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Hubert Cancik und Jörg Rüpke

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Franca Fabricius

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World Religion and World Empire in the Ancient Mediterranean

von

GREG WOOLF

There is broad agreement that the period in which the Roman empire dominated the Mediterranean basin also saw major changes in the nature of ancient religion. This was the period in which a number of today's most important religions emerged, or took something like their present form. It was the period in which persecution, heresy and repression were largely invented. It was the period in which writing began to play a major part in cult and in its organization. Rome conquered a Mediterranean in which the rulers of tribes and cities by and large managed their own religious life. When the empire's control of the Mediterranean ended, between the fifth and seventh centuries CE, the religious landscape was utterly transformed. Missionary cults competed for converts, religious leaders struggled with their political counterparts, disputes about doctrine tore apart a world hitherto barely sensitive to differences of belief. The importance of this story has never been doubted, but there is less agreement about how to characterise these changes. Yet characterising them is fundamental to understanding them. This paper is an attempt to contribute to that characterisation as a preliminary stage in explaining these changes, and their relationship with the contemporaneous phenomenon of world-empire.

1 World Religion and Civic Religion

If one considers the historiography, it is immediately apparent that these questions have been posed at different places and in different times in fundamentally different ways. Since antiquity, Christian writers have emphasised this period as the one in which a true understanding of the divine was for the first time available. Christian origins have naturally dominated the debate. The notion of ‹oriental religions› was developed in part to provide a context for the rise of Christianity, one that made Christianity more explicable and hinted at wider processes of which other cults too were beneficiaries. The creation of a taxonomy of religion in which the worship of Christ, Mithras, Isis, Bacchus and sometimes the Judaism of the Diaspora might be grouped together also allowed a re-definition of other forms of paganism as predominantly the cults of the city.

From the late nineteenth century on, two mutually supporting concepts – ‹civic religion› on the one hand, and on the other ‹world religion› – became ever more influential. Rarely connected explicitly – largely because those who used them operated in different academic territory – they nevertheless reflect a widespread consensus about how the religious landscape of the ancient Mediterranean was structured. Most accounts of the fundamental changes that took place in this period presuppose a distinction between two kinds of religion, and speak of one of them – world religion – overtaking the other. If we are to conclude that this is what really happened during the period of Roman rule, it is important to be sure of our concepts.

Civic religion was installed at the heart of FUSTEL DE COULANGES' *La Cité Antique* (1864).[1] Political and religious institutions were shown to be closely interwoven; cities and cults were controlled by the same landholding elites; civic identity was instantiated by repeated collective cult; and the gods were in some senses members of the citizen body. Through DUMEZIL to today's leading authorities on Greek and Roman religion, this concept has remained central. FUSTEL, in the manner of Aristotle, showed how the political community was built on kinship and law: unlike Aristotle he set religion at its heart.

Recent discussions do not challenge this model, so much as ask how complete an account of ancient cult it provides.[2] This might mean asking how influential civic authorities were over the cults of remote rural areas, or wondering how far down into the cults of the family and of individuals civic authority penetrated. But for some critics this discussion has meant probing the ontological status of ‹civic religion›. How far are ancient accounts of cult in these terms (of which there are surprisingly few) disinterested descriptions of social, institutional and political realities? How far should ‹civic religion› be thought of an interested version of the world, an ideological production of ancient elite members?[3]

A corollary of setting the city at the centre of the study of ancient religion, is that other cults are thereby fixed at the margins. This perpetuates a notion of something like oriental religions in the east, and pre-Roman survivals in the west, long after both analytical categories have been widely rejected as unsatisfactory. Non-civic religion encompasses the private cult of classical deities in utterly conventional ways; the worship of alien deities (also sometimes in a very familiar form); the ancestral cults of the various diasporas of the ancient Mediterranean; magic, or cults designated as such; and the cults of many rural sanctuaries from Atlantic France to central Anatolia. It is evident that such a diverse array of practices has no unity beyond the negative one, that each component part is in one respect or another distant from or other than civic religion.

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[1] FUSTEL DE COULANGES 1864.
[2] E. g. WOOLF 1997.
[3] E. g. GORDON 1990.

