

THE GODLESS AND THE GOD-FEARING:
ATHEISM AND SUPERSTITION IN THE EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE

by

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Abstract

The concept of religious deviance is fascinating and has already received attention from classicists, ancient historians, and religious studies scholars. Religious groups that existed in the early Roman Empire, including Jews, Christians, mystery cult initiates, and atheist philosophers, all fall under the broad category of religious deviance. However, little comparison has been made between the sub-categories of atheism and superstition. Inspired by a statement in Plutarch's discourse on superstition, this paper seeks to compare the social and legal acceptability of these two sub-categories during the first two centuries C.E. in the Roman Empire. By examining a variety of sources from social and intellectual elites, as well as judicial and political authorities, two conclusions will be drawn: 1) viewed through a social lens, the unusual practices and rituals of superstitious religious groups were less acceptable than atheism; 2) viewed through a legal and political lens, the threat of political dissension made atheism less acceptable than superstition.

Introduction

The topic of religious validity and the acceptability of various religious practices has long been a point of contention among groups of people. The world's ills have been blamed on religious extremists and non-believers alike, and many a war or court case has been fought on religious grounds. The ancient Roman world has often been given a reputation as a time when religious tolerance was at a high, with native gods from all over the Empire being allowed into the Roman pantheon and worshipped as though they had always been a part of it. As classical scholar Tim Whitmarsh says, "The Roman pantheon was roomy, and there was nothing at all remarkable about an emperor adding another god to it."¹ Yet religious conflict did exist in the Roman Empire; in fact, there are many examples of trouble caused by the religious practices, or non-practices, of certain groups.

Such groups which existed outside the norm of traditional Roman religion are classified by religious studies scholar Jörg Rüpke as "deviant." In the preface to his book *Religious Deviance in the Roman World: Superstition or Individuality?*, Rüpke defines religious deviance as "individual religious behavior at or beyond the margins of general approval."² This paper will examine religious deviance at the group level rather than the individual level, but Rüpke's definition still remains relevant. Religious groups such as Jews and Christians, as well as groups which practiced cult activities or did not practice any religious activities at all, can all be considered to be outside the borders which marked "general approval."

Within the category of deviant religious practices, there exist two extremes: superstition and atheism. Superstition (*superstitio*), rather than having the modern sense of

¹ Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 236.

² Jörg Rüpke, *Religious Deviance in the Roman World: Superstition or Individuality?* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), vii.

placing a supernatural significance on an item or action without any logical reason, refers to “the unreasoning fear of the gods”³; in fact, the Greek word for the concept of superstition (*deisidaimonia*) has the literal meaning “fearing the gods.”⁴ As the Roman politician and orator Cicero explains in his *De Natura Deorum*, the concept of superstition is distinct from that of religion and carries with it a connotation of censure.⁵ A superstitious individual practices religion because he fears the consequences of not doing so, rather than because of a healthy level of respect and appreciation for the gods. The other extreme, atheism, also had a somewhat different meaning in the ancient world than in the modern day. Ancient atheism had a wider scope, including not only those who did not believe in the gods, but also those who believed that the gods had no interest in human affairs. As the Greek philosopher Plato states in his *Laws* regarding a person who acts impiously: “Either he does not believe in what I have said [i.e. the gods]; or secondly, he believes that the gods exist, but have no care for men; or, thirdly, he believes that they are easy to win over when bribed by offerings and prayers.”⁶ The first two categories of these “three kinds of disbeliever” were the forms associated with atheism in the early Roman Empire.⁷

In his discourse on superstition, the first century C.E. Greek writer Plutarch addresses these opposing ends of the religious spectrum, stating, “Some persons, in trying to escape superstition, rush into a rough and hardened atheism, thus overleaping true religion which

³ René Gothóni, "Religio and Superstitio Reconsidered," *Archiv Für Religionspsychologie/Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 21 (1994), 40.

⁴ *Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v., “δεισιδαιμων,” <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=deisidaimwn&la=greek#lexicon>.

⁵ Cicero. *On the Nature of the Gods*, trans. by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 268 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 193.

⁶ Plato, *Laws, Volume II: Book X*, trans. by R. G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library 192 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 299.

⁷ Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World*, 197.

lies between.”⁸ By referring to “true religion,”⁹ Plutarch implies that neither superstition nor atheism is acceptable in the eyes of the gods. There exists a space in between these two categories which he has deemed acceptable. Yet he does admit that one of these two extreme practices is worse than the other when he asks:

“Would it not then have been better for those Gauls and Scythians to have had absolutely no conception...regarding the gods, than to believe in the existence of gods who take delight in the blood of human sacrifice and hold this to be the most perfect offering and holy rite? Again, would it not have been far better for the Carthaginians...not to believe in any divine power or god, rather than to offer such sacrifices as they used to offer to Cronos?”¹⁰

Plutarch’s questions are rhetorical; he is disgusted by the superstitious sacrificial practices of the Gauls, Scythians, and Carthaginians and believes that they would have been better off had they not believed in any gods at all. Thus he asserts his claim that, between the two extremes of superstition and atheism, atheism is the lesser of two evils.

This paper seeks to determine the validity of Plutarch’s claim by examining the consequences faced by and opinions felt toward those who fell under the categories of superstitious and atheist. A variety of deviant religious practices which existed during the first two centuries of the Roman Empire will be examined, including Christianity, Judaism, and mystery cults, in addition to the ancient Roman idea of atheism. Then the social and legal consequences of those practices and ideas will be considered and compared, ultimately helping to determine whether or not Plutarch’s claim was true in the context of the early Roman Empire.

⁸ Plutarch, *Moralia, Volume II: Superstition*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library 222 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 495.

⁹ The word translated here as “true religion” is εὐσεβεία (*eusebeia*) in Greek, which, according to the *Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*, can also be translated as “reverence to the gods.” The word conveys a sense of practicing the proper customs and traditions with respect to the gods.

¹⁰ Plutarch, *Superstition*, 493.

