

*Interdisciplinary Journal of
Research on Religion*

Volume 2

2006

Article 6

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Religious Competition and Roman Piety[†]

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Abstract

The market theory of religious economies predicts that when the state neither supports an official religion nor effectively limits religious options, a number of competing religious groups will exist, with the consequence that the overall level of public religious commitment will be high. In addition, the more effective and innovative religious organizations will prosper, and the less effective ones will decline. Applied to ancient Rome, these predictions are strongly supported by the evidence. An additional finding is that Roman religious persecution was prompted by governmental fear of and antagonism toward all faiths that sustained intense, local congregations. This fear accounts for the persecution not only of Christians and Jews, but of several pagan faiths as well.

[†]This research was supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation to Baylor's Institute for Studies of Religion to fund an Initiative on the Economics of Religion. A shorter version of this essay was given as the second of four Templeton Research Lectures at Vanderbilt University, Spring 2006. A much expanded version will appear as Chapter 3 in Stark (2007).

A remarkable feature of Roman religion was the prominence of ritual in all aspects of public life. “Every public act began with a religious ceremony, just as the agenda of every meeting of the senate was headed by religious business” (Liebeschuetz 1979: 1). In effect, nothing of any significance was done in Rome without performance of the proper rituals. As John North pointed out, when a religion places the primary emphasis on ritual acts, it becomes paramount that the “ritual should be successfully repeated” (1974: 1). For the Romans, “successfully” meant precisely, word for word. In his famous *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder noted that “a sacrifice without a prayer is thought to have no effect,” but it is equally ineffective when the prayer is not the one appropriate for that occasion or when performance errors occur. Thus, Pliny continued, “someone dictates the formula from a written text to ensure that no word is omitted or spoken in the wrong order; someone else is assigned as an overseer to check [what is spoken].” He went on to warn of the often dire consequences “when the prayer has been spoken wrongly” (Beard, North, and Price 1998b: 129). To have stumbled over a phrase or omitted a word required that one start over. Should it be discovered that a ritual done to open a municipal assembly, for example, either was not appropriate to the occasion or had been performed incorrectly, the result was that any and all decisions made by the assembly were invalidated.

In addition, nothing in the way of public activities took place without recourse to divination (Liebeschuetz 1979: 7). The Senate did not meet, armies did not march, and decisions, both major and minor, were postponed if the signs and portents were not favorable. The Augures read the signs based on observations of the flight and calls of birds and from thunder. The Haruspices interpreted the entrails of sacrificial animals. The Quindecimviri consulted the sacred books of the Sibylline oracles. Such importance was placed on divination that if, for example, lightning were observed during the meeting of some public body, “the assembly would be dismissed, and even after the vote had been taken the college of augurs might declare it void” (Liebeschuetz 1979: 3).

The ubiquity of very public rituals and the constant rescheduling of public life, including festivals and holidays, in response to the “temper of the gods” made religion an unusually prominent part of the everyday life, not only of the Roman elite, but also of the general public (Liebeschuetz 1979: 8). It was this that so impressed visitors from societies in which state temples prevailed. As the Greek historian Polybius (203–120 B.C.E.) commented, “The quality in which the Roman commonwealth is most distinctly superior is, in my opinion, the nature of their religious convictions” (quoted in Liebeschuetz 1979: 4).

However, the most unusual aspect of Roman religion is that it was relatively unregulated and little subsidized. The Roman Republic did not impose a system of state temples and allowed the evolution of a remarkably free and crowded religious marketplace in which an amazing array of faiths jostled for popular

support. Some of these faiths demanded an exclusive commitment; most did not. But all of them were at the mercy of the marketplace, forced to vie with one another for followers and financial support. It was not very important that individuals could frequent several temples devoted to different gods; what mattered was that each temple had to attract sufficient support or close, a pattern that exists among the folk temples in China today (Lang, Chan, and Ragvald 2005). The vigorous competition among Roman religious organizations resulted in a great deal of religious conflict and even outbursts of vicious persecution. But it also prompted constant innovation as each group sought to more effectively appeal to the general public for patronage. The collective result of these organizational efforts was to create a far higher level of religious involvement on the part of ordinary Roman citizens than was ever achieved in societies served by monopoly state temples.

ON RELIGIOUS MARKETS

Societies differ greatly in the degree to which their religious organizations (suppliers) are vigorous and effective because societies also differ greatly in terms of the degree to which their religious economies are regulated. In other ancient societies, such as Sumer, Egypt, and Greece, although there were temples devoted to many different gods, they were all part of a single organized religious option that was content to serve the elite and to largely ignore the public (Stark 2007). Consequently, most ordinary people probably were rather uninvolved in the official religion, meeting their personal needs through a mixture of magic and unorganized folk religion. This result was produced not by variations in individual religious needs (demand), but by the nature and actions of the suppliers.

Of course, needs matter too. In all societies, people differ in the intensity of their religious preferences. This is important because, as a result, all societies include a set of relatively stable market niches, sets of people who share distinctive religious preferences (needs, tastes, or expectations). Relatively similar sets of niches have been identified in many Western nations, in Islam (Introvigne 2005), and in China (Lang, Chan, and Ragvald 2005), and there is no reason not to suppose that they are universal. To make that assumption is to reject the frequent and facile claim that most people in most cultures have no religious choices. A young Canadian sociologist recently even denied that North Americans have any meaningful religious options because almost everyone is a Protestant (Beaman 2003)! Such nonsense aside, H. W. F. Saggs claimed that the ancients had no option other than to believe, since for them, religion was not a matter of faith but was perceived to be a matter of fact (Saggs 1978: 67). However, even if people perceive there to be only one religion, they still have considerable leeway in their degree of commitment. Even in preliterate societies, unbelief is quite common, as Clifford Geertz (1966)

made abundantly clear, and Mary Douglas extended that point to all prior eras: “let us note at once that there is no good evidence that a high level of spirituality had generally been reached by the mass of mankind in past times” (1982: 29). This view is supported by findings on the walls of Pompeii, which “display dozens of blasphemous graffiti, insults to Venus (patron deity of the town), or, in a tavern, and obscene painting at Isis’ expense. We may take their like for granted elsewhere, if other sites were so well-preserved” (MacMullen 1981: 63). In a similar fashion, Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets report many thefts from temples, including a remarkable caper in which fearless burglars stole the bejeweled sun disk from the chest of a “living” idol (Saggs 1978: 162). Clearly, even in societies that appear to have but one religious option, people will be distributed across niches on the basis of their level of involvement, from the intensely pious to the uncommitted and unconvinced.

The existence of such niches has profound consequences for religious suppliers and supports the conclusion that pluralism is the *natural* state of any religious economy. No single supplier can satisfy the full array of niches in the religious market, since no organization can be at once intense and lax, worldly and otherworldly. Thus, other things being equal, there will always be a variety of suppliers, each competing to attract a particular niche or narrow set of niches. These may be independent organizations within the same religious tradition, as in the case of Christian denominations. Or religious suppliers may represent different traditions, as they did in ancient Rome. What is important is that they must depend on adherents for their support. Consequently, to the extent that a religious economy is pluralistic, there will be competitive efforts to appeal to each market niche. As a result, the overall level of public religious involvement will be maximized. In addition, the more effective and innovative organizations will grow, and the less effective organizations will decline and eventually disappear. However, pluralism has not been the *usual* state of religious economies. Most often, the state imposes a religious monopoly; in consequence, religious life rests with an unchallenged, unmotivated religious elite, and the overall level of religious involvement is minimized.

