

Introduction

- I. Last week: the question “what is religion?”
 - A. What is the meaning of everything?
 - B. Religions each answer in a particular way
- II. Christianity’s answer, briefly
 - A. Theosis / divinization – to become like God in heaven.
 - B. This is done both in the present life and fulfilled in the next
 - C. Afterlife is to be unlike any other religion’s claim
 1. United with the Divine
 2. Maintain individuality
 3. Afterlife is not awful (more on that...)

To really understand Christianity, we have to go back in time a bit. Doing this will help us understand the human practices of worship and liturgy, and it will help us understand why Judaism and Christianity were radically different from pagan worship. Continuing down that path, we see how Christianity differentiates itself even from Judaism.

Ancient Religious Practices

- III. Ancient Religious Practices in general – not just pre-Christianity, but pre-Judaism.
 - A. Gods to the ancients
 1. Most modern people understand God – or at least claim to understand him – as one, all-powerful, all-knowing type being
 2. This is not how ancient peoples saw it. Their gods were more of a reflection of humanity. They had feuds, they warred, some were more powerful than others.
 3. The gods, however, had powers to bless and incur wrath on peoples.
 4. Often, you had very similar gods across many civilizations, with strikingly similar attributes
 5. Often, gods were limited to a particular place or a particular race of people.
 - B. Worship: What’s the point?
 1. Appeasement of the deity was desired for benefits primarily during this life
 2. By appeasing the deity, the people wanted to either secure blessings from a deity (if the deity was kindly) or the prevent the wrath of a deity (if they weren’t)
 3. Primary goal in the most ancient religions: fertility – both of the crops and the people
 4. Other goals included: success in battle, advancement of technological or worldly knowledge, etc.
 - C. How was worship done?
 1. If we look at archaeological findings and the most ancient religious texts we can find, we can begin to develop a general picture of what was happening in these ceremonies
 2. Worship, in its most basic form, usually took the form of some sort of communal meal. The community would gather to participate in this meal. The people would request the presence of the deity at the meal and would seek to extend hospitality to that deity.
 3. Often, something was chosen to be sacrificed—set apart—for the deity at the meal. It’s kind of like the idea of making someone’s favorite meal when they come to visit. and then the

- entire community would partake in the sacrifice. This is actually at the core of worship: partaking in a communal meal with the deity. In many cases, the sacrifices to the deity were animals. Crops were sometimes the sacrifice, but more commonly than any of our stomachs would prefer, they sacrificed humans. And remember: the community would have to partake of the sacrifice for it to be proper worship. Gross.
4. At these worship banquets, the people would also generally do some sort of action that they believed the deity would find pleasing. This often took the form of a disregarding of social rules and mores, for example who you are married to wasn't a big deal at these things. I suspect you can figure out where things go if that is the kind of thing they're ignoring.
- D. Other liturgical actions, temples, etc.
1. As religions developed, we start seeing temples to deities, idols being made, and priesthoods being established.
 2. While there was always some sort of meal aspect in the worship, it was sometimes less prevalent than the other ritual actions that developed around it.
 3. Temples were understood to be abodes of the deity and would house an idol of the deity. The idol was understood to be a 'face' of the deity, often one that was localized and instantiated primarily for that particular place. It's pretty common to see the same deity with different names, and to see them invoked across cultures.
 4. The priests were established to care for the temple. The idol of the temple was dressed, "fed", etc. by the priests. The priests also attend to various ritual actions and religious services offered at the temple. You do see female priests in many pagan religions, especially in service to female deities. Temples with female priesthood usually had either virgins (e.g., the Vestal Virgins in Rome) or—more commonly—prostitutes (e.g., temples of Aphrodite) associated with them, depending on what type of deity was worshipped there.
- E. Life in general
1. It's important to remember that religion was not separated from general life in these days.
 2. Religious devotion was an important part of communal life. The calendar, the way business was done, the way children were raised, all of this was touched by the religious devotion.
 3. When you changed communities, it meant that you started following different deities.
 4. From what I understand, the term religion as we use it wouldn't have even made sense to those folks back then.
 5. Treaties in between tribes, nations, and empires were religious in nature as well. Deities were to be witness to the treaties, with the curses of Poseidon, for example, to be invoked the treaty were to be broken.
 6. The patron of a community could often tell you much about a community and their answer to the question of meaning.
 - a. Sparta: conflict and war
 - b. Athens: pursuit of knowledge
 - c. Rome: many deities, but Jupiter (aka Zeus): authority and order; the nymph Egeria: wisdom in law; Vesta: hearth, home, family (virgin)
- F. Afterlife