Categorization

Since this paper seeks to compare superstition and atheism, it is necessary to sort religious groups into each category. This task is not as simple as it seems; the two categories may seem mutually exclusive, but in fact they are not. Some religious groups are easier to sort than others. Members of mystery cults can be placed firmly within the category of superstition, since they did not reject the existence or benevolence of the Roman gods, but were involved in secret customs and rituals beyond what was necessary for the practice of traditional Roman religion. Atheistic philosophers, including both those that were admittedly atheist and those that were accused of being so, are also easily categorized.

Judaism and Christianity pose more of a problem. According to Rüpke, the term *superstitio* can not only be applied to “unnecessary fears of divine anger” but can also “be concentrated on foreign religions,” thus including Judaism and Christianity within its bounds.¹¹ However, both groups were also accused of atheism. Pliny the Elder, writing in the first century C.E., calls the Jews “a race remarkable for their contempt for the divine powers.”¹² Although not declaring them atheists outright, Pliny makes it clear that the Jews do not believe in the gods as they should. The second-century C.E. Christian apologist Justin Martyr, in his first apology addressed to the emperor of Rome,¹³ states, “Thus are we even called atheists. We do proclaim ourselves atheists as regards those whom you call gods.”¹⁴ This statement suggests that Roman authorities had begun associating Christianity with atheism. Lucian, writing around the same time, seems to confirm this by grouping Christians

¹¹ Rüpke, *Religious Deviance in the Roman World: Superstition or Individuality?*, 8-9.

¹² Pliny, *Natural History, Volume IV: Books 12-16*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 370 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945), 127.

¹³ “Apology” is a rhetorical term referring to a work written in defense of the author’s position or opinion.

¹⁴ Saint Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, D.D. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1948), 38-39.

together with atheists and Epicureans, although he does not explicitly state that they were the same thing.¹⁵

Although it may seem reasonable to sort Jews and Christians into the category of atheist, both groups received harsher criticism for their religious practices, both real and perceived, than for their disbelief in the Roman gods.¹⁶ In fact, most of the evidence for Christians being hated as atheists comes from the Christians themselves. Whitmarsh goes so far as to say that “the violent ‘othering’ as atheists of those who hold different religious views was overwhelmingly a Judeo-Christian creation.”¹⁷ It is more important to look at external perspectives on what constituted deviance than at what Jews and Christians claimed was being said about them. For the sake of consistency, both Judaism and Christianity will be considered superstitious, not atheist, religious groups for the purposes of this paper.

Historical Background

In order to study the levels of acceptability of the various groups which will be discussed in this paper, it is necessary to understand the historical background for each group’s existence in the Roman Empire.¹⁸ Judaism as it existed in the early Roman Empire

¹⁵ Lucian, *Alexander the False Prophet*, trans. A. M. Harmon, Loeb Classical Library 162 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 225.

¹⁶ Joseph J. Walsh, “On Christian Atheism,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 45 (1991), 264.

¹⁷ Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World*, 240.

¹⁸ For a good general history of religion in the Roman world, see Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome, Volume I: A History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For a useful collection and analysis of relevant primary sources, see the second volume Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome, Volume II: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998). More specific information about the categories of Judaism, Christianity, mystery cults, and atheism is contained within the following sources. A comprehensive history of Judaism can be found in Judith R. Baskin and Kenneth Seeskin, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Jewish History, Religion, and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Information about traditional Roman religion, Christianity in the Roman Empire, and Christian relationships with non-Christians can be found in Lane Fox, Robin, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987). Historical context and important primary sources for mystery cults, in particular those of Isis and Mithras, are contained in Marvin W. Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1987). The concept of atheism in the ancient world and information about groups which could be considered atheistic are discussed in Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015).

began to develop during the Babylonian exile beginning in 586 B.C.E. This exile was a result of the Babylonian king's conquest of the Judean city of Jerusalem in 597 B.C.E. Being forced out of their homeland led the Judean people to create a new identity; it is during the period following the exile that some scholars begin to classify the Judean religion, centered around the worship of a god whom they called YHWH, as Judaism.¹⁹ Although the Jews were eventually allowed back into their homeland, they continued to spread and establish communities throughout the Mediterranean world. By the time Christianity came into existence, Judea had become a province of the Roman Empire, and Jewish communities had existed in the Roman world for many years.

For several decades, Jews were able to coexist with non-Jews in Rome and practice their religion with little fear of persecution. However, Judaism began to lose that privilege during the early Roman Empire. By this time, Judea had become a province of the Empire and non-Jewish Roman officials had been placed in charge. Poor relations between the often corrupt officials and the native Jewish people led the Jews to revolt in 66 C.E. The revolt was ultimately crushed, leaving Jerusalem damaged and its Temple in ruins.²⁰ Although the Jews were unsuccessful in their revolt, their violent actions made it clear that Judaism could pose a threat to Roman rule and that Rome needed to monitor large groups of Jews. Violent uprisings instigated by Jews continued to occur throughout the Empire in the years following 66 C.E. until finally, in 132 C.E., another major revolt occurred in Judea. Led by a man named Simon bar Kosiba, this revolt also ended in disaster for the Jewish people. A large number of Jews were either killed, sold into slavery, or exiled, leaving their homeland not only damaged by war but also nearly emptied of its native people. To prevent further revolts,

¹⁹ Baskin and Seeskin, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Jewish History, Religion, and Culture*, 30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

the emperor Hadrian began a large-scale persecution of the Jews, enacting strict measures to forbid them from practicing many of their rituals and from settling in or near Jerusalem. Not for the first time in history, the Jewish people found themselves displaced and forced to reconsider their identity. However, regardless of their bitter feelings, the Jews gave Hadrian what he wanted; there would be no more major Judean revolts against the Roman Empire.²¹

“An offshoot of Judaism,” Christianity arose in the mid-first century C.E., shortly after the death of Jesus.²² Communities of people professing to be followers of Jesus existed at least by the time Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome around 55 C.E. This letter, along with many other early Christian texts, was written in Greek, suggesting that the earliest Christians in Rome had come from Greek-speaking regions. The second and third centuries C.E. saw Christianity become more widespread within the Latin-speaking world and Rome itself, as is shown by the increased number of Christian texts being translated into Latin and the spread of Christianity throughout Rome’s social strata.²³ By the mid-third century C.E., Christians had become a large and significant community in Rome, numbering in the thousands.²⁴

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when persecution of the Christians began in the Roman Empire. The great fire that swept through Rome in 64 C.E. is often cited as the starting point, since, according to the Roman historian Tacitus, the emperor Nero “substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians.”²⁵ Nero’s actions supposedly began a

²¹ Ibid., 60-61.

