CHAPTER ONE

RECONSIDERING LATE ANTIQUE RELIGION

This work is an investigation of late antique cult in the Korinthia, not a theoretical treatise. The major theoretical assumptions are neither new nor particularly controversial: 1) Process, not events, is important. 2) Religion is a product of its societal and historical context. 3) Archaeology can yield evidence about society. I mention these only because there are scholars working in the field who do not share these assumptions, and it is easier to make them clear in the beginning.

The key, although not unique, theoretical innovation is a partial rejection of the terms “pagan” and “Christian.” The issue is reasonably complicated, and worthy of extended consideration. The root of the problem is, I think, a reversal of cause and effect in some understandings of the Christianization of the ancient world. It is not that paganism gave way to Christianity and thus the pagan state gave way to the Christian state, but rather that a “Christian” state overcame a non-Christian state, and thus Christianity defined and forced out polytheism. The religious transformation followed the civic transformation, and must be understood in this context.

The process of Christianization was, in part, a problem of identification. The monotheistic and exclusionary claims of Christianity struggled in stark contrast to the diverse polytheism of antiquity. Consequently, various religious and political authorities found it necessary and desirable to categorize religious practice and belief. A major component of the practical problems was creating a territorial model where none existed before.

When the emperors decided to favor Christianity and Christians, and shortly thereafter to forbid non-Christian activity, it became necessary to define religious behavior in an exclusive manner. The difficulty of this

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1The influences are far too many and diverse to list here. The investigation began over a decade ago, sparked by comments written by MacMullen ((1981) xii-xiii). Major influences include but are not limited to Asad (1993), Fowden (1993), Gregory (1979a), Herrin (1989), Krauheimer (1983), Price (1984), Renfrew (1985), Shanks and Tilley (1987).
2For a similar error see de Coulanges (1864), where he argued that a movement from ancestral cult to nature religion resulted in the denigration of kinship groups and the elevation of social groups. It is almost universally agreed that he reversed cause and effect in his analysis. Cf. Morris (1987) 111-12.
3This argument has been presented in Rothaus (1996).
4On territorial models, syncretism and eclecticism see Berling (1980) 1-13.
process should not be underestimated. I do not intend to deny that for some
the difference between paganism and Christianity was, at one level, clear.
Augustine elaborated the differences between Rome and the City of God,
and Libanios had his Hellenes and Gigantes. One need only refer to the
battle between the Christian and pagan Neoplatonists over the possession of
Plato to be reminded, however, that even among the rarefied thought of the
intellectuals differentiation was not always simple. As will be demon-
strated, the differentiation was even more difficult for those, educated or
not, engaged in less philosophical religious practices.

Our vision of these boundaries between “pagan” and Christian is further
complicated by our own conscious and unconscious compartmentalization
of historic and social phenomena. I have found the use of set theory helpful
to explicate this situation and our understanding of it. Historians, and most
other humans, tend to think in terms of sets, definable groupings of real
objects sharing common characteristics. The creation of such conceptual
sets has become a quite ordinary thought process. These sets, be they reli-
gious or other, allow the discussion of continuity and discontinuity and
make the overly complex understandable. The sets are, however, a short-
hand designed to reduce complicated reality to manageable concepts. As
such, they can never be completely adequate to the historian, and in fact,
can be a two-edged sword: they can clarify, but they can also distort. The
thrust of my argument is this: the conceptual sets “pagan” and “Christian”
do not always serve adequately to study the religious world of late antiquity.
For some questions, they suffice, but for others they obfuscate.

The standard dichotomy, pagan and Christian, has long been recogniza-
bly false (Figure 1). The set “Christians” can be made with a very simple
definition—those who worship Christ. The boundary of this set is relatively
clear. “Pagans,” however, are a non-set; they can only be defined as those
who do not worship Christ, and there is no external boundary to this group.
For some purposes, for example proselytism, this definition serves perfectly
well. This set, non-set combination is evident in many late-antique sources,
perhaps most notably the Codex Theodosianus.

For the historian, however, this categorization can be disastrous. It be-
gins with assumed superiority of Christianity and a derogatory term--
paganos. Moreover, the division creates a false grouping of people. This
phenomenon has been seen more recently in India, where in the 19th cen-
tury British colonialists coined the term “Hinduism.” The word “Hindu”
has an ancient pedigree, but initially was used as an ethnic, not a religious
determinant. The British, faced with the innumerable sects of India and a
caste system, simply lumped all together in one faux religious tradition:
Hinduism. It is impossible to speak historically of Hinduism and maintain

5 For set theory and its application in cognitive processes and especially historical thought
and analysis see Chaudhuri (1990) 27-37.