Do these propositions hold in ancient Rome?

THE EVOLUTION OF ROMAN PLURALISM

In the beginning, Rome had kings, and they built and sustained state temples. The first was dedicated to Jupiter and probably was built by King Lucius Tarquinius Priscus in the 7th century B.C.E. The second was a Temple of Diana, thought to have been built by King Servius Tullis a few years later. But in 509 B.C.E., the Romans overthrew their king and initiated a republic ruled by an elected senate.

In the first days of the Republic, Rome was little more than a city, covering only about fifty square miles along the Tiber River and holding sway over no additional territories. But the Romans soon won much more territory, initiating many centuries of almost nonstop wars of conquest. These victories brought many new gods to the city but not, for the most part, at public expense. Very few temples were ever built by the Senate; Roman religion depended almost entirely on private initiative as not only the rich but sometimes even poor people combined to finance a temple or shrine. Many temples were built by military commanders to fulfill vows made before a victory, and the “building costs were normally met by the booty and profits of the campaign” (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 88). Many other temples were built by groups of adherents to various gods, often by one of the many “foreign” groups residing in the city. State officials did, however, control what could be built, where, and dedicated to what god (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 88).

Another aspect of the absence of a subsidized state religion in Rome is found in the priesthood. The traditional Roman temples were not served by professional, full-time priests. Of course, priests showed up to conduct festivals or supervise a major sacrifice, but most of the time, the Roman temples seem to have been served only by a few caretakers who lacked any religious duties or authority. In addition, except for a very small number of priests who were advisors to the Senate and those who undertook divination, nearly all other priests were prominent citizens who served in the priestly role only part-time, and who did it for the status involved; for example, Julius Caesar got himself elected Pontifex Maximus (a position of major religious importance) in 63 B.C.E. Presumably, those who served as priests in Rome received some training for their duties, but it could only have been minor in comparison with the training of full-time, professional priests found in Sumer, Egypt, or Mesoamerica (Beard 1990: 27). Because Roman priests were amateurs for whom being a priest was not their primary role, “Roman temples were not independent centres of power, influence, or riches ... they did not ... have priestly personnel attached to them and they did not therefore provide a power base for the priests” (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 87).

Surviving accounts of temple funding are very fragmentary. As has already been noted, with very few exceptions the temples were built from private donations, and their operations were not subsidized at state expense (or by land grants given by the state). There are some records of temples being supported by endowments given by the individuals or families who had built the temples (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 88), and many scattered references survive of individuals and families being involved in maintaining or refurbishing temples. Keep in mind that to support a traditional Roman temple did not require support of a priesthood, which was the major cost involved in sustaining temples in Sumer

and Egypt. After the Republic was replaced by emperors, some of them built temples from time to time and remodeled others. Augustus made a great show of this. But even support from an emperor was regarded as more of a personal good deed than as a state expenditure (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 196–197).

Perhaps the most convincing proof of how greatly Roman temples depended on private support can be seen in the results of the widely known collapse of temple donations that began late in the 3rd century, long before the conversion of Constantine. Suddenly, around 270 C.E., inscriptions proclaiming private gifts to various temples “wither away within a generation” (Brown 1978: 28). The reasons for the rapid decline of donations have long been debated. Many have argued that this was caused by the onset of an economic recession (Brown 1978; Rostovtzeff 1926). But by then, times had been bad for decades; besides, that would not account for the precipitous drop in pagan inscriptions on gravestones that occurred at precisely this same time, since there was no drop in the size or expense of gravestones. Families simply no longer identified themselves as pagans. A plausible interpretation is that by 270 C.E., the Christian populations of the major cities had become very large and increasingly influential, creating an era of religious tension and uncertainty, and that people found it expedient to lower their religious profiles; Christians did not often identify themselves on their gravestones at this time either (Stark 2006). Whatever the reason, it is the results that are of interest here. Lacking donations, the temples began to deteriorate rapidly. Both literary and archaeological evidence confirms the decay of the temples from that time on: “roofs fallen in, votaries departed, idols missing, the whole sanctuary tumble-down” (MacMullen 1981: 107). The important point is not that people stopped giving but that when they did, it became obvious that these were not state temples.

THE ARRAY OF ROMAN RELIGIONS

Romans took pride that theirs was an open city that welcomed not only people from a great many different cultures, but their gods as well (Scheid 1995: 17). From early on, this included large numbers of Greek immigrants, since before the rise of Rome, various Greek city-states had established many colonies on the Italian peninsula, and these were incorporated by the expanding empire. Soon the Romans developed such admiration for Greek culture that they not only imported many Greek gods, but also were inclined to identify Roman gods with Greek counterparts, whether or not that had originally been the case. Furthermore, after the influx of Greek gods came new gods from Egypt and from the Near East. In addition, Rome gave birth to several new religious movements and had long and transforming encounters with the first two great missionizing monotheisms: Judaism and Christianity.

Seven major gods were established prior to the Republic, headed by Jupiter (also called Jove), who was regarded as the supreme father of the gods and eventually was equated with Zeus. Once the Republic was established, the gods proliferated rapidly, most of them imported from Greece. These Greco-Roman gods were the basis of the traditional religions of Rome. But even though they sustained scores of temples, in Rome and in all the other cities of the empire, somehow they did not seem to provide enough religion. New faiths from the East and Egypt continued to arrive and to generate public enthusiasm.

One of these new faiths involved the Greek god Bacchus (or Dionysus), whose mystery religion came to Rome as an intense, proselytizing group and aroused vicious persecution by the Senate on (probably) spurious grounds that it was devoted to drunken immorality. Another of the new imported faiths was devoted to the goddess Cybele, known to the Romans as Magna Mater (“the Great Mother”), and her consort Attis. Although initially from Phrygia, Cybele was imported from Greece by an act of the Senate. The Cybelene faith stirred up considerable government concern and opposition but to no avail, as Cybele proved to be immensely popular, eventually having six temples in the city of Rome, compared with four devoted to Jupiter (see Table 1). Then from Egypt came Serapis, consciously created by two scholars to be a supreme god, and his female companion Isis, who evolved from many centuries as goddess of the annual inundations of the Nile to become a serious pagan effort at monotheism (but not quite). Isis became so popular in Rome that eventually she had eleven temples in the city alone.

Table 1: Number of Known Temples Devoted Exclusively to a Major God in the City of Rome (circa 200 C.E.)

God	Number of Temples
Isis	11
Cybele	6
Venus	4
Jupiter	4
Fortuna	3
Apollo	2
Sol Invictus	2
Aesculapius	1
Ceres	1
Diana	1
Janus	1
Juno	1
Liber	1
Mars	1
Neptune	1
Quirinus	1

Source: Beard, North, and Price (1998a: Maps 1 and 2).

