



Reading: Acts 7:51-60

Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Lord Jesus Christ, grant that, in all our sufferings in witness to your truth, we may learn to look steadfastly to heaven and see by faith the glory that is to be revealed, and, filled with the Holy Spirit, may learn to pray for our persecutors, as Stephen your first martyr prayed for his murderers to you, blessed Jesus, where you stand at the right hand of God to aid all who suffer for you, our only mediator and advocate. Amen.

--Book of Common Prayer, Stephen

Class #5:

- **Greco-Roman Religion**
- **The Defense of the Faith: Christian Apologetic within Greco-Roman Society**
- **Christians and Military Service:**
 - **What Loyalty or Obedience Is Owed to the State?**
 - **What Civic Duties Are Binding upon Christians?**
- **Martyrdom: Reading the Tales of the Martyrs**

Greco-Roman Religion

Best seen as a patchwork of traditional local observances, segmented in ways that reflected the segmentation of society into various social divisions.

- Thus, for example, there might be a divinity who served as a patron for the city as a whole and another divinity who was the peculiar patron of the one's professional guild (e.g. the goddess who was the patron of goldsmiths).
- People who came from a different ethnic background, city, region or profession therefore worshipped different gods, but this was seen as normal and predictable and not as a problem.
 - If I live in Corinth, why would I need to worship the god of the Ephesians?
 - If I am a goldsmith, why would I need to worship the god of the linen merchants?

Note that this is one of the ways in which Christianity was completely different from the traditional religions:

- It claimed that everyone needed to give up their traditional gods and way of life and worship just this one new God, who was not just a local god or a professional patron but the Lord of all. This claim is why some people found Christianity so incredibly appealing and why others found it so terribly frightening. To refuse to "acknowledge things divine" in the traditional way was atheism and would call down the wrath of the gods and lead society into a social and moral collapse.

To understand why Christianity was seen as a threat, let's reflect upon a similar modern phenomenon, that of cults (authoritarian, countercultural, high-demand religious organizations):

- a) Have you ever had a friend, acquaintance or family member who joined a cult or an authoritarian, extremist church or religious organization?
- b) How did that cult group or authoritarian religious organization understand itself?
 - o Understanding themselves in this way, how did the group's members contrast themselves with the broader society or other religious groups?
- c) What did you think about these claims?
- d) Why did you worry about what this group might do to your friend, acquaintance or family member?

Like cults, primitive Christianity challenged the traditional ways that power was structured (e.g. the roles of women in subordination to their father and husband and of children in subordination to their parents), since women were often the first family members to convert and tried to raise their children in such a way that the children might also adopt the new faith.

- The Greeks and Romans were afraid of foreign cults. As a recent study has observed, "the very nature of...'foreign' evoked various unpleasant associations: the smell of magic and profit-making, connotations of license or ecstasy, revelry and sexual promiscuity and a special appeal to women and people of low status. Foreign cults also tended to be associated with private or secret ritual [e.g. at night], which in its turn fostered all kinds of suspicions" (H.S. Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion: Ter Unus, Isis, Dionysos, Hermes*, Leiden: Brill, 1990, 121-122)
- If the discipline and honor of the family were to be preserved, it was obviously unsatisfactory for women, being weaker (i.e. gullible and undiscerning and unable to resist temptation, charlatans, or possession by spirits) to gather privately or hold private ceremonies. Insofar as the integrity, good order and honor of the family were prerequisites for a well-ordered society, women's religious activities need to be regulated to protect both the family and the society.
- Foreign cults also required authorization from the state authorities to acquire land and to build a temple and any use of these was generally expected to be by foreign residents, not by people with deep local roots.
- To fail to comply with the above was to commit the crime of impiety (*asebeia*), an offense against both the gods and the state and was liable to criminal penalties, up to and including death.
- Misfortunes or disasters in the natural world could also be interpreted as the displeasure of the gods for the inattention given to them due to foreign cults (see Tertullian in NE 135).

Like cults, primitive Christianity also was characterized by

- an apocalyptic worldview (something previously hidden but crucially important has now been revealed);

- eschatological imminence (the wrath of God is about to be revealed against all who are disobedient; final judgment and punishment are close at hand and greatly to be feared);
- the state, the broader society and one's unconverted family members represented as being under the influence or control of spiritual powers hostile to the Gospel;
- a strong moral basis in the instruction given to persons interested in entering the group through conversion/baptism, which indicated
 - the strenuous nature of the divine demand;
 - the ways by which one might become conformed to God's perfect will; including the surrender and proper disposition of one's body, money, resources and time;
 - the emphasis upon a renunciation of one's past life and a break with all that characterized it upon entering the new community.

The Apologists: The Defense of the Faith

ἀπολογία (*apologia*="a formal defense of one's position in response to an accusation" (especially before a court), **not** "an apology" ("I'm sorry!")

These typically

- criticize the use of informants, who make accusations against Christians for bearing the name of Christ, yet themselves are only motivated by a desire to take advantage of the situation and gain an economic advantage from the other's condemnation (Roman authorities had to be careful about this due to the prevalence of people trying to use an accusation of some time type to punish or exploit the innocent or those whose actions, however objectionable, did not require intervention by the state/the courts.)
- refute accusations of cannibalism, incest, corrupting the young, etc. made by pagans against new (esp. foreign) religions in general and Christianity in particular
- assert that Christian morals and the Christian way of life are not a threat to the state, but are superior to pagan morals and the pagan way of life (including criticisms of the immorality of the Greek gods and goddesses, as portrayed in Greek literature) (the Greek gods equated with demons, who desire to lead people into false worship, idolatry and immorality; perhaps making Greco-Roman religion analogous to the secret, socially deviant practice of magic that aimed at harming others by the invocation of amoral spiritual powers)
- argue that Christianity, although it does involve the repudiation of traditional religious practices, should not therefore be regarded as a form of atheism (cf. Justin in NE 60).
- praise the noble aspects of Greek culture (e.g., philosophy), which were often regarded as being derived from the prior practice of the Hebrews