

Divine Competition in Greco–Roman Polytheism

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Abstract This paper surveys the main features of polytheistic religious organization in the ancient Greek and Roman world, emphasizing two aspects: there was substantial, multiple overlap between the jurisdictions of different gods, which increased over time and made the costs and uncertainty borne by supplicants ever more burdensome; and the priesthood was in general not a profession but a service undertaken, or assigned, in addition to political or military office. The growth of elective cults in the imperial age further complicated the range of offers but did not create a class of religious entrepreneurs. A simple economic model shows that such jurisdictional overlap was inefficient and that supplicants stood to gain from concentration and unification of the industry—that is, from one-stop shopping. This did not happen until the very end of paganism, so competition did not work. The reason for this non-event is found in the absence of a professional religious class with a vested interest in its occupation, one which could act as an interest group and profit from the unification of supply. This in turn suggests a nonstandard explanation of why, unlike other polytheistic systems such as Hinduism, Greco–Roman paganism died out without leaving a trace or any attempt at revival.

Keywords Greco–Roman polytheism · Priests · Religious competition · Economics of religion · Interest groups · One-stop shopping

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JEL Classification Z12 · D71**1 Introduction**

When confronted with a multiplicity of agents with overlapping activities or functions, the economist's hard-wired instinct is to look for signs of competition and to ask how it works, and if the competition does not show, to ask why it does not. This paper takes the admittedly bold step of applying this approach to ancient Greek and Roman religion, which featured a multiplicity of gods—a polytheistic religious system (though “system” is a loaded word—on which more below). In ancient theology, the gods had specific but overlapping “jurisdictions” over human affairs, which makes the question about competition an appropriate one to ask. Of course, the agents who would, or would not, compete were not the gods themselves but their human agents—first of all the priests (another loaded word, on which more below) and then the associations of devotees, when and where these existed. This is the first economic study of a polytheistic religious market, so its approach and findings hold promise of possible applications to other such systems. We will begin with a sketch of ancient theology and the historical development of organized religion and cults (Sect. 2), follow up with a closer focus on priesthoods (Sect. 3), and then try to cast this material into the framework of jurisdictional competition (Sects. 4, 5). It is shown that considerable overlap between the jurisdictions of different gods was present, increasing the costs borne by supplicants, and that supplicants could gain from unification of the industry. However, unification came not within living paganism but at its demise with the establishment of Christianity. The failure to unify is attributed to the absence of a professional religious class with a vested interest in its occupation, one which could act as an interest group and profit from the unification of supply.

A polytheistic religion market is characterized by an exchange relationship whereby supplicants (be they individuals, groups, or corporate entities) demand blessings for a wide range of activities and situations in their life, and believe that the gods can and will provide such blessings if enticed by prayers or vows backed by offers and sacrifices of proper quality and sufficient amount. Here, we use the term “market” to denote that worshipers considered that several gods and goddesses were simultaneously able to influence events that had a direct bearing on individual welfare. As a result, worshipers had to choose the offers to make to placate each deity.¹ The gods are thus effectively perceived as selfish beings who benefit (or, using economic terminology, derive utility) from recognition and offers in their areas of jurisdiction and supply the requested blessings in return—a gift-exchange relationship. Priests and religious officials only ensure that such transactions follow proper ritual forms so as to maximize the likelihood of the deity's responding in

¹ We recognize ancient authors did not conceive of market exchanges between the “mortals” and the “immortals”. Nevertheless, because an analytical instrument did not exist at the time does not rule out its use to develop a better understanding of the observed pattern.

the desired way—even though they usually take a cut of the sacrificial offerings. As this description suggests, we are thus viewing the gods as utility-maximizing beings, while the budget set that limits their satisfaction is the supplicant's. Modeling God's preferences as a rational agent is not new to economics; Brams (2002, 2007) and Rasmusen (2015) model God as playing games with man while Oslington (2009) models him as writing an optimal salvation contract with man. These works, however, focus on the one and only God of Jewish and Christian tradition, who is assumed to be all-knowing, all-powerful, and radically beyond human comprehension. By contrast, we will undertake the—perhaps simpler—task of modeling multiple gods who are not supposed to possess any of these mind-boggling attributes. A contribution of this paper is a way of formally modeling the rivalry or competition among rational gods in a polytheistic system.

Before starting, it is useful to briefly sketch the larger picture where our inquiry belongs and suggest the broader question that motivates it. When they emerge into written history, the archaic Greek and Roman pantheons are rather different from each other: while the latter still bears a recognizable relation to its supposed forebear—the ancestral Indo-European religion (Dumézil 1970)—the former, for reasons that are lost to us, has already distanced itself from it sufficiently to make the later equation of the two—the so-called *interpretatio graeca*, starting in the 3rd century BC—a rather imperfect exercise. Both religions, however, were tied down to places where temples were built from an early time—presumably sacred spaces that were dedicated to a particular god. The reason for this most probably is the emergence of the city–state format of political organization, defined as a distinct territorial, political and economic unit of free citizens. By contrast, two other major descendants of the parent religion—the religion of the Celts and the Vedic religion of ancient India—were not localized in this sense: permanent temples did not exist, sacred places shifted, and rituals and sacrifices could be performed anywhere. Related to this, and even more important for our purposes, is the difference regarding priesthood. Ancient Greek priests were laymen, not a separate anointed class of clerics, and so were Roman priests despite some organizational differences. Furthermore, Greek and Roman priests were specialists of the cults of particular gods or the performance of particular ritual functions, and even (with the exception of some high-ranking religious officials in the city of Rome) of particular temples of particular gods; so there was no such thing as a priest of Apollo in general, but only priests of Apollo's temple at Delos or of Apollo's temple on the Palatine hill in Rome. By contrast, the Celtic Druids and the Vedic Brahmins were professional, learned priestly classes, and they were generalists, performing all rituals for all gods as appropriate or demanded. We will see that this difference plays an important role in our interpretation of events.