²² Ibid., 32.

²³ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome, Volume I: A History*, 297.

²⁴ Ibid., 267.

²⁵ Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13-16*, trans. John Jackson, Loeb Classical Library 322 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 283.

widespread persecution in which those found guilty of being Christians were punished by being thrown into amphitheaters, where their gruesome deaths by fire and wild animals became spectacles for the crowds. However, classicist and historian Robin Lane Fox acknowledges that prior to 257 C.E., “action was taken only against Christian individuals, but its legal grounds and the degree, if any, of official encouragement have been much discussed.”²⁶ Lane Fox’s statement suggests that even if Nero’s persecution of Christians did occur, it may not have been as widespread or large-scale as Christian sources have made it seem. Persecution targeted at Christians certainly did occur during the first couple of centuries of the Roman Empire, but likely not at the same level as the later universal persecutions such as the one that occurred under the reign of Diocletian, who ruled from 284 to 305 C.E.

Besides groups such as the Jews and Christians who existed outside of Roman religion entirely, there were also groups which technically fit within the boundaries of Roman religion yet which were still different enough to be viewed as superstitious. Known as mystery cults, they were not stand-alone religions, but instead were “varying forms, trends, or options within the one disparate yet continuous conglomerate of ancient religion.”²⁷ Cult and ceremonial activities were not unusual in and of themselves. They were an integral part of traditional Roman religion, but mystery cults were distinctive for the secretive nature of their cult practices. Such practices were tied to a secret myth that only initiated members were given access to.²⁸ The decision to be initiated was personal, and the worship of the cult’s main deity was far more private than was typical in Roman religion.²⁹

²⁶ Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 422.

²⁷ Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 4.

²⁸ Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 93.

²⁹ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook*, 4.

The appeal of mystery cults was connected to concerns about death; according to Lane Fox, “in mystery cults, initiations offered reassurance, whatever the fate of the soul after death.”³⁰ Beliefs about the afterlife varied, but at least some of the mysteries offered comfort to those who were concerned about what would happen to their soul when they died.

Two of the major mysteries that existed in the early Roman Empire were the cult of Isis and the cult of Mithras. The goddess Isis came from Egypt, where her worship was tied to that of her brother and husband Osiris, and thus to funerary rites and accessions of pharaohs. She eventually became popular in the Greek world and then the Roman world, where she continued to be connected with ideas of death and rebirth.³¹ Mithras, as opposed to the feminine Isis, was associated with masculinity. The cult surrounding him gained popularity in Rome in the second century C.E., especially among sailors and soldiers. He was a warrior god associated with concepts such as justice and valor.³² Both of these cults were relatively popular in the Roman Empire, but their secretive nature still left them open to criticism.

Ancient atheism is different from the groups discussed above in that there was no single group of people who identified as atheists. Instead there were individuals and groups with atheistic beliefs who were assembled together by others in texts known as doxographies. Doxographers “set about collecting, editing, and archiving the opinions (*doxai*) of those who went before” in an effort to “[tidy] up the conflicting opinions of different individuals into a cogent body of knowledge.”³³ Ancient authors such as Plato and Epicurus grouped atheist individuals together in their works, creating a collective sense of atheism that did not actually

³⁰ Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 97.

³¹ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook*, 157-159.

³² *Ibid.*, 199-200.

³³ Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World*, 207-208.

exist in the real world. Ironically, Epicureans were one of the groups accused of atheism, despite Epicurus' disparaging remarks toward those who did not believe in the gods. Epicureans were considered guilty of Plato's second category of atheism, not believing that the gods cared about the affairs of humans.³⁴ By the time of Augustus' reign, atheistic beliefs had become not only a religious issue but also a political issue. According to Whitmarsh, it is difficult to find evidence of resistance to the Empire, but "given that ideas of divine providence and imperial ideology were so closely intertwined, however, atheism now took on a political slant too."³⁵ Therefore, like Judaism and Christianity, schools of atheistic thought were seen as problematic not only because they did not follow the conventions of traditional Roman religion, but also because of their potential for encouraging political unrest.

Social Acceptability of Religious Deviance

It is difficult to determine the thoughts and feelings of the general Roman public in regards to deviant religious groups and practices. The historical record does not favor the average everyday Roman; the written sources that have survived come largely from educated men with enough influence for their writings to have been worth preserving over hundreds of years. There were no Gallup polls or social media posts to provide insight into the typical Roman's opinion on the people around him or her. It is impossible to know what women, slaves, uneducated men, or other underrepresented members of the Roman public thought about superstition and atheism. Therefore the majority of primary sources used in this section come from educated male authors from the first two centuries C.E. The statements about Judaism, Christianity, mystery cults, and atheist philosophies written by these authors represent the opinions of Rome's social and intellectual elite.

³⁴ Ibid., 197-209.

³⁵ Ibid., 197.

Opinions toward Judaism from the perspective of non-Jews were largely negative and mostly focused on criticisms of their rites and traditions. The Greek geographer Strabo, writing during the earliest years of the Roman Empire, accuses the Jews and their priests of superstition due to some of their customs, including “abstinence from flesh...and circumcisions and excisions and other observances of the kind.”³⁶ Plutarch criticizes Jewish customs as well, specifically their strict observance of the Sabbath, claiming that such a superstitious practice would prevent them from protecting themselves even if enemies were climbing their walls.³⁷ The Roman historian Tacitus also has a less than flattering opinion of the Jews and their prophet Moses. In his *Histories*, he writes:

To establish his influence over this people for all time, Moses introduced new religious practices, quite opposed to those of all other religions. The Jews regard as profane all that we hold sacred; on the other hand, they permit all that we abhor.³⁸

In this passage, Tacitus portrays Moses as manipulative and power-hungry, creating a new religion in conflict with every other extant religion in order to ensure that he could retain his influence over his people. He portrays Judaism as a religion in complete opposition to Roman religion. Tacitus’ other scathing commentary regarding the Jews includes calling their customs “base and abominable” and claiming that “the earliest lesson they receive is to despise the gods.”³⁹

Not all opinions toward Jews were negative, however. A positive view of Jewish beliefs, though not necessarily of Jewish people themselves, exists in the writings of the Greek physician Galen, who lived in Rome in the second century C.E. In support of the

³⁶ Strabo, *Geography, Volume VII: Books 15-16*, trans. Horace Leonard Jones, Loeb Classical Library 241 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), 285.

