

Paganism is not a Religion: The Social Significance of the Ancient Gods

Matthew Raphael Johnson
Johnstown, PA

I.

One of the central tenets of modernism is that human history is a more or less uninterpreted line of intellectual development from the “primitive” to the “advanced.” In 2017, it means being able to produce a detailed chart on which all societies can be measured. Any society can be given a rank in its development. This is not so much an argued thesis as it is an axiom that is itself the foundation of argument. It is often held unconsciously. The basic prejudice is that since technology in 2017 is more powerful than in 1979, then human history is the development of technological prowess and power.

The “advanced” society is a liberal, capitalist and mostly privatized in its main institutions. It is highly oligarchic, individualist and sports a small, largely anonymous ruling class and a highly centralized media and educational system. It is scientific in that all truths must be expressible in quantitative formulae and all “forces” of “nature” are impersonal. There is no purpose or meaning inherent in nature or thought. There is no “human nature” except that of one that grows with technological development.

Self-interest is the primary moral doctrine in these “advanced” societies. To be “primitive” is to be authoritarian, religious and generally traditionalist in outlook. The “advanced” life is urban, anonymous, and mobile. It has a strictly hierarchical structure based largely on monetary income. The modern stresses the “procedural” aspects of society as identical with the most just and most moral, eg the adversarial court system is most likely to produce the best results. All things are measured by their ability to produce the most desired things – including personalities – at the lowest rate of cost, investment and effort.

The “advanced” modern believes that ancient peoples, therefore, were radically inferior to moderns. Simply put, they knew fewer things and saw the natural order as autonomous and personal. “Myth” was the primary means they understood the world, inventing stories that “explained” phenomenon that “modern science” has understood in a non-personalized way. The defender of the “advanced” society argues universally that ancients “worshiped” the gods in the same sense Christians worship Jesus. “Myths” functioned as holy texts in the same sense as the Koran is the text of Islam. Taken together, they were manifestations of a single phenomenon, “religion.”

This mindset is based on a crude form of circular reasoning: the scientific revolutionary defines truth as quantitative, therefore, a society is advanced when it uses sciences based on quantity. The more a society sees things in quantitative terms, it is likely more “advanced” and “sophisticated.” Quantity is the language of public truth while quality is the language of private preference. The moral life is entirely qualitative and hence, cannot rise to truth at all.

While the external world is understood according to a very strict and rigorous mathematical idea, the moral order is purely internalized and subjective. The opposite of “truth.” In other words, most aspects of human life can be reduced to mathematics except moral reasoning. The natural order is supposed to be subjected to human control, granting the elite great power. How this power is to be used is not amenable to truth claims at all.

Put in even cruder terms, the more “religious” a society, the less advanced it is and the

more it requires outside intervention to actualize their potential. Its metaphysics is nominalist in that there is no inherent meaning or purpose to the world unless the scientific mind creates it. Meaning comes from the human mind forcing itself onto the “outside” world. This (elite) mind is seen as separate from this external universe. This is the intellectual “default setting” of the modern thinker.

If this modernist narrative is harmed, then the entire organization of the western world has no further purpose or justification. There is nothing special about capitalism or media centralization. In fact, there would be good reason to hold that the “primitives” were possibly more just and scientifically accurate than the modern. The dividing line, broadly speaking, is between “myth” and “fact.” They have nothing in common.

II.

This paper argues that the stories of the pagan gods, the “myths” are not “religious.” they are not “private preferences” but the very constitution of ancient societies. They are not “true” or “false” but rather the expression of the ancient world's conception of truth. They are the foundational texts of a society and are not literal beliefs. The ancient elite never believed in “gods” as they were never meant to be believed in as real people. The simple people might have believed in a literal Zeus, the elite of a society did not.

Gods were always meant to be expressions of a society's identity and were civic expressions. They are “gods” that were “worshiped” only in the sense that Superman is “worshiped” among young Americans. The statue of liberty is a “goddess” in the ancient sense. She is an expression of the American conception of liberty and not seen as a literal woman. The Pledge of Alliance is not a liturgy in the modern sense, but it is in the ancient one. The “gods” are archetypes and symbols of very profound social truths learned from experience. They are not actual personalities.

