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Relations of Religion in the Graeco-Roman World

Formative Judaism and Christianity

STEVE MASON

In modern research on the Graeco-Roman world, religion features prominently. At least, there are countless books ostensibly on ancient religion, although the reader soon discovers that they unfold their subject matter as myths, gods, temples, altars, priests, and animal sacrifices (Burkert 1985: 8; Baumgarten 2002; Scheid 2003: 18–29; Johnston 2004: 3–153; Rives 2007: 13–53). They do not claim that a category comparable to our religion was current in antiquity. Religion is a resistant category, however, no doubt because of its convenience: it covers the most obvious bits of a society's ‘God-stuff’.

The problem arises when we treat the category as real, for example when we characterize Judaism and Christianity as the only two surviving *religions* from antiquity.¹ This assumes that there were many such religions. The common story is that, in the fourth century, the small and vulnerable religion of Christianity managed to consume its rival religions, closing their temples, altars, and social functions. Only Judaism was

1. E.g. Parkes (1934: 33): “two religious organisations”; Sanders (1977): *A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*; Segal (1986: 1): “[T]he time of Jesus marks the beginning of not one but two great religions of the West”; Finn (1997: 91): “Out of the innumerable religions and religious movements of the Greco-Roman world, only two ... outlasted the Roman Empire”; Schäfer (2012: 1): “This is a book about ... boundaries within religions”.

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indigestible. Christians felt obligated to preserve this religion, Judaism, because they believed that both scriptural prophecy and the unhappy state of the Jews validated Christian truth. Christians *needed* Jews, albeit for an abusive relationship (Ruether 1974).

Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho - a Jew* (c.140 CE) shows these two dynamics working in symbiosis. According to the Christian philosopher Justin, God stripped everything of value from the old ship of the Jews as he put it in dry-dock, and gave it to the newly christened fellowship of Christus-believers, to preserve as a vestigial heritage. Now without metaphors: when Roman armies destroyed the Judaeian capital Jerusalem (70 CE), and especially when Hadrian built Aelia Capitolina on the same site and forbade Jews from entering (135 CE), Christians found the proof they needed of a divine salvage-and-transfer operation. To explain God's retiring of his flagship, they accused all Jews of having lynched God's son, Jesus, in Jerusalem.² In Justin's *Dialogue*, the character Trypho has fled the second conflict in Judaea, which saw the building of Aelia and banishment of Jews. Justin explains these events as retribution for the murder of Christ (*Dial.* 1: 16). He devotes most of his work to arguing that Jewish scripture finds its fulfilment in Christian devotion. For the fifteen centuries following Christianity's ascent, where Jewish minorities were allowed to remain in Europe's Christian cities³ they were subjected to sermons aimed at converting them to Christ (Mason 2016a: 43–57).

This is the usual explanation of how a *mother religion*, Judaism, gave birth to a *daughter religion*, Christianity. By and large, it makes sense of the evidence. The catch is *religion*: a magic blanket that can make a fellowship look like an actual ship. But to ancient eyes, Jews and Christians were different sorts of groups.

We find it difficult to untangle this because the category religion is so familiar and appealing, but we forget that it was a Christian creation. Having had no secure place in the classical social-political lexicon (below), as their influence grew in the third century Christians began to rewrite that hostile lexicon. To do so, they repurposed the Latin word *religio*, which had formerly meant any sort of solemn obligation, as a category uniquely suited for their creed-based world-view, "Christian-ism"

2. Matt 22.1-14; Luke 19.41-44; Acts 3.14-15; Melito, *Pasch.* 94–99; Tertullian, *Apol.* 21; Eusebius, *H.E.* 1.1; 3.7.1; documents for Christianity and the Jews are in Marcus and Saperstein (2015).

3. Jews were expelled from Christian France between 1185 and 1394, England and Wales in 1290, German states in 1348, 1510, and 1528, Spain in 1492, Portugal in 1497, parts of Italy in 1389, 1544, and 1594. Martin Luther's bitter 1543 essay, *The Jews and their Lies*, cited Titus's destruction of the temple as "sufficient evidence that they assuredly have erred".

(Boyarin 2004; Mason 2007). After the emperor Constantine's endorsement of Christianity in the fourth century, their model began to nudge out the classical lexicon. Each culture that had left the Christians rootless was now inverted and reduced to an *-ism*, a belief system contrastable with Christian faith: Juda-ism, Samaritan-ism, Hellen-ism, or pagan-ism.

By the seventeenth century, after 1200 years of Christian civilization and the rise of Islam, since the seventh century, the Christian religious landscape comfortably comprised "Christianity, Mohametanism [Islam], Judaism and Idolatry" (Smith 1998: 271). That fourth body, idolatry, was experiencing rapid cell-division, however, as the West more seriously encountered the East. It soon included Hindu-ism, Buddh-ism, Confucian-ism, and Dao-ism – all supposed belief systems, in fact freeze-dried reductions of vibrant civilizations.

