

Slow Religion

The Foundations of Christian Faith in the 21st Century

The Slow Religion: The Foundations of Christian Faith explores the core beliefs and experiences of the Christian faith and invites reflection in our 21st Century/Covid-19 pandemic context. The series is led by Joe Jennings, the Rev. Zoila Schoenbrun (St. Stephens Church), the Rev. Br. Richard Edward Helmer (Church of our Saviour), and Nancy Clark (St. Mary the Virgin) and is organized into two sets: first, the historical context and development of the faith; and, second topical examinations of belief and how to apply those today.

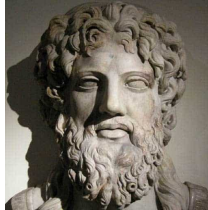
The topics include: God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, Incarnation, Resurrection, Forgiveness of Sins and Eternal Life. Each subject will include a brief presentation to give historical and textual content, readings in the Bible, creeds and prayers from multiple sources, and then questions for reflection and discussion.

CLASS #2

Pre-Christian Origins and Context: Greco-Roman Wrestling

Pre-Christian context for the new religion: Greek, Pagan, and Jewish views of God, early creeds and prayer life. Sources include the Old Testament and Roman and Greek texts.

SUBJECT



Greco-Roman Wrestling: Greek and Roman Cultural and Religious Views

BRIEF OVERVIEW

The two overlapping dominant cultures in the Roman Empire were the Greek philosophical and the Roman Polytheistic/ and Emperor Worship cultures. The Greeks maintained the operation of pure intellect could perceive the *Logos (Pure Reason)*. The philosophical schools of Epicureanism and Stoicism debated whether God existed and if God did exist, did it matter to human life. The Roman Emperor worship, started in 43 BCE was the official state religion.

READINGS

Plato (428-348 BCE)

"It is hard to find the maker and father of the universe, and having found him it is impossible to speak of him at all." Plato, *Timaeus*

"The highest of all forms was the idea of The Good. Plato cast the ancient myth of the archetypes into a philosophical form. His eternal ideas can be seen as a rational version of the mythical divine world. Of which mundane things are mere shadows.

Plato did not discuss the nature of God but confined himself to the divine world of the forms though occasionally the ideals of Beauty or Good does represent a supreme reality. Plato was convinced that the divine world was static and changeless.

The utterly static image of divinity would have a large influence on Jews, Christians and Muslims even though it had little in common with the God of revelation, who is constantly active, innovative, willing to change his mind.

Plato's divine forms were not realities "out there" but could be discovered within the self. In Symposium Plato showed that love of a beautiful body could be purified and transformed into an ecstatic contemplation of ideal Beauty.

Plato believed that the universe was rational."¹

Aristotle (384-322 BCE)

Aristotle appreciated religion and mythology. He saw that people in the world of religion did not have to learn facts as much as experience certain emotions.

Aristotle's believe that Greek tragedy effected a purification (katharsis) of the emotions of terror and pity – they revealed a more serious truth.

This insight then led religious thinkers to realize the religion is a ritualized, symbolic or mythical presentation of events that would be unendurable in daily life can redeem and transform them into something pure and even pleasurable. (pp37)

Aristotle's idea of The Good influenced monotheists, particularly Christians in the western world. Aristotle's Physics included a theory of emanations that grew weaker the father they were form their source. At the top of his hierarchy was the pure being, eternal, immovable and spiritual. God was pure thought, both the thinker and the thought, engaged in an eternal moment of contemplation of himself.

Man is in a privileged position: his human soul has the divine gift of intellect, which makes him kin to God and a partaker in the divine nature. This godly capacity of reason puts him above all of creation. Man's duty is to become immortal and divine by purifying his intellect. Wisdom (Sophia) was the highest of all human virtues, it was expressed in contemplation (theoria) of philosophical truth. In Plato this made us

¹ Karen Armstrong, "A History of God" Notes

divine by imitating the activity of God – Theoria was not achieved by logic alone, but was disciplined intuition resulting in ecstatic self-transcendence.

Both Plato and Aristotle conceived of systems that had very little impact on ordinary mortals.