A “myth” is not a religious text and the “gods” were not meant to be seen as real beings. Hesiod was not a “prophet of the divine” and no one treated him as such. “Gods” are not analogous to the God of Christianity or Islam. They refer to two different things confused by the use of the same term. “Religion” too is misleadingly used to cover both sorts of phenomena. “Pagan” mysteries were not primarily religious. They were civic, scientific or philosophical.¹

The use of the term “religion” has reached absurd levels of elasticity. The term “god” likewise. If the devotees of the pagan myths were religious, then so are Eric Clapton's fans. Rock concerts have almost every mark of a religious liturgy, but no one would call it that except as a creative analogy. Thus, the dividing line is very arbitrary. GMA Grube's work on Plato makes the simple statement: “The Greek *theos* and the English word God are by no means synonymous.”

Grube states that the term “god” was used for anything that lasted more than a human life. The most secular cosmologists such as Thales used the term “*theos*” to refer to any substratum upon which the world was founded (the archetype of water, in his sense, not literal “water.”). He states, “It is true that these abstractions were clothed with human forms by Greek artists and poets.”² This is the precise thesis argued here.

That the ancients had a tendency to personalized scientific ideas does not make them a religion. BB King's guitar, “Lucille” would then be a “god” in this sense. BB did not believe his guitar was a person. Playing it with feeling is not a form of religious devotion, and neither are

1 Dreyer, Boris. “Heroes, Cults, and Divinity,” Alexander the Great: A New History ed. Waldemar Heckel and Lawrence Tritle. Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009

2 Grube, GMA. Plato's Thought.. Beacon 1935, 150-151

fans when they post pictures of it on their walls.

In the same sense, ancients did not believe the “gods” lived on a mountain visible from many Greek cities. If the intellectual system of Egypt are religions, then so is the “Dog-pound” at Cleveland Browns home games. By this definition, the Republican National Convention with all its rituals and performances would be a “religious” phenomena. These events have the same purpose as the ancient myths. They represent greater philosophical and social ideas that are effectively described in stories rather than in dry, expository prose.

The only thing that keeps modern scholars from making this elementary distinction is the prejudice that ancients were “primitive” and hence, were apt to believe such tales as literally true. If this prejudice were dismissed, the myths would be seen as civic forms of self-expression, not religious entities. When the middle-aged concert-goer says “Eric Clapton is god” on the other hand, they are merely being enthusiastic, not religious.

The *Theogony* of Hesiod is a work of philosophy in metric form. The mere use of characters representing concepts such as “reason” or “chaos” make this a “religious” book. There is no excuse for that sloppy thinking. The characters in Hesiod's compilation are manifestly scientific and philosophical concepts, not religious ones. The ultimate conclusion is that the transcendent categories of reason must be ascendant against self-interest and emotion, the typical traits of the “titans” of the earth.

III.

Paganism has no theological identity, no definition and no doctrine. This is because it is not a religion. It has no doctrine, no creator God (rather, they arrange preexisting matter) and no heretics. The stories are fragments, with a few exceptions from Ovid, and they changed constantly depending on political or social circumstances. For the Catholic, change in doctrine is to step away from truth. Pagan stories were not seen as “true” in any literal sense, and we know this in part because they changed constantly.

The term “religion” and “god” is used in both cases, so it becomes very easy to see them as expressions of the same concept. This is unfortunate. Moderns approach paganism as a “religion” like any other. They then impose Christian or Islamic attitudes towards God onto the ancient devotee of Athena. They have nothing in common. Ancient paganism has more in common with philosophy and literature than theology.

E. Swedenborg writes:

The idolatries of nations in ancient times originated in a knowledge of correspondences, since all things visible on earth correspond; thus not only the trees, but all kinds of beasts and birds, also fishes, and all other things. The ancients, who had a knowledge of correspondences, made for themselves images corresponding to heavenly things, and took delight in them because they signified such things as belong to heaven and the church. . . . When the knowledge of correspondences had perished, their posterity, because these images and figures had been placed by the ancients in and near their temples, began to worship them as holy, and finally as deities.³

“Correspondence,” in the sense Swedenborg uses the term above, means the rejection of

3 Quoted from Kuhn, AJ (1957) Blake on the Nature and Origins of Pagan Gods and Myths. Modern Language Notes 72(8): 563-572

nominalist ontology. A symbol is not the opposite of the substantial, but a gateway into it. It is the expression of the outer contours of a Platonic Form. The gods of the ancient world were such symbols. These stories and depictions changed not merely to make room for social change, but also to express a deeper knowledge.