Every student of religion learns that no definition of religion works for all cases. But that is because the category was imposed by Christians on very different cultures. The strongest criticisms of religion as covering category have come from experts in India, China, and Japan (Fung 1948: 1–6; Smith 1963: 28: 61–64; Masuzawa 2005; Josephson 2012; cf. Smith 1998: 269–270). I propose here that abstracting Juda-ism from ancient Judaeon society, to create a religion comparable to Christianity, creates no fewer problems. Before the rise of Christianity, no one saw these as two species of the same genus.

Background and Method

Studying the human past unavoidably makes us think about history as a method. Let us ponder each of these words for a moment: method and history. From its earliest Greek occurrences, method (Greek *methodos*) has had two senses: (a) a technique or procedure for doing something (extracting natural gas, learning piano) and (b) the whole way of thinking that characterizes a discipline (the scientific method). For history, the former meaning would include specialist understanding of archaeology, inscriptions, coins, papyri, and text production. We see the latter meaning in such famous book titles as *The Historian's Craft* (Bloch 1941), *What is History?* (Carr 1961), *The Idea of History* (Collingwood 1994), or *In Defence of History* (Evans 2000). These assume that historians (should) share a philosophy, rationale, and logic – method in the holistic sense.

What constitutes this method? Herodotus (fifth century BCE) was known in antiquity as "the father of history" because he first applied the method of "inquiry", or *historia* in Greek, to the human past. In its root meaning, that is, *historia* had nothing to do with the past. It meant

research. Before Herodotus, it was mainly used of investigating nature. He created “history” by explicitly calling for a similar methodical care in studying the past – rather than merely recycling stories and comforting traditions. He himself would scour the world in the search for evidence about the recent Persian–Greek wars too easily ignored by his fellow Greeks. Herodotus’s effort was so successful that his slogan *historia* would become fully identified with the human past. Still today, most practitioners would at least agree that historians need to undertake methodical investigation of something. Of what?

This is not the place for a history of history. It is enough to observe that, during the nineteenth century, as universities threw off centuries of church imposition and embraced scientific knowledge (albeit in the service of new nation-states), history’s place in the academy became an awkward question. Until then it had been mainly written by amateurs, whether philosophers or statesmen in retirement. Could it be a worthy companion in the common room with professional scientists? Historians responded to the challenge by breaking in opposite directions (Beiser 2011). Some found the heart of the scientific spirit in precise, careful observation and cautious induction: getting the particulars right (Ranke 2011; Droysen 1893; Carlyle 1900–1901). Applied to history, this meant putting aside grand narratives to focus on one piece of evidence: a text, biography, or event. “Historicizing” everything (German *Historismus*) meant breaking it into discrete elements for contextual analysis, without assuming similarity or coherence.

Other scholars, on the contrary, found the essence of science in aggregation, generalization, covering laws, and prediction. They dismissed particulars, especially the royals and generals who had previously dominated history books, as trivial aberrations. Like the medical doctor – or veterinarian – who judges a swollen elbow or rash by comparison with general norms, not caring much what you think about it, these historians were interested only in what was typical. In order to qualify as science, they thought, history had to generate laws: when people are in situation X, they behave in way Y. This approach moved history out of its ageing home in the humanities to the shiny suburbs of social science (Comte 1830–1842, 1896; Buckle 1857: 1.2–7; Mason 2016b: 19–41). This basic tension has not gone away. Both streams are found in history departments today.

The study of ancient religion most often lives in religious studies departments, which have their own version of the same bifurcation. A social scientist might define religion according to a provisional (“heuristic”) model, then go looking for its markers. Many things existed in antiquity without names, the logic is: the earth’s turning on its axis and

revolving around the sun, obviously, but also diseases such as malaria – and human power-relations or economic constraints. Most researchers within the social sciences, as the label suggests, focus on trans-local and generalizable experience. A scholar in the humanistic stream of history will instead turn to particular texts, events, and situations.

Although each side has vilified the other, in principle there is no need to choose. We are free to pose any questions we like of the past. Some are aggregative by nature; others deal with particulars. I, for example, lean on the work of social historians for the ancient economy, demography, and family relations, but gravitate towards investigating particular events, writers and texts, lives, and conflicts (e.g. Mason 2016a). Even in this humanistic branch of history, however, we cannot hope to understand particulars if we have no sense of their shared values, language, and categories of communication: how they ordered knowledge of their world. Today we have a shared lexical bank, or public script. Without thinking about it, we can readily talk with foreigners about education or health systems, legislatures, courts, police, religion, citizenship. In the ancient world, they could not have recognized these terms, but they had their own counterparts. They are the focus of this chapter: What shell categories did residents of the Graeco-Roman world use to communicate with each other? Let us measure them against our “religion”. Agreeing with some recent studies that they did not know a comparable category (Nongbri 2013; Barton and Boyarin 2016), I shall spell out some consequences of the categories they did use for our understanding of ancient Judaism and Christianity.