³⁷ Plutarch, *Superstition*, 481.

³⁸ Tacitus, *Histories: Books 4-5*, trans. Clifford H. Moore and John Jackson, Loeb Classical Library 249 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), 179.

³⁹ Tacitus, *Histories*, 181-183.

argument that the human body was created with an ideal design, Galen writes that it is best “to maintain with Moses the principle of the creator as the origin of every created thing.”⁴⁰

The Jewish prophet Moses is thus given credit by a non-Jew. According to Beard, North, and Price, Galen was not alone in the regard he gave to the ideas of an important Jewish figure:

“Many Greek writers of the Roman empire treated Jewish teaching as comparable with Greek philosophy.”⁴¹ Although it cannot be automatically assumed that such writers accepted the ideas of Jews in general, the fact that they held Moses at the same level as their own philosophers means that they had some level of respect for Judaism. This respect was largely due to the fact that the Jewish religion had such a long history; Judaism, like traditional Roman religion, was centuries old. Even Tacitus had to admit, “Whatever their origin, these rites are maintained by their antiquity.”⁴² He may have hated their customs, but he had to acknowledge that their long tradition gave them some credibility.

As a much newer religion, Christianity was not entitled to a place among respected philosophies. The new religion may have originated from Judaism, but as its influence began to grow, Romans were becoming “increasingly aware of the distinction between Jews and Christians.”⁴³ As a result, non-Christian commentary about Christians was almost entirely negative in the early Roman Empire. For example, the second century C.E. Greek writer Celsus made some harsh accusations against the Christians according to the Christian writer Origen, who explained some of Celsus’ problems with the religion in his own defense of it. Celsus believed that the Christian faith was irrational and was followed largely by the lower-

⁴⁰ Galen, “On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body,” in *Religions of Rome, Volume II: A Sourcebook*, ed. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 321.

⁴¹ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome, Volume II: A Sourcebook*, 320.

⁴² Tacitus, *Histories*, 181.

⁴³ Samuel Sandmel, *The First Christian Century in Judaism and Christianity: Certainties and Uncertainties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 171.

class members of society, some of whom were so uneducated that they “do not even wish to give or receive a reason for what they believe”.⁴⁴ Another Christian defender, Minucius Felix, gives more of the accusations made against followers of Jesus: they are made up of “illiterates from the dregs of the populace,” engage in “meetings at night and ritual fasts and unnatural repasts,” and “spit upon the gods” of the Romans.⁴⁵

It would be fair to take Origen’s and Minucius Felix’s accounts with a grain of salt, since both authors were Christians. However, non-Christian sources show that antagonism towards Christianity was not a fabrication. Tacitus, for example, had no higher opinion of Christians than of Jews, especially considering that the “pernicious superstition” of people with a “hatred of the human race” had come out of Judaism.⁴⁶ Lucian also has some less-than-kind things to say about followers of Christianity. He makes fun of “the poor wretches” for believing that their faith will bring them immortality, for worshipping a crucified criminal, and for being easy to take advantage of due to their ideas about brotherhood and common ownership of property.⁴⁷ The attitude which Lucian has toward Christians, bordering almost on pity, confirms the Christian apologists’ claims that their fellow worshippers were viewed as ignorant and poorly educated because of their beliefs.

Having looked at the two superstitious groups which clearly did not belong within the confines of traditional Roman religion, it is now time to look at those which did. The choice to become an initiate into a mystery cult was connected to a fear of the gods. Initiation rites, prayers, sacrifices, and other cult practices were performed in order to earn the favor of each

⁴⁴ Origen, “Against Celsus,” in *Religions of Rome, Volume II: A Sourcebook*, ed. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 279.

⁴⁵ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, trans. T.R. Glover and Gerald H. Rendall, Loeb Classical Library 250 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), 335.

⁴⁶ Tacitus, *Annals*, 283-285.

⁴⁷ Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus*, trans. A. M. Harmon, Loeb Classical Library 302 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 15.

particular mystery's deity as part of the initiate's "quest for personal salvation."⁴⁸ Those who took this to the extreme could be accused of superstitious beliefs and actions resulting from an unreasonable fear of the gods.⁴⁹ The consequences of fearing the gods are expressed by the first century B.C.E. Roman poet Lucretius in his poem *On the Nature of Things*: "Man's life lay for all to see foully groveling upon the ground, crushed beneath the weight of Superstition,⁵⁰ which displayed her head from the regions of heaven."⁵¹ Lucretius was a follower of Epicurean philosophy, and thus his views toward religion tend toward the opposite extreme of atheism; however, he did "still insist on the reality of gods."⁵² Therefore his view of superstitious beliefs as destructive to human life is helpful in determining the criticisms of extreme Roman religious practices. The following are examples of personal opinions held by Romans about specific mystery cults.

Perhaps the most famous account of the cult of Isis exists in Apuleius' second-century C.E. novel *Metamorphoses*, also known as *The Golden Ass*. The novel tells the story of a man named Lucius who is transformed into a donkey. He is rescued by the goddess Isis and afterwards becomes an initiate into her cult. Lucius tells of his incredible gratefulness for "the powerful goddess's saving kindness" and of how he "celebrated [his] birth into the mysteries, a most festive occasion."⁵³ Apuleius' account of initiation into the mysteries of Isis is admittedly contentious; the episode takes on a very different tone from the previously

⁴⁸ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook*, 4.

⁴⁹ Rüpke, *Religious Deviance in the Roman World: Superstition or Individuality?*, 6-7.