This contrast between different embodiments of early Indo-European religion flags the fundamental question that lurks in the background of this research. Under the onslaught of Christianity, paganism in the Roman Empire, as well as paganism among the European peoples to the north and east of it, died out without ever coming back—however many remnants of it may have crept into the new Christian faith, for example in the form of the cult of Mary and the saints. In contrast, the successor to the Vedic religion—Hinduism—came under similar attack from other forms

of monotheism—mainly Islam, and later, and more marginally, Christianity itself; moreover, the rising ascendancy of Buddhism over the last few centuries BC had similar effects to the extent that it was “non-theistic”, i.e. it devalued the Hindu gods and the priests that serviced them. Yet Hinduism managed to withstand Muslim pressure, and after the fall of the Gupta Empire in the 6th century AD Buddhism slowly declined until it all but disappeared from the Indian sub-continent. The reason for the difference is not likely to be found in state endorsement and coercion as this occurred everywhere. Then what explains the singular resilience of Vedic-Hindu polytheism as against the impermanence of the Greek and Roman variety? One suspects that the organization and role of the priestly class may have been a key. This paper may be seen as preliminary groundwork toward addressing that larger question.

2 The Gods

2.1 Classical Greek Pantheon

The earliest surviving documents of Greek literature, the Homeric poems (dated to the early 8th century BC in their written form), give us a lively picture of a true “society of the gods” (Sissa and Detienne 2000), who dwell on the inaccessible heights of Mount Olympus and intervene in human affairs on earth as a matter of course; in particular, they are active and take sides in the great Trojan War and its aftermath. The relations among the gods are intricate to say the least, and the poet Hesiod (end of the 8th century BC) tried to sort it out and produce a genealogy, or mythical “history”, of the gods in his poem *Theogony*, which may be regarded as the closest thing to a theological treatise that the Greeks ever produced. Regardless of origins and kinship, a general understanding seems to have developed among Greeks that some gods were more important than others and hence more deserving of cult. This crystallized in a group of 12 major deities that may be regarded as the top layer of the Olympian pantheon, and which found their classical representation in the famous frieze of the Parthenon temple in Athens (5th century BC). As depicted in the Homeric poems, the twelve Olympians convened in a kind of parliament of the gods, presided over by Zeus as “first among equals”, to settle disputes arising between them or their human clients. Beyond these, there was a vast array of lesser deities, some of which still Olympian or “heavenly”, others associated with the countryside and the wilderness, and still others with the underworld—the latter called “chthonian” deities. In particular, Hades and Persephone (later called Pluto and Proserpina by the Romans) were the rulers of the underworld. All these might also have to be propitiated on given circumstances or locations.

The twelve major Olympians, with the associated jurisdictions (and with their Roman counterparts in parentheses, on which more below), are the following (Burkert 1985, part III ch. 2):

- Zeus (Jupiter), king of the gods, god of the sky, law, order, and justice.

- Hera (Juno), wife of Zeus, goddess of marriage, women, childbirth, and the family.
- Poseidon (Neptune), god of the seas, earthquakes, and horses, and protector of seafarers.
- Athena (Minerva), goddess of wisdom and knowledge, handicraft and technique, and war.
- Apollo (Apollo), god of light, healing, oracles, poetry, music and arts.
- Artemis (Diana), goddess of the hunt, the wilderness, wild animals, virginity, and protector of young women.
- Aphrodite (Venus), goddess of love, beauty, and sexuality.
- Hermes (Mercury), the messenger of the gods, god of trade, travelers, thieves, borders, diplomacy, eloquence, athletic games, and guide to the underworld.
- Demeter (Ceres), goddess of fertility, the harvest, and sacred law.
- Dionysus² (Bacchus or Liber), god of wine, ecstasy, and theater.
- Hephaestus (Vulcan), god of fire, blacksmiths, craftsmen, sculpture, and volcanoes.
- Ares (Mars), god of war and violence.

Even a cursory reading of this list suggests two things: most of the gods are complex characters, overseeing matters that span different, even apparently distant walks of life; and as a consequence, jurisdictional overlap abounds. The reasons for this complexity must be traced back to the way the pantheon and its cult complex came into being, dating back to pre-historic, and partly pre-Indo-European cults that were in time incorporated into the classic pantheon; it is because of this gradual accretion of disparate elements that this polytheism cannot properly be called a religious “system”. However that pre-history may be, the result is that in historic times each god bore a collection of epithets (which etymologically means “additions”), each indicating a particular function or capacity that specialized that god’s cult in each locality and temple. For example, Athena protects the city as *polias*, patronizes handicraft as *ergane*, leads soldiers into battle as *promachos* and grants victory as *nike*. This gave rise to a huge diversity across the Greek world, which is why, as pointed out in the Introduction, the cults and their priesthoods were specialized and localized as well, each highlighting a specific property of what was ostensibly still the same god.