Ancient Categories

Are you religious? What is your religious background? How do you see the relationship between religion and science, or between religion and the state? Do you consider religion beneficial or harmful? These questions make sense to us because religion is a known category. We can study it in school or university, or read the religion section in some newspapers. Individuals are free to make their religion central in their lives, we agree, but that is a private matter. In our public script, religion is a voluntary pursuit detached from others. That is, we would consider it a glaring infringement of our norms if medical procedures, business meetings, or football games began with hymns and prayers – let alone animal sacrifices to a deity.

In antiquity things were different. There was no way to formulate the questions above in Greek, Latin, or Hebrew (Boyarin 2004: 202–25; Mason

2016b: 175–220). Both domestic and public life were, to be sure, saturated with elements we recognize as religious, but there was no way to extrude them into a distinct domain matching our “religion”. Sacrifices were enmeshed in civic, political, military, and family life, but sacrifices do not figure in our conception of religion anyway, and they were not a distinct sphere of life. This matters because it means that there were no *religions*, and because religion – if it was not a thing – could also not have been a distinct motive in human action, as in “I am acting for my religion”. One could act from zeal for the god of Jerusalem, Carthage, or Rome, for example, but that was all entangled with other aspects of social-political belonging in those places.

What were the ancient categories, then? As the Romans expanded their empire eastward, into the heartland of the Jews and the birthplace of Christianity, during the first century BCE, they took over Greek ways of ordering knowledge and supplied Latin equivalents. Greek discourse featured two root categories, which appear frequently in texts and inscriptions: *ethnos* and *polis*.⁴ Along with related terms for laws, ancestral customs, and piety, these two terms covered much of what we could call religion, but also a great deal more fused together.

The fourth-century BCE author we call Pseudo-Skylax gives a vivid impression of the centrality of *ethnos* and *polis*, using them 369 times in his brief 114-paragraph tour of the Mediterranean. Here is a taste (*Per.* 104–106):

After Cilicia comes an *ethnos*: the Syrians. In Syria the Phoenicians, an *ethnos*, live along the sea. ... A *polis* of the Tyrians is Sarapta; another *polis* is Tyre, having a harbour within its walls. This is the royal island of the Tyrians. ... Ake [Acco], a *polis*. ... Arad, a *polis* of the Sidonians. Ioppe [Jaffa], a *polis*. ... Ascalon, a *polis* – and a royal one, of the Tyrians. This is the limit of Coele-Syria. ... After Syria [eastward] are the Arabs – an *ethnos* of horse-riding nomads.

This language assumes that everyone ever born belongs to an *ethnos* (near-synonym *genos*). They have no choice: this is the origin-group that shapes their upbringing and customs (Jones 1996). We are not speaking of a scientific, hierarchical taxonomy. *Ethnos* was a convenient word because it was so elastic: it meant a bunch or group of any size. All Syrians constituted an *ethnos*, but so did small groups such as Phoenicians, Gazans, Azotans, or Idumaeans.⁵

4. Herodotus 611 times, Diodorus Siculus 3,368, Strabo 1,913, Philo of Alexandria 911, Josephus 2,416, Plutarch 3,774, Dio of Prusa 878, Pausanias 851.

5. E.g. Strabo, *Geog.* 8.1; 16.2.2; Pausanias 7.16.10; Josephus, *AJ.* 1.122–139.

Most of the world's *ethnē* (plural) were thought to have derived from just a few major sources.⁶ The Egyptians were one prime source, being thought to have spawned many eastern *ethnē* – including the Jews-Judaeans, who had migrated from Egypt to southern Syria and fashioned a new identity. Environment was assumed to be a crucial factor in defining any *ethnos*: the quality and temperature of its air, nature of its terrain, and availability of water. Mountainous country thus nurtured a hardy *ethnos*, whereas plains, marshes, and deserts created a weaker population. These nature-informed predispositions were tempered by an *ethnos*'s formative experiences: wars won or lost, further migrations or absorption of migrants, great lawgivers (Sparta's Lycurgus or Judaea's Moses), relations with neighbours, and forms of worship. That is why ancient writers, when describing the character of a foreign *ethnos* at the present time, and no matter where they live, tend to return to their origins and formative experiences in the homeland (e.g. Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.1–13; cf. *Germania* – with Latin *gens* for *ethnos*).

What, then, was a *polis*? The Greek countryside made it possible for populations living fairly close to each other, as the crow flies, to maintain distinct cultures, because mountains or expanses of water separated them. They built walls to protect their core institutions – markets, shops, assembly and council halls, courts, *gymnasia*, temples, and a few residences – usually in a space of just 1 or 2 square kilometres. This area constituted the *polis* proper, or *astu*. The walled compound anchored a much larger hinterland (*chōra*). The countryside provided farmsteads, herding, fishing, and in some cases mining. Its villages were smaller nodes of communal life, though all were dependent on the *astu* for governance and justice. The size of the walled *polis* was limited by practical constraints, whereas the dependent territory could range from a few to thousands of square kilometres. It could also expand or shrink dramatically as a result of conflict. Although the majority of people lived in the countryside, civilized life meant having a *polis* structure of laws and customs. If your people lacked a *polis*, as the Arabian nomads above, they were an *ethnos* only. Otherwise, your *polis* belonged to an *ethnos*, as above Tyre, Sarapta, and Ascalon are *poleis* (plural) of the Tyrian *ethnos*.