Judaism

- IV. Judaism, being more ancient than Christianity, first grappled with these practices.
- A. The Bible & some other notes
 1. contains many critiques of the pagan religions
 2. I'll talk more about the Bible in a later talk, but for my purposes today, I'm using the texts primarily as historical documents to help us understand the differences between the ancient pagan practices and the Jewish ideal, and their struggle to get there.
 3. There are other Jewish writings, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and various royal inscriptions, but the Bible is the one I'm most familiar with
 4. During this part of the talk, I'm using the term "Israelite", which is technically different than "Jewish." Jewish people would technically only be descendants of the tribe of Judah, while "Israelite" would refer to descendants of all the 12 tribes of Jacob's sons. We use "Jewish" or "Jews" as a synonym, as most of the tribes were scattered and therefore wiped out as recognizable entities by the Assyrians in the 700s BC. For context on the timeframe, the Assyrian Empire was busy wiping out the 300 year old Kingdom of Israel when Rome had just been founded and Romulus was still the king. The Empire was still 200 years in the future. Even more expansively, the term "descendants of Abraham" would include even those descendants who are not Israelites.
 - B. God
 1. Unlike the pagan conceptions of deity, the Israelite people understood God fundamentally differently. It took them a while to get there. The things I'm going to list below developed over time as the Hebrew people learned more about God.
 2. There is only one God, and this God is the creator of all things.
 3. They were not to make idols of God, because of several reasons:
 - a. Idols were believed to give power over a deity to those who had the idol
 - b. It would give them the mistaken notion that God was human and not utterly other
 4. They did believe God could grant blessings or incur wrath on peoples who pleased or displeased him; however, there was an order to this.
 5. God was not limited to a single place or even a single race, but He is always present to his people. Furthermore, He can act through those who did not follow him.
 - C. Worship
 1. We see similarities to pagan worship. There are sacrificial banquets in honor of God. A major difference is that licentiousness and breaking of social mores was not a part of it.
 2. While seeking the benevolent favor of God was certainly a goal of worship, it was also given to give glory and honor to God for his interaction with his people in history. We see worship services focused not just around the need for crops and children, but also around celebrations of the Exodus from Egypt, for example.
 - D. How did they worship
 1. Unlike pagan worship, the Israelite people were strictly forbidden from partaking of the blood of their sacrifices and from human sacrifice. One idea behind this is that blood carries the life force of a being, and to partake of it grants us some of their qualities.
 2. Various different types of sacrifices took place: some to atone for sin, some in thanksgiving, etc. The type of sacrifice determined what was offered and how it was offered.

3. For example, the sacrifice on the day of atonement required many animals: a young bull, a ram, and two goats. The bull and ram were sacrificed to atone for the sins of the priest himself and to sprinkle on the mercy seat in the temple. One goat was given a confession of all the sins of the community and cast out into the wilderness, while the other was sacrificed and, if I remember correctly, most of these animals were *not* eaten, because they were given fully over to the Lord to beseech his mercy.
 4. A thanksgiving sacrifice, on the other hand, was an offering of grain cooked into breads and wine. These were waved before the Lord and offered in thanksgiving.
 5. Until the temple was built, these occurred in many places and on many altars. The religious authority centralized over time in response to abuses and to the struggle of the Israelite people to actually practice their beliefs.
- E. Other liturgical actions, the temple, etc.
1. The reciting of the Shema twice daily, which is several paragraphs of text, but the first of them is this:

Hear, O Israel, the L-rd is our G-d, the L-rd is One.