The evolution of the concept of World Religions has been traced back to the 1870s,[4] when a science of religion *(Religionswissenschaft)* came to appear alongside conventional theology in the universities of northern Europe. Like any social science created in this period it shows a strong sense of history and made a virtue of the comparative method. Unlike many social sciences it developed a life outside the academy, as a way of understanding the great transnational religious movements that dominated a globalizing world. World Religions first grouped Christianity with Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. Eventually a list of a dozen or so World Religions appeared, all still ‹live›, each with millions of adherents distributed across vast areas. This view of a world dominated by a small number of great traditions, all ‹religions› in broadly the same sense, each claiming the exclusive attention of their members is so familiar that it is easy for us to forget the comparatively recent genesis of the concept. It has come to seem as normal to us, as the ancients found the image of a world divided into civic and ethnic cults.

World Religions each had their home territories, but it was their capacity to transcend them and make universalizing claims that came to seem distinctive. The modern world order is increasingly structured by tensions between the spheres of competing World Religions, and its politics by intercommunal stresses in regions where more than one World Religion has a foothold. Like Civic Religion, World Religion created its own margins. The excluded cults were typically highly localised and had few worshippers. More significantly, the evolutionary schemata at the heart of the concept led to the classification of these other religions as primitive, sometimes even as living fossils. Close correlations were asserted between socio-political taxonomies and taxonomies of religion. Mankind progressed from animism and magic via various kinds of polytheism towards the ‹higher religions› characterised by ethical concerns, and universalizing teachings. There were, naturally, a variety of taxonomies differing in complexity and in the emphasis given to each criterion. When it came to classifying actual religions there were always boundary problems. Sometimes this concerned religions of long duration: was Judaism an ethnic religion or a universalizing one? Sometimes it is easy to suspect orientalizing or even racist prejudices at play. Was Islam really in the same category as Christianity? Yet there was no real dispute about the validity of a taxonomic enterprise of this kind, one with World Religions at its summit.

World Religion was not developed by the same individuals as elaborated the notion of Civic Religion, and few explicit connections were made between the two. After all, World Religions were largely about classifying present-day cult, while Civic Religion was a tool for understanding the past (despite its interest to those wondering what cults, ceremonies and priesthoods were most appropriate for emerging nation-states). Yet the two concepts drew on the same resources, and they were born of the same intellectual universe. Nationalism

[4] MASUZAWA 2005.

and imperialism, the origins of the social sciences especially anthropology, and the development of a secular science of religion help explain both formations. Where they did intersect was in the study of Christianity, increasingly seen as one Religion among many.[5] Less obviously, the two concepts were close to (but not exact) mirror images. What Civic Religion marginalised included the two World Religions known to classical antiquity – Diaspora Judaism and Christianity. What World Religion marginalised were local, ancestral cults of particular peoples, a category that included Civic Religion and the cults of the *nationes*.

Close to mirror images, yet not exactly so. After all, Civic Religion marginalised other kinds of cult, such as magic and whatever went on in remote rural shrines. Yet until recently these were still grouped together analytically. Much of the characterization of oriental religions can be seen as an attempt to form a religious space in which personal commitment, mystery, eschatology and socially subversive groups might come together. ‹Oriental› stood not only for a place of origins, but also for a moral and aesthetic identity that was distinctively nineteenth century in flavour. A corollary was the tacit occidentalization of civic religion, a familiarization and rationalization of the ancient city, connected to the process by which it was being appropriated as an ancestor to emerging national-states.[6]

Likewise, World Religion excluded not only civic cults but also totemism and shamanism, the cults of tribal peoples and the like. The more sophisticated typologies also separated the polytheisms of Rome and Greece from those cults as clearly as from ‹higher religions›. The folk-taxonomies of some World Religions were a good deal less nuanced. ‹Paganism› is the most obvious version of a catch-all category defined only in negatively terms. The Islamic distinction between ‹religions of the book› and others operates in the same terrain. The dominant categorization of religions before the late nineteenth century (in the western academy that was) was Pagans, Jews, Christians and Moslems.

Civic Religion and World Religions were never really opposites within in a single classificatory system. All the same, the imperfect match between non-Civic Cult and World Religion was a productive source of confusion. As a result it has become quite unclear what – the triumph of Christianity apart – is to be explained in the history of this period. Should the focus be on the emergence of new spiritualities? or on the disappearance of old rituals such as blood sacrifice? Are we to investigate a new personal locus of religion, evidenced by narratives of conversion of the kind used by NOCK.[7] There is a long tradition of seeking intimations of Christianity in pagan thought and practice, currently best exemplified by the very recent discussions of pagan pilgrimage and mo-

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[5] ASAD 1993 for the emergence of a modern concept of ‹religion›.
[6] For suggestive discussion see MURRAY 1990.
[7] NOCK 1993.

notheism.[8] Or are we investigating a new sociological phenomenon, the emergence of groups of co-religionists united *only* by a shared cult, rather than also by kinship, ethnic origin, citizenship and so on as in FUSTEL's *cité antique*? It makes a huge difference whether we approach the period trying to chart the decline of ancient civic religion, or trying to excavate the origins of today's World Religions.