For examples of overlap, Athena presided over the strategic side of war while Ares mastered its strictly military side; so a general starting on a military campaign would do well to make offers and sacrifices to both gods. In the *Iliad* (II, 400 ff.) the Greek warriors sacrifice each to a different god before joining battle. For marriage, the wedding couple would do well to make offers to Aphrodite for the sex part, to Hera for the marriage bond itself, and to Artemis for childbirth. Often, one was not

² Dionysus is included among the twelve in the Parthenon relief. In other Greek cosmological and mythological writings, on the principle that this top layer should be balanced between six male and six female deities, Dionysus is replaced by Hestia, goddess of the hearth, who was, however, never prominent in Greek cult outside the household. Later she became central to the Roman pantheon under the name of Vesta (see below).

sure which gods should be propitiated on a given matter, so a wise counsel (and one consistent with portfolio diversification practice) was to spread offers widely lest any one god be forgotten and thereby angered. For the Greek gods are thought to be jealous of one another's cults, wrathful, and revengeful. In a famous Homeric story (*Iliad* IX, 534–549), the hero Oineus forgot the goddess Artemis when giving thanksgiving offers to the gods for a bountiful grape harvest; the goddess took her revenge by unleashing a wild boar which destroyed the harvest. In the *Iliad*, Hera, Poseidon, Hermes, and Athena support the Greeks while Aphrodite, Artemis, Apollo, and Ares support the Trojans in the war. This rivalry fostered offsetting sacrifices by which the heroes sought to pacify the enemy's gods.

This fundamental conception that the power of the gods was unpredictable and men could do no more than try and channel its force in advance, and that the gods' own anger at their neglect could only be averted through propitiation, or "giving to the givers", remained central throughout the life of ancient paganism. "Any account of pagan worship which minimizes the gods' uncertain anger and mortals' fear of it is an empty account" (Lane Fox 1988, 38). In general, animal sacrifice, often joined with libations, was the chief form of offering to the heavenly gods, who were thought to be eager for the odors of burned meats rising up from the altars and willing to be so placated and forgive an erring supplicant, as famously declared in the *Iliad* (IX, 499–501); in effect, the gods were carnivorous (see the discussion in Sissa and Detienne 2000, ch. 5).

As we will see, in the Hellenistic and Roman periods the migration of gods' cults from place to place only added to the complexity and confusion of the whole, making the task of hedging against insecurity an increasingly difficult task.

2.2 Roman Pantheon

The historical difference between Roman and Greek religion is that the former began as the religion of a small, insignificant Latin city which then, step by step, rose to become the dominant power of the Mediterranean world and beyond; hence, the original Roman religion spread to countless new territories and nations and, in the process, absorbed or accommodated many of the cults of the newly conquered peoples. By contrast, Greek religion remained the religion of a network of city-states, none of which ever gained lasting supremacy over the others; if anything, it was the Roman Empire that allowed the original Greek religion to travel far and wide. The critical interaction, however, was the so-called "Greek interpretation" (*interpretatio graeca*), by which the Roman literate classes, starting in the third century BC, found in the Greek deities the "twins" of their own, often with some significant strain, which in turn permitted the borrowing of myths, imagery, and cult practices from the supposedly superior culture of their elder Greek brethren (and which explains the double names of the 12 Olympian gods listed above).

The earliest Roman religion is surrounded by obscurity because of the lack of contemporary written sources; our knowledge becomes progressively firmer with the historic shift from monarchy to republic (around 500 BC) and especially from the third century BC onward. One influential, if controversial, theory (Dumézil

1970) argues that the earliest religion was dominated by the so-called “archaic triad” (Jupiter, Mars and Quirinus), which shows the unmistakable, tri-functional structure stemming from the original Indo-European religion and common to its descendants (Iranian, Vedic, Celtic, Scandinavian, and other religions): a ruler of the heavens who at the same time embodies political sovereignty and priestly power (Jupiter), a god of war (Mars), and a god of the common people in their capacity as producers (Quirinus). For a variety of reasons, the figure of Quirinus became blurred in the course of time and finally drifted into obscurity, while the archaic triad was replaced by the classic Capitoline triad (Jupiter, Juno and Minerva) that was to become the symbol of Rome throughout its history.

Beyond the triads, Rome always had a wide variety of other divine figures, greater and lesser, presiding over all aspects of life, much like the Greeks. Two differences, however, stand out: the Romans originally had no mythology, including no myth of the origins of the world—at least not one that has come down to us; and they had no genealogy or “history” of the gods, arranging them in a sort of chronological order or hierarchy. They acquired both when they paired their gods with the Greek ones, thereby inheriting myth, stories, and a fertile ground for the poetry that bloomed around the end of the Republic (first century BC). Some other important differences regard the organization of the priesthood, which will be discussed in the next section.