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל, יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יְיָ אֶחָד:

Blessed be the name of the glory of His kingdom forever and ever.

You shall love the L-rd your G-d with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you today shall be upon your heart. You shall teach them thoroughly to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit in your house and when you walk on the road, when you lie down and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for a reminder between your eyes.

And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates.

2. Once the temple was built, sacrificial worship centered there. There were temples in Dan (N. Israel) and some other places, but these were not considered legit to the authorities in Jerusalem, and they often fell into the pagan practices, got filled in with idols and various other debaucheries.
 3. Keeping Sabbath weekly was considered very important.
 4. The priesthood was originally vested with the patriarch of a family, but as abuses crept in, it became more and more restricted. It was majorly restricted at the golden calf incident, where the Hebrew people made an idol to God—which looked suspiciously like one of the Egyptian bull-gods—and were having a “traditional worship service”... At that point, it fell to the Levites to be the priestly class, and specifically Aaron’s descendants to minister as the high priests. Over time, this restriction to Aaron’s descendants was restricted to particular lines of his descendants, etc.
 5. Ritual purity.
- F. Life in general
1. Like the pagans, every facet of life was impacted by religious belief. The day of rest, the way in which the Israelites waged war, what they ate, all of it.

2. Like the pagans, if you wanted to be an Israelite, you were expected to live like they did and believe as they did.
- G. They were actually really bad at following their own beliefs
1. There are many who critique Judeo-Christian religion by claiming that followers of these religions do not follow their own teachings. An archaeological dig, for example, finds evidence of pagan worship in an ancient Jewish village, and everybody thinks it's groundbreaking and never been seen before
 2. The Bible itself tells us this was happening. The Jewish people continually were lured away from their own religious practices by the pagan practices around them.
 3. The pagan religions believed that they could control their deities by offering sacrifices "correctly". Often, when a favor was not granted, the assumption was that there was something wrong with how the sacrifice was performed, etc. (Being a priest in this scenario can be a dangerous job. If you don't get results, then you probably aren't doing the sacrifices right, and we can't have priests who can't do the sacrifices right.)
 4. Further, the pagan rites were, well, much more pleasurable to the human senses of those involved. Especially the men, who tended to run the show.
 5. The Israelites, however, knew that God could not be controlled. Every time they tried to control him, it went horribly wrong—the Bible documents this numerous times—and eventually they realize that they cannot control God, the best they can do is live according to his law and try to discern his will.
 6. The religious rites of the Israelite people had various sense elements—incense, food, etc.—but were not raucous festivals of debauchery and social upset.
 7. When the Jewish people return from the Babylonian exile—598/587-539BC—they are purged of a lot of their bad habits, but they got some new ones too.
- H. Vs. the giants
1. A recurring theme we find in the Bible is this idea of the total destruction of a city.
 2. This was how most civilizations practiced warfare, but *not* actually how the Israelites were instructed to carry out their warfare. They killed way less people when they took over a city.
 3. So why were particular cities singled out, on the command of God himself it often appears?
 4. Giants.
 - a. Worst of the worst pagans
 - b. The pagan deities I mentioned are many times demons
 - c. demonosis.
- I. Afterlife

Christianity

- V. Christianity has its roots in Judaism. Jesus and the Apostles were Jewish. It took the Apostles and the early Christians a while to recognize that they were something new. At this point in time, the 10 Northern Tribes had been scattered, the Jews had returned from exile, and while there were several different sects (Essenes, Pharisees, Sadducees) and Samaritans which practiced the Israelite religion, it is accurate to refer to it all as Judaism at this point, as the lone remaining tribe that populated the bulk of Israel was the tribe of Judah.
- A. The Bible