This Greek way of ordering society spread eastward with the rapid conquests of Alexander the Great and the rule of his successors (320s BCE). It was not merely a discourse overlaid on reality, however. It was a scheme that also created the material world. That is, the Hellenistic monarchs and the Romans after them established new *poleis*, often where an unaffiliated village had stood before. In Syria, these new *poleis*

6. See Herodotus 7.91 on the diverse origins of Cypriots.

fused Greek culture – with such characteristic institutions as *gymnasia* (educational-athletic institutions), assembly and council halls, markets, and classical architecture and statuary – with the Semitic traditions that had been around for centuries. Local deities such as Baal, Astarte, and Atargatis were assimilated to Greek Zeus, Artemis, and Tychē (Kaizer 2008).

By the first century BCE, southern Syria – including Judaea – thus had numerous distinct population centres configured as *poleis*: Gaza, Ascalon, Tyre, Sidon, and Berytus along the coast; Scythopolis, Hippos, Gadara and Gerasa inland. Jerusalem was a *polis* with an unusually large territory, Judaea (*Ioudaia*). Its inhabitants were first of all Judaeans (*Ioudaioi*) – the same word we normally translate “Jews”. In ethnographic discourse, that was the place where Judaeans laws, customs, calendar, and worship were normative. When Judaeans lived abroad, even for generations, like Syrians or Egyptians abroad they remained a tolerated foreign minority, called metics (Latin *incolae*), who had to find a way to get along with the local *polis*'s laws and customs.

A “mother-*polis*” – the original meaning of Greek *mētropolis* – was one that had dispatched colonies (*apoikiai*) abroad. Greeks and Phoenicians, and later the Romans, established colonies around the Mediterranean. Each colony gradually forged a new character by mixing the mother-*polis* culture with the local environment. Judaeans came late to the colonizing party, but during the Hasmonean expansion (140s–70s BCE), they too imposed Judaeans colonies on much of southern Syria, before the Romans arrived in the 60s and returned them to their earlier inhabitants. The 1st-century authors Philo and Josephus use the language of mother-*polis* and colony for Judaeans minorities abroad (Philo, *Conf.* 78; *Flacc.* 46; *Legat.* 281–82; Josephus, *Apion* 2.38) – rather than the less cheerful modern term *Diaspora*.

One can hardly overstate the importance of *polis*-belonging in antiquity, as the source of one's first identity and pride. Not only did each *polis* worship its own gods, observing their holy days and sacrificial demands, but each also had its own way of counting time – years, months, weeks, days, or holidays. Each had its own Year 1 and Day 1, month names, and divisions (Samuel 1972). Each *polis* carefully guarded its citizenship, which was usually available only to the children of citizens. A person's original *polis* was the only place in the world where they truly felt at home, where the laws were *the* law. Foreign groups, even of long residence, remained vulnerable to that citizen body. Although usually tolerated, they could face hostility and abuse in times of crisis.

Roman imperial rule, far from eradicating the old Greek *poleis*, re-energized them. That is because the Romans innovated a model of

empire according to which proud *polis* leaders would help them govern and share fully in the empire's interests, partly because some were granted Roman citizenship. Roman governors would spend much of the year visiting each *polis* in their province, to maintain good relations with leaders and populace. As far as possible, the governor was happy to leave internal affairs to local leaders.

Between them, the categories of *ethnos* and *polis* included much of what we would label religion. The example of Jews-Judaeans shows, however, why we cannot extricate "religious" from other elements. The Judaeans were an *ethnos* (Hebrew *'am*) with a famous homeland in Jerusalem-Judaea, an ancient lawgiver (Moses), and distinctive laws covering civil and criminal law, calendar, diet, purity rules, and proper worship of their ancestral god. But these were all of a piece. They did not separate some laws as "religious" and others not, or separate religious from other civic activities.

One of the hardest aspects of ancient life for us to grasp is the usual ancient form of worship. Our sanitized category "religion" obscures the bloody, smoky, and smelly nature of ancient worship. People worshiped mainly by offering their deity the meal that he or she desired. A meat sacrifice required elaborate ritual slaughter. The sacrificer had to be careful because the offering could be rejected, if it was not offered the right way (Baumgarten 2002; Knust and Varhelyi 2011; Naiden 2013). Every *polis* had holy or sanctified zones, which only those who had purified themselves could enter (Parker 1983). These included the shrine of the deity and altars where sacrifices were conducted. Some of these were massive, such as the building-size altar of Pergamum now in a Berlin museum; others were thigh-high stones. The best animals were selected, dressed with garlands, and roasted, accompanied by chants and prayers and offerings of wine, grain, and oil, which might also be offered on their own. Ancient priests, accordingly, were not theologically trained teachers and counsellors, comparable to modern clergy, but specialists in performing sacrificial rituals. Calling those activities the heart of ancient religion, as if this category matched what we call religion, requires us to bleach out the gore of sacrifice, while ignoring many ancient activities that more closely resembled those of modern religion.