2.3 Travelling Gods: Hellenism and Empire

Gods had begun to travel early, in classical times. As a rule, a city’s permission was required for introducing worship of a foreign god—be it non-Greek or simply from other parts of the Greek world—and especially for granting him a public, official cult. This was based on pragmatic cost–benefit considerations, as a new cult would require an endowment to cover the costs of sanctuary building and maintenance, sacrifices, and presiding officials, and this in turn would compete for resources with existing cults and irk influential families that held prestigious priesthoods of traditional gods (Anderson 2015; Kearns 2015). Thus in democratic Athens in the fifth century BC, the citizens’ assembly decided to grant a cult and festival to the Thracian goddess of the moon and the hunt, Bendis, whom the Athenians equated with Artemis, as well as to the Greek gods Pan (from Arcadia) and Asclepius (from Epidaurus), among others. At the opposite end of the political spectrum, aristocratic Sparta was ruled by two kings who had authority over cultic innovation. By contrast, the Phrygian mother goddess Cybele, often called Meter (Mother) by the Greeks, spread mainly as a private cult. She did not sit easily with the classic genealogy of the gods in that it was “the mother of all gods and men”, and also of all animals; the Greeks, however, tended to equate her with Demeter as goddess of the harvest. Her cult was distinctly non-Greek, featuring wild, ecstatic music and dances and presided over by eunuch priests. Similarly, worship of the Semitic god Adonis, the “dying god”, spread as a private cult reserved for women (Burkert 1985, 176–179).

Looking beyond the boundaries of the *polis*, when alliances formed among cities, each city’s gods were solemnly acknowledged by its partners. Then with

Alexander's conquest and the establishment of its successor states, which brought unity to the eastern Mediterranean and beyond, the diffusion process accelerated. The Egyptian goddess Isis in the third century BC began a long, successful career in Greek, and later Roman, lands; Serapis—a syncretistic deity derived from the worship of two pre-existing Egyptians gods (Osiris and Apis) as a means to unify Greeks and Egyptians in Ptolemaic Egypt—likewise became a major success story first in the Greek and then the Roman world. Isis and Serapis were often worshipped in a joint sanctuary.

In republican Rome, the senate time and again decided to welcome foreign gods into the city and grant them a temple, a cult, and often a festival marked on the official ritual calendar alongside the original Roman festivals. This could be the result of alliances or trade connections with other Italian cities whereby the partner cities would acknowledge and “import” each other's gods, in a pattern similar to that established among Greek cities long before. Since such cities were often Greek colonies, many of these imported gods were Greek, but not all. Another process by which local gods found a new home, especially in republican Rome and occasionally in later periods, was the importation of the patron deity of a conquered city into the conquering city in fulfillment of a vow taken by the Roman general ahead of battle. The vow promised the deity would be honored if he/she “switched sides” at the time of battle and ensured the Romans' victory; whereupon in Rome the new deity would be not just acknowledged but “equated” to a pre-existing indigenous deity—a procedure known as *evocatio* (Dumézil 1970, part III, ch. 3; Beard et al. 1998, 34–35).

Cybele—a non-Greek goddess, as we have seen—was officially and solemnly introduced to Rome, as Magna Mater (the Great Mother), around 204 BC on the advice of the Sibylline oracle, which said that the second war against Carthage might be won by the goddess' help—which indeed happened. Isis arrived in Rome in the first century BC and gained a temple and a large following, and later also the personal endorsement of some emperors. Occasionally, a foreign cult could be repressed or suppressed for reasons to do with law and order or propriety of behavior; for example, a mystery cult to Bacchus was banned by the senate in 186 BC on grounds of being unruly and morally corrupt (Beard et al. 1998, 96–98, 196).

As these examples show “Oriental” gods and goddesses, foreign to both the classic Greek and Roman pantheons, had begun to travel west and make Rome or Athens their home long before the imperial age. Importantly, several of these “new” gods (especially Cybele, Isis, and Serapis) crisscrossed the lines of jurisdiction or competence of the traditional pantheon, promising blessings and protection for a wide array of issues.

With the Roman Empire and the establishment of lasting peace across the Mediterranean and beyond (*pax romana*, which included *pax deorum*), more travelling could and did take place. Some travelling was entirely private and unsanctioned. Merchants settled in faraway places to establish trading posts; soldiers were stationed far and wide across the empire and often changed stations of assignment in successive years; slaves—typically war prisoners—were shifted around, then often freed and their free offspring put down roots in the new place. All these groups brought along their favored gods and built them shrines, thus widening the range

of cults on offer in any one place; these upstarts occasionally made converts in their new lands through marriage or other ways.