Grube states:

By saying that love, or victory, is god, or, to be more accurate, a god, was meant first and foremost that it is more than human, not subject to death, everlasting. . . . Any power, any force we see at work in the world, which is not born with us and will continue after we are gone could thus be called a god, and most of them were.” In this state of mind, and with this sensitiveness to the superhuman character of many things which happen to us, and which give us, it may be, sudden stabs of joy or pain which we do not understand, a Greek poet could write lines like: “Recognition between friends is *theos*.” It is a state of mind which obviously has no small bearing on the much-discussed question of monotheism or polytheism in Plato, if indeed it does not rob the question of meaning altogether.⁴

These words have been forgotten in modern scholarship. The term “*theos*” today has absolutely no meaning since its used for objects radically different from one another. “God” in the Greek sense referred to any stable form of knowledge, that which is above and beyond physical change. Thales can refer to “gods” as synonymous with the water archetype he's famed for theorizing is the foundation of all things.⁵ “Water” is a god in the Greek sense, but certainly not the Christian sense. To use the term “god” for both of these is absurd. Because the term “god” is used, the term “worship” is also used, compounding the error.

Ryan Stone, writing for Ancient Origins, writes:

This effort of combining all non-Christian religions under one umbrella was, in fact, a clever strategy by the early Christians to remove the “pagan” faiths altogether. Using the Norse traditions as an example, the Vikings of the early medieval period had no true name for their religious following. In truth, the word “religion” would have been an unknown, foreign term to them. The Nordic tribes preferred the word “customs” as—like the Greeks and Romans—their rituals, beliefs, and traditions were undefined and fluidly interpreted, orally passed down rather than rigidly studied. There was no all-encompassing word for the belief in the *Aesir* and *Vanir*, and the various other beings and deities the ancient Norse worshiped, and there was no written text discussing their practices until the Christian author Snorri Sturluson wrote their mythology down in the 13th century.⁶

He goes on to make the claim that Christian missionaries invented a “pagan faith” to have an easier target to attack. The result was a sort of “church” that was then debated by Christian scholars. Almost all terms in theology are anachronistic. The Romans held that “gods” ruled the earth in the same sense that the law of gravity rules downward velocity. Jupiter defined and symbolized the office of the emperor and was not a being in his own right. There are still history

4 Grube, GMA. *Plato's Thought*. Beacon Press, 150

5 Tarnas, R. *Archetypal Principles*. *Archai: The Journal of Archetypal Cosmology* 1(1): 2009: 23-35

6 Stone, Ryan. (2014) *The True Meaning of Paganism*. Ancient Origins. August.

<http://www.ancient-origins.net/myths-legends/true-meaning-paganism-002306?nopaging=1>

professors claiming that Romans thought the emperor “a god.” Did anyone not notice that he died? That he made errors? Did anyone notice that he could be easily overthrown? Are we to believe that the leadership of the Roman empire, its Senate and local nobles, were incapable of noticing these things? Obviously, the term “divine” is not used in the same way St. Paul uses the term. So how is it being used?

The emperor was “divine” in the sense that his role as a conqueror of chaos was a recapitulation of the architecture of natural law. The notion of a civilization was the opposite of chaos. The “world” never referred to everything in existence, but only the civilized world that was comprehensible to those living in it. Chaos had no name.

In the *Institutes of Gaius*, we read:

Subject to divine right are *res sacrae* and *res religiosae*. *Res sacrae* are those consecrated to the gods above; *res religiosae* are those dedicated to the gods below. That alone is considered *sacrum* which has been consecrated under the authority of the Roman people, for instance by *lex* or *senatus consultum* passed to that effect. On the other hand, a thing is made *religiosum* by the act of a private person, when he buries a corpse in his own land, provided that the dead man’s funeral is his affair. In the provinces, however, the general opinion is that land does not become *religiosum*, because the ownership of provincial land belongs to the Roman people or to the emperor, and individuals have only possession and enjoyment of it. Still, even if it be not *religiosum*, it is considered as such. Again, though a thing consecrated in the provinces otherwise than under the authority of the Roman people is not strictly *sacrum*, it is nevertheless considered as such. Moreover *res sanctae*, such as the walls and gates of a city, are in a manner subject to divine right.⁷