2 (Only) Two Models of Religion in the Roman World?

One effect of these arguments has been to invite a kind of religious history of the Roman world in terms of a competition between two models of religion. Civic cults have been presented on the defensive against new-style religions, some of which would successfully achieve World Religion status, even if others such as Manicheeism and Bacchism would wither away. At points Civic paganism has played the role of rational foil to the supposed eccentricity of mystery cults and superstition. At others it has been the conservative background against which innovation has played.

Among the most persuasive modern versions of this narrative is that presented by JOHN NORTH. For him, the main story is

> one of development from religion as embedded in the city-state to religion as choice of differentiated groups offering different qualities of religious doctrine, different experiences, insights, or just different myths and stories to make sense of the absurdity of human experience.[9]

This formulation has the virtue of clarity. It does not purport to be a total account of change in this period (although here and elsewhere NORTH expresses his scepticism about many other supposed trends over this period).[10] It does, however, identify a shift in the religious gravity and connects it with the emergence of Diaspora Judaism and Christianity.

Oddly enough the Roman empire has little part in these narratives. Few now believe that individual emperors had anything approaching an explicit and well-thought out *Religionspolitik* before the late third century CE.[11] Imperial cult belonged more or less in the realm of Civic Religion, given that is properly a modern short hand for all those myriad insertions of the name, person, temple or statue of an emperor into calendars, public squares, festivals, prayers and so on, most of them in ancient civic centres and mostly by civic authorities. For these purposes we have to count army camps and grand mansions as quasi-

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[8] On monotheism ATHANASSIADI, FREDE 1999; on pilgrimage ELSNER, RUTHERFORD 2005. But note NORTH's 2005 cautions about moves to bring late paganism closer to Christianity in this period, especially on the terrain of monotheism.

[9] NORTH 1992, 178.

[10] NORTH 2005.

[11] RIVES 1999 for interesting discussion of this transformation.

civic, but this is perhaps reasonable enough.[12] Emperors also did a great deal to patronise particular civic cults. But it does seem curious, given that cultural historians today are finding post-colonial contexts for almost every sphere of activity from sexuality to the writing of medical texts, that empire seems scarcely relevant to one of the major debates in the religious history of this period.

There must be a suspicion, however, that this is a false problem, at least in the terms in which I have presented it. There is so little sign that non-civic cults had any common denominator except the one that defines them, *videlicet* that they are difficult to fit within the paradigm of civic religion. Only a few have real claims to be connected with anything like World Religions. For what it is worth (maybe not very much) few ancient commentators seem to have had a concept of World Religion or anything like it, anymore than they had a concept of oriental cults. Was there a notion of Civic Religion? Within each city, to be sure, it was immediately clear which were the *officia publica*: these were cults that appeared in the calendar, for which the state in some sense provided priests and often funds, those in which citizens participated *qua* citizens. Rome at least had evolved a range of procedures for adding to these cults. But when Romans looked at the mass of foreign cults, whether in general or at those of a given area such as Asia or Egypt, did they distinguish civic from non-civic religions? Pliny's view of magic is often cited, but the loose connections he asserts between Druidism, human sacrifice and Persian religion fall short of the category we seek. Lucian's *Peregrinus* offers a different view of a cluster of non-standard religions, but the set is hardly complete. Was there a simple way that ancients could formulate a category that included Bacchists and Christians, Isiacs and Jews? I think the balance of probabilities is that there was no such folk-taxonomy. It seems more and more likely that any characterization of these in terms other than ‹not-part-of-the-*officia-publica*› (which we must immediately qualify with ‹usually›) will fail. Only the teleological search for the origins of World Religions draws them together. This point can be supported with just a few observations on two specific cases.