At the level of civic religion, the changes wrought by Roman rule, especially in the western provinces of the empire, must be differentiated according to the citizenship status of the towns and their residents (Beard et al. 1998, ch. 7). This is because, for most of the pagan period of the empire, Roman citizenship was a privilege differentially granted to individuals, groups, and whole towns, and one much prized and actively sought for—until in 212 AD the emperor Caracalla extended citizenship to most of the free population of the empire. Since citizenship was a precondition for military service, the army camps had an official religious life that was predominantly Roman, from the deities worshiped to the ritual calendar to the forms of ritual—though this did not prevent both officers and troops from worshiping other gods in a private capacity. Next came the *coloniae*, i.e. communities of Roman citizens, often discharged soldiers, settled outside Italy and designed to be replicas of Rome in all respects, including the religious institutions from the pantheon to the principal priesthoods. Then there were *municipia*, i.e. towns that had been granted the so-called “Latin rights”, a subset of the full citizenship rights; these shared some of the Roman features of the previous type, especially the priestly organization. Finally there was the vast number of towns without Roman status, even though they might have included individual Roman citizens among their residents. Here the Romans resorted to some degree of repression, notably trying to suppress the Druids—the native priestly class of the Gauls—who were seen as posing a threat to Roman order; otherwise the native peoples understandably sought accommodation with their new masters by “reinterpreting” their traditional gods as variations of, or another name for, Roman deities, so that e.g. Mercury in Gaul and Saturn in North Africa (often hyphenated with a local epithet) came to cover old Celtic and Punic deities respectively.

Besides the spreading of old, localized gods to new places, the imperial age witnessed the birth and growth of new “Oriental” cults (Beard et al. 1998, 278–309). The well-known Isis and Cybele were joined by Jupiter Dolichenus—one of many variants of the Syrian god Ba'al—and Mithras—supposedly a “Persian” sun religion, whatever that may have meant to contemporaries. Despite the “Oriental” label, these cults were virtually unknown in the east but spread widely in the western provinces and were particularly associated with the army. These gods were even less specialized than the traditional gods and tended toward a kind of encompassing jurisdiction—a feature that had the potential to unsettle the traditional “division of labor” among gods, although the details escape us. Of course, the Oriental religions included such oddities—in Roman eyes—as Judaism and Christianity, including the many Gnostic and other fringe groups and sects that were close to them.

The cumulative result of these processes is captured by the stock of Latin inscriptions (i.e. from the western part of the empire) for the second and third centuries AD (MacMullen 1981, 5–8, 113). Jupiter is by far the leader. The 14 gods that come next have different weights in the different provinces; they include half of the twelve Olympians listed above (i.e. Apollo, Diana, Venus, Mercury, Liber, Mars) but not the others, a few other traditional deities, and four Oriental gods: Isis-Serapis, Cybele, Dolichenus, and Mithras-Sol. The last two are especially prominent in

frontier regions such as the Danube where the settlements were heavily militarized. The corresponding Greek epigraphic record (i.e. from the eastern part of the empire) is fragmentary, but a collection of inscriptions from Asia Minor largely overlaps with the western record, except that of the Oriental gods only Cybele is in, but ranking low, while the others are replaced by the good old Greek goddesses Athena and Hera that failed to make it into the western record.

So in the Greek-speaking east nothing of substance had changed from Hellenistic times, despite Roman domination. In the western provinces, by far the most important change had been the broad establishment of the worship of Jupiter and, after that, of a fairly representative mix of traditional, if heavily Hellenized, Roman deities (including Isis and Cybele, which had been thoroughly domesticated centuries before); only Dolichenus and Mithras were the real newcomers. So even in the late 3rd century AD the old, traditional Greek and Roman gods were alive and well, though joined by a few newcomers. This finding belies once-popular arguments about the dying out of traditional gods under the onslaught of the new cults in the late pagan empire (MacMullen 1981, 126–127). In Nock's words (quoted in Lane Fox 1988, 83), "there was, if anything, less chance of the Roman Empire turning Mithraic than of seventeenth-century England turning Quaker".

The upshot of this discussion is that hedging against risk by making offers to multiple gods on each issue (in the economist's language, portfolio diversification) was a ubiquitous, increasing problem. This suggests that any process that would shrink the number and range of competing claimants for offers would have benefited supplicants.

3 The Human Agents

3.1 The Priests

Classical Greek religion has been defined "a religion without priests" (Burkert 1985, 95) because it has no professional priestly class with a corporate identity.³ "There was no 'mother church', no national priesthood, no central authority on ritual, let alone doctrine" (Finley 1964, 50).

In summary outline (Burkert 1985, part II ch. 6; Garland 1990; Flower 2015), a priest (*hiereus*) or priestess (*hiereia*) was a public official in charge of a specific sanctuary and its belongings as well as the rites connected with the cult that was housed therein, chief of which was the sacrifice; as a general rule, male deities were attended by male priests and female deities by female priests. The only requirements for office were full citizenship and absence of physical blemishes. In

³ It would be interesting to speculate on the reasons why, in stark contrast to ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian religions, a priestly class never developed in Greece. A promising line of argument could be that Greek city-states were based on broadly equal political rights of citizens, who controlled power and decided policy, and knew no absolute ruler endowed with divine rights or powers. In such an egalitarian environment, it is difficult to imagine how a priestly class could ever acquire a monopoly of religious practice. Adequately addressing this issue, however, lies beyond the purview of this paper.

democratic Athens, a number of traditional priesthoods remained the hereditary preserve of certain aristocratic families, possibly from Mycenaean times; but starting in the 5th century BC, many important priestly offices were assigned by lot or by voting in the citizens' assembly among the eligible free population of the appropriate gender, and generally were for one year terms. This implies that specialized learning or skills were neither required nor expected. At the opposite end of the political spectrum, aristocratic Sparta had two kings who also took care of the religion. Most other Greek cities stood somewhere in between; the pattern of non-professional priesthoods, rotation in priestly office, and near-absence of life tenure seems to have been the general rule, to continue much in the same form down through the Hellenistic and then Roman periods.⁴ In these later periods, priesthoods were often auctioned off to the highest bidder among the city elite (Lane Fox 1988, 77–78). The latter thus considered priestly service as a normal duty to be taken up alongside civic duties, and one that was onerous but brought prestige. It follows from this that nobody earned their living from religious service.

