion, by no means was everyone then, any more than people are now, equally religious. My four options comprise only those who are in some sense truly religious in their dispositions; not all ancient Greeks and Romans are included.

There was, in fact, a wide range of religious attitudes among the Gentiles speaking Greek and Latin. At one extreme were people whose concentration on religious practice was so intense, and whose credulity concerning the numinous was so marked, that they were considered by the more moderate to be superstitious. The term *deisidaimonia* can mean either "intensely religious" (in the good sense) or "superstitious" (in the bad sense).[99] The positive or negative nuance depended on the perspective of the speaker. Theophrastus provides a vivid depiction of the superstitious person: his "cowardice about divinity" drives him to a concern for purity and for religious initiations so exaggerated that today he would earn the clinical term "obsessive-compulsive."[100] Superstitious characters also populate Lucian of Samosata's satires: they are willing to believe any nonsense if it is sufficiently amazing.[101] Thoughtful observers like Plutarch

considered superstition a vice rather than a virtue, because it was a religiosity driven by ignorance and fear.[102] He declares superstition to be worse than atheism, for if it is bad to deny the gods, it is even worse to think about them badly.

The credulous were the sort of people who were taken advantage of by those at the opposite extreme: the cynical manipulators of popular faith, who preyed upon the superstitious for their own fame and fortune. Lucian describes the philosophical charlatan Proteus Peregrinus, who used his public virtue as camouflage for private vice and was willing to do anything, even associate with despised Christians, in his quest for notoriety.[103] Peregrinus ends his life in a dramatic gesture of self-immolation before his followers, but Lucian regards it only as final evidence of his lust for vainglory.[104] Even more vivid is Lucian's satire of Alexander of Abonoteichus, a religious flim-flam artist who bilked the local populace of Paphlagonia by his invention of a new oracle cult—finding an egg in the mud, rigging a fake serpent out of a sock, taking advantage of dark rooms for effect.[105] The number of religious sideshow operators then, as now, probably corresponded to the number of those willing to be gulled.

Greco-Roman society also had critics of religion as it was commonly carried out. Some philosophers condemned the immorality found in religious myths (the "poets"), and others, most notably the Epicureans, based their whole manner of life on a rejection of the public round of religious ritual, which they regarded as superstitious, root and stem.[106] Not surprisingly, the satirist Lucian of Samosata portrays the Epicureans as distinctively immune to the religious frauds purveyed by charlatans.[107] He also depicts his ideal philosopher, Demonax, as a critic of traditional religious practices.[108] It is, to be sure, always difficult to assess satirists of religion, whether recent or ancient: are they, like Mark Twain, personally disappointed at religion, writing as angry lovers; or are they, like H. L. Mencken, simply disgusted at human folly, writing from a stance of intellectual superiority?

An even more devastating challenge to Greco-Roman religion may have been posed not by those who critiqued it but by those who simply ignored it. Inscriptions tell us a great deal about religious associations, and art informs us about sacrifices and festivals. But extant graffiti is also as coarsely and irreverently profane as that found on contemporary walls.[109] Comic dramatists from Aristophanes to Plautus wrote plays of considerable popular appeal that used religion, when they do, mostly as an incidental backdrop to profane (in every sense of the term) human activity.[110] And while many of the extant Greco-Roman novels—written between the first century BCE and fourth century CE—testify to the sort of pervasive religiosity described in this chapter (they are replete with visions, sacrifices, prayers, oracles, and even elements of magic,

such as necromancy), Petronius' *Satyrika* shows us characters seemingly devoid of any impulses beyond those having to do with pleasure and self-preservation.[111]

When I turn in succeeding chapters to the "ways of being religious" in the Greco-Roman world, then, I trust that readers will share my assumption that the writers whom I isolate for analysis represent a tiny sample of the actual religious world of the ancient Mediterranean. They are special in three critical ways. First, they are sufficiently passionate about the subject of religion to devote time and energy to engage it in their writing. Second, they are sufficiently wealthy or well born to have enjoyed a certain level of education to enable them to produce religious literature. Third, their works have, for whatever reasons, either survived through Christian transmission or have been recovered through discovery, while many others—representing perhaps other varieties of religious sensibility—remain unknown to us. With these cautions in mind, then, I propose the four "ways" or "types" of religiosity that I consider well attested in the literature. They are distinguished by distinct perceptions concerning power and by corresponding responses to those perceptions.

THE WAY OF PARTICIPATION IN DIVINE BENEFITS

This type encompasses virtually all the religious perceptions and practices I have described up to this point. Its emphasis is on the negotiation of divine power in the present life, even when it has one eye on the future. The divine *dynamis* is conceived as available to humans in the empirical world: revealing through prophecy, healing through revelation, providing security and status through Mysteries, enabling and providing for the daily successes of individuals, households, cities, and empires. The role of sacrifice and prayer is to open the channel for the flow of such power. Attention to the moral agency of the worshipper may get some small attention, but in the extant sources it does not hold a central place. If this type were asked what *salvation* meant, the instinctive response would be in terms of safety and success. The extreme version of this type, as I have suggested, is found in the practice of magic. A splendid example of this mode of religious sensibility is the rhetorician Aelius Aristides, whom I will consider in the next chapter.