1. We will talk more about the development of the Bible another day, but we inherited the scriptures from the Jewish people. At the time Jesus walked the earth and Christianity emerged, the Jewish people used the Septuagint—a Greek translation made in Egypt of the books which we now call the Old Testament. It was not until later—in reaction to the Christian use of the scriptures—that the Jewish people removed several of the books of the Septuagint from their canon (list) of scriptures. We find a similar move amongst our many Protestant brothers and sisters: books were removed, because they were not seen as “in line” with the teachings of that particular sect of Protestantism.
 2. The New Testament writings were developed by the Apostles themselves or, such as the cases of Luke and Mark, a close collaborator working as a scribe to the Apostles.
 3. We’ll be using the Bible a bit more theologically in this section, but primarily to help us understand the differences between Christianity and Judaism.
- B. God
1. In Christianity, we believe that there is one God, but we believe He is one God in three Divine Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is a mystery. Sometimes people try to give the persons other names (Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier), but these are not accurate and they are not what our Lord taught us—Father, Son, and Spirit are Biblical. They actually point to some incorrect teachings about our God. (C, R, & S is basically modalism, Patrick.)
 2. We will get into this more later, but we understand that each person works simultaneously and in concert with the others.
 3. The Trinity is relational in nature. This has strong implications for humanity and for the bond of marriage. I’ll get into that when we talk about the Trinity.
 4. The other attributes of God—that he is all-knowing, all-powerful, etc. that the Israelite peoples understood God to be all still apply.
- C. Worship
1. At first, Christian worship reflected Jewish worship. Our celebration of the Mass did not spring from nowhere—it originated in Jewish temple practices and synagogue practices.
 2. In Christianity, bloody sacrifice was not necessary, as it was understood that Jesus made the perfect sacrifice on the Cross and fulfilled the need for any further bloody sacrifice.
- D. How did they worship
1. What we call the Mass is actually a participation in the Holy Sacrifice of our Lord on Calvary. When we talk in detail about the Mass, I’ll fill in a lot more here. Essentially, though, the core is this: We worship God by mystically joining ourselves to the Son as one Body of Christ, bonded together by the power of the Holy Spirit. We present ourselves unified with the Son, and offer ourselves to the Father so that he might make us holy, like his Son, and bring us closer to him, both individually and as one Body of Christ.
 2. We share in a communal meal of the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ through our sharing in the Eucharist. More on this later.
 3. Even this has reflections of the ancient religion: the recognition that we must find closeness and favor with God, and that by following a way of life—shown to us by Christ—we have a legitimate hope of attaining that favor. Also, the Worship and Sacrifice is accompanied by a meal. Except, instead of the people offering food to the deity, our God feeds us: he