For along with this triad of more or less given identity markers – *ethnos*, *polis*, and sacrificial cult – people could usually choose to join a group or club (*thiasos*, *hetairia*, Latin *collegium*), with others who shared their interests. Because these voluntary associations were largely ignored by elite writers, unless they created trouble, evidence comes mainly from inscriptions (Kloppenborg and Wilson 1996; Arnaoutoglou 2002, 2005; Harland 2003; Kloppenborg, Ascough and Harland 2011; Ascough,

Harland and Kloppenborg 2012). Some were clubs for members of a guild, such as bakers, metal- or leather-workers, but a voluntary association could become the most prominent feature of one's identity. Some were local chapters of international societies, devoted worshippers of Isis or Mithras – or Christus – or those committed to pursuing a disciplined, philosophical life together (see Lucian, *Philosophies for Sale*). Such groups had a defined membership, initiation procedures, a code of behaviour, and regular meetings. They often worshipped a patron deity, and they cared for members who became ill or died – in the absence of state welfare or private insurance.

If *ethnos* and *polis* life, including (sacrificial) worship, included many elements of what we call religion – attention to gods, public ritual, a calendar of holy days – many other typical activities in modern houses of worship were better paralleled in ancient philosophical schools: study of authoritative texts, discussion of the nature of the divine and the soul, virtue, and the afterlife. That is because ancient Christians were a voluntary association resembling philosophical schools in some respects, and they had the largest role in shaping the concept of a religion. We turn now to compare ancient Jews and Christians in terms of ancient categories.

Ancient Judaism and Religion? Conversion as a Test Case

Jews-Judaeans fit the *ethnos-polis-colony* scheme well, and they were discussed precisely that way by insiders and outsiders.⁷ The Jewish authors Philo and Josephus use 'the *ethnos* of the Judaeans' as a default phrase, because this was the obvious category for Judaeans, Syrians, Romans, or others.⁸ The great geographer Pliny considered the Judaeans'

7. E.g. the *ethnos Ioudaiōn* statue base from Aphrodisias (Smith 1988: 57 and Plate VIII); Plutarch, *Pomp.* 45.1–2 (listing Judaeans among eastern *genē* conquered by Pompey); an inscription from the Circus Maximus honouring Titus for conquering *gentem Iudaeorum* (*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 6.944); a vast range of Jewish and early Christian literature (1 Macc. 8.23–27; 10.25; 11.30–33; 12.3, 6; 2 Macc 4.35; 10.8; Greek *Jub.* 1.1; in Matt 21.43; Luke 7.5; 23.2; John 11.48–52 (4 times); 18.35; Acts 10.22; 24.3, 10, 17; 26.4; 28.19); in Latin literature generally (Cicero, *Prov. Cons.* 10.3; Columella, *Rust.* 3.8; Pliny, *H.N.* 5.66–67 [with 7.97–98; 13.47]; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.8).

8. E.g., Philo, *Mos.* 1.7, 34; *Dec.* 96; *Spec.* 2.163, 166; 4.179, 224; *Virt.* 212, 226; *Prob.* 75; *Flacc.* 1, 45, 179, 191; *Legat.* 117, 160, 184, 194, 207, 210, 256, 373; *Hypoth.* 6.10; Josephus, *War* 1.1; 2.197, 202–283; 6.17, 330, 342; 7.423; *Ant.* 7.456; 11.123, 184–185, 270, 272, 285, 303, 323, 340; 12.6–7, 135, 141, 357, 412, 417–418; 13.1, 48, 126–127, 143, 166; 14.196, 212, 248, 306, 320; 15.15, 179, 383; 16.56, 158, 162; 17.174, 330; 18.378; 19.278, 284–285, 309; 20.111; *Apion* 1.137; 2.43.

mother-*polis*, Jerusalem, the jewel of the Orient (*H. N.* 5.70). When they discussed Judaeans anywhere in the world, ancient writers predictably cited their origins, homeland, lawgiver, and mother-*polis* to explain the *ethnos* (Stern 1974). Judaeans also met the expectation that an *ethnos* worshipped its god(s) by sacrificing animals. Until 70 CE, Jerusalem housed the only temple and altar available to Judaeans worldwide (the small shrine in Leontopolis, Egypt, remaining a puzzle to historians). Judaeans abroad would make the long pilgrimage to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice in their world-famous sacred compound.