Table 1 reports the number of known temples in the city of Rome exclusively devoted to each major god. As has already been noted, Isis had by far the most, and Cybele was a strong second. Then came Venus and Jupiter with four each, Fortuna with three, and Apollo and Sol Invictus with two each. Nine other gods had a single temple each in Rome. Of course, many other gods had a niche in the Pantheon, and small shrines to various gods were abundant throughout the city. A number of temples also were devoted to “divine” emperors.

In addition to new pagan imports, many large Diasporan Jewish communities grew up in many parts of the empire. The one in the city of Rome was established sometime around the middle of the 2nd century B.C.E. (Barclay 1996). In these days, Judaism engaged in very active missionizing, and many scholars agree that converts made up a significant number of the Diasporan Jews (Harnack 1904; Stark 1996, 2006). And, of course, in the days of the Caesars, Christianity arrived.

The Romans also created some new religions of their own. It was in Rome, not in the Near East, as was long believed, that the worship of Mithras was initiated, and it spread rapidly throughout the Roman army (Clauss 2000). Finally, in 274 C.E., the Emperor Aurelian attempted to establish a new god, Sol Invictus (“the invincible sun”). Like Isis, Sol Invictus was a pagan approach to monotheism.

This extraordinary array of faiths proved to be a volatile mixture, mostly because the traditional temples were not sufficiently competitive.

COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES

Given the immensely crowded array of gods and temples, the question arises: Why did new faiths continue to arrive in Rome from Egypt and the East? Moreover, why did these new faiths seem so vigorous in comparison with the traditional temples in terms of attracting and holding a committed following?

A very insightful analysis of why these new religions achieved great popular success in Rome was written a century ago by Franz Cumont, the great Belgian historian (1956 [1906]: 20–45). Cumont argued that the new religions succeeded because they “gave greater satisfaction.” He believed they did so in three ways, to which must be added a fourth and fifth. First, according to Cumont, “they appealed more strongly to the senses,” having a far higher content of emotionalism, especially in their worship activities. Although Cumont made no mention of it, the chief emotional ingredient that was lacking in the traditional Roman faiths was love. Romans thought the gods might come to their aid, but they did not believe that the gods loved them; indeed, Jupiter was depicted as quite unfriendly to human concerns. Consequently, pagan Romans often feared the gods, admired some of them, and envied them all, but did not love them—not in the way that some Romans loved Isis or Christ. Second, the Eastern faiths

appealed directly to the individual rather than to the community, linking faith to the “conscience.” Third, “they satisfied the intellect” by possessing written scriptures and by presenting a more potent and virtuous portrait of the gods. Fourth, a point not made in Cumont’s analysis, they were far more appealing to women, some offering women the opportunity to lead. Finally, the new religions were not content merely to function as temples to which people went from time to time but organized their adherents into structured and very active communities that provided a deeply rewarding social as well as spiritual life.

EMOTIONALISM

In Rome, the traditional religions mainly involved tepid civic ceremonies and periodic feasts. They sought to enlist the traditional gods to provide protection and prosperity for both the individual and the community. Mostly, this involved public rites conducted by priests and involved little more than some chanting and a sacrifice. Even “worship” by groups devoted to a specific deity usually amounted to little more than an occasional animal sacrifice followed by a banquet (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 287), inspiring the early church father Clement of Alexandria to remark, “I believe sacrifices were invented by men to be a pretext for eating meat” (*The Stromata* Book 7: Chapter 6). In any event, traditional Greco-Roman religions relegated religious emotionalism “to the periphery of religious life” (Burkert 1985: 109)

In contrast, the new faiths stressed celebration, joy, ecstasy, and passion. Music played a leading role in their services—not only flutes and horns, but also an abundance of group singing and dancing. As for ecstasy, the behavior of participants in the worship of some of these groups sounds very like modern Pentecostalism, with people going into trancelike states and speaking in unknown tongues. Writing in the 2nd century, the physician Aretaeus of Cappadocia described worshippers of Cybele as entering a state of ecstatic “madness.” “This madness is divine possession. When they end the state of madness, they are in good spirits, free of sorrow, as if consecrated by initiation to the God” (Burkert 1987: 113). As Cumont summed up, the new “religions touched every chord of sensibility and satisfied the thirst for religious emotion that the austere Roman creed had been unable to quench” (1956 [1906]: 30).

But as was noted above, the emotion that was most lacking in traditional Roman religion was not a matter of ecstasy and dancing. The Roman gods had many shortcomings, but of greatest importance was that they were neither loving nor lovable. The traditional Roman image of a god, like those held in Greece, Sumer, and Egypt, was essentially that of a human being who had immortality and some supernatural powers. Such gods were very fallible and often quite lacking in morals and manners. They were afflicted with jealousy, greed, pride,

and lust. They usually had little or no interest in humans or human affairs, as long as they themselves were properly and adequately propitiated. Consequently, even in times of dire crisis, Roman efforts to enlist divine aid involved remarkably impersonal rites. In contrast, her devotees often addressed Isis in deeply emotional and loving ways, and Christians emphasized their joy at knowing the love of Christ.

INDIVIDUALISM AND VIRTUE

The traditional gods of Rome were “primarily gods of the state,” not of the individual (Pettazzoni 1954: 208). As did the temple religions of Sumer and Egypt, the traditional Roman religions pursued “salvation” not for the individual but for the city or state. Moreover, aside from requiring humans to venerate them properly, the Greco-Roman gods seemed to care little about human behavior, moral or immoral; “moral offences were not treated as offences against the gods” (Liebeschuetz 1979: 40). Worse, these gods set bad examples of individual morality: They lied, stole, raped, committed adultery, betrayed, and tortured.

In contrast, the new religions arriving in Rome were not devoted to sanctifying civic affairs but were instead directed toward the individual’s spiritual life and stressed individual morality, offering various means of atonement. It was not primarily cities that were punished or saved; individuals could “wash away the impurities of the soul ... [and] restore lost purity” (Cumont 1956 [1906]: 39). Some paths to atonement were built into the initiation rites of many of these new religions, which stressed purification and the washing away of guilt. Various forms of baptism were common. In addition, formal acts of confession were practiced by followers of both Isis and Cybele; no such practices existed in the traditional temple faiths (Pettazzoni 1954: 62). Nor was atonement achieved through rites alone. Many of the new faiths required acts of self-denial and privation, sometimes even physical suffering, actions that gave credibility to doctrines of individual forgiveness.

SOPHISTICATION

Remarkably for a society with an abundance of historians and written philosophies, the traditional Roman religions had no scriptures. “They had no written works which established their tenets and doctrines, or provided explanation of their rituals or moral prescription for their adherents” (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 284). In contrast, the new faiths were religions of the book. Not only Judaism and Christianity but also Bacchanalian, Cybelene, Isiaic, and Mithraic religions offered extensive written scriptures that “captivated the cultured mind” (Cumont 1956 [1906]: 44). Moreover, the new faiths presented a

far more rational portrait of the gods. Even many worshippers of Cybele, Isis, Bacchus, and Mithras “recognized no other deity but their god” (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 286), and if they did not claim that theirs was the only god, they did regard theirs as the supreme god.