⁵⁰ It is worth noting that the original Latin actually uses the word *religio* here, not *superstitio*. However, the idea expressed by Lucretius of religion being such a heavy weight to carry that it crushes the man who carries it aligns well with the concept of superstition. A man practicing religion to such an unhealthy extent would certainly have been considered superstitious by ancient Roman standards.

⁵¹ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse, rev. Martin F. Smith, Loeb Classical Library 181 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), 7-9.

⁵² Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World*, 184.

⁵³ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass), Volume II: Books 7-11*, ed. and trans. J. Arthur Hanson, Loeb Classical Library 453 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 275-283.

comedic quality of the novel. Much scholarly debate has occurred over whether Apuleius intended for Lucius' salvation through Isis to be satirical or not.⁵⁴ Classicist Brigitte B. Libby argues for the latter interpretation in her article on the topic in *The American Journal of Philology*. According to Libby, the imagery that Apuleius uses shows his true feelings about Isis and her cult; she is an "opportunistic fraud" who demands secrecy and money from her followers.⁵⁵ If this interpretation is correct, then Apuleius' novel is actually condemning the cult for being fraudulent, secretive, and greedy. However, it is certainly possible that Apuleius intended for Lucius' praise of Isis to be sincere.

A clearly negative portrayal of Isis' followers exists in the *Satires*, written sometime between the late first and early second centuries C.E. by the Roman author Juvenal. In his work, Juvenal mocks a female worshipper of Isis:

If white Io tells her to, she'll go to the ends of Egypt and bring back water fetched from sweltering Meroë to sprinkle in Isis' temple, towering next to the ancient sheepfold. You see, she thinks her instructions come from the voice of the Lady herself! There you have the kind of mind and soul that the gods converse with at night!⁵⁶

Although Juvenal's writing is satirical, the ideas that he has about Isis worshippers are important to note. He portrays the cult as one whose members would do anything to please the Egyptian goddess and who believe that the goddess herself speaks to them; the woman he mocks is willing to travel an unreasonably long distance just to get some water because she believes that Isis told her to. This doesn't necessarily mean that Juvenal finds membership in the cult of Isis to be unacceptable, but it does suggest that he sees the mysteries as extremist and their followers as worthy of ridicule.

⁵⁴ Brigitte B. Libby, "Moons, Smoke, and Mirrors in Apuleius' Portrayal of Isis," *The American Journal of Philology* 132 (2011), 301-302.

⁵⁵ Libby, "Moons, Smoke, and Mirrors in Apuleius' Portrayal of Isis," 302.

⁵⁶ Juvenal, *Juvenal and Persius*, trans. Susanna Morton Braund, Loeb Classical Library 91 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 283-285.

Like the cult of Isis, the cult of Mithras had secret initiations and its initiates were expected to perform purification rituals.⁵⁷ Such practices could certainly be called superstitious and thus be open to criticism from outsiders. Unlike the cult of Isis, however, Mithras worship was a Roman, rather than a foreign, practice. Mithras was originally a Persian god, but the mystery cult associated with him in the Roman Empire “seems largely to be a western construct.”⁵⁸ The cult’s initiates were mainly made up of men who served the Roman Empire in some form, such as imperial soldiers and military officers. The virtues taught by the cult, including justice and bravery, fit neatly amid the virtues valued by Romans. There do not exist many sources either promoting or mocking Mithras worship, likely because of the ability of its adherents to blend their cult practices with traditional Roman religion. As Meyer states, “the character of Mithras and the Mithraic devotees also helps explain why emperors often favored the worship of this divine warrior.”⁵⁹ Unlike the Egyptian goddess who demanded complete devotion to her worship and large sums of money from her worshippers, Mithras promoted ideals consistent with Roman values. The superstitious nature of the rituals associated with Mithras was therefore easier for outsiders to overlook.

Overall there appear to be fewer accounts expressing opinions about atheist philosophies than superstitious religious groups. Perhaps because of the relative obscurity of atheism throughout most of history, fewer sources have survived. One group for which records do exist is the Epicureans. Due to their belief that the gods had no influence on the nature of the world, Epicurean philosophers were often accused of atheism.⁶⁰ Cicero, citing

⁵⁷ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome, Volume I: A History*, 289.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁵⁹ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook*, 199.

⁶⁰ Tim O’Keefe, *Epicureanism* (Durham, UK: Acumen Publishing Ltd., 2010), 155.

Posidonius in *On the Nature of the Gods*, argues against Epicurus' own claims that he was not an atheist, saying, "It is doubtless therefore truer to say...that Epicurus does not really believe in the gods at all, and that he said what he did about the immortal gods only for the sake of deprecating popular odium."⁶¹ It made no sense to many Romans for the Epicureans to say that they believed in the gods and yet did not believe that they cared about humans. Epicurus may not have considered himself an atheist, but his non-traditional views regarding the gods gained him and his followers reputations as such.⁶²

The Epicureans, in an attempt to defend themselves, turned the accusations of atheism toward others. In a second-century C.E. inscription found in the city of Oinoanda in Lycia (now southwestern Turkey), the author, an Epicurean philosopher named Diogenes, adamantly denies the claim that he and his fellow philosophers are atheists, stating, "It will become clear that it is not we who remove the gods, but others."⁶³ He mentions some of these "others" by name, including Diagoras of Melos, who "directly denied the existence of the gods" and Protagoras of Abdera, who "said that he did not know whether the gods exist."⁶⁴ Epicurus himself denounced atheist philosophers who were his contemporaries, by insisting that humans perceive the gods and therefore they exist.⁶⁵ The Epicureans refused to embrace the label of atheism; for them, such a label only belonged to those who fell under Plato's first category of atheists, those who did not believe in the gods at all.

A general statement about atheists, not aimed at any group of philosophers in particular, is found in Lucian's *Slander*. Lucian writes:

⁶¹ Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, 119.

⁶² Dirk Obbink, "The Atheism of Epicurus," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 30 (1989), 221-222.

⁶³ Diogenes of Oinoanda, in *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World*, ed. Tim Whitmarsh (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 210.

⁶⁴ Diogenes of Oinoanda, 210.