Before we contrast the Christians, I must anticipate a possible objection: What about conversion? Since we read about people *converting to Judaism*, surely that, at least, makes Jews comparable to Christians – as religions (for want of a better word) to which people could convert? I raise this point because it has been advocated by prominent scholars. Jewish conversion practices, which entail immersion in a ritual bath (*miqveh*) and circumcision for males, are nowadays called *religious* rites. Since they are traceable to antiquity, were they not religious then too? Some historians of ancient Judaism have proposed that a major change occurred in antiquity, when Judaeans – originally an *ethnos* propagating itself by natural succession – began to attract converts. Assuming conversion to be a property of religion, these scholars argue that provision for converts marked “the beginnings of Jewishness” – or of Judaism as a religion (Cohen 1999: 136–137; Schwartz 2005: 68–78).

In respectful disagreement, I would point out that attraction to, and adoption of, foreign laws and customs was a known issue within the *ethnos-polis-cult* triad, without the need for religion – a category not invoked by ancient writers. Consider the question from three vantage points.

First, the Bible already makes provision for foreigners who adopt the laws of Moses (later: Judaeon law), on the assumption that they live in the land. In fact, the Hebrew and Greek terms that would later be used for “religious” converts, *ger* and *prosēlytos* [proselyte], in the Hebrew Bible and its Greek translation the Septuagint, referred to a foreigner who has “come over” to live under our laws (Exod 12.48–49). The parade example was Ruth, a Moabite who insisted on moving with her late husband’s mother to Bethlehem near Jerusalem, there to live under biblical law. She famously declared to Naomi, “Your people shall be my people, and your god my god” (Ruth 1.16). This idea of coming in, to change one’s identity so comprehensively as to live by a new calendar, law, and rhythm of life, would remain as a model throughout the Graeco-Roman world, even for foreigners who joined Judaeon communities abroad. Those who

did so abandoned their family traditions to embrace the laws of Moses and Judaeen customs.

Second, attraction to foreign ways and constitutions was familiar elsewhere in antiquity, though not common because it invited the accusation of disloyalty to one's people. Herodotus tells a story about a Scythian royal attracted to Greek customs, for example, who paid with his life for his new enthusiasm (4.76–80). His people would not tolerate such betrayal. Spartans attracted huge numbers of admirers, and periodically expelled foreigners who threatened to dilute their admired traditions. Conversely, a Spartan general was condemned for adopting Persian ways (Thucydides 1.130–132). The seductiveness of both Egyptian and Judaeen customs reportedly led the emperor Tiberius to expel these groups from Rome, along with Romans “infected” by them (Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.85). Judaeans were thus fully part of this picture. No one could object if they maintained their ancestral customs. But if they seemed to encourage foreigners to reject their own traditions, indignant criticism followed (Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5; Celsus in Origen, *C. Cels.* 5.41).

Third, Philo and Josephus, the Judaeen authors most fully engaged with the ambient culture, discussed attraction to Judaeen law in precisely these established terms, without needing to invoke a new category. Philo, celebrating the humanity of Moses's laws, indicates that his provision for those who “come in” to share them still holds good in first-century Alexandria:

Having legislated for fellow-members of the *ethnos*, he [Moses] holds that newcomers [or “those who have come over”] must be deemed worthy of every privilege, because they have left behind blood-affiliation, homeland, customs, sacred rites and temples of the gods, the gifts and honours too, having undertaken a noble migration. ... He directs those of the [Judaeen] *ethnos* to love the newcomers, not only as friends and relatives, but as their own selves in body and soul.

(*Virt.* 102–103)

Josephus makes the same move, treating the biblical welcome of foreigners who “wish to live under the same laws with us” as still in force and insisting that Moses did not consider familial bonds a result of ancestry alone, but also a shared life choice. Like Spartans, Judaeans do not allow the dilution of their laws, but (unlike Spartans) they welcome those who resolve to come and live under them (*Apion* 2.210, 261; generally, 2.255–286). He even furnishes a recent example. At the climax of his *Antiquities*, a twenty-volume exposition of Judaea's peerless laws (*A.J.* 1.7–14, 20–26), he tells the dramatic story of the royal family from Adiabene (modern Iraq), which becomes enamoured of Jerusalem's laws (*A.J.* 20.17–96). This

puts them in mortal peril because their local nobles will not tolerate *foreign* allegiance and defection from Adiabenean customs (nothing about religion here). The royal family opts to identify so closely with Jerusalem that many of its members move there, build palaces, and take leading roles in the Judaeen War. Their burial chambers can still be seen today.

“Conversion to Judaism”, then, although considered a religious experience in modern terms, in antiquity meant a highly visible change to join a foreign *ethnos* and live under its laws – somewhat (not quite) like a change of citizenship for us. Let us now consider where the early Christians fit (or not) in the same social-political scene.

Ancient Christians and Religion

To put it simply, nothing we have said about the Judaeans applies to early followers of Christus. If Judaeans ticked all the boxes of an *ethnos*, Christians ticked none. As Christians, they had no homeland, ancient laws and customs, temples, priesthood, or sacrificial cult. They were a different kind of group, made up of voluntary associations in the existing *poleis* and towns of the eastern Mediterranean. Their members – male citizens, women, and slaves (Matthews 2001) – were raised in the customs of those *poleis*, but pointedly gave that up to worship a Judaeen man crucified by a Roman governor. Christus-followers were a single-issue salvation circle, united by their allegiance to Christus and an idea of salvation from him – not by their *ethnos* or *polis*, ancestral traditions, or citizenship.