Stoicism²

Stoicism offers such a direct experience of the sacred through the recognition that God, as *pneuma*, is immanent in all of Nature and humankind.

The Stoic conception of the divine has little in common with the God of Western monotheistic religions. The Stoic God is an all-pervasive, immanent, active force in the cosmos, and is equivalent to and often called “Nature.” Zeus, *pneuma*, and *logos* are also used to refer to this active force. The Stoics used many names to refer to the divine principle in the cosmos.

The Stoics are most frequently considered pantheists; however, deist, theist, and panentheistic qualities are found in the surviving writings. It is important to keep in mind that all of these labels are modern creations; therefore, none applies perfectly. The God of Stoicism does not fit neatly into any box.

Stoicism as religion

- “[Stoicism] was a religion first, a philosophy only second.” (Hamilton, E. (1964). *The echo of Greece*. New York: Norton, p. 157)
- Stoicism may be called either a philosophy or a religion. It was a religion in its exalted passion; it was a philosophy inasmuch as it made no pretense to magical powers or supernatural knowledge. (Murray, G. (1915) *The Stoic Philosophy*, New York: The Knickerbocker Press, pp. 14-5)
- Stoicism was a religious philosophy, as is shown by the great hymn of Cleanthes, the successor of Zeno as head of the school—a hymn which is inspired by the consciousness that it is one spiritual power which penetrates and controls the universe and is the source of every work done under the sun, “except what evil men endeavor in their folly.” (Caird, E. (1904) *The Evolution of Theology in the Greek Philosophers*, Glasgow: James MacLehose and Son, pp. 76-7)
- It would be impossible to give a full account of the philosophy of the Stoics without, at the same time, treating of their theology; for no early system is so closely connected with religion as that of the Stoics. Founded, as the whole view of the world is, upon the theory of one Divine Being... There is hardly a single prominent feature in the Stoic system, which is not, more or less, connected with theology. (Zeller, E., & Reichel, O. (1870). *The Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics*. London: Longs, Green, and Co, p. 322)
- While Stoicism was never a religion in the modern sense, with temples and altars, its spiritual nature evoked reverence and piety in the ancients and in many who practice it today. In its traditional form, Stoicism was a personal religion where “the fundamental doctrines of the Stoa were such as to create a kind of spirituality and to raise men’s souls toward the cosmic God.” (Zeller, E., & Reichel, O. (1870). *The Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics*. London: Longs, Green, and Co, p. 322)

Epicureanism³, Epicurios (341-270BCE)

Materialism: everything is made of atoms, including gods and the soul. A deistic sort of polytheism: the gods exist, but take no notice of humans. Everything is made of atoms, including gods and the soul. No afterlife.

² <http://www.traditionalstoicism.com/the-religious-nature-of-stoicism-2/>

³ <http://www.religionfacts.com/epicureanism>

Epicureanism is an ancient Greek philosophical system taught by Epicurus. It emphasized the goal of a happy and content life in the here and now, rejecting both superstitious fear of the gods and notions of an afterlife.

Though the modern use of the term "Epicurean" is associated with the saying, "Eat, drink and be merry," Epicureanism did not advocate simple pursuit of bodily pleasure and differed significantly from hedonism.

Epicurus also rejected believe in an afterlife. The soul is also made of atoms, though of a subtler sort than the body. 3 Body and soul must be joined to give life; when the body dies, the soul also disintegrates. Therefore, there is no need to fear either death or future punishment.

Epicurus did believe in the gods. The visions of gods in dreams and the universal opinion of humanity proved their existence. But he regarded them as made of atoms like everything else (immortal because their bodies do not dissolve) and living in a happy, detached society out of contact with humans. Thus there is no place for providence, prayer or fear of the gods. Epicurus saw religion as a source of fear; banishing religion made peace of mind possible. He could be said to have had "a theology without a religion." 4

The Epicurean purpose of life is peace of mind, happiness and pleasure. But the Epicurean pursuit of pleasure was neither hedonism nor self-indulgence. Epicurus primarily promoted the pleasures of the mind, friendship and contentment. Epicurus noted that it is human nature to seek pleasure and avoid pain, and made this the basis of his guidelines for living.