- transforms bread and wine into himself so that we might partake of his divinity and join in his holiness—literally tasting Heaven itself—even while we are still on earth.
4. Finally, the priest acts as an image of God, and he is dressed in holy vestments. In paganism, the idol is dressed in vestments and cared for, but in Christianity (and Judaism), the priest is clothed in vestments, becomes an image of the Most High God, and cares for the people. Jewish, and even more so Christian, worship of God turns the pagan worship on its head. Instead of the people extending hospitality to the deity and trying to find favor with the deity, in Christianity, our God provides us with the food, he extends hospitality to us, and he begs us to allow him into our hearts so that he might find favor with us, so that at the end of our days we might join him in everlasting life.
- E. Other liturgical actions, the temple, etc.
1. Liturgy of the Hours: Similar to the Jewish practice, Catholics—I can't speak for other Christians—have a book of prayers to recite daily and are called to make prayer a part of their lives. Clergy and Religious are obligated to pray it, others are invited to pray it.
 2. Daily prayer
 3. Adoration
- F. Life in general
1. Baptismal priesthood—we are all called to bring God's creation back to him
 2. Sent out to make disciples—we are all called to be missionaries of Christ
 3. The Beatitudes—"the new Law"—we are called to live our lives in a certain way, and living a Christian life is a life that is very different from the society around us. Society is concerned with material possessions, and it has lost a notion of the spiritual. For us, we should tend first to the spiritual needs of ourselves and others, because we know that this life is passing and we have everlasting life waiting for us.
- G. They were actually really bad at following their own beliefs
1. Christians have been bad at being Christian since the very beginning.
 2. We see this in St. Paul's letters.
 3. One of the earliest controversies in our Church is what to do with people who deny Christ when they are faced with persecution. (The Donatist heresy, if I remember correctly.)
 4. Living Christianity is not a "hah! We're fixed" moment type thing, it is a lifetime of hard work to become holy and conform ourselves to the image of God that he intended for us from the beginning, had sin not gotten in the way.
- H. Vs. the giants
1. We don't recognize this anymore, but demons still exist, and we still fight against them.
 2. Catholics believe in angels, we believe that there are guardian angels for each of us, in addition to many, many other angels. We believe that there are fallen angels, called demons, who work against our Lord and try to drag us away from him. We also believe that there are structures of sin within our society, which incline us to choose wrongly. Many of these are the result of the sinful activity of humanity, and some are the result of demonic influence on humanity causing that sinful influence. (For example, I find it hard to believe that the Holocaust, the Shoah—"catastrophic destruction"—as the Jewish people call it, was not somehow demonically influenced.)
- I. JESUS AND THE INCARNATION

1. Christianity has many unique teachings. The most unique is that God himself became fully human. Some other religions have a teaching that their deities descended and took human form, but we are the only religion that teaches that God become *fully* human.
 2. We call this the Incarnation; that term simply means “to take flesh”. It is what we celebrate on Christmas Day.
 3. The implications of this are intense. We will talk about this when we talk about Jesus in two weeks.
 4. Believe it or not, this is only the second most important mystery of our faith.
- J. THE PASCHAL MYSTERY
1. The Paschal Mystery is what we call the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus.
 2. This is the most important mystery of our faith, because it is this event which destroys sin and death and paves the road to eternal life for all who might follow the path Jesus made for us to follow.
 3. We will have a class on this one too.
- K. Afterlife
1. Unlike any other religion.
 2. (describe – don’t need notes & don’t have time to write. Try to fill out after talk)

Wrap-up & Announcements

Today was a bit of history and comparison to help us understand what sets Christianity apart from other religions.

I’ve changed the schedule a little bit, to try and make the talks a little bit more pertinent. I always have a temptation to nerd out and talk about the things I find most interesting, but that’s not what we need here. Here we need to talk about the things someone who is interested in Catholic Christianity needs to know, and why they should care about Catholicism.

Next week, instead of talking about the Church, I’m going to talk about the core of the Gospel. We call this “the Kerygma” and it’ll cover:

- Why were we created
- How we got into the mess we’re in
- What God did about it
- What that means for us

I also hope to dig in to more details on the Paschal Mystery, because that is core to so many of the things that we’ll be talking about next week.

Thanks, and see you all next week!

Schedule

Date	Time	Topic
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Sunday, October 29, 2023	at 2pm:	What is Religion about? Why should I care?
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Sunday, November 5, 2023	at 2pm:	What makes Christianity different?
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Sunday, November 12, 2023 at 2pm: The Kerygma; The Paschal Mystery

Sunday, November 19, 2023 at 2pm: Jesus!

Sunday, December 3, 2023 at 2pm: Where does the Bible come from? (topics: Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture, Inspiration, Divine Revelation)

Sunday, December 10, 2023 at 2pm: Catholic Stuff You Should Know (topics: Prayer, Going to Mass, Importance of Sunday, What's a Catechumen?)