The earliest Christian texts we possess are Paul's letters from about 40 CE. They provide a vivid picture of these realities. Paul's first known lines reveal that he has been entrusted with what he calls *The Special Announcement* (to *euangelion* – usually “gospel”). Its content is that “those who trust” must prepare themselves for evacuation when Christus returns from heaven (1 Thess. 1.4-10). They prepare for this by leading blameless lives, to ease the transition to spiritual ascent (4.9-17; 5.21-23). Their withdrawal from the world's practices will enable them alone to escape the divine wrath that is about to fall on humanity.⁹ As they hold themselves apart from *polis* activities, they should expect hostility from neighbours who consider them mad, bad, or both. Paul himself recounts his traditional background as a Judaeen only to say that he now considers it so much excrement, in contrast to Christ-belonging (Phil. 3.3-16). Naturally, he faces hostility everywhere, not least from fellow-Judaeans

9. 1 Thess. 2.17-3.13; 4.13-21; 5.1-11, 23; 1 Cor. 1.7-9; 7.25-35; 15.12-57; Gal 1.4.

and in the towns he visits, and advises his followers to expect the same, but persevere to the end (1 Thess. 1.6, 2; 2.2, 14–16). His letters show him often in custody or facing beatings,¹⁰ as he goes about denouncing a world that is disintegrating before “the day of Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1.7–8; 1.17–2.5; 3.13; 7.31; 15.12–58). To those who would tell him to get a life and participate in *polis* affairs, he is scathing (Phil. 3.2–11): “Our political community is in the heavens, from where we await a saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3.20).

We are fortunate to have surviving correspondence between a Roman governor, Pliny (“the Younger”), and the emperor Trajan in the early second century CE (*Ep.* 10.96, c.110 CE). Although this comes from two generations after Paul, it is close enough to suggest how others viewed the Christians. Pliny seems a very decent man (Wilken 2003). But as the emperor’s emissary to the troublesome province of Pontus-Bithynia (north-western Turkey today), he is concerned about a fast-growing Christus fellowship. Certain that they are up to no good, but unsure how, and seeing the socio-economic harm they are creating, he arrests and interrogates a number of purported Christians, as well as ex-members who say they left the group as much as a quarter-century earlier (c.85 CE). Pliny assumes that they engage in the gross immorality mentioned in other ancient texts: orgiastic sex, incest, and eating infants (cf. Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 8.5–11.1; Tertullian, *Apol.* 2). He is determined to stem this “contagion”. His dual approach is, first, to use Trajan’s ban on all clubs to stop Christian meetings (they obviously fell in this category), and second, to persuade the Christians he encounters to return to their senses and traditional customs. Trajan agrees (*Ep.* 10.97) that the *Christiani* must be given every chance to “rethink” their foolish choice, facing execution only if they persist.

Pliny’s letter brings us to the nub of the issue in this chapter. Christians were not a religion for him, but another club, comparable to firefighters or any other group that defined itself by initiation and membership. They were completely different in kind from Judaeans, who were such by ancestry. It was possible to become a Judaeans, as we have seen, but this was a life-decision about primary *ethnos*-affiliation, which would involve either a move to Judaea or, within a *polis*, joining the *ethnos* community there to live by its calendar, laws, and festivals – and be buried in its cemetery (Mason 2007: 477). We do not know how many people moved to Judaea, though funerary inscriptions in the Jerusalem area attest some (Avni, Greenhut and Ilan 1994). Christian “conversion” was similar in what was being rejected – the world’s other cultures – but altogether

10. Phlm 8-23; 1 Cor. 4.9-13; Phil. 1.13-26; 2 Cor. 11.23-27.

different in what one joined. When Jews-Judaeans (or other *ethnē*) fell into conflict with the citizen population in a *polis*, the only real option was their expulsion. When Christians became a problem for *polis* officials, there was nowhere to expel them to because they belonged there, in theory. Short of expelling them to heaven, their claimed homeland, the only remedy was to persuade or compel them to give up this choice and return to their traditions.

The most obvious parallel in ancient discourse to “Christian conversion” was therefore not joining another *ethnos*, but choosing a philosophical life. Various texts speak of discovering philosophy in quasi-evangelical language. People who were once blind now see! Awakened to new life, they renounce the world’s values of money, power, and sex for inner peace and virtue (*Nigr.* 1, 35–38; Epictetus in Arrian, *Diatr.* 3.21–23; Diogenes Laertius 4.16). Philosophers, like Christians, were ridiculed for being so at odds with common values. Roman officials considered high-status philosophers a particular nuisance because of their willingness to criticize monarchical regimes, even at the cost of death (Nock 1933: 164–253; Macmullen 1966: 46–94). Emperors never forgot that the senators who murdered Julius Caesar had philosophical pretensions. When people consider themselves answerable to a higher law, who knows what they might do? Converts to Christianity, though they included more women and slaves than a philosophical school, looked somewhat the same: smug critics of worldly values willing (sometimes) to die rather than give up their commitment.