⁶⁵ O'Keefe, *Epicureanism*, 155-156.

To a pious, godly man the charge is made that his friend is godless and impious, that he rejects God and denies Providence. Thereupon the man, stung in the ear, so to speak, by a gadfly, gets thoroughly angry, as is natural, and turns his back on his friend without awaiting definite proof.⁶⁶

If it is natural for a man to abandon a friend that he thinks is an atheist, then Lucian must have considered not believing in the gods to be a serious offence. It is also important to note that the impious friend not only denies the providence of the gods, but also denies their existence. This helps to explain why the Epicureans were so adamant about their belief in the gods; it was this disbelief that provoked anger from others.

Based on the Epicureans' constant insistence that they believed in the gods and Lucian's assertion that it would be natural to be angry at an impious friend, it may seem that atheism was an accusation to be avoided at all costs. However, not all non-atheist opinions regarding atheism were negative. The second-century C.E. philosopher Sextus Empiricus presents arguments in favor of both theism and atheism in his work *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. As a Skeptic, he believed that "the existence of God is not pre-evident," and thus he presents both sides of the case without leaning toward any conclusion about the existence of the gods.⁶⁷ He is not necessarily trying to portray a positive image of atheism, but he is certainly not doing the opposite either. In fact, his goal is to show that "God's existence...will be inapprehensible."⁶⁸ Yet by treating arguments for atheism as seriously as arguments for religion, Sextus Empiricus shows that not everyone in the early Roman Empire considered the label of atheist to be a derogatory one.

⁶⁶ Lucian, *Slander*, trans. A. M. Harmon, Loeb Classical Library 14 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), 377.

⁶⁷ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. R. G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library 273 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 329.

⁶⁸ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 331.

The sources examined in this section have shown that negative opinions existed toward both superstition and atheism. The fiercest disapproval, however, appears to have been aimed at those who participated in superstitious religious practices. Jews, Christians, and mystery cult initiates all received ridicule for their unusual rites and customs. At best, as in Juvenal's account of Isis worshippers, they were simply mocked; at worst, as in Tacitus' scathing commentary on Jews and Christians, they were hated. Atheists, too, were clearly disliked, but they were not the recipients of such demeaning insults as "base and abominable" and "dregs of the populace." It could be argued that Jews and Christians were both accused of atheism, thus showing that atheism was the worst offense. However, this accusation was never the main one used against them. As classicist Joseph Walsh says, "the Jews were not detested for their atheism...Pagans hated them for a complex of repugnant traits of which atheism was only one."⁶⁹ The same was true of Christians. It was their superstitious practices, not their lack of belief in the Roman gods, which gained them such poor reputations among followers of traditional Roman religion. So far it appears that Plutarch's claim is correct.

Legal Acceptability of Religious Deviance

It seems that opinions toward those within the category of superstition were generally harsher than toward those within the category of atheism. Based on a comparison of social acceptability alone, Plutarch's statement is correct. However, it is important to look beyond individual opinions about deviant religious practices and to also take into consideration the legal consequences, or lack thereof, faced by their practitioners. As will be shown, official policy often differs from public opinion in important ways.

⁶⁹ Walsh, "On Christian Atheism," 264.

The Jews were initially given legal privileges in the Roman Empire. The Jewish historian Josephus, writing in the late first century C.E., explained that an edict of Julius Caesar “forbade religious societies to assemble in the city, but these people alone he did not forbid to do so or to collect contributions of money or to hold common meals.”⁷⁰ “These people,” referring to the Jews, were also given privileges during the reign of Augustus. Philo, a first century C.E. Jewish philosopher, attempted to remind the emperor Caligula of these privileges, saying that Augustus never “took any violent measures against the houses of prayer, nor prevented them from meeting to receive instructions in the laws, nor opposed their offerings of the first-fruits.”⁷¹ At least during the reigns of Julius Caesar and Augustus, the Jews were able to avoid having legislation passed against their practices.

These privileges disappeared when the Jews began revolting against Roman rule in 66 C.E. The worst of the persecution occurred under the reign of the emperor Hadrian. As punishment for their constant revolts which led to the deaths of many Romans, specific Jewish practices, including circumcision, were banned.⁷² The Jews were also prevented from settling in their ancient city of Jerusalem. According to Justin Martyr, “no one would be allowed to dwell therein...a death penalty was decreed for any Jew caught entering it.”⁷³ With the Jews now evicted from Jerusalem, the city was renamed Aelia Capitolina and opened to Roman settlers.⁷⁴ Interestingly, it was not the actual religious practices of the Jews that were seen as problematic by the emperor, but rather their resistance to Roman rule.

⁷⁰ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities, Volume VI: Books 14-15*, trans. Ralph Marcus and Allen Wikgren, Loeb Classical Library 489 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1943), 117.

⁷¹ Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius*, trans. F.H. Colson, Loeb Classical Library 379 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 81.

⁷² Baskin and Seeskin, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Jewish History, Religion, and Culture*, 61.

⁷³ Saint Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, 84-85.

⁷⁴ Baskin and Seeskin, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Jewish History, Religion, and Culture*, 61.

Revolt, not superstition, had disastrous consequences for the legal acceptability of Judaism in the Roman Empire.

Political opposition to Christianity existed for similar reasons. Christians did not partake in violent revolts like Jews, but they did resist authority in their own way. However, unlike Judaism, Christianity did not undergo widespread persecution under orders of the Roman emperor during the first two centuries C.E.⁷⁵ Christians were certainly mocked and hated for their strange practices, but they were not punished for them. They could believe what they wanted to and engage in whatever unusual rituals they wished; as Lane Fox says, “a gesture of honour to the gods and conformity to tradition was all that was required of them.”⁷⁶ Individuals who did undergo trials and punishments did so because of their refusal to participate in traditional Roman religious life. Adherence to religious norms was part of political control in the Roman Empire; to defy these norms was potentially threatening to those who held power.⁷⁷

Pliny’s letter to the emperor Trajan, written while the author was serving as the governor of Bithynia-Pontus in the early second century C.E., provides insight into the frustration felt by a Roman in a position of authority toward Christians. In the letter, Pliny seeks the emperor’s approval for the actions he has taken against the Christians living in the province. He explains that he has asked those accused of being Christians whether or not the accusations were true. If they denied them and passed a test in which they had to formally invoke the Roman gods and denounce the name of Christ, they were released. Even those who admitted to having practiced Christianity at some point were allowed the opportunity to repent and be spared punishment by passing Pliny’s test. Only those who continued to insist

⁷⁵ Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 422.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 425.