This is the legal definition of “sacred” in Roman law. It is not a religious concept. The “sacred,” as is well-known, refers to the setting apart of something for a fundamentally definitive use. The “Roman people” are the arbiters of the sacred. This means that it is not a religious element, since revelation can not come from popular acclaim. Something becomes “religious” when a corpse is buried on the land. The land is then clearly set aside for a purpose that has nothing to do with economics, farming or any other mundane concern. The “dead” are those that make a mundane pursuit possible at all. A religious object is one connected to the dead. Further, the veneration of the dead was identical to the veneration of tradition. The “dead” referred to a very real, practical link that connected the living to natural law whose precepts tradition makes manifest.

In the edited volume *Selected Studies in Roman Religion*, H. Wagenvoort writes,

Of the meaning of the word *pious* and *pietas* Wissowa says that the Romans meant the conduct of the man who performed all his duties towards the deity and his fellow human beings fully and in every respect. As *pietas adversus deos* (piety towards the gods), he goes on to say, the concept comes very close to *religio*, which gradually replaced it to such an extent that *pietas* came to denote, in a more restricted sense, the fulfillment of duty and virtuous behavior of men to one

7 Rives, James (2012) *Control of the Sacred in Roman Law*. In: *Law and Religion in the Roman Republic*, Olga Tellegen-Couperus, ed. Brill. 166-167

another, and particularly between blood relatives and relations by marriage.⁸

Piety and religious ideas were the following of natural law, which of course, has a superhuman origin. If natural law exists, then a very obvious conclusion is that a lawgiver must exist. Laws are not inherent to matter and certainly cannot be said to “evolve” at precisely the same rate as everything else in the cosmic ecosystem. It is often the case that terms such as “venerate” is confused with the very different “worship.” The latter is personal and places the deity in a position of manifest, mysterious superiority. The suppliant is dependent on it in a radical way. Veneration is far less dramatic. It is a matter of showing respect to a personalized natural law. Stories and myths were invented, altered and rewritten as an expression of civilization.

Plutarch writes:

The wiser of the priests call not only the Nile Osiris and the sea Typhon, but they simply give the name of Osiris to the whole source and faculty creative of moisture, believing this to be the cause of generation and the substance of life-producing seed; and the name of Typhon they give to all that is dry, fiery, and arid, in general, and antagonistic to moisture.⁹

This is just one example of dozens where Plutarch makes the argument that these gods were never meant to be seen as actual beings, but were symbols of social significance. To “worship” them is tantamount to expressing loyalty to one's civilizational constitution. The human mind seems to have a natural inclination to personalize everything.

Another example is from John West's work on ancient Egyptian myths:

The image is concrete (bird, snake, dog, etc.), and it represents a synthesis, a complex of qualities, functions and principles. Careful study of the symbols usually reveals the reason why the given symbol, and not some other, was chosen. So the bird represents the volatile, or 'spirit'. The stork, which returns to its own nest, hence a migratory bird par excellence, is the bird chosen for the 'soul'. The serpent symbolises duality and dualising power. The dog symbolises digestion, but given the dog's preference for carrion over fresh meat, the choice of this symbol emphasises that aspect of digestion which is the transformation of dead matter into living. So Anubis, opener of the way, presides over the deceased and takes part in the ritual of the weighing of the heart. For death is not an end, it is a transformation.¹⁰

These are the gods. In Egypt, they are symbols in the true sense: the introduction into the world of Forms. Personification is a natural human tendency. In *Symbol and the Symbolic: Ancient Egypt, Science, and the Evolution of Consciousness*, we read,

In civilizations such as ancient Egypt, what we in our present presumptuousness call "primitive animal worship" was not a worship of the animal itself, but a