Consider the Mysteries of Eleusis, the archetypal mystery cult.[13] Chronologically they are at least as old as Athenian Civic Religion for the very good reason that they were to begin with a part of it, for all that they involved personal, voluntary and intensely spiritual experiences that had something to say about the afterlife. As far as can be ascertained from the testimony of Herodotus and the archaeology of the site, the incorporation of Eleusis into the civic cults of the Attikan state is a good example of what DE POLIGNAC has shown about the part played by sanctuaries in *polis*-building or state-formation.[14] Like other Attic sanctuaries including Brauron, Rhamnous and Sounion, the worship of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis was drawn into a complex of cults

[12] WOOLF 2008 on this.
[13] BURKERT 1987 for what follows.
[14] POLIGNAC 1984.

focused on Athens and linked by ceremonies, processions, myths and sacrifices. Yet the mysteries performed there to the same goddesses *also* became, in the Hellenistic period and throughout late antiquity, a religious centre that drew first non-Athenian Greeks and then others from great distances to be initiated. Initiation at Eleusis was sought and boasted of by senators and emperors from Sulla to Praetextatus. It is just the fact that the Mysteries could only be performed on that particular spot that distinguished this cult from other mystery religious such as the worship of Bacchus. At no point was it essential to Athenians to be initiated. But even after many initiates were not Athenian, yet the sanctuary remained governed by Athenian priestly families and tied into Attic cultic systems. It is not easy to fit Eleusis into the neat typology of Civic Religion versus differentiated religious group.

Consider again the cultural biography of Isis, from a central figure in Egyptian myth and cult, through her Hellenistic transformation in anthropomorphised form to become the much syncretised goddess of the eastern Mediterranean, eventually patronized by the Flavian dynasty and who appeared to Lucius in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* to offer him help in this world, and promises about the next. The story of Isis is not simply one of the universalizing of a local deity to make a world religion, a story that might also legitimately be told of Christ or Mithras. For Isis, unlike both of these, was repeatedly incorporated in the Civic Religion of numerous Greek and Roman cities all around the Mediterranean world (and occasionally beyond it as Isis Noreia in the Austrian Alps shows). Nor were there two distinct forms of Isis worship, the one focused on civic festivals at the start of the sailing season and temples like those in Pompeii and the Campus Martius at Rome, the other manifested in aretologies and personal devotion. After all Lucius encounters Isis at a civic festival, experiences his personal revelation and salvation, becomes a priest in a civic temple, and then undergoes other initiations.

Neither the mysteries of Eleusis nor those of Isis fit neatly into a picture of religion dichotomised between ancestral civic religion and new cults orientated on personal spirituality.

These two examples raise other questions about Civic Religion. GORDON has suggested that we see Civic Religion as something created by and serving the interests of particular social and political classes rather than as a manifestation of an organic community of the kind FUSTEL imagined.[15] If so, it would be appropriate to view civic cults as the results of repeated efforts to appropriate, master, and mobilise the power of particular cults, ritual traditions, symbols and the beliefs that accompanied them. Civic Religion then becomes less of a norm against which other religions struggle to be emancipated, so much as a measure of the power – at any given moment – of those civic elites.

This compelling analysis immediately raises new questions. Why it was so difficult to incorporate Mithras or Christ within the cults of the city, when

[15] GORDON 1990.

Cybele and Isis were repeatedly domesticated? Should we see Civic Religion as a set of temporary formations imposed over some deeper and wider cultic matrix? Are we seeing the emergence of new expressions of cult, or the resurgence of older ones? Sacrifice, prayer, myth and a personal relation with deities are, after all, easy to document from the Homeric epics. But if these questions also sketch new research agenda, they also point up the differences among some of these cults that have been grouped together as alternatives to Civic Religion and the precursors of World Religions. At the very least, developmental models of religion are a good deal less secure than before.

3 The Roman World in Comparative Perspective

Perhaps the best example of a developmental model of religion is the notion that World Religions emerged at a particular stage in human history.

At the most basic level, of course, there is a clear sequence. There is no real trace of anything that might be termed religion prior to the appearance of *homo sapiens sapiens*, with the possible exception of the slender evidence for Neanderthal art, burial and music. Thereafter, religion seems integral to all human societies, but rarely as a differentiated sphere. Today, religious identity is for many no longer an aspect of other social orders. The notion of religion as an autonomous realm, the possibility of choice between religions, and the existence of social groups organised mainly or solely around religion is widespread. It is the shift from religion as an aspect of the social order to a world partly constituted by religion that NORTH is concerned with in writing of ‹the development of religious pluralism›, of the differentiation of religious groups and (in metaphors drawn from economic anthropology) of a disembedding of religion and a marketplace of religions.[16] He writes, too, in an awareness that this watershed has been identified and discussed by others before him.[17]

That very broad perspective, however, poses a problem of a different order. Our modern world of religious pluralism on a grand scale – of World Religions – emerged from parallel developments across Eurasia, from the Mediterranean to the Yangtze. Diaspora Judaism certainly flourished in the Roman Mediterranean, but also outside it in Mesopotamia. There were Christians in Persia before the conversion of Constantine. Manicheeism straddled the empires of late antiquity, connecting Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism. Islam developed in a similiar interstitial space between empires. Buddhism and Jainism originated in North India, Confucianism and Taoism in northern China. We may concede that the emergence of autonomous religious groups of the

[16] NORTH 1992. STARK 1996 for a less nuanced interpretation of religious change in terms of competition for market share. BECK 2006 offers an excellent critique, to which this paper is much indebted.