As Cumont summarized, the new “religions acted upon the senses, the intellect and the conscience at the same time, and therefore gained a hold on the entire man. Compared with the ancient creeds, they appear to have offered greater beauty of ritual, greater truth of doctrine and a far superior morality. ... The worship of the Roman gods was a civic duty, the worship of the foreign gods the expression of personal belief” (1956 [1906]: 43–44).

But Cumont failed to recognize two additional factors that were at least important as the three he noted and probably even more important: gender and organization.

GENDER

The situation of Roman women was abysmal. They were married off in their early teens (usually to far older men), they had no legal rights except as the ward of a spouse or male relative, and wives of the wealthy were kept in virtual seclusion. As for religion, although women were permitted to attend “most religious occasions ... they had little opportunity to take any active religious role” (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 29) in the traditional Greco-Roman religions. There were some priestesses in various traditional temples but only in those dedicated to a goddess. Worse yet, priestesses were subject to severe regulations quite unlike anything imposed on priests. For instance, vestal virgins were buried alive for transgressions.

In contrast, many of the new religions offered women substantial religious opportunities as well as far greater security and status within the family. For these reasons, Roman women flocked to Christianity when it became available (Stark 1996). But this trend began much earlier vis-à-vis other new religions. Consider the cult of Bacchus that developed in Rome several centuries before Christianity arrived and that seems to have held a very strong appeal for women (Kraemer 1992). What this group might actually have done to bring about its vicious repression by the Senate will be discussed later. But among its alleged sins was that both men and women held leadership positions within the group (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 96). Having either a male or a female leadership would have been within Roman norms; to have both was not.

Roman authorities also were deeply offended by the gender outlook and practices that accompanied the arrival of temples dedicated to the great female deities Cybele (Magna Mater) and Isis. Both religions were negatively portrayed by Romans as being “for” women, but this was not so. While both drew enthusiastic female followings, they also were popular with men, and both sexes held priestly

positions (Kraemer, 1992).¹ Nor was Diasporan Judaism wanting in this respect. Beyond the reach of patriarchs in Israel, Jewish women held leadership roles in many synagogues, including “elder,” “leader of the synagogue,” “mother of the synagogue” (Brooten 1982; Kraemer 1992; Trebilco 1991), and “presiding officer” (*archisynagogos*), as supported by inscriptions found in Smyrna and elsewhere (Grant 1990 [1970]: 23).

ORGANIZATION

But it was not only a matter of having scriptures and moral concerns, singing and speaking in tongues, or even a more equitable view of sex roles that gave the new religions such an advantage. Above all else was their capacity to mobilize a lay following by involving people in congregations, in active communities of believers.

Previously, Roman religions offered very little in the way of community. It was typical for devotees of a particular god to meet once every few months for a sacrifice and dinner, with nothing more between times (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 287). The new religions expected their followers to worship daily on their own and then to gather for services weekly or even more often. Sheer frequency, let alone the intensity of these gatherings, made these religious groups central to the lives of their adherents. This was something that had not previously existed: “at least until the middle of the Republic, there is no sign in Rome of any specifically religious groups: groups, that is, of men or women who had decided to join together principally on grounds of religious choice ... there were no autonomous religious groups” (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 42). Put another way, the Greco-Roman gods had only clients and festivals, not members and regular services. It was the new religions that “offered a new sense of community ... a much stronger type of membership” (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 287). As John North expressed it, “the degree of commitment asked of the new member when he joins is patently far higher ... [and involves an] intensified awareness to direct personal experience of contact with the divine. The new structure corresponds to the intensification of religious life and to the new place which religious experience will occupy in the life of the initiate” (North 1979: 88). Thus, followers of the new religions had a singular religious identity. “They could and did identify themselves by their religion as well as by their city or their family, in a way that earlier centuries would not have understood at all ... It is hard to exaggerate the importance of this change” (North 2004: 231). Although not as exclusive as Judaism and Christianity, Bacchanalianism, Mithra, Isiacism, and Cybelene worship expected initiates to cease temple-hopping and devote themselves fully to their respective deity. To support this commitment, they adopted a clear religious identity that required and sustained a

¹ Also, for Cybele, see Roller (1999); for Isis, see Donalson (2003) and Heyob (1975).

closely knit and very active religious community—a congregation, not a clientele. Like Jews and Christians, followers of these pagan faiths made their religious group the focus of their social life. In doing so, they not only strengthened their commitment, but also gained far greater rewards from being committed, as other members rewarded them for it. It is by being set apart and offering opportunities for intense interaction and the formation of close social ties that religious groups generate the highest levels of member commitment and loyalty (Stark and Finke 2000).

But it was precisely those religious groups that were set apart and strongly committed that caused so much anxiety in Roman officials and provoked official reprisals. The rulers of Rome not only feared and opposed intense or semisecret groups, they feared all voluntary groups as a potential source of dissent and conspiracy. Thus, early in the 1st century, edicts were issued regulating the formation of all private gatherings. Under Augustus, a “more extensive Law on Associations was passed which required that all associations be authorized by the senate or emperor” (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 275), and such permission was seldom granted (Gierke 1977 [1873]). During the first decade of the 2nd century, Pliny the Younger wrote to the Emperor Trajan asking permission to establish a company of volunteer firefighters in Nicomedia, following a serious blaze in that city. The emperor wrote back, denying his request on grounds that “it is societies like these which have been responsible for political disturbances. . . . If people assemble for a common purpose, whatever name we give them and for whatever reason, they soon turn into a political club” (Radice 1963: Book X, pp. 33–34).

Thus it was that from time to time, the Roman state persecuted many religious groups—not only Christians and Jews, but pagan congregations too.

CONFLICT

There is little evidence of religious conflict in societies that have state-supported, monopoly temples. Aside from the interlude when Pharaoh Akhenaton attempted to impose monotheism and whatever conflicts occurred with the Jews, ancient Egyptian history lacks evidence of any significant religious disputes. The same is true of Sumer. As for Greece, only two minor incidents, involving the mutilation of figures of Hermes and the “impiety” of Socrates, mar an otherwise placid history (Price 1999). This tranquility reflected the absence of significant challenges, not tolerance. After all, in designing his ideal state, Plato recommended that anyone who did not conform to the official religion should be executed.

Things were far different in Rome. The massive immigration of Greek gods did not please everyone. Inspired by such resentments, the 1st century satirist

Lucian wrote a parody in which the gods on Mount Olympus are concerned about running short of ambrosia and nectar should their numbers keep increasing, especially since the newcomers were “a riotous rabble of many tongues” (Lucian, *Deorum Concilium* 14). But really vigorous intolerance was reserved not for new gods per se, but only for those that inspired congregations of highly committed believers.