8 Wagenvoort, H (1980) *Pietas: Selected Studies in Roman Religion*. Brill, 7

9 Plutarch (1936) *Moralia: Isis and Osiris*. Loeb Classical Library, 81

10 West, John Anthony (1993) *The Serpent in the Sky: The High Wisdom of Ancient Egypt*. Quest, 131

consecration made to the vital function which any animal particularly incarnates. It was not, in reality, a worship; it was a meditation used to support and clarify an essential function of nature, that is to say, a Meter, a god. The Egyptians saw the jackal as incarnating certain characteristics, functions and processes of universal Nature. The jackal is an animal which tears the flesh of its prey into pieces, which it buries and does not eat until they rot. From this real, observed behavior, it becomes a symbol for both a metaphysical and physical process: digestion.¹¹

The gods are or functional types, summarizing the qualities of and in a set of symbols. It is a most efficient way of transmitting knowledge at its most fundamental. The human soul is a bird with a human head. Most historians will assume that the Egyptians believed the soul was therefore a bird with a man's head attached. The belief in a literal set of "gods" would force this conclusion. Again, Grube says, "But this anthropomorphism, though it certainly affected the popular conception of the divinities, was, to the educated Greek at least, merely symbolical."¹²

A popular website, "Land of Pyramids," describes Ra this way: "Ra, the Supreme Solar God was believed to travel across the sky each day in a Solar boat, and pass through the realms of the underworld (Duat) each night." While it might be true that simple people believed this, the priestly elite did not. Rather, it was a way to comprehend the fundamentals of astronomy in a way that avoided the dryness of expository prose, or at least, its equivalent. It is the exoteria of a deep truth about the natural order.

The conception has Egyptian roots and comes from "ka-maat." Ma'at is the Egyptian "goddess" of justice. Ma'at was a moral principle, the foundation of the Egyptian "constitution." Early monarchs called themselves the "lords of Ma'at" to mean that they had mastered the basic conceptions of justice and knew how to bring it about. "Order" meant right order. It was not worshiped in Egypt any more than it is in modern societies.

By definition, "order" meant the true and good order. There was no such thing as a bad order. A "system" based on falsehood, in any sense, was not an "order," but only a regime based on lies that will soon collapse.

Part of the problem is that modern historians are almost exclusively secular. They are almost all liberal in the broad sense, meaning that they have little first hand knowledge of what it is to believe anything. What does it mean to worship the sun? Was the sun a person? The sun was never worshiped. It was a reminder that God is everywhere. It is the symbol for the royal crown and hence, the victor over chaos.

What did "worship" mean? This is surprisingly sparse in the literature on these myths. Mostly secular, historians have no idea what it means to worship anything, so they use the words in the most vague sense. Given that their audience is exclusively other secular historians, it is really not a huge problem. The question will not be asked. "Worship," however, in these stories seems to be a faithful obedience rather than a personal devotion.

"Cosmic harmony" is not inherently a religious notion, but both a scientific and metaphysical one. In the time of the Pharaohs, the idea of Ma'at was this "cosmic harmony" and justice. As a goddess, justice is a mere personification in Ma'at. To personalize abstractions is an important means of communicating its content. Ma'at bound all good actions into a transcendent conception of "good." It is a Platonic form, so to speak, not a person.

11 De Lubiez, RA Schwaller (1981) *Symbol and the Symbolic: Ancient Egypt, Science, and the Evolution of Consciousness*. Inner Traditions, 13

12 Grube, op cit 151

Ma'at is described in the *Instruction of Ptahhotep* this way:

Ma'at is good and its worth is lasting.
It has not been disturbed since the day of its creator,
whereas he who transgresses its ordinances is punished.
It lies as a path in front even of him who knows nothing.
Wrongdoing has never yet brought its venture to port.
It is true that evil may gain wealth but the strength of truth is that it lasts;
a man can say: "It was the property of my father."

This is anything but a religious notion. It is a common philosophical motif on natural law. Had this been written in normal, expository prose and would have been called a work of ancient philosophy. The *Instruction* is not a religious work. Ma'at is thus a secular, political idea later taking poetic form. Certainly, the ultra-secular academic world has an interest in trying to make “religious” myths as varied as possible, hence showing their radical relativity. Ultimately, the difference between religious writing and philosophy is the use of poetic characters rather than abstract concepts.

