

Notes for Quiz #1

History of Ancient Religion • Fall 2022

1. What does it mean to say that polytheists tend to believe in a “unity of the divine”?

The “unity of the divine” describes the gods collectively—a divine world. The pantheon is not just an accumulation of random gods and goddesses; rather, it is a structured whole—a system where the gods interact with each other, and that collectively represents the forces of the natural world and a counterpart to the world of mortals.

In the tripartite theory of polytheistic theology put forward by the Roman scholar Varro, this “unity of the divine” represents the natural or cosmic theology: a self-contained system in which the gods cooperate in creating and maintaining the world.

In other words, each god is part of a larger process that as a whole is responsible for the physical world.

2. The Kassites favored the Sumerian gods, led by Enlil. How did Marduk end up becoming dominant instead?

The Kassites had a close cultural connection with Sumer, and as they took control over lower Mesopotamia (during the 15th century BCE) they preserved Sumerian heritage and especially aspects of their religion, consecrating the key buildings in their new capital city to Enlil, Ninlil, and other primary Sumerian gods.

The Kassites were displaced by the inhabitants of the city of Babylon, who established a new and more domineering dynasty (around the 12th century BCE). The First Dynasty of Babylon emphasized the power of Babylon over all other cities, unlike the Kassites. One of the ways they brought about this dominion was to raise the profile of Marduk, their city god, over the rest of the pantheon. The Babylonian rulers and priests promoted Marduk to king of the gods and ascribed more and more power to him, mirroring the irresistible dominion of Marduk’s city on Earth.

Babylon was expanded and rebuilt on a grand scale, becoming the most impressive city of the ancient world. The superiority of Babylon and Marduk over all mortals and gods was merged in the construction of the Etemenanki Ziggurat, which at the time was thought to be the most massive temple in the world (and which provided the inspiration for the fable of the Tower of Babel).

3. What does the “theologization of history” refer to? Give an example of what you mean.

The tripartite structure establishes an enclosed world of gods; an enclosed world of mortals that tell stories about gods; and a mechanism of indirect interaction via cultic practices (rituals, sacrifices, offerings, festivals, and divination).

Over time, some societies chafed at the idea of the gods being so aloof and looked for signs that the gods influenced human history. This provided an explanation for how what happens to us as humans seems not to be totally under our control. The gods determined or affected the course of human history, the welfare of the state, and the wellbeing of the people; they did this by sending victories and defeats, health and illness, prosperity and disaster.

This idea developed into the use of *religious guilt* and *divine punishment* as a political tool in ancient society. Rulers and groups could use betrayal of the gods and divine wrath in particular to discredit previous rulers or foreign enemies.

This could also be applied not just to the whole community but to individuals forging a relationship with a “personal god,” notably in Babylon and Assyria. Related to this is the idea of judgment after death—the gods taking direct action to determine the course of an individual’s afterlife.

EC1. According to the text, the original three spheres or dimensions ascribed to polytheism (by the Roman scholar Varro) are all of the following EXCEPT:

(d) quadratic theology

EC2. This week’s reading was “Poem of the Righteous Sufferer”. How would you describe the main character’s attitude toward the gods? Give an example of what you mean.

This is subjective, but there are a number of things that can be mentioned here, including the protagonist’s expectation of suffering—and even a certain amount of pride therein, as proof of his piety toward Marduk. He sees the other gods as petty and at cross-purposes; what matters is the judgment of Marduk, who is remote and on the other side of the troubles he experiences. He fears the potency of Marduk and the disruptive capriciousness of the other gods. Ultimately he feels the suffering he faces in life and at the hands of the minor gods allows him to earn maturity and the recognition from Marduk he believes he has earned.