Along with the implicit contrasts we have seen between the Christian Paul and the Jewish Philo or Josephus, outside observers also realized that Christians rejected allegiance to traditional laws and customs, including Judaeans. First, consider two Christians writing around 200 CE. Clement of Alexandria’s *Exhortation to the Greeks* is a frontal attack on *ethnos* identity, on the ground that Christian truth is infinitely older than anything considered ancient among the *ethnē* (*Protr.* chs. 10–11). All these gods are late-comers, who “fell on *poleis* and *ethnē* like plagues” (3.1). His closing exhortation declares (12.1): “Let us then steer clear of custom! ... Custom is a snare, a trap, a pit, an evil treat.” Tertullian of Carthage ridicules “these oh-so-pious champions and avengers of laws and ancestral institutions” (*Apol.* 5–6). He makes Christian weirdness, in relation to traditional *ethnos*-allegiance, a virtue. The Christians are a *secta* (group, faction), it is true. They date only from the time of Tiberius (21.1) and bear only the name of a man, not of an *ethnos* (3.6; 21.26). But they should not be harassed, just as philosophers are not when they

reject common values (*Apol.* 46). While awaiting their heavenly departure, after all, Christians lead disciplined lives and pose no threat (*Apol.* 38–39).

Some observers made the same points from the outside, but championing *ethnos*-allegiance. None of them thought Judaeans superior to Greek,¹¹ but they agreed that Judaeans were an established *ethnos* admirably loyal to its laws, whereas Christians were a danger to social order. In the early second century Tacitus, a friend of Pliny, mentions Judaea throughout his narrative and, when he is about to describe Jerusalem's destruction in war, relates the origin of the Judaeans and its homeland (*Hist.* 5.2–5). Christians, in stark contrast, Tacitus mentions just once as a “mob despised for their shameful acts”. They take their name from a mere man, Christus – a criminal executed by a Roman governor, whose death generated a “deadly superstition” (*Ann.* 15.44). In a similar way, the neo-Platonist Porphyry (late third century) would include Judaeans alongside Egyptians, Syrians, and others as examples “by *ethnos*” of the disciplined life (*Abst.* 4.2), whereas he was unsparing in his mockery of Christian beliefs, which he had studied, concerning the return of Christ and heavenly ascent (above).¹²

The second-century philosopher Celsus made the same contrast between Jews and Christians. According to the Christian writer who preserved his fragments, he celebrated the customs of all *ethnē*. Citing Pindar's maxim that “*nomos* (custom/law) is king of all”, he expected each *ethnos* to cherish its own laws (*C. Cels.* 5.35, 40). He criticized Judaeans' exclusiveness (1.14, 22–23, 26; 5.41–42), but respected Jews as such an *ethnos* (5.25). He had no time for Christians, however, because they adhered neither to the traditions of their upbringing nor to those of the Judaeans. They had no place in the world (5.33). The emperor Julian (ruled 361–363 CE) made the same points even more forcefully. He was raised as a Christian but turned against the new faith. When he became emperor, he tried to undo the measures his uncle Constantine had set in motion and rescue classical society. He even planned to rebuild Jerusalem's temple so that the Judaeans could practise their traditions fully – and the Christian claim to have superseded them would crumble (*C. Gal.* 351d, 324c–d).¹³ Julian relished the diversity of *ethnē* (*C. Gal.* 116a–141d) and found no place for Christians. They must either return to their native Greek laws or, having chosen to follow a Judaeans, follow Judaeans' laws (*C. Gal.* 42e–43b, 305d). Julian could not understand life outside an

11. Julian, *C. Gal.* 116a–b, 131b–d, 168b–c, 171a, d–e, 176a–c, 184b–c, 198b.

12. Fragments of Porphyry are in Harnack (1916; cf. Hoffmann 1994).

13. I follow the Loeb numbering in Wright (1923: 3.319–428).

ethnos. Christians had concocted a strange brew, he thought, of the worst aspects of Judaeian and Greek societies, while missing the crucial need for *ethnos* affiliation (209d, 238a–b, 253a–291a).

Conclusions

Whereas we usually regard Judaism and Christianity as two species of the same genus, religion, historical thinking creates problems for this scheme. Being members of a famous *ethnos* with a homeland, laws, and temple, as the Jews were in the Graeco-Roman period, was a different thing – indeed opposite – from abandoning one's *ethnos-polis* traditions to join a saviour-based fellowship or club. This is not to deny points of intersection or partial similarity. But belonging to an ancestral *ethnos* and joining new “brothers and sisters” in worshipping Christos and awaiting his return were basically different kinds of experience, not a matter of belonging to one of “two religions”.

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