Ma'at is the daughter of the Sun and the Moon. No one believed the Sun and Moon actually copulated. This means simply that she derives from both reason and feeling; the male and the female. It is a communitarian idea and not a literal story about an actual personality. Cosmic harmony can be approached by reason and is a product of a universal reason. Such a thing almost has to be depicted in accessible, personalized terms. Being the daughter also of the moon goddess, this simply means that the cosmos is also based on harmony: the cooperation between man and woman based on the family. Thierry Benderitter describes it as follows:

Ma'at is at the heart of understanding Egyptian civilization in its entirety, and is the foundation of its longevity. It is bound to and confused with ethics (including justice and truth), with universal order (cosmic order, social order and political order) and with social integration based on communication and confidence. The foundation of Egyptian cultural identity, ma'at is the great creation of the thinkers of the Old Kingdom. It is she who ultimately offers an ideological setting to the Pharaonic State, both at the level of justification of its existence and in that of the rules which define good government.¹³

These are purely secular concerns. Depicting Ma'at as a goddess is identical to symbolizing liberty with the bell in Philadelphia. To “worship” her is the same, more or less, as visiting the Statue of Liberty. Patriotic sites and symbols come complete with rituals and things that smack of religion, but are not. It is merely how humans show respect to foundational truths.

IV.

The story of Prometheus is another important example. The backdrop is the famous war between gods and titans. There is no “war” possible between “divine” beings and mortals of whatever sort, so the entire story could not have been taken as factual. The leading titans were literally earthly: time and earth herself (or Cronus and Gaia).

The very fact that Hesiod depicts Uranus, or the “heavens” as the daughter of Gaia shows

13 Benderitter, Thierry (2015) Ma'at. Osirisnet

that these were never meant to be taken as real people. The “heavens” do not refer to the heaven of Christians, but refer to what one might call today as meteorology, the sky. The defeat of the titans was continued in the work of the state: to keep the passions in check. Titans were representatives of the lower passions while the gods were representatives of the rational faculty. Like human reason itself, it was never perfectly employed and was always vitiated by self interest and other drives.

Regardless, Prometheus sided with Zeus during this war, thus earning his name, literally meaning “forethought.” The very fact that different versions of this story co-existed without a problem strongly suggest there was no canonical version at all, and these changed according to social need.

The basic story is that Prometheus sought to ease the sacrificial requirements of humans and offered Zeus, as a trick, only bones and fat rather than the best meat. Realizing the trick, Zeus then takes fire from mankind, only to have it restored again by Prometheus. Soon, Zeus uses Pandora, the first woman, to rain more troubles on mankind. Fire, now apparently a permanent possession of humanity, led to civilizational development and technology. As punishment for this, Prometheus was famously chained to a rock while his liver was torn out of his side daily.

There is no distinction between the memory of a hero and the “worship” of a god in the ancient world. The Platonic Academy itself had an “altar” to Prometheus. In fact, it was nothing more than a place where a statue of him and a fire might have been placed. Calling it an “altar” is just lazy. But once called an altar, then all that occurs near it is hence “religious” rather than philosophical. It is circular reasoning. This is not an altar in the religious sense because a) the Academy didn't “worship” in this manner, b) Prometheus was not a god and c) there is very little evidence of “worship” elsewhere. It is a mere reminder to the students of the importance of humanism. Fire is an element referring to cultural energy, sexuality, power and the will to survive. It eventually becomes all those things that a culture develops to extend its life. There is no religious element to this.

V.

In his *On the Matter of the Gods*, Clifford Ando makes a similar argument. He states, among other things, that the fact the Roman Senate legislated which gods were real and which should be worshiped proves that these were not gods in our modern Christian or Islamic sense. A real God does not receive his reality from politicians.

He further argues that the lack of any creed or belief system further demonstrates that terms like “god” or “religion” are misleading and the result of sloppy or biased research. The ancient concept of the “divine” was radically altered by both Yahweh and Christ, who called himself by that very name, “I am.” The Roman conception was far more elastic than this. Using the term, even in the early Christian era, caused great confusion.