IN PURSUIT OF BACCHUS

Today, the term *Bacchanalian* refers to people who are committed to drunken orgies, because that is what the Roman Senate claimed about the cult of Bacchus when they “ferociously suppressed” it (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 92) in 186 B.C.E., although the charges were probably false (Beard, North, and Price 1998a; Klauck 2003). Unfortunately, many generations of historians of Roman religion based their accounts of this affair entirely on two sources. The first is Livy, whose report seems more like fiction than history: how a good boy is led by his evil mother into this dreadful group.² The second source is the senatorial decree that condemned the group and laid down regulations by which it must abide. On the basis of Livy’s account, it has been assumed that this group engaged in all manner of vile deeds: human sacrifice, rape, unrestricted sex, drunkenness, and the like. According to Livy, at least 7,000 people were involved, including “certain nobles, both men and women.” Subsequently, the male leaders of the group were rounded up and executed; others committed suicide, and the “women were handed over to their relatives for punishment” (Hopkins 2004: 573; see also Warrior 2002). But if these sentences were actually imposed and if the charges brought against the group were true, then the restrictions laid down in the Senate decree were absurdly mild.

The Senate decree (Beard, North, and Price 1998b: 290–291) began by prohibiting Bacchic shrines (allowing ten days from the receipt of the decree for them to be dismantled). However, the group itself was not outlawed but was only limited as to the size and functions of its gatherings. The Senate commanded that members no longer meet in groups larger than five (no more than two of the five being male), that they could hold no funds in common, and that they not swear oaths of mutual obligation. In addition, they were forbidden to celebrate rites in secret, and men were not permitted to be priests. And that was it! Nothing was said about refraining from rape, drunkenness, group sex, or human sacrifice, which makes it obvious that these claims were fantasies knowingly invoked by at least some senators “to provide legitimation for ... [their] very controversial decision” (North 1979: 87).

² For the relevant extracts, see Beard, North, and Price (1998b: 288–290) and Warrior (2002:99–105).

Equally spurious is the assumption that this was a group that had appeared suddenly and was of Roman origin. The Bacchanalians had been in operation for a considerable time before the Senate took action, long enough to have built up a substantial following all across Italy (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 92–96; Burkert, 2004; North, 1979). Moreover, the cult of Bacchus did not originate in Rome; it was an import from Greece. Even Livy blames an anonymous Greek priest and missionary for bringing the cult to Rome (North 1979: 86). Consequently, we need not try to read between the lines of Livy's account or of the Senate's edict to discover the group's origins, what it actually taught and practiced, why it was so attractive, and what it was that the Senate really feared. All that is required that we turn to the many studies of the group by historians of religion in Greece. Here, one finds an extensive literature on the Bacchic or Dionysiac mysteries, including recent reports of many important new discoveries (Burkert 2004).

Drawing on this literature allows insight into two fundamental questions. What was the movement really like? Why did it provoke such a violent yet limited response from the Senate?

Specifically, the cult of Bacchus (or Dionysius) promised the initiated that they would be welcomed into a blissful life after death, enjoying the company of their fellow initiates. A recently discovered gold plate shaped in the form of an ivy leaf instructed the dead to "Tell Persephone that Bacchus himself has set you free" (Burkert 2004: 77). The ordinary person need only become an initiated and committed Bacchanalian to escape the dreary afterlife envisioned by the traditional religions of Rome and to gain everlasting joy: "Now you have died, and now you have been born, thrice blest, on this day" (Burkert, 2004: 80). This was a remarkable innovation and gave everyone, rich or poor, a substantial reason to join.

Had the promise of an attractive afterlife been the only unusual feature of the Bacchanalians, the Roman Senate would most likely have ignored them—as indeed it did for several generations. But of perhaps even greater importance in gaining converts, the cult of Bacchus surrounded its members with a very intense group life. Originally, in Greece, it had been a group restricted to women; subsequently, there were separate male and female groups. When the cult was transplanted to Italy, the congregations became mixed. Moreover, rather than meeting several times a year, as they had in Greece and as was typical of groups devoted to other traditional pagan gods, the Bacchanalians now met at least weekly. To do so without disrupting their affairs, they held their meetings at night in temples and shrines built for that purpose. To become a member required initiation into the group's mysteries and the swearing of solemn oaths of devotion and loyalty (North 1979).

What these facts tell us is that the Bacchanalians were not casual participants in periodic sacrificial feasts; they were closely united into intense, very self-conscious congregations. It was this that aroused the senators against them. No doubt, senatorial fears also were inflamed by stories about lurid activities (similar claims were routinely leveled at many other unpopular religious groups, including Christians and Jews), but what the Roman Senate actually suppressed were the congregational features of the group: its regular meetings, its formal organizational structure, the strong ties among members, the prominent role of women in a group that included both sexes, and, most of all, the high level of member commitment. These things, not noisy revelry, were what the Senate perceived as a threat and “wished above all to destroy” (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 95).

CYBELE ARRIVES

Cybele’s origins are lost in unrecorded history. Many scholars believe that she evolved from the generic mother goddess found in many primitive religions (Roller, 1999). In any event, Cybele seems to have first come into her own in Phrygia in central Anatolia (modern Turkey). Archaeological evidence from as far back as the 8th century B.C.E. establishes Matar (as she was known then) as “the most important cult figure in Phrygia” (Roller, 1999: 108). Unfortunately, thoughts leave neither ruins nor fossils, so almost nothing is known of the mythology surrounding Matar. It was not until she was known as Kybele (in Greek) or Cybele (in Latin) that her story has come down to us. Clearly, much of this narrative was not of Phrygian origin. In Greek and Roman teachings, Cybele is linked to Attis, whose castration, death, and rebirth are central to her story. But Attis seems to have been unknown in Phrygia, as Matar was usually depicted alone, and any male companions were always depicted as much smaller figures, indicating that they are merely “attendants, not equals” (Roller, 1999: 113).

Turning to the Greco-Roman Cybelene narratives, we read of an unusually handsome Phrygian shepherd named Attis (who, in some accounts, is of supernatural origin) with whom Cybele fell in love. Unfortunately, the young man became sexually involved with a nymph, and Cybele found out. In a fit of extreme anger, Cybele caused Attis to become insane, and in his mad frenzy, he castrated himself, lay down under a pine tree, and bled to death. Cybele sorrowed and caused Attis to be reborn, and he became her companion ever after. Attis never became a major figure, remaining only a member of his lover’s supporting cast. However, his self-castration became a major feature of Cybelene worship. For one thing, the most solemn ritual of Cybelene worship was the *taurobolium*, in which a bull was slaughtered on a wooden platform under which lay new initiates, who were then drenched in the bull’s blood, all in commemoration of Attis’

mutilation. It was believed that the blood washed away each initiate's past, giving each a new life. But perhaps the most remarkable aspect linking the Attis story to Cybelene worship is that all "priests of Cybele were eunuchs; self-castration in ecstasy was part of the process of [their] initiation" (Ferguson, 1970: 27). This Cybelene mythology and the self-castration of her priests must have developed in Greece, because both were fully developed by the time Magna Mater reached Rome.

