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Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World

Course Guidebook

Professor Glenn S. Holland
Allegheny College



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Glenn S. Holland is the Bishop James Mills Thoburn Professor of Religious Studies at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania. Born in 1952 and raised in Los Angeles, California, Professor Holland received his A.B. in Drama from Stanford University in 1974. After several years as a writer, Professor Holland entered Mansfield College at the University of Oxford and received a master's degree from Oxford in Theology in 1981. The same year, he entered the Divinity School of the University of Chicago; he received his Ph.D. in Biblical Studies, with a concentration in the works of St. Paul, in 1986. His dissertation was later published as *The Tradition That You Received from Us: 2 Thessalonians in the Pauline Tradition* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck]: 1988).

Professor Holland has written on many topics, including the use of classical rhetoric as a means of analyzing the letters of St. Paul and frank speech as a philosophical, political, and literary virtue in ancient Hellenistic culture. He was a co-editor, with John T. Fitzgerald and Dirk Obbink, of a collection of essays on Philodemus, an Epicurean philosopher of the 1st century B.C.E., *Philodemus and the New Testament World* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum 111, Leiden: Brill, 2004). Professor Holland is also the author of *Divine Irony* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2000), a study of irony as a person's adoption of the divine perspective on events in the human world, with special attention to Socrates and the letters of the apostle Paul. The professor is a contributor and assistant editor for the award-winning multidisciplinary journal *Common Knowledge*, published three times a year by Duke University Press.

Professor Holland has taught in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Allegheny College, a traditional four-year liberal arts college, since 1985. It was there that he developed, over many years, the course of lectures that is now *Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World*. The course has proven to be one of Professor Holland's most popular classes and has introduced many of his students to the academic study of religion. The professor was awarded the Thoburn Chair in Religious Studies in 1992 and the Divisional Professorship in Humanities at Allegheny College in 2003. He is also active with the Allegheny

College Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa and has served as both its secretary and president.

Professor Holland and his wife, Sandra, an elementary mathematics teacher, have two grown sons, Nathaniel and Gregory.

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Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World

Scope:

This course of 48 lectures is an introduction to the religious cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world, from the earliest indications of human religious practices during the prehistoric era to the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity in the 4th century of the Common Era. The course examines what we can recover of the religious activities of prehistoric human beings before considering in depth the religious cultures of the great ancient civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine, Greece, and the Roman Empire. The emphasis throughout the course is not only on the rituals and mythology of a civilization's official religious culture but also on the beliefs, practices, and yearnings of the common person. The course content is derived in part from primary literary sources that speak about these different religious cultures in the voice of the believer. Comparisons among the different religious cultures will reveal what is unique about each and what ideas, practices, and aspirations appear to be typical of all human religious communities. The course is presented in 4 parts of 12 lectures each.

The first part of the course introduces the subject and addresses the fundamental question "What is religion?" With an understanding of religion as beliefs and practices that express a community's relationship to the sacred, it becomes possible to investigate prehistoric religious cultures on the basis of their physical remains. The course will trace the development of religious practices in the transition from the Paleolithic and Mesolithic eras to the Neolithic era and the beginnings of the first great Near Eastern civilizations. The first of these civilizations to be considered is Egypt, the most straightforward example of an ancient polytheistic religious culture developed in relative isolation from the rest of the world. Because of the richness of the sources and the clear points of focus of Egyptian religious culture—the sun, the Nile, and the king—it is possible not only to reconstruct official Egyptian religious practices and mythology but also to gain some sense of the concerns and sentiments of the common people.

The second part of the course shifts the focus to the other great center of ancient Near Eastern civilization, Mesopotamia. Here, a series of city-states, kingdoms, and empires held sway in succession over the centuries, and the people felt some unease at the power and willfulness of the gods. But Mesopotamia has also left religious literature that brings those gods to

life. The course pays particular attention to the creation stories, stories about Ishtar, the impetuous goddess of love, and the first epic poem, the story of the hero Gilgamesh. Points of contact between Mesopotamian religious literature and more familiar biblical literature lead to a consideration of the different concepts of divinity in the ancient Mediterranean world and introduce the religious cultures of Syria-Palestine, especially that of ancient Israel. Here again, despite Israel's distinctive history as a people and a nation and its concern with one God, certain recurring religious ideas and practices, such as prophecy, are seen to reflect more widely spread phenomena common to ancient Near Eastern civilizations.