[17] In particular NOCK 1933.

kind described by NORTH or at least the notion of ‹a religion› as an entity, was a necessary precondition for the emergence of World Religions. But if we do so, then we need to explain why this seems to have happened across the Old World on a number of occasions during the last and first millennia CE.

Put simply, phenomena need explanation at the same scale at which they are observable. Local factors may be of great importance. But – as with the Neolithic revolution, urbanization and state-formation – it is not acceptable to explain a general and broadly synchronous change as the result of unconnected and dissimilar particular causes. Naturally it is acceptable to envisage multiple and essentially independent origins. Agriculture was invented on a number of occasions using different cultigens by peoples in no contact with each other. But if so we need to be able to explain why they occurred when and where they did, if we are not to resort to quasi-mystical invocations of the *Zeitgeist*. For Neolithicization the common factors generally invoked are the increased cognitive potential of *homo sapiens sapiens* and the climatic changes at the start of the Holocene. Likewise no account of the rise of Bacchism, Buddhism, Christianity and the rest will be convincing if it is cast only in terms of local factors. As with the origins of agriculture, finding a general explanation is made easier if we can be more certain about the location in time and space of these developments. Correlating other variables with religious changes might offer some clues about which conditions allowed or promoted developments of this kind. This is, in fact, a routine and much used procedure.

Geography is easiest. No differentiated religious groups of the kind described by NORTH, or claimed as the origins of World Religions, are held to have emerged in the New World, in sub-Saharan Africa, Australasia, nor in the temperate zones, steppe, taiga or tundra of Eurasia. We are dealing then with that broad core area of Eurasia in which agriculture, cities, states, writing systems and warfare had first evolved, if much earlier. The areas involved can be narrowed down further to a number of key *foci* of creativity within that broad band, none located west of Italy, many concentrated in the Near East, and others in north India and northern China. Again there is a good general fit with the multiple cradles of civilization, understood in terms of agricultural intensification, urbanism and political growth. None of these areas were wholly isolated from others even in the Neolithic, let alone in the Iron Age. Yet there are discernible gradients of interaction, creating something more like an island chain than a continuum of variation. Only a few of these nascent ‹World Religions› jumped far along the chain and when they did – Manicheeism, Buddhism and Eastern Christianity are the best examples – they were transformed in the process, and soon took local forms.

Chronology is more difficult. One common characteristic of these cults is that many seem to have emerged through the elaboration and or universalization of previously more localised cults. It would be pointless to date Mithraism from Mitra's appearance in the Vedas, or the cult of Isis from her first testimonia in Pharaonic Egypt. Yet it is difficult to know at what point to decide

that Judaism was no longer primarily a local cult or ethnic cult.[18] The historical dates of the Buddha, Mahivara (the creator of modern Jainism) and especially of Zoroaster are fiercely contested. A number of these universalizing cults have no identified or claimed founding figure. We are, however, dealing with emergent phenomena, that is with new global systems appearing out of the interactions of the component parts of complex systems. The key question is, then, not How old is the oldest part? but When do the new global entities begin to function as wholes? Judaism becomes apparent as a cosmopolitan order only in the Babylonian or Hellenistic periods. Buddhism engaged the attention of Asoka in the early third century BCE, Bacchism that of Rome in the early second century, and Confucianism under the Han Dynasty that began in 220 BCE.

This account differs in important respects from some of the earliest attempts to describe these phenomena. Most famous is that of KARL JASPERS who coined the term Axial Age to denote a period in which ‹Man as we know him today, came into Being›.[19] For JASPERS, the Axial Age was defined by the teachings and lives of a number of key figures, among whom the Buddha, Zoroaster, Confucius, Lao-Tse, Socrates and the Israelite prophets were the most important.[20] He did see a common sociological background, generally characterised as worlds divided into small states and cities through which wise men wandered, advising princes and teaching disciples. But the period, which he generally described as roughly 800–200 BCE, was also for JASPERS a critical stage in mankind's spiritual evolution, a moment of awakening that sealed off a primitive past and set a great challenge to the future. The great thinkers emerged from parallel but unconnected philosophical traditions, and their supposed convergence was a sign of the unity of the humanist and ethical values that JASPERS espoused. When Empire followed – the Hellenistic kingdoms and Rome in the West, the Maurya dynasty in Indian and the Han in China – the insights of those sages became classics.