Christianity eventually gained immense influence by being credited with bringing victory to Constantine at the Battle of Milvian Bridge. Similarly, Cybele (also known to the Romans as Magna Mater, or Great Mother) was brought to Rome (personified by a hunk of meteorite) by order of the Senate in 204 B.C.E. because of a prophesy inferred from the Sibylline Books and confirmed by the oracle at Delphi that she would deliver victory for Rome over Hannibal. Within months after her arrival in Rome, the prophesy was fulfilled. Soon afterward, a temple was erected to Cybele on the summit of the Palatine, the meteorite was set as the face in a silver statue of the goddess, and she was officially recognized as one of the gods of Rome. She was worshipped there for more than 500 years. Every March 27, the silver statue of Cybele was borne by a procession of her priests to a nearby tributary of the Tiber River and bathed, then carried back to the temple.

The Romans soon learned that having Cybele on their side was a very mixed blessing. Cybelene worship was a wild, disruptive affair. "The enthusiastic transports and somber fanaticism of [Cybelene worship] contrasted violently with the calm dignity and respectable reserve of the official religions" (Cumont 1956 [1906]: 52). Her priests, known as the *galli*, excelled at ecstatic frenzies. Not only did they castrate themselves during their initiation, they subsequently cross-dressed, wore makeup, frizzed their hair, drenched themselves in perfume, and acted like women. Although Romans were not offended by homosexuality, they were absolutely appalled by effeminacy. Yet they could not doubt the power of the goddess—she had ended the Carthaginian threat. Hence came the decision to isolate the religion before it could infect the populace but to permit the "barbaric" rites to continue on her behalf. Once a year, Cybele was honored by all Romans, and her "priests marched the streets in procession, dressed in motley costumes, loaded with heavy jewelry, and beating tambourines" (Cumont 1956 [1906]: 53). During the rest of the year, the priests were "segregated and inaccessible to the Romans, their cultic activities were confined to the temple" (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 97). Moreover, Roman citizens were prohibited by law from becoming Cybelene priests.

In time, Cybelene worship adjusted to Rome, and Rome adjusted to the Cybelenes. The legend of Attis was minimized, and Romans were allowed to become priests. Once freed of legal restrictions, Cybelene groups flourished, which points to the matter of central interest: the formation of religious groups of

intense and very active devotees. They were not marked by a singular ethnicity or even social class but depended on voluntary affiliations. It was these groups that brought “the most radical changes to Roman religious life” (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 98).

Meanwhile, Cybele was not alone. A new goddess from Egypt also was rapidly attracting followers and provoking Roman officialdom.

ISIS COMES WEST

Isis began as an Egyptian nature goddess who was responsible for the annual flooding of the Nile and gained substantial followings throughout the Grecian world after Ptolemy I, a comrade of Alexander the Great and the first Greek ruler of Egypt, had her promoted to the savior goddess, “or more explicitly ‘saviour of the human race’” (Bailey 1932: 258).

And just as so many other Greek gods had moved to Rome, soon it was Isis’ turn to go West, transported by Greek merchants and sailors. By about 100 B.C.E., a temple dedicated to Isis had been built in Pompeii, and soon after that came her first temple in Rome.

As with the other new religions, Isis inspired congregations. Her followers set themselves apart and gathered regularly. They did not disparage the other gods and temples, but neither did they attend to them. This singularity did not escape official attention. In 58 B.C.E., the Senate outlawed Isis and ordered her altars and statues torn down (Bailey 1932: 186). They repeated their ban ten years later, and Roman consuls around the empire responded by destroying Isiac altars as “disgusting and pointless superstitions” (Grant 1986: 34). Next, Isiacism was “vigorously repressed by Augustus” (Bailey 1932: 186), and Tiberius had the Isiac temple in Rome destroyed and its priests crucified (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18: Chapter III). Indeed, it was Caligula, who was hardly a paragon of tolerance but who had a taste for the exotic, who first allowed a temple dedicated to Isis to be built on the Campus Martius, and it was not until the reign of Caracalla early in the 3rd century that an Isiac temple was allowed on the Capitoline (Bailey 1932: 186).

So when Isis came West, she encountered considerable Roman opposition to foreign cults, especially those of Egyptian origins. Indeed, well after official intolerance of Isis had ceased, Roman intellectuals continued to rage against all things Egyptian, especially religion (Donalson 2003: 132–133).

MITHRAISM

Too often confused with the ancient Persian god Mitra (Cumont 1956 [1906]), Mithras was a new god, so closely associated with the sun that he was sometimes called “Mithras, the Invincible Sun.” Mithraic worship took the form of a mystery

cult that began in the city of Rome (Claus 2000; Merkelbach 1992). There is no record of its gradual development; evidence of the cult's existence suddenly appears in the historical record around 90 C.E. This has led scholars to agree with Martin Nilsson that Mithraism was created all at once by some "unknown religious genius" (quoted in Claus 2000: 7). Although some scholars continue to trace Mithraism to Iran in the 6th century B.C.E., it "was an independent creation with its own unique value within a given historical, specifically Roman, context" (Claus 2000: 7). Some of the confusion over the cult's origins was caused by the fact that Mithraism represented itself as being based on the wisdom of Zoroaster and of Persian origins. But this seems to have been a bogus attempt to gain credibility and prestige (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 280), very similar to claims by many modern cults to be descended from various ancient groups such as the Druids.

Because it was a mystery cult, only initiated members were informed of the key elements of Mithraic faith or allowed to know and take part in its secret rituals, and each member was sworn to secrecy. That fact has inspired an immense amount of nonsense by writers who believe that they have decoded the "Mithraic mysteries" (e.g., Cooper 1996). But the fact remains that we know very little about Mithraic doctrines, their mysteries, or what went on at their secret meetings. What we do know is largely based on archaeology. Scores of Mithraic sites have been discovered and studied, including a large number of Mithraea, the human-made caverns within which the groups met. These are remarkably uniform; the average Mithraeum is 16 to 22 feet long and 9 to 12 feet wide, which means, of course, that the average congregation could hardly have numbered fifty people (Merkelbach 1992: 877). Because these underground grottos had no windows, everything was done by the light of oil lamps or torches, creating a darkened room with flickering lights and shadows, which heightened the mysterious effect of the rituals. Access to a Mithraeum was through a maze of subterranean passages that seem to have played a role in the initiation ceremonies (Merkelbach 1981: 290).

Since a key aspect of Mithraic belief involved the god Mithras sacrificing a bull by leaping onto its back and severing the carotid artery, some scholars believe that (echoing Cybelene faith) a bull sacrifice was a part of the inner mysteries practiced at the secret ceremonies. Others doubt this, especially in light of the small size of the sanctuary, and believe that the bull sacrifice took place only in a symbolic form. What is well known is that each Mithraeum was also a dining hall and that a sacred meal was served at each gathering. This meal was reported to have been remarkably similar to the Christian Eucharist. Bread and wine were shared in the belief that members were thereby reborn, and perhaps the words consecrating the "meal" were quite similar to those used by Christians (given when the cult began, they easily could have been copied from

Christianity). Justin Martyr, who seems to have had firsthand knowledge of Mithraism dating from his pre-Christian days, was so concerned about the similarities between the two rites that he attributed this to the work of evil demons (*First Apology*: 66). Tertullian offered a similar explanation.