⁷⁷ Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World*, 196-197.

that they were Christians were sent to Rome for trial or execution.⁷⁸ Trajan's reply to Pliny confirms his approval: "These people must not be hunted out...in the case of anyone who denies that he is a Christian, and makes it clear that he is not by offering prayers to our gods, he is to be pardoned as a result of his repentance however suspect his past may be."⁷⁹ This policy is relatively forgiving, offering accused Christians the opportunity to be acquitted by simply praying to the Roman gods. They are not being punished for any particular superstitious practices. It is their unwillingness to submit to Roman authority by refusing to honor the Roman gods that angers Pliny and Trajan. Pliny confirms this sentiment when he writes, "whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished."⁸⁰ Pliny blatantly states that it is the Christians' refusal to submit to authority that is so frustrating to him and thus warrants legal consequences.

Pliny's frustration with the Christians' unwillingness to budge is echoed in accounts of Christian martyrdom. Martyrs prided themselves on being uncooperative when on trial, preferring to undergo harsh punishment rather than deny Jesus. In fact, they felt that they were following in the footsteps of Jesus himself by suffering death as he had.⁸¹ Choosing to die for their faith rather than cooperate with Roman officials was difficult to understand for non-Christian Romans who lived in a world where religion and government were closely intertwined.⁸² In the eyes of Romans in positions of power, such extreme opposition to Roman religious authority could only be dangerous to the stability of the Empire.

⁷⁸ Pliny the Younger, *Letters, Volume II: Books 8-10*, trans. Betty Radice, Loeb Classical Library 59 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 287-289.

⁷⁹ Pliny, *Letters*, 291-293.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁸¹ Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 441.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 421-422.

Mystery cults sometimes became the victims of imperial law as well. Under the reign of Augustus a senatorial decree was enacted to prevent the meeting of private associations called *collegia*.⁸³ Certain religious associations, including the cult of Isis, were affected by this decree. However, it was not really intended as an attack against deviant religious practices.⁸⁴ The law encompassed more than just religious associations, and the purpose was to protect against political dissent, not to destroy superstition. According to the Roman historian Suetonius, Augustus “disbanded all guilds,⁸⁵ except such as were of long standing and formed for legitimate purposes.”⁸⁶ This meant that many religious groups were exempt from the decree, including funeral societies, Jews, and soldiers who were worshippers of Mithras.⁸⁷ Graffiti found in a sanctuary of Mithras praises other Roman gods,⁸⁸ and an inscription on an altar in the Roman province of Noricum is dedicated to both Mithras and the well-being of the Roman emperor.⁸⁹ These examples show the cult’s adherence to traditional religion. Worshippers of Mithras were therefore not seen as threats to Roman political stability so long as they continued to exist “for legitimate purposes” and thus were considered legally acceptable.

Isis worshippers, in contrast to Mithras worshippers, were considered dangerous largely because of their independent and secretive nature. The cult of Isis had its own priesthood and many of its initiates attached their identities to membership in the cult.⁹⁰ They became the target of other legal measures during the early years of the Roman Empire

⁸³ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome, Volume I: A History*, 230.

⁸⁴ Rüpke, *Religious Deviance in the Roman World: Superstition or Individuality?*, 106.

⁸⁵ The word translated here as “guilds” is *collegia* in Latin.

⁸⁶ Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars, Volume I: Augustus*, trans. J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library 31 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 201.

⁸⁷ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome, Volume I: A History*, 230.

⁸⁸ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome, Volume II: A Sourcebook*, 316-317.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 310.

⁹⁰ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome, Volume II: A History*, 308.

besides the previously mentioned senatorial decree. For example, Augustus banned Isis worshippers from practicing their rites within the *pomerium*, the religious boundary of the city of Rome.⁹¹ The emperor Tiberius, who ruled after Augustus from 14 to 37 C.E., also had no patience for the cult. Josephus recounts the story of a Roman noblewoman named Paulina, who was a worshipper of Isis during the reign of Tiberius. She was tricked into committing adultery when a man named Mundus, whose advances she had denied, claimed to be the god Anubis. When she found out and brought her complaints to the emperor, he had the temple and statue of Isis destroyed.⁹² Suetonius confirms Tiberius' disdain for the cult, stating that he "abolished foreign cults, especially the Egyptian and Jewish rites, compelling all who were addicted to such superstitions to burn their religious vestments and all their paraphernalia."⁹³

Despite the sometimes harsh legal measures taken against the cult of Isis in the early Roman Empire, the superstitious practices of mystery cults were ultimately unproblematic. Cult members still participated in Roman religious life and worshipped the gods as they were supposed to. They were not among the "dangerous groups who refused to honor the gods," such as the Christians.⁹⁴ As Rüpke states, exclusion of superstitious practices was not the true goal of any of the legal measures taken against deviant religious groups; instead, the Romans' "foremost concern was the safeguarding of their own tradition."⁹⁵ Isis worshippers caused concern due to their strong identification with a foreign, non-Roman deity, not due to any specific practices or beliefs that they had. Mithras worshippers were actually protected

⁹¹ Ibid., 180.

⁹² Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities, Volume VIII: Books 18-19*, trans. Louis H. Feldman, Loeb Classical Library 433 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 51-59.

⁹³ Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars, Volume I: Tiberius*, 363.

⁹⁴ Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 95.

⁹⁵ Rüpke, *Religious Deviance in the Roman World: Superstition or Individuality?*, 106.

under Augustus' anti-association decree, likely because they were largely made up of Roman soldiers who swore loyalty to the emperor. Whatever strange rituals members of these mystery cults might have been performing behind closed doors did not pose any threat to Roman political stability or risk angering the gods. They may have been considered "superstitions of the unlearned" in the opinion of educated men such as Cicero, but being unlearned was not a crime.⁹⁶ Only when their association with such cults became a potential problem of political dissent did Roman authorities take action against them.