It is easy now to pick holes in JASPERS' formulation. JASPERS was more interested in the founder figures than the emergent social and religious orders that are the subject of this paper. His desire to identify a relatively short *Achsenzeit* led him in many cases to prefer a chronology that concentrated his thinkers into the narrowest space possible. Another result of this was that Zoroaster, Christ and Mohammed were inconveniently marginalised. He also stressed similarities at the expense of differences: Confucius and Plato may have been unsuccessful advisers to princes, but that was not a role associated with the Buddha or Christ. We might note too that he focuses only on figures whose influence endured to the twentieth century. Mani, for example, is mis-

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[18] GOODMAN 1989 offers a very localised answer – in the reign of Nerva – but the debate was clearly of much longer standing and the issue worried taxonomists in the founding generation of *Religionswissenschaft* (MASUZAWA 2005, 107–119).

[19] JASPERS 1953, 1.

[20] JASPERS 1966.

sing. So too are all those religious movements that did not represent themselves as following a particular founding figure. Finally his analytical history comes into conflict at points with his desire to draw lessons for the future from what he saw as the common ground of these thinkers. His programme, based on the unity of mankind, on fundamental freedoms but also on socialism, world government and a generalised theism, is utterly explicable in terms of his own experiences but it reads oddly today. His present day followers are easily divided into those primarily interested in advancing his ethical and humanistic agenda (if at the cost of doing some violence to history in the process),[21] and those attracted by his contribution to comparative historical sociology.[22] The differences between these two groups can make his own work seem – unfairly perhaps – incoherent. All the same the scope of JASPERS' imagination and his willingness to engage with such big questions commands admiration. For the present purpose – that of setting events in the ancient Mediterranean in a broader context – JASPERS' comparative sociology is an inspiration. For presents purposes it is necessary, however, to depart from his formulation of the problem in two important ways.

The first has already been introduced, that we need to consider the *emergent phenomena* rather than focusing on the moment of creation and/or the person of the founder. This not only simplifies some of the chronological complexities, but also brings into sharper focus the chronological co-incidence of ancient empire and these new religious systems across the Old World. If the period considered is thus a little later than JASPERS' Axial Age, it correlates more clearly with the rise of early empires across Eurasia. That correlation makes it all the more urgent to discern connections between ancient world empires and these new religious phenomena.

The second is that we abandon the genealogical investigation of today's so-called World Religions in favour of investigating that broader group of cults, roughly equivalent to that which NORTH described as differentiated religious groups. This raises an immediate problem. For NORTH's category is even more heterogeneous than the canonical list of World Religions. All the same it is important to be clear that the phenomenon under discussion is not, in fact, the appearance of today's major religions in their essential pure and uncorrupted form – as JASPERS and many others have supposed in their slightly ahistorical and idealizing search for an essential core common to Judaism, Christianity, Confucianism and the rest. JASPERS and some of his followers have imagined that this common stock of wisdom was later adulterated and misrepresented until World Religions seemed (falsely) to be irreconcilably opposed. Their interest was, of course, in recovering that core wisdom which would reflect the unity of mankind and lead mankind on to a better state. Admirable as this humanistic quest might seem, it leads to bad history.

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[21] ARMSTRONG 2006 is a case in point.

[22] E. g. EISENSTADT 1986; EISENSTADT, ÁRNASON, WITTROCK 2005; BELLAH 2005.

The historical reality was in fact the precise opposite. The notion of Religion that we commonly use today is the result of convergent evolution.[23] Moreover, this has not been the kind of convergent evolution that is the product of parallel adaptation to a similar environment, but rather the result of intensive exchanges and communications across religious boundaries. It is not an exaggeration to say that the World Religions collectively brought themselves into existence through mutual borrowing and antagonism. The modern concept of Religion was formed largely through debates *within* a pluralist tradition.

4 Re-characterising Religious Change

How does this broader perspective affect our assessment of the appearance of differentiated religious groups in the classical Mediterranean?