Another key feature that endured throughout the life of ancient paganism and militated against the entrenchment of a professional priestly class was that a priest was generally not necessary to make offers and sacrifices to the gods or to hold public festivals and processions. These rituals could also be performed by a family head, a village head, a city magistrate, or an army commander at different locations, including homes and occasionally temples, without a supervising priest (Burkert 1985, 95). Finally, there was another widespread figure of religious specialist: the seer or diviner (*mantis*), a private professional that provided his services for a fee to anyone who was willing to pay and whose business success depended on his/her technical knowledge and personal charisma; to enhance their credibility in the eyes of clients, often they claimed to belong to ancient clans of seers. Female seers served at pan-Hellenic oracular sites such as Delphi and Dodona. As far as we can gauge, this profession in Greece was very competitive and not organized as a pressure group (Burkert 1985, 111–114; Flower 2015).

Republican Rome was different in that priestly offices, rather than being individual assignments as in Greece, were organized in colleges, and were normally for life (although sometimes one could resign) (Dumézil 1970, part IV, ch. 2; Beard 1990; Beard et al. 1998, 18–30, 99–108). The main colleges were: the *pontifices*, the *augures*, the *decemviri/quindecimviri* (their number changed with time), and the *fetiales*. The pontifical college, headed by the *pontifex maximus* or chief priest (a title later assumed by the head of the Christian church), included not only the pontiffs but also the *flamines* and supervised the Vestal Virgins. The *flamines* were the only priests who did not function as a college but had specific individual assignments, each being dedicated to the cult of a particular god of varying importance. The Vestals—the only female priesthood in the picture—were the only full-time professionals, living in separate quarters and dedicated as a group to the upkeep of

⁴ There were a few isolated exceptions featuring lifelong, consecrated priesthoods; these included the priestess of the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, known as the Pythia, and the priests or priestesses of the non-Greek gods Cybele and Isis, mentioned above.

the sacred hearth of the city, whose fire should never be extinguished. The pontiffs themselves had a specialized knowledge of sacred laws and rituals, which extended to matters like the supervision of burials and adoptions and the keeping of the calendar, and they both regulated individual behavior and advised the senate on such matters. The augurs (*augures*) “took the auspices”, i.e. divined the will of the gods from the observation of birds, thunder and lightning, and on this basis advised the senate and the magistrates for any intended political or military action. They also ritually “inaugurated” new temples. The 10 men/15 men (*decemviri/quindecimviri*) were the guardians of the Sibylline Books, from which they produced oracles on the senate’s request. Finally the *fetiales* presided over the rituals that ensured the proper starting and ending of wars.

As the foregoing description implies, there was an elaborate division of labor that differentiated priesthoods by specialized, non-overlapping tasks; the division of functions and powers was strictly defined by tradition and custom. So Roman priesthoods were organized along different lines than their Greek counterparts—so much so that only hesitatingly did the Romans themselves use the general term *sacerdos* (equivalent to the Greek *hierous*) to embrace the whole range of their religious officials (Beard 1990, 43–47). Exactly for this reason, there was, and there could be, no overall hierarchy; the chief pontiff had some limited disciplinary power only over members of his college. The collegiality principle (extending to all groups but the *flamines*) ensured that the priests of each college were interchangeable and could take turns at the job, so that they all (except the Vestals) were part-time priests. The result was the figure of the “priest-politician”: a man could and normally did join any of these priesthoods (with very few exceptions) with a political or military career. Originally all priesthoods were patrician, i.e. reserved for the aristocracy; since around 300 BC access to the office of augurs, pontiffs, *fetiales*, and *quindecimviri* was opened to the plebeians, i.e. the commoners. As to the method of selection, the *flamines* and the Vestals were chosen by the chief pontiff, while the *fetiales* always by cooption. The augurs, pontiffs, and *quindecimviri* were also originally chosen by cooption; then a method of partial popular election was introduced in the last century BC—a belated “democratization” in the Athenian style.

The empire saw the rise of a formal hierarchy: by claiming the title of *pontifex maximus* for himself the emperor, beginning with Augustus, became in a sense the head of the religion. However, this power was never used to dictate religious belief or behavior to his subjects. The emperors often did show a preference for particular gods, lavishing patronage on their cult—especially in the third century AD, when emperors such as Elagabalus and Aurelian endorsed an Oriental, non-Roman deity of universal power (*Sol Invictus*—Unconquered Sun). But this was never meant to imply, let alone impose, a claim to exclusive worship or a disestablishment of the other gods; in short, it was an assertion of relative superiority, not monotheism—Number One, not The Only One. So despite the intertwining of priests and politics from the beginnings of Rome, the widespread notion of “state cult” to describe the Roman system is basically a misconception (MacMullen 1981, 83–95, 102–107). Little else changed with the empire except the rise of a cult to the genius of the current emperor—to wish him fortune and glory—as well as to some previous emperors who had been “deified”; these special cults had specially dedicated priests appointed

from the provincial towns as well as in Rome. Other than that, as discussed in the previous section, the Roman priestly organization was exported to, or borrowed by, the settlements with Roman status across the empire.