In another work of Ando's, he states:

Unwillingness to countenance a scale of divine potentialities that included both Augustus and Christ can only impede attempts to understand the foreign thoughtworld of the ancient Mediterranean: we must understand how Vitruvius could believe that both Augustus and God had “divine minds.” As with any traditional deity, the emperor's divinity implied neither moral perfection nor true omnipotence, and, with Vergil, many probably understood that an emperor's

animus was in many ways constrained by the mortality of his body. Menander did not suggest, ultimately, that the emperor himself controlled the weather; rather, men should pray to the gods for the emperor's safety because his special blessedness positioned him to mediate between the divine and the mortal. When Aelius Aristides wrote that the "mere mention of the emperor's name" caused men to rise and in a single breath "pray to the gods on the emperor's behalf, and to the emperor for his own affairs," he participated in the same theological position: the emperor's exalted position allowed him to exercise godlike power among mortal men, even as it prevented him from receiving aid, save from the gods.¹⁴

Ando is exasperated with the unprofessional beliefs of professional historians. To call the emperor a god only meant that he was in union with the archetype, the natural law that led some men to carve out empires in the wilderness. The "world" was not "everything" as the modern today says. The world was Roman civilization. To "rule the world" meant to rule the expansion of Rome and her possessions that followed the natural order. Believe it or not, there are well paid professors of history who believe that the Romans were so primitive that they did not realize there was a world outside Rome.¹⁵ Ando is seeking to protect the innocence of these historians. Using misleading language is the primary reason this confusion has become worse over time.¹⁶

Ando brings up one of the most stupid of the manifestations of this religious confusion: the idea that the Roman emperor was "worshiped as a god." More than anything else, this example shows how terms like "god" and "worship" have no relationship to our modern understanding of the terms. This confusion is found in statements like this:

In order for the Roman people to be open to the idea of emperor worship, the imperial cult had to appear to develop spontaneously as a unique Roman institution. Augustus began a religious revival to restore the republic from the civil wars. This also served to explicitly link Augustus to the well-being of Roman society. Through the use of religion, politics, and propaganda, Augustus managed to establish an imperial cult that recognized his divinity upon death. He modified the conception of genius, which resembled a living spirit that was present in all living things, people, and gods. Augustus adopted the worship of his genius as a way for the public to unofficially worship his potential divinity. The worship of Augustus' genius did not make Augustus divine, but was a way to publicly acknowledge the "spirit" of the emperor. Sources tell us that Augustus decreed that a libation should be poured to his genius at every banquet.¹⁷

The author is ludicrously and humorously confused. All she says is that the virtues of the emperor are tightly bound to the fortunes of the empire. This is hardly interesting. In this work, the author refuses to define "divine" or "genius," leaving the reader more ignorant than before he began reading. Calling Octavian "*theos*" is proof of the thesis of this article: the term did not mean "god" in any modern Christian or Islamic sense. It was merely his spirit that all living

14 Ando, Clifford. *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*. The University of California Press, 2000: 391

15 One of these poor creatures is Indra Kagis McEwen. She states this in her *Vitruvius: Writing the Body of Architecture* (137). I'd put the publisher and the year here, but she's not worth the effort.

16 This is similar to the absurdity that "Greeks" couldn't tell the difference between the name and the object named.

17 Crawford, C. (2014) *The Foundation of the Roman Imperial Cult*. Harvard

things possessed. Alexander's being a "son of Zeus" is not a claim that his mother was impregnated by the paternal archetype (which the author above clearly implies). It means that the emperor's job was to conquer chaos and disorder as Zeus himself did. The terms "divine" and "worship" are misleading and confusing.

Ramsay's more famous description reads

...in no part of the world was there such fervent and sincere loyalty to the emperors as in Asia. Augustus had been a saviour to the Asian peoples, and they deified him as the Saviour of mankind, and worshiped him with the most whole-hearted devotion as the 'present deity.'¹⁸

The confusion of terms, yet again, makes this description ludicrous. Many people are saviors. Great generals can take victory out of the hands of defeat. They are "gods" in the sense that they have shown manifest powers to save a society seen to be defeated. This is what the term meant at the time. "Lord and God" was allegedly Domitian's title, meaning the exact same thing. By this argument, the "landlord" is a divine being. The Greek "tyrant" was an illegitimate, authoritarian ruler and a "temple" was primarily a place of "worship." The confusion of word meanings over time have made understanding the ancient world almost impossible.¹⁹

Some correctives exist. A popular blog reads: "The cult paid to the living Augustus was more like that of heroes and benefactors than that of the actual gods and was particularly strong in the Greek East, where it built on Greek and Near Eastern traditions of ruler cults."²⁰ Sort of. It shows that "god" did not mean the literal creator and ruler of heaven and earth. It only meant that the Emperor had the ability to bring order out of chaos. He was the sustainer of civilization. "Actual gods" were both intellectual archetypes and "heroes and benefactors."²¹

Another author deflates the terms to more manageable proportions:

It was during the reign of Domitian when the imperial cult became a factor in unifying the empire in Asia Minor. The provincial cult allowed the Roman network of social obligations to be extended to virtually the whole population. If you lived within the empire, then you were a social client of the Emperor and owed him supreme allegiance.²²

This is what the "cult of the emperor" meant. George Washington is a "god and savior" to Americans in this sense. Therefore, using terms like "God" has to end, since it creates confusion that, while occasionally funny, harms one's understanding of ancient history. It serves the interest of modernity because it suggests that there were "millions and millions" of Gods in the ancient world. Hence, so the argument goes, Yahweh was only one of "millions." This is far from true. Yahweh as creator and sustainer *ex nihilo*, was almost totally unique. "Creator gods" were architects, symbols of order and "number" in the world, not creators "*ex nihilo*." Roman and Mesopotamian societies had no concept of "zero," so *ex nihilo* creation was not a conceptual

18 W. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1909) 115

19 Hekster O.J. "Descendants of Gods: Legendary Genealogies in the Roman Empire" In *The Impact of Imperial Rome on Religions, Rituals and Religious Life in the Roman Empire*, edited by Lukas de Blois et al. Leiden: Brill, 2005, 24-35

20 <http://earlyworldhistory.blogspot.com/2012/03/roman-imperial-cult.html>

21 Price, S.R.F., *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*. Cambridge University Press, 1984

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

option. These “creator gods” were “worshiped” in the same sense that a philosopher honors truth or objectivity. That ancients had “rites” and festivals celebrating this makes it no more a religion than the Deadheads that used to follow Jerry Garcia around on tour make his music divine revelation.

It further serves the interests of modernity further because it permits moderns to see themselves as the pinnacle of progress. Only the “ignorant ancients” worshiped gods, we do not, they clearly imply. To argue that these “gods” were archetypes made into relatable, personalized beings shows them to be far more sophisticated than the Enlightenment gave them credit for.

VI.

This paper has taken on a substantial and complex topic. Its ultimate end was to define the notion of “god” or “religion” into a usable concept. It's presently useless. A God must be a creator and must be all powerful. Otherwise, it is just a spirit, hero or power. Religion too must be based around the attempt to unify oneself with this god, or else it is merely a philosophy or a form of poetry. The mere existence of stereotypical ritual does not show something to be a religion.

Over time, sloppy reasoning has equated Yahweh or Allah with Hermes and Poseidon. Since the stories show these beings acting in very human ways, they are not seen as “gods” in the normal sense. St. Peter writes in his second epistle: “For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.” Here, Peter is distinguishing the Christian faith from the mere analogies of the Romans surrounding him.

The ancient myths are poetic tales that give a human face to natural forces. To understand, people have to make the subject matter about them, to give it a human personality. The human mind struggles with abstraction. Our devotion or hatred can only be directed at a person, not an abstraction.

The above gives ample evidence to the thesis that the gods of the ancient world were not “worshiped” as the Christian worships Yahweh. The relationship was radically different. Modern scholars, overwhelmingly secular, merely take the present ideas of god or religion and impose it on the ancients. Any form of ritual action is called “religious.” Any being with some supernatural powers is called “divine.” Hesiod did not think of himself as a revealer of divine truth. This alone shows that he was aware these were myths. Concepts such as reason, emotion, necessity, war or navigation are not religious subjects, but they were the domain of many gods.

Terms such as “god” need to be removed from students of the classical world. “Religion” too has to be defined with greater rigor and should not be used to substitute for ignorance. As Eric Clapton fans literally do not see him as a god, neither did the ancients see Zeus. Furthermore, in removing paganism from the realm of religion, it means that Christians can see the beauty and truth encoded in them, rather than a demonic set of tricks. Myths were secular, never religious.