For a start, the ancient Mediterranean appears as just one end of a system of exchanges and communications that stretched from the Atlantic to the China Sea. The series of linked core areas from Mesopotamia to the Yangtze had been driving change across the Old World since sedentarisation and the origins of agriculture. By the end of the last millennium BCE these were areas in which populations and urban networks were generally densest, and where representational media and religious texts had developed into the most complex and convoluted forms. Those core areas were also hubs or nodes, areas of intense interaction and exchange, places where populations were particularly cosmopolitan. To some extent they were core areas because they were predetermined by geography to be hubs or nodes, but once urbanization and state formation took hold they attracted communication and migration in their own right. The correlation with clusters of cities and states that JASPERS noted is quite real.

But there was also a correlation with imperial systems, something that JASPERS resisted and underestimated, partly because he was more interested in the lives and works of the founding figures than in the emergent phenomena of differentiated religious institutions. At the time when these institutions began to become important, this east-west zone was the site of a string of imperial powers. Fixing the chronological origins of this process is difficult. It was certainly a development of the iron age, and from Mesopotamia through India to China it seems that smaller less stable imperial systems (like the Assyrian New Kingdom and the Shang dynasty) preceded the creation of more stable entities like those of the Achaemenids in Persia, the Maurya of North India, and the Qin and Han dynasties in China. Rome and her Hellenistic predecessors were fully part of these developments.

The Roman empire was neither irrelevant to the emergence of new forms of religiosity, nor can it provide an explanation on its own either for the emergence of religious pluralism or for the inception of World Religions. A higher

[23] ASAD 1993.

order explanation is called for. Political and economic growth, and all that went with them, in the Hellenistic East, in the Roman Mediterranean, in Persia, on the Gangetic plain, in northern and eventually in southern China all created environments in which a variety of religious forms could thrive. Local civic and tribal religions were among the beneficiaries in some areas, but so were other kinds of religious organization.

The actual origins of these many and various cults that existed outside Civic Religion and its analogues are obscure. Some certainly predated the proliferation of empires across Eurasia. Bacchism seems to have operated partly outside the civic framework already in the fifth century BCE. The great oracular centres of the Greek world, were consulted by powers at a great distance, from the archaic period, and the panhellenic festivals of the *periodos* were about aristocratic families before they were about civic competition. The mysteries of Samothrace and Eleusis predated the apogees of Civic Religion, were accommodated into it with ease, and expanded beyond it when circumstances changed. So there was no sudden moment when religion was disembedded. A better analogy is offered by the long history of mammals from their emergence in the age of the dinosaurs, their survival of the mass extinction at the end of the Cretaceous, and their very gradual emergence first as marsupials and then placental mammals to their current position of dominance on the planet.

How about a different formulation? A variety of forms of cult co-existed throughout the last millennium BCE. Civic authorities created some, appropriated and prohibited others and probably ignored many. Most contemporaries saw these all as part of the same broad cosmological and ritual system (in the loosest sense of that word.) The appearance of empires evidently created some new opportunities for cults of all kinds. Imperial patronage seems to have been the least common of these. Episodes of persecution are a little more frequent. Examples can be found in responses to worshippers of Bacchus and Isis in Italy, to Christians and Manichees in the Roman and Persian empires, and to Buddhists in mediaeval China. But on occasion imperial authorities stepped in to limit persecutions *within* cities, not in a positive spirit of multi-culturalism but because the cost of inter-communal tension were unacceptable, or because some of the persecuted were well connected. The history of the Jews in the Roman empire provides several examples. Some of these episodes seem to have been defensive responses by local authorities, an attempt to maintain the fragile domination of the ritual system by landowning elites. Cities might be reactionary islands attempting to resist the ebb and flow of ancient seas of faith. But the larger cities were also perfect incubators for new cults that drew on multiple sources of inspiration. Where else might one have created Mithraism, with its Persian god redolent of Zoroastrian dualism, its exaggerations of Roman sacrifice and Roman patriarchy, its lavish use of a Hellenised version of Babylonian astrology and an initiatory system that merged Greek and Latin terminology, and animal and ethnic imagery? Civic authorities on occasion

tried to localise new cults, to bind them to particular places and customise them for particular citizen bodies. But members of civic elites were also among the leaders of many new religious organizations. There had, after all, always been religion outside the classical city-state, and Civic Religion had often drawn on it, as some of the new Religions did. The same applies to emperors whose occasional patronage of one of these new cults or another never stopped them leaking across frontiers, which were in any case zones of intense interaction.[24]

If we ask what major changes empires introduced into these ancient games of localization and universalisation, of appropriation, persecution and accommodation, two elements seem particularly prominent.