THE WAY OF MORAL TRANSFORMATION

The main examples of this type of religious sensibility are the moral philosophers. In Chapter 2, I explained how the categories of religious studies enable us to see the religious character of the life found in some philosophical schools. Among Pythagoreans—and, to a lesser degree, among Epicureans—we find

founders who have divine status ascribed to them, community of possessions, notions of purity, stages of admission and probation (as in the initiations of Mysteries), and the practice of mutual correction.[112] Even philosophers in the Cynic-Stoic tradition, though individualistic, often considered philosophy in terms of a way of life rather than a set of ideas and recognized certain marks of identity (long beard, robe, staff, leather purse, sandals, itinerancy) and social role (critic, gadfly, prophet, scout).[113] It is among philosophers that we find conversion in two senses: turning from vice to virtue, and turning from one school to another.[114] Therefore, it is also in philosophy that we find competition for adherents, as well as polemic directed against adherents of competing schools; if philosophers agreed on the goal, they disagreed on which school best achieved the goal.[115] In short, a great deal of what is regarded as true religion among many Christians is found among Greco-Roman philosophers.

My focus in this discussion is not on those religious forms but on a distinct religious sensibility. In moralists such as Dio of Prusa or Epictetus, we do not find a dismissal of popular piety of the sort ascribed to Demonax. But neither do we find any particular attention given to those manifestations of divine *dynamis* outside moral agency—the proportions are the opposite of those in Type A. They concentrate instead on the mandate implicit in being called by God to live a life worthy of God: their way is to imitate the divine agency in the world by the transformation of their life through moral effort, thus extending divine blessings to others. The divine power is present immanently through their own activity in the world. In this way of being religious, salvation (if the term should ever arise) is understood not in terms of participating in the benefits of security and success. Indeed, risk and adversity is frequently a part of the philosopher's countercultural stance.[116] Rather, salvation is understood in terms of the triumph of the human spirit—or, in Stoic terminology, of the divine *pneuma*—over ignorance and moral inertia. The philosophers' pattern of life was just as real and frequently more concentrated than that of those seeking oracles or healing; their piety was as real and often more intense—indeed, the philosophical life was a process of healing from vice.[117] But the arena of divine activity was, for them, moral transformation. To apply one of their favorite metaphors, theirs was an athletic form of religion.[118] In Chapter 5, I will analyze Epictetus as the best Greco-Roman example of this way of being religious.

THE WAY OF TRANSCENDING THE WORLD

The first two types are the easiest to locate, once contemporary categories of analysis enable us to see some philosophers as intensely religious even if they do not use specifically religious language. The third type is clear enough

conceptually, but by its very nature is more difficult to pin down. It is especially hard to detect as a precise mode of religiosity before the rise of Christianity because it came to full flowering late. Its roots within Hellenism, however, are both deep and ancient.

It derives from the Orphic tradition (Orpheus is the ancient singer who gives access to the underworld) and from the tradition's permutations within the Pythagorean and Platonic worldviews, and it can be associated with certain aspects of the Mysteries as well. Orpheus was early aligned with the god Dionysius, whose myth tells of his dismemberment, the scattering of his body parts, and his reassembling—a myth that supports an unhappy start to existence and a perilous path to rescue.[119] This type can perhaps best be located by means of contrast to the first mode (Type A), which is fundamentally positive in its appreciation of the divine presence and power in the world, and to the second mode (Type B), which is basically positive concerning the power to change human behavior in a manner worthy of the divine. In this third way, the world and human existence are viewed more negatively, in terms of illusion and entrapment. The body is a tomb. Salvation is to be found not in the power made available through worldly systems, nor through moral endeavor, but by purification from the body and its worldly entanglements through a process revealed to elect people, leading to the eventual liberation of the soul, which alone is worth saving.[120] The human spirit is related through knowledge to a realm that transcends the empirical world of deception and corruption and seeks union with the realm that is the soul's true home. The earliest full expression of this sensibility within the Greco-Roman world—at least as is known to us and is extant—is the Hermetic literature, above all the tractate *Poimandres*, which is the subject of analysis in Chapter 6.

THE WAY OF STABILIZING THE WORLD

In some ways, this type is difficult to distinguish adequately from Type A, with which it has much in common. It could be regarded, in fact, as the "supply-side" of religiousness Type A (participation in divine benefits). I think here of all the keepers of shrines and temples (*neōkoroi*), all ministers and mystagogues of cults, all prophets who translated oracles and examined entrails and Sibylline utterances, all therapists who aided the god Asclepius in his healing work, all "liturgists" who organized and facilitated the festivals, all priests who carried out sacrifices, all Vestal Virgins whose presence and dedication ensured the permanence of the city. From one perspective, these are all "keepers of the flame" that enable the divine benefits to flow in all the religious phenomena identified as Type A.[121] From another perspective, while some such roles are

inherited, others are chosen and elected and therefore draw certain kinds of people—or people with certain kinds of perceptions—to them. This, I am suggesting, is the religious sensibility of the emperor Augustus, who as *pontifex* reformed and restored traditional religion precisely to restore and stabilize the empire.[122] Such a religious sensibility is conscious of the political dimensions of religion in the fullest sense—that religion can be the glue or solvent of society—and chooses to cultivate religion's stabilizing functions through what can be termed, in a neutral rather than negative sense, priestcraft. This, I am suggesting, is the part of the many-sided Plutarch that is less concerned with moral development than with the continued success of the cult at Delphi, where he serves as priest of Apollo, the same part that led him to attack Epicureanism most vigorously because its atheism threatened the stability of the social order, which depended on the recognition and service of the gods.

These are the types of religiosity that I think can be found in the confusing welter of Greco-Roman religion and that enable meaningful comparison with Christianity in the first centuries of its development. In order to make such comparison more responsible, it is necessary to develop more fully the examples I have selected to represent each of the types: Aelius Aristides, Epictetus, *Poimandres*, and Plutarch.