Perhaps because these two distinguished early Christians paid attention to parallels with Mithraism, many modern scholars have concluded that it was the primary competitor of the early Christian Church. The famous 19th century French historian Ernest Renan wrote that “If Christianity had been arrested in its growth by some fatal malady, the world would have become Mithraist” (quoted in Clauss 2000: 168). This has been repeated many times (Cooper 1996: ix; Gager 1975: 133; Merkelbach 1992: 878; White 1990: 609). It is not so, however, and a glance at any map of known Mithraic sites reveals why.³ The dots representing individual sites provide a very good outline of the borders of the Roman Empire. Why? Because first and last, Mithraism was an army cult, and most of the sites are at old legionary camps and fortresses, which were, of course, mainly along the frontiers. By this time, the Roman army was not composed of citizens-in-arms but was primarily a professional force. It was not representative of the population (already having large numbers of Germanic recruits) and was quite deficient in social ties to civilians. No army cult would have become a popular movement.

There probably were many reasons why soldiers were attracted to Mithraism. Even though it was not really an Eastern faith, it had most of the attractive features associated with those religions. The initiations and services seem to have aroused deep emotions. There was much emphasis on being washed free of personal sins. Mithraism had written scriptures, although all of them have been lost. And it generated intensely committed, small congregations that met frequently and built strong attachments among members. Mithraism differed from the actual Eastern faiths primarily in its total exclusion of women. This might have appealed to legionnaires, but it further doomed Mithraism to being only a peripheral movement.

ROMAN ANTI-SEMITISM

Strange ideological commitments have driven some contemporary scholars, especially Rosemary Ruether (1974), Jules Isaac (1964, 1971), and John Gager (1983), to claim that Christians originated anti-Semitism. For this reason, they stress passages in the New Testament that criticize Jews for rejecting Christ and for persecuting Christian missionaries, although they know full well that deep hostility toward Jews was prevalent in Rome long before the birth of Jesus. To get around this obvious fact, the revisionists resort to word games. Thus it is admitted

³ A superb example is included in Manfred Clauss’s fine study (2000: 26–27).

that from time to time, the ancients did feel some “antagonism” toward the Jews, but this is attributed entirely to political conflicts such as the Maccabean Revolt—wars always breed hard feelings. These “occasional outbursts” of anger, it is claimed, are different in both their basis and their virulence from true anti-Semitism, the latter being something entirely new, introduced by Christianity and born of Christian arrogance and ambition. If this were so, then many leading Roman intellectuals must have been Christians, even some who wrote before the birth of Jesus!

The great Roman philosopher and statesman Lucius Annaeus Seneca denounced Jews as an “accursed race” (quoted in Augustine, *City of God* 6: 11.) and condemned their influence. Marcus Tullius Cicero, regarded as the greatest Roman orator, complained that Jewish rites and observances were “at variance with the glory of our empire, [and] the dignity of our name” (Cicero, *Pro Flacco*, 28:69). The esteemed Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus railed against the Jews because they “despise the gods” and who called their religious practices “sinister and revolting.” Not only that, according to Tacitus, the Jews had “entrenched themselves by their very wickedness,” and they seek “increasing wealth” through “their stubborn loyalty” to one another. “But the rest of the world they confront with hatred reserved for enemies” (Tacitus, *The Histories* 5: 1–13 (The Jews)). How do Tacitus’ complaints differ from standard European anti-Semitism, so prevalent in the 19th and 20th centuries?

Nor was it only a matter of words. The Jews were expelled from Rome in 139 B.C.E. by an edict that charged them with attempting “to introduce their own rites” to the Romans and thereby “to infect Roman morals” (Smallwood 1981: 129). Then, in 19 C.E., the Emperor Tiberius ordered the Jews in Rome to burn all their religious vestments and assigned all Jewish males of military age to serve in Sardinia to suppress brigandage, where, according to Tacitus, “if they succumbed to the pestilential climate, it was a cheap loss” (Tacitus, *Annales* 2: 85). In addition, all other Jews were banished not just from the city, but from Italy “on pain of slavery for life if they did not obey,” as reported by Paulinus Suetonius (Suetonius, *Tiberius* 36). In 70 C.E., the Emperor Vespasian imposed a special tax on all Jews in the empire, thereby impounding the contributions that had been made annually to the temple in Jerusalem. And in 95 C.E., Emperor Domitian executed his cousin Flavius Clemens and “many others” for having “drifted into Jewish ways,” as Cassius Dio put it (Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana* 67: 14).

No doubt many Romans did resent that Jews dismissed the gods as illusions and their temples as blasphemous, but it seems likely that the most compelling objection on the part of the state was more generic: fear of and opposition to all tightly knit congregations. Hence, a major sin of the Jews was to be a strong, well-organized, separated community, which is consistent with the fact that the periodic persecutions of the Jews were not so different from persecutions of the

Bacchanalians and followers of Isis. These aspects of Mithraism were ignored, no doubt only because emperors were unwilling to risk any needless conflicts with the army. As for Cybele, having invited her to Rome as an official state-sponsored religion, the Senate had to settle for merely isolating this goddess from public access.

CHRISTIAN MARTYRS

By the time Christianity presented Rome with intense, active, set-apart congregations of the sort sustained by Jews, Bacchanalians, and followers of Isis, the repressive response was quite predictable. As Gibbon reported, compared with such things as volunteer fire departments, Christian assemblies “appeared of a much less innocent nature: they were illegal in principle, and in their consequences might be dangerous” (Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: Book I, Chapter XVI). What Roman officials preferred were easygoing gods whose clients were content to gather from time to time for a feast.

And so it came to pass in the year 64 C.E. that scores of Christians died as human torches, crucified and set on fire in Nero’s garden. Thereafter, it was illegal to be a Christian, but the prohibition was enforced only occasionally and then only here and there; for two centuries, all persecutions were local (de Ste. Croix 1963: 7; Rives 1999: 135). By the time Decius began the first empirewide persecution, it was too late: Christianity was no longer a tiny sect but probably made up about 2 percent of the empire’s population, nearly all them living in the major cities, where their presence was greatly magnified.⁴ Nor were the Christians recruiting mostly slaves and poor people; in fact, they were doing best among the more privileged classes, which made their growth both more visible and more significant.⁵ Hence, the Christians already were too numerous, too well-connected, and too committed to be easily suppressed, especially since the Roman authorities mistakenly took a top-down approach, murdering bishops and other church leaders in the belief that with the leadership destroyed, the movement would collapse. In fact, Christianity at this time was a bottom-up movement, and for every bishop executed, there were scores of candidates waiting to replace him.

In the end, the traditional temples proved incapable of holding their own in a free market. By 313 C.E., when the last persecution ended, Christians had grown to about 15 percent of the total population and probably made up majorities in many of the larger cities, inspiring Constantine to seek their support. By the middle of the 4th century, they numbered about half of the total population, dominated the cities, and were consolidating their position as the state church,

⁴ Population projections are in Stark (2006).