Rome

Polytheistic, and highly religious, the Romans ascribed their military, economic and political success to fidelity to the Gods. The religion was practical and transactional, *do ut des*, "I give that you might give." There was no concept of separation of Church and State and many political leaders also held high positions in the religious world of Rome.

The State had a founding myth, but the religion had no creation myth of similar power. There were upper heaven gods, underworld gods, and many earthly deities. As the empire grew it absorbed local religions as a mean of maintaining local social order. The Romans absorbed the Etruscan religion and then the Greeks, and grew out from there.

Roman religion involved cult worship⁴. Approval from the gods did not depend on a person's behavior, but on accurate observance of religious rituals. Each god needed an image – usually a statue or relief in stone or bronze – and an altar or temple at which to offer prayers and sacrifices.

Quid pro quo

Requests and prayers were presented to gods as a trade: if the god did what was requested (*nuncupatio*), then the worshipper promised to do a particular thing in return (*solutio*). This trade was binding. To persuade the gods to favor the requests, a worshipper might make offerings of food or wine, or would carry out a ritual sacrifice of an animal before eating it.

⁴ <https://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/worship.html>

Roman Emperor Worship

In the 4th century BCE, Alexander the Great received veneration by titles and symbols and forms of address as if he were a superhuman being. In Egypt, where the pharaohs had long been worshiped, and to peoples in the Middle East, for similar reasons of religious custom this was seen as the norm.⁵

In 44 BCE Temples were erected in honor of Julius Caesar soon after his death and to Augustus in his lifetime, e.g. at Pergamum.⁶ If Caesar was a god then, as his heir, Augustus was the son of a god.⁷ In 12 CE he made himself Pontifex Maximus, the chief priest of Rome and head of the Collegium Pontificum, the highest priests in the land.

Associated Titles⁸:

- Augustus is known in some inscriptions as CAESAR DIVI FILIUS, Son of God, that is, Son of eternal Caesar.
- Caligula was the first emperor to demand to be worshiped, he demanded that citizens everywhere bow to his statue.
- Nero also claimed to be divine, although in neither case was there a requirement to worship the emperor. As Augustus had been Zeus incarnate, so Nero was Apollo incarnate. Even Seneca called him as the long-awaited savior of the world.
- Domitian took the title "Lord and God"

Failure to give divine honors to the emperor or 'to swear by the genius of Caesar' was not the only ground for persecution; but the anti-Christian writer Celsus (about 178 CE) warned Christians of the perils of their lack of civic sense and of their disloyalty to an empire from which they derived many material benefits.⁹

Greek/Roman on Resurrection

Death was a one way street¹⁰. No resurrection. There was a underworld. But death was all powerful and no one escaped death.

For those who wanted an afterlife:

1. Those who wanted a new body
2. Those who wanted a spiritual experience – Platonists

Resurrection meant new body after death

Not a concept that made sense in the Greek/Roman theological worldview

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/Cult-of-the-emperors>

⁶ <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t94/e602>

⁷ https://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/augustus_religion.html

⁸ <https://readingacts.com/2010/04/02/the-roman-cult-of-emperor-worship/>

⁹ <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t94/e602>

¹⁰ NT Wright Resurrection Lecture Notes

PRAYERS

Cleanthes, the second head of the ancient Stoa, Hymn to Zeus:

*Most glorious of the immortals, invoked by many names, ever all-powerful,
Zeus, the First Cause of Nature, who rules all things with Law,
Hail! It is right for mortals to call upon you,
since from you we have our being, we whose lot it is to be God's image,
we alone of all mortal creatures that live and move upon the earth.
Accordingly, I will praise you with my hymn and ever sing of your might.*

Epicurus, quoted from Eugene O'Connor, *The Essential Epicurus*

If the gods listened to the prayers of men, all humankind would quickly perish since they constantly pray for many evils to befall one another.

Greek inscription to Poseidon:

'Oh Great Poseidon, brother of Zeus, Lord and Ruler of the Seas, I call on you to help me once again. Last year I asked you to protect my ship and its crew during that violent storm. You made the waters tranquil almost immediately and I honored your name with offerings in your temple. This time, on the day of the month sacred to you, I am beginning a long voyage to a distant land and I seek your blessings for fair weather and calm seas. At dawn today I ask you to accept this offering.'