3.2 The Elective Cults

In the classic Greek world there arose the first hints of what we would today call sectarian groups: elective association based on esoteric doctrine and initiation, separate from, and potentially at odds with, the official civic religion. These were the Orphic and the Pythagorean groups (Burkert 1985, 296–304). But these groups remained marginal down through the later imperial age.

In the imperial age, the “elective” cults, i.e. those who drew from a self-selected pool of believers outside the official system of civic cults, did spread far and wide. In particular, the cult of Isis—an old acquaintance from pre-imperial times—was attended to by a specialized, dedicated priesthood that, supposedly, might have had a vested interest in active missionizing. Yet, contrary to earlier claims, her cult does not seem to have attracted many new recruits, but rather to have diffused mainly through travel and resettlements of slaves or ex-slaves and their descendants (MacMullen 1981, 114–117). Conscious, organized evangelizing of any sort was basically unknown in the empire; if a cult acquired new adherents, ordinarily initiative lay with the unconverted, often influenced by the endorsement of people in high positions (*ibid.*, 97–99, 111–112).

By contrast, Jupiter Dolichenus and Mithras started from scratch at the beginning of the second century AD and, as we have seen in the previous section, achieved a remarkable increase in membership over the following two centuries, especially in the army camps and frontier towns in the west; so their growth must have occurred through conversion, even if of the “passive” kind. Their membership seems to have consisted mainly of soldiers and officers, as well as slaves and ex-slaves—so definitely not the social elite—and to have been restricted to men. The cult of Mithras in particular, on which we have substantially more information from archeology and epigraphy, was a remarkable success story given that it had no launching pad, no ancestral home to lend it authority and prestige. It was organized as an elaborate hierarchy of seven grades of initiation, and hence of leadership, through which members ascended, supposedly gaining access to some esoteric knowledge such as that concerning the immortality of the soul. This mirrored the hierarchy that soldiers and freedmen were experiencing in their secular lives. Members gathered in elaborately designed subterranean chapels, or *Mithraea*, where they enjoyed communal meals and worship. So Mithraism seems to be the closest thing in the ancient world to the modern sense of a congregational religion—one that can properly be said to have members, not customers, and where members derive satisfaction from participation in (material and spiritual) collective activities, solidarity and mutual support. So this may be the first example of a group to which the economic model of the religious sect as a club (Iannaccone 1992) might apply. Yet it was not a religious “movement” in the sense that individual Mithraic groups and temples seem not to have been part of any organized network or coordinating structure.

Even more important, the elective cults, including Mithras', were not exclusive (Beard et al. 1998, 278–309; MacMullen 1981, 92–93; Lane Fox 1988, 34–36): they did not promote or demand exclusive allegiance to their god and disownment of all other deities. Their temples housed statues, paintings, and inscriptions that acknowledged a variety of other gods, both traditional and Oriental, which were evidently accommodated as friends and guests or thought to be “the same” as the cult's chief deity. In short, even if their *theology* was monotheistic inasmuch as their gods claimed universal jurisdiction over human concerns, their cult *practices* and behavioral requirements were not monotheistic. The true monotheists, Jews and Christians, were in a class apart, even if the Christians had to wage a protracted struggle up until the fourth century, redefining and sharpening their theology in the process, to differentiate themselves from this seemingly monotheistic competition (Ferrero 2008).

To summarize, the great, unique strength of Greco–Roman paganism, often noted by scholars, was its seemingly unlimited capacity to accommodate new and foreign cults of every description, which would be lined up alongside the others for the believers to worship as they pleased. Unlimited religious tolerance was the hallmark of the system. Some cults might in time decline and die out while others might rise and spread, following worshippers' demand and/or the elite's patronage, but if one turned to a new cult there was no requirement that one should forsake or forswear previous allegiances. So as Nock (1933) put it long ago, the very notion of “conversion”, i.e., subscribing to a new cult to the exclusion of all others, had no meaning in this world—until the advent of Christianity, which changed everything.

As a final remark, it is worth addressing the oft-repeated claim that religion is fundamentally a tool of social control—the “opiate of the masses” argument. In the Greco–Roman world, the absence of a professional priestly class and the nonexistence of religious dogma diminished the use of religion as an instrument of control over citizens. After the citizens of the Greek city-states wrested power from the kings, the performance of the religious rituals was taken over by ordinary citizens on a rotation basis—“amateurs” rather than religious professionals, so that there was no permanent religious authority to exercise control. In Rome priestly tenure was usually for life but still non-professional and non-exclusive; if anything, the city Senate exercised control over the priesthoods rather than the other way around. Further, since the polytheistic religion did not proclaim a code of ethical behavior to save one's soul, religious teaching could hardly have served as an instrument of control. Hellenistic kings and Roman emperors were keen to claim ancestry from gods, demigods and mythological heroes, while Roman emperors also established the cult of their own geniuses. However, as already described, neither did they try to establish a uniform dogma, nor did they demand exclusivity.