⁵ For a summary of evidence, see Stark (1996).

with the result that Rome's dynamic and competitive religious economy withered away.

These sketches of religious conflict and persecution offer a needed rebuttal to several centuries of unfounded and often disingenuous claims about the inherent tolerance of paganism. This nonsense probably began with Gibbon, who celebrated the "mild spirit of antiquity" in contrast with the "narrow and unsocial spirit ... [and] sullen obstinacy" of the Jews and the "intolerant zeal" of Christianity (Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. I: 2, 14–15). Similar claims about tolerant pagans and intolerant Christians and Jews have been made again and again. As recently as 1990, a distinguished historian could write that "Polytheism is by definition tolerant and accommodating" (Bowersock 1990: 6). Even more recently, Jonathan Kirsch explained: "Nowhere in the ancient world was the open-mindedness [of paganism] more apparent than in imperial Rome" (Kirsch 2004: 9). In support, Kirsch quoted Ramsay MacMullen to the effect that paganism was "no more than a spongy mass of tolerance and tradition" (MacMullen 1997: 2). Kirsch continued by regretting the failure of Emperor Julian to undo Constantine's boost of Christianity and restore the empire to paganism: "it is tantalizing to consider how close he [Julian] came to bringing the spirit of respect and tolerance back into Roman government and thus back into the roots of Western civilization, and even more tantalizing to consider how different our benighted world might have been if he had succeeded" (Kirsch 2004: 18). But just who was it who threw Christians to the lions, crucified priests of Isis, or executed converts to Judaism?

COMMITMENT

The market theory of religion proposes that religious competition increases the overall religiousness of a population. It follows that because subsidized monopoly religions gain no benefits from popular support, they will not exert themselves to engage the public; in many societies with state temples, most people were not even permitted to see, let alone take part in, the sacred rituals. This does not mean that the most Sumerians or Egyptians, for example, were irreligious. But it does mean that they were abandoned by the state temples and left to seek satisfaction from undemanding and not very fulfilling folk religions (Stark 2007). In contrast, Romans had the opportunity to be involved in relatively intense, competitive, religious groups that were eager to enlist their support. But did they respond? Was the average Roman more involved in religion than were people in societies served by monopoly state temples? Lacking public opinion polls, that is a very difficult question to answer. Nevertheless, although only a few pertinent facts are available, all of them support the prediction that there were relatively high levels of religiousness among the Romans. Perhaps the most obvious indication of

unusually high religious participation on the part of the Roman public is that when they sought to bring the gods back to the support of Rome, both Emperor Decius and Emperor Diocletian thought it important to have everyone take part in their revival campaigns—hence their edicts that everyone obtain an official certificate attesting to their sacrifice (thus causing a crisis when Christians refused to join in). No Sumerian king or Egyptian pharaoh would have seen any reason to involve the general public in an appeal to the gods; they did not even allow the public to see the gods or to take part in temple ceremonies. It seems reasonable that the inclusive policy of the emperors reflected a different religious outlook in which it was not enough that priests conducted the appropriate rituals; the extent of participation mattered too. For society as a whole to deserve divine aid, everyone should have participated in the sacrifices.

That leads directly to a second reason to suppose that Rome excelled in religiousness: Greek intellectuals remarked on it. Writing in the middle of the 2nd century B.C.E., Polybius claimed that “the cohesion of the Roman state” was because members of the ruling class were meticulous in their public piety and thereby aroused intense religious feelings in the “common people” (quoted in Liebeschuetz 1979: 4). This was necessitated, according to Polybius, because Romans, unlike the Greeks, had been unable to form a state ruled by “wise men” and therefore had to hold the “unreasoned passion and violent anger” of the masses in check through the “invisible terrors” of religion. According to J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, such piety among the Romans “had no parallel among comparable circles in Greece” (1979: 4).

A third indication of a relatively high level of public piety is the presence of a number of successful religious mass movements. Cybele and Isis did not merely gather a priesthood; nor did Bacchus. Each attracted significant numbers of committed, active lay devotees. So did Mithras. That alone sets the Roman religious economy much apart from those served by monopoly state temples. In addition, of course, was the presence of millions of Jews and, eventually, millions of Christians. By the 1st century C.E., Jews had grown to about 10–15 percent of the population of the empire, much of this growth coming through conversion (Stark 1996, 2006; Harnack 1904). And although early Christianity was very attractive to the upper classes and was not primarily a religion of the poor and dispossessed, it attracted a substantial following among these social strata too, thus contributing greatly to the overall religious mobilization of the general population of Rome. Indeed, by the middle of the 4th century, at least half of the population of the empire, and far higher proportions in the cities, were professing Christians.

Of course, to cite the success of these mass movements as evidence of a high level of religious involvement on the part of the public approaches circularity—to say that pluralism and competition resulted in greater involvement because of the

presence of a variety of competing movements. But this is not simply true by definition. These competing movements could have languished, failing to mobilize public support. That they did not seems to be of compelling significance.

There also are fragments of physical evidence to be cited. The most persuasive hard evidence of unusual religious involvement is that many ordinary Romans, and even many poor people and slaves, pooled their resources to build temples, as is frequently attested in temple inscriptions listing the donors (MacMullen 1981: 109). A very early study of inscriptions found that 16 percent of those contributing to the “oriental cults” in Rome were identifiable as freedmen or slaves (Robinson 1913: Table 1). Obviously, such people made up a somewhat larger percentage than this of the total population of the city. But given their circumstances, this seems like a very substantial representation. Nothing comparable is known from the ancient societies that had state temples.

In addition, beneath the ruins of a temple devoted to Cybele, archaeologists found a large cache of terra-cotta images of her companion Attis, brought as offerings to the goddess. Significantly, “the poor quality of the terracottas suggests ... [that the] offerings ... [came from] poor devotees of the cult” (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 98). Surviving records also show that once it became legal for Romans to serve as priests and priestesses of Cybele, most who did so were ex-slaves (Beard, North, and Price 1998a: 261).

Admittedly, the evidence is not abundant. But perhaps it is enough, since there is nothing obvious to offset it.

CONCLUSION

One of the handicaps of social science is that theories that are meant to have universal application often have been tested only against contemporary data—too often only using current data from the United States. It is exceptionally important to make use of any practical opportunities to apply such theories to very different eras and cultures. That is the primary value of this article: to demonstrate that the market theory of religious economies jibes well with the religious life of Rome. But there also is a specific finding that is of perhaps even more importance vis-à-vis this particular time and place: the common bases for repression and persecution not just of the Jews and the Christians, but also of many of the new pagan religious movements. It was not just their monotheism or their rejection of Roman polytheism that got the Jews and Christians in trouble with Rome, since the followers of Cybele, Isis, and Bacchus got in serious trouble too. What all these groups had in common were high levels of commitment to closely knit religious congregations. That is what upset the ruling Roman elite. And this elite became truly frightened when one of these intense groups grew larger and larger and when efforts to suppress it failed and failed and failed again.

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