Pirene Inscription (Good news – Gospel)

*'It seemed good to the Greeks of Asia,
in the opinion of the high priest Apollonius of Menophilus Azanitus:
"Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life,
has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus,
whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind,
sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants,
that he might end war and arrange all things,
and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations),
surpassing all previous benefactors,
and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done,
and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings for the world
that came by reason of him," which Asia resolved in Smyrna.'*

SUMMARY

27-30 CE Greek/Roman-Jewish Context Summary

	Jewish/OT	Greek/Roman
God	<p>Monotheism</p> <p>Yahweh, Covenant with Israel</p>	<p>Polytheism</p> <p>Incorporated all religions within the empire</p> <p>Stoicism: God, as <i>pneuma</i>, is immanent in all of Nature and humankind.</p> <p>Epicureanism: everything is made of atoms. Gods exist, but take no notice of humans. No afterlife.</p>
	<p>One transcendent God who revealed himself to Abraham, Moses, and the Hebrew prophets and by a religious life in accordance with Scriptures and rabbinic traditions.</p> <p>God who created and rules the entire world and who at the end of history will redeem all Israel and the whole world.</p>	<p>Plato and Aristotle conceived of systems based on reason that had little impact on ordinary mortals.</p> <p>Plato: utterly static image of divinity would have a large influence on Jews, Christians and Muslims even though it had little in common with the God of revelation.</p> <p>Aristotle: Man is in a privileged position: his human soul has the divine gift of intellect, which makes him kin to God and a partaker in the divine nature. This godly capacity of reason puts him above all of creation.</p> <p>Man's duty is to become immortal and divine by purifying his intellect. Wisdom (Sophia) was the highest of all human virtues, it was expressed in contemplation (theoria) of philosophical truth -- achieved by logic alone, but was disciplined intuition resulting in ecstatic self-transcendence.</p>
Jesus Christ	<p>NA</p> <p>The universal goal of the Jewish people has frequently expressed itself in messianism—the idea of a universal, political realm of justice and peace</p>	<p>Augustus is known in some inscriptions as Son of God</p> <p>Caligula was the first emperor to demand to be worshiped, he demanded that citizens everywhere bow to his statue.</p> <p>Nero claimed to be divine, although in neither case was there a requirement to worship the emperor.</p>

		As Augustus had been Zeus incarnate, so Nero was Apollo incarnate. Even Seneca called him as the long-awaited Savior of the world. Domitian took the title "Lord and God"
The Holy Spirit	Ruach, God's spirit in OT	NA
Incarnation	NA	NA
Death	Final	Final
Resurrection	Small element for one faction of the Jewish community. Not a central point or seen as very important by any of the factions.	NA
	Pharisees believed it would occur for the righteous at the end time. Great turnaround of Israel	
	Sadducees disagreed and did not believe in resurrection	
Forgiveness of Sins	Sin is the result of our negative human tendencies or inclinations, 2 known in Hebrew as the yetzer hara (the inclination toward evil) ³ , which must be channeled in ways that affirm life by the influence of the yetzer hatov (the inclination to goodness). The word in Hebrew for sin (ḥet) literally means something that goes astray, like an arrow that misses the mark. ¹¹	NA
Eternal Life	NA	NA
Communion	Readings, Prayer and Interpretation are basic structure of Jewish synagogue service	NA
Prayer	Transactional and Relationship	Transactional
Covenant	This arrangement is designated a covenant and is structured by an elaborate and intricate law.	NA
Chosen people	Jewish people... the people chosen by God to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). Designated a covenant and is structured by an elaborate and intricate law. Jewish people are both entitled to special privileges and burdened with special responsibilities from God.	NA

¹¹ <https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/article/sin-and-forgiveness>

REFLECTIONS

What is the nature of God?

- Pure reason and distant from human affairs, static and never changing. (Plato/Aristotle)
- All-pervasive, immanent, active force in the cosmos, and is equivalent to and often called "Nature." (Stoic)
- God or Gods exist, but take no notice of humans. (Epicureanism)