The third part of the course begins with prophecy as a response to the political and religious crises that arose in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah with the threat posed by the Mesopotamian empires of Assyria and Babylon. Faith in the one God proved particularly resilient, as the experience of exile in Babylon led the prophets of Judah to assert all the more emphatically the uniqueness of the God of Israel. By comparison, the religious cultures of the Aegean Sea made a virtue of diversity. The physical remains of the Minoan civilization of Crete offer some intriguing clues to Minoan religious culture, and the ruins of Mycenaean cities on the Greek mainland provide only glimpses of a world much better known through Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, themselves products of the succeeding Greek Dark Age. With the rise of Greek civilization and the autonomous city-state during the Archaic era, the pantheon of Greek gods and goddesses begins to assume its familiar appearance. The classical age of the 5th and 4th centuries B.C.E. saw the height of Greek civilization, as well as philosophical and literary reflection on Greek religious culture. After the conquests of Alexander the Great and the spread of Hellenistic culture, mystery religions brought the traditional Greek gods Demeter and Dionysus new prominence as divine patrons who could rescue their devotees from the afflictions of the human situation and fear of the blind power of fate.

The fourth part of the course begins by considering how mystery religions introduced eastern gods, such as Isis and Mithras, into the Hellenistic world. Rome is a prominent example of how a distinctive religious culture is gradually transformed by the incorporation of elements of foreign religious cultures, including those of the Etruscans and the Greeks, as well as by evolving social and political history. Rome came to dominate the Mediterranean world around the turn of the age and continued to

accommodate the cosmopolitan expressions of the traditional religious cultures of Greece and the east. The proliferation of religious claims and communities inspired skepticism among the intellectuals of the Roman world, leading to philosophical explanations of religious beliefs and literary attacks against religious charlatans. In this pluralistic context, Jesus of Nazareth appears as a Jewish religious reformer proclaiming a new relationship between the divine and the human worlds. His followers spread a faith based on both his teachings and his person throughout the Mediterranean world, despite official persecution and disagreements among themselves over the proper understanding of who Jesus was and what he taught. The Christian movement's resilience under persecution and its appeal to the religious needs and concerns of the Roman world eventually led to its triumph over traditional Roman religious culture under the emperor Constantine, although the traditional religious culture survived and manifested itself in new ways. The concluding session considers the ways in which the religious cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world are most foreign to our own and the ways in which they appear to have expressed the enduring religious yearnings of all humanity.

Lecture One

Talking About Ancient Religious Cultures

Scope: The lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea provide the basis for most religious belief and practice in the modern Western world. The religious history of the ancient Mediterranean world begins with its earliest human inhabitants and comes into full flower with the first Near Eastern civilizations to develop written language, in Egypt and Mesopotamia. The religions of ancient Syria-Palestine, Greece, and Rome have left a rich cultural heritage, including the beginnings of the Christian movement. We will discuss ancient religious cultures with the help of archaeological evidence, non-literary records of religious practices, references to religious practices in other non-religious literary works, and religious narratives, such as epics and poems. All religious language is necessarily metaphorical because it describes what lies above, beyond, or behind daily experience in language taken from the natural world.

Outline

- I. This course looks at religious cultures in the areas surrounding the Mediterranean Sea in the formative years of human civilization.
 - A. The Mediterranean world is often called the “cradle of civilization” in the West.
 1. But this title is appropriate only if we overlook the ancient civilizations in the rest of the world.
 2. The ancient Mediterranean world stretched from the Persian Gulf to the Nile Valley, across the Aegean to the Italian peninsula, and to the straits of Gibraltar.
 3. This vast area includes the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine, and Egypt.
 4. The Mediterranean basin was also home to the civilizations surrounding the Aegean Sea.
 5. Farther to the west is the Italian peninsula and Rome, destined to become the capital of a world empire.
 - B. We will begin with religious activity in the prehistoric era and continue chronologically and topically to early Christianity.

1. We will consider physical remains of prehistoric human beings that seem to point to religious activity and belief.
 2. The first religious culture we will discuss that has left literary remains is that of ancient Egypt.
 3. We will then move on to religion in Mesopotamian civilizations, notably Sumerian and Babylonian religious culture.
 4. The religions of Syria-Palestine include the religious culture of ancient Israel and its rivals.
 5. Greek religion is familiar through its mythology, but we will consider Greek religious culture over centuries.
 6. We will also discuss the reevaluation of Greek religious culture in the aftermath of the conquests of Alexander the Great.
 7. Roman religious culture, and its appropriation of Greek mythology, has strongly influenced our ideas about ancient religious culture.
 8. We will consider those elements that make Roman religious culture distinctive and its historical development.
 9. Finally, we will talk about the origins of the early Jesus movement and the gradual development of Christianity.
- C. We will be able to touch on only the highlights of our very broad and varied subject.
1. Each ancient culture we will consider is an academic discipline in its own right.
 2. This course is introductory, an opportunity to learn something about ancient religious belief and practice.
 3. The course is intended to provide a sense of the “feel” of these different religious cultures and their distinctive points of view.
- II. We will draw on a variety of sources to talk about ancient religious cultures.
- A. We have essentially four sources of information about ancient religious cultures available to us.
1. Archaeological evidence provides information about worship practices and household religion.
 2. Non-literary writings that may tell us about religious matters include records of rituals performed or festivals celebrated.