4 Some Economics of Divine Competition

Imagine that there are several gods who have overlapping, but non-coincident, jurisdictions over several matters. As so often in economics, a 2×2 model will suffice to illustrate the problem. Let A and B be two gods who are thought to be able to affect

outcomes in two fields, x and y . For example, x might be a woman's health and y her giving birth, and A and B might be Hera and Artemis. Let x_A and x_B (respectively, y_A and y_B) denote the amounts of sacrifices or offers of an agent to gods A and B in pursuit of a favorable outcome in field x (respectively, y). Suppose for the moment that there are fixed amounts of resources, $\bar{x}$ and $\bar{y}$, that the agent can or will devote as offers to each outcome, such that $x_A + x_B \leq \bar{x}$ and $y_A + y_B \leq \bar{y}$.

The agent maximizes utility on behalf of each god by choosing the offer basket with a view to satisfying the god as best he can. Analytically, gods are perceived to be pleased by the offers dedicated to them, thankful for it, and rewarding the supplicant by bestowing favors on him towards the fulfillment of the supplicant's wishes. The happier the god, the fuller and more effective his/her blessings—which makes ancient polytheism a kind of “fee for service” operation (Iannaccone 1995), although one founded on beliefs and subject to random disturbances. However, the supplicant is well aware that each god is sensitive to his/her being recognized as influential in both fields and will not make the mistake of only trusting one god for x and the other for y —unless the gods are perceived as specializing in x or y (see below).

Furthermore, each god is supposed to have a satiation point which is, in principle, within the supplicant's reach and consists of a bundle of offers that makes the god perfectly satisfied. This point is a perception or subjective belief of a typical supplicant, as determined by the prevailing culture and mythology of the ancient world which viewed the gods as greedy for acknowledgment and offers but amenable to be pacified with sufficient effort. If the supplicant cannot or will not make offerings that match the satiation point, he believes he will face in return less satisfactory or more haphazard blessings from the god. Any offer in excess of this ideal bundle, however, does not turn the “good” into a “bad” but into a “neutral” good—i.e. the god is indifferent to the excess offer which, therefore, would not harm the supplicant. Hence, the supplicant will not waste scarce resources in excess of satiation levels but turn them over to the other god or, if the resources are sufficiently flexible in use, to the other outcome.

This suggests that the resources devoted to each outcome can be made variable subject to an overall resource constraint. Suppose that x and y are measured in the same units, so that they are perfectly substitutable across outcomes (e.g. money). Denoting with R the fixed amount⁵ of total resources available for religious offers, $R = \bar{x} + \bar{y}$. Let S_A and S_B be the two gods' satiation bundles and the superscript S attached to the x s and y s denote the corresponding satiation levels. Avoiding waste of religious resources requires:

$$\bar{x} \leq x_A^S + x_B^S \quad \text{and} \quad \bar{y} \leq y_A^S + y_B^S. \quad (1)$$

Scarcity of resources will prevail if at least one of the inequalities in (1) holds as a strict inequality (“<”), i.e. the supplicant cannot supply both gods with their

⁵ A full model would determine, in the usual way, the supplicant's optimal R by maximizing his utility over religious and secular consumption subject to a budget constraint. At an interior solution, one would expect this R to fall short of the gods' satiation bundles, i.e. scarcity would prevail. Giving priority to satiation of both gods regardless of opportunity cost would seem to require some kind of lexicographic preferences.

satiation bundles. Under scarcity, to maximize utility, the available amounts of both religious resources will be fully used up, hence $x_A + x_B = \bar{x}$ and $y_A + y_B = \bar{y}$. Therefore under scarcity, using (1), the following inequality holds:

$$R = \bar{x} + \bar{y} = x_A + x_B + y_A + y_B < x_A^S + x_B^S + y_A^S + y_B^S. \quad (2)$$

Scarcity of resources is, however, not sufficient to create a nontrivial choice problem for the supplicant. Two cases can be distinguished, corresponding to different theologies. The first is the case of *specialized gods*, where each god has exclusive jurisdiction over one field and cares only about offers in that field, so there is no jurisdictional overlap. In this case two of the satiation levels in (1) and (2), one for each god, would be equal to zero. For example if god A cares only about y and god B cares only about x , then $x_A^S = 0$ and $y_B^S = 0$. Then the supplicant will naturally devote the whole of offer y to god A and the whole of offer x to god B, although falling short of fully satiating them if he labors under scarcity. The second is the case of *rival gods*, where each god has jurisdiction over both issues and cares about both offers, implying jurisdictional overlap. Joined with scarcity, this creates a meaningful choice problem for the supplicant.

With these assumptions, the situation can be simply modeled by an unusual application of a straightforward tool: an Edgeworth box, which depicts the indifference maps over the perceived preferences of gods A and B with respect to offers x and y . The sides of the box are measured by any pair $(\bar{x}, \bar{y})$ that satisfies (1), and which also satisfies (2) if there is scarcity. Figure 1 illustrates the case of *specialized gods*, with god A influencing only and therefore caring only about y and god B caring