The first is that the west-east sequence of imperial powers and imperial peaces – together with the increased commercial and other contacts they facilitated – made broad trans-continental interactions just a little easier. What empires created, and what they were sustained by, were vast systems of communications and exchange.[25] New religious systems made use of these networks, slipping easily from one localised regime of authority to another, and from one imperial circumscription to another. Nothing illustrates this better than the career of Mani, moving in the third century between the eastern Roman provinces to Buddhist north India and back via Sassanian Persia. But cult spread also in less planned fashion simply through movement among the various cosmopolitan groups that lived between and across the spaces controlled by individual cities and tribes.[26]

Especially important were the emergence within this broad band of empires of a series of overlapping diasporas. As well as the Jewish Diaspora, stretching from Rome to Iran at the turn of the millennia, there were diasporas of Greek and of Syriac speaking Christians, of Manichees and of Buddhists. Diaspora Buddhism effectively ensure the survival of the religion after its near extinction in North India. Diasporas are also good reminders of the unevenness or lumpiness of connectivity in this respect. Pockets of high interaction were connected across areas of relatively little contact, allowing the development of local and regional variations of each of the really wide-scale Religions.

The second way in which the appearance of empires across the Old World may have promoted the spread of non-civic Religions is a little more speculative. Empire offered a paradigm of universalism, of a social and cosmologically ordered world that stretched far beyond any one city or people. These universalizing paradigms closely resemble the ‹transcendental visions› that EISENSTADT finds characteristic of Axial Civilizations.[27] Claims to cosmo-

[24] LATTIMORE 1940 on China, followed for Rome by WHITTAKER 1994.

[25] ALCOCK, D'ALTROY, MORRISSON, SINOPOLI 2001. WOOLF 1990 for a characterisation of their dynamics in terms of world-system theory.

[26] MANN 1986 evokes these processes in explaining the rapid spread of Christianity.

[27] EISENSTADT 1986.

logical centrality are a commonplace of early empires.[28] From the *orbs* deployed by Roman emperors to the mediating role between gods and men appropriated by the Sons of Heaven in China, universalizing cults were particularly characteristic of these systems. Perhaps only a few emperors engaged in ideological production on the scale of Akhenaten, Darius, Asoka, the First Emperor of the Qin, Augustus or Constantine. But the routine universalization of cult perhaps provided a model for cults that did not emanate from the centre of power, yet shared their aspirations.

This analysis leaves much unconsidered. The precise processes by which those cults that we know today as World Religions emerged from these early experiments is far from clear. Oddly enough it was not those movements that cohered best with the existing social and political order that lasted longest. Some universalizing cults were evidently more amenable than others to appropriation by civic authorities.[29] Isis worship was easily incorporated by civic authorities and emperors alike. Mithraism was a religion of social conformers. But the future belonged to more exclusive Religions – Diaspora Judaism and Christianity, Buddhism and the Tao. Competition for comparative advantage or market share within a rule-governed market seems a poor way to imagine these processes.[30] It may well be that thinking about how plant and animal species colonise new environments, might offer more productive analogies.

For the first differentiated Religions did not simply provide good business models for later imitators. Like any successful colonizing species, they also modified their new environment into one in which new religions of their kind could flourish. By entrenching the idea of a Religion, in the sense of a voluntary association of co-worshippers who might – to begin with – have little else in common, they created the conditions for replication. Manicheeism and Islam expanded into worlds already familiar with the idea of exclusive religious systems. Other cults had to modify in order to thrive in the new environment. A good example is the transformation of ‹Hellenism› in late antiquity into a form that made it too an aspirant World Religion, one that individuals were invited to join and (incidentally) one that came to cohere poorly with civic cults. It is perhaps this feature of the spread of new religions that accounts for the entropic quality of the process. These new cults, a varied group at first but one whose members increasingly came to resemble each other, did not out compete Civic Religion in a religious market place. They simply created a world in which they, rather than any of the many alternatives available, could thrive. That process continued, I suspect, until the number of World Religions was even smaller and the notion of what constituted a Religion was even more widely shared. That first generation of World Empires had largely passed away

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[28] A conclusion of ALCOCK, D'ALTROY, MORRISSON, SINOPOLI 2001, especially the papers of WOOLF and YATES.

[29] BEARD 1994 for a model of how this might be done.

[30] BECK 2006.

by this stage, their demise hastened by the greater capacity of World Religions to offer compelling and transcendent visions of the cosmos. But those empires – Rome among them – had made a major contribution to an irreversible transformation of the religious environment across the entirety of the Old World.

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