The examples above show that superstition on its own was compatible with the law. Jews were actually given legal privileges and only lost them due to violent revolt, not due to their religious practices. Christians were not persecuted on a large scale until later in the Roman Empire, and those individuals that experienced persecution were considered punishable for defying Roman religious authority, not for their superstitious beliefs. Initiates into the cult of Mithras were exempt from a decree banning associations in Rome. The cult of Isis ran into some legal trouble, but it had more to do with fear of its members' allegiance to a foreign power over Roman authority than with its customs and beliefs. In a legal and political sense, superstition was not a significant problem.

Atheism, however, was dangerous to the structure of the Roman Empire. Such an enormous empire containing such a great diversity of people needed a binding element in place to prevent it from falling apart. The Roman military and system of provincial governments under the central rule of the emperor helped to keep order, but religion "provided the most powerful mechanism of symbolic integration" for the many regions and peoples that made up the Empire.⁹⁷ It was important for the Romans, and especially for

⁹⁶ Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, 323.

⁹⁷ Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World*, 192.

Augustus as the first emperor of Rome, to promote the idea that the power of the Roman Empire had been ordered by the gods and that the emperors had been given divine favor. Those who refused to partake in traditional Roman religious life risked angering the gods and losing their favor. They also showed themselves to be potential political dissenters; if the gods did not exist, or if they did not care at all about human affairs, then there was no “divine mandate for empire.”⁹⁸ People with such beliefs could not be tolerated by the law.

It was the atheist, not the superstitious, qualities of deviant religious groups that got them into trouble with Roman authorities. The nature of Pliny’s trials of the Christians is clear evidence of such a conclusion. Pliny and Trajan did not care what those accused of being Christians actually believed or practiced in their own homes; they simply wanted the accused to prove their loyalty to Rome by taking part in the worship of the Roman gods. If they refused, “the apparent treason and disloyalty” to Rome could not go unpunished.⁹⁹ Similarly, it was only when Isis worshippers became too devoted to their non-Roman deity that they became unacceptable. Although not directly a form of atheism, identifying too strongly with the Egyptian goddess could cause cult initiates to neglect the native Roman gods, leading to similar concerns about disloyalty to Rome.

For Romans in positions of authority, the promotion of adherence to traditional Roman religion was essential. In *On the Laws*, regarding the importance that Roman citizens should place on the gods and piety, Cicero writes:

Who will deny that such beliefs are useful when he remembers how often oaths are used to confirm agreements, how important to our well-being is the sanctity of treaties, how many persons are deterred from crime by the fear of divine punishment,

⁹⁸ Ibid., 193.

⁹⁹ Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 427.

and how sacred an association of citizens becomes when the immortal gods are made members of it, either as judges or as witnesses?¹⁰⁰

Traditional religion is crucial; according to Cicero, agreements, treaties, crimes, and associations are all affected by the piety of Rome's citizens. If religious groups which denied the existence or providence of the gods became too influential, the results could be disastrous for the structure of the Roman Empire. From a legal and political perspective, Plutarch is wrong. Atheism was a far greater danger to the stability of authority in the Roman Empire than superstition.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to determine whether there is truth in Plutarch's claim that to not believe in the gods at all would be better than to practice superstitious religion.

Although Plutarch would prefer that people find "true religion" in between superstition and atheism, if a choice had to be made between the two, he would rather they choose atheism.¹⁰¹

A comparison of personal opinions toward superstitious and atheist religious groups, followed by a comparison of legal consequences faced by those groups, was used to determine whether or not Plutarch was correct in the context of the early Roman Empire. Rather than providing a single answer to the question, however, looking at deviant religious practices through both social and legal lenses has led to two complementary conclusions.

Socially, superstition was the greater problem, therefore supporting Plutarch's point. Jews and Christians were hated and scorned for their unusual rites and customs, earning them some nasty insults from a variety of authors living in the early Roman Empire. Initiates into the cult of Isis did not receive as much hatred, but they were mocked and satirized for their

¹⁰⁰ Cicero, *On the Laws*, trans. Clinton W. Keyes, Loeb Classical Library 213 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 391.

¹⁰¹ Plutarch, *Superstition*, 493-495.

deviant religious practices. Atheism certainly did not receive support from adherents of traditional Roman religion, but it was never attacked with the same level of disgust as superstitious practices were. Even when Jews and Christians were accused of atheism, such accusations were secondary to those calling their customs ignorant and hateful. Deviant practices stemming from what was viewed as an unhealthy fear of the gods, in addition to the foreign nature of those practices, barred Jews, Christians, and some mystery cult members from being considered socially acceptable.

Legally, however, atheism was the more serious issue, therefore disproving Plutarch's claim. Those who held positions of power in the Roman Empire did not care about deviant religious practices or personal beliefs so long as the Roman gods were still worshipped and respected. Respect for the gods equated to respect for the authority of the Empire and its emperor; therefore a failure to properly worship the gods was seen as a sign of treason. Those who did not believe in the gods or their providence were problematic in a political sense. Through their atheism, they defied the central Roman belief that the power of the Empire had been fated by the gods. Such defiance was threatening and thus had to be punished. When superstitious religious groups received imperial punishment, it was for reasons such as revolt, refusal to submit to authority, or dangerous loyalty to a foreign deity. Punishment almost never had anything to do with the actual beliefs or rituals of those groups. Atheism in the form of refusal to honor the Roman gods and respect traditional Roman religion was legally unacceptable.

There are two conclusions which can be drawn depending on which lens, social or legal, historians choose to look through. In order to draw a firm conclusion one way or the other, it must be determined whether social or legal acceptability was more important to

Roman life. If Romans would have considered being a social outcast to be the worse fate, then Plutarch is correct. If, however, they would have considered being a criminal or political enemy to be worse, then he is not. The answer to that question is different depending on which sources are consulted and is beyond the scope of this paper, but does leave the door open for further research. In answer to the original question asked by this paper, it is sufficient to say that Plutarch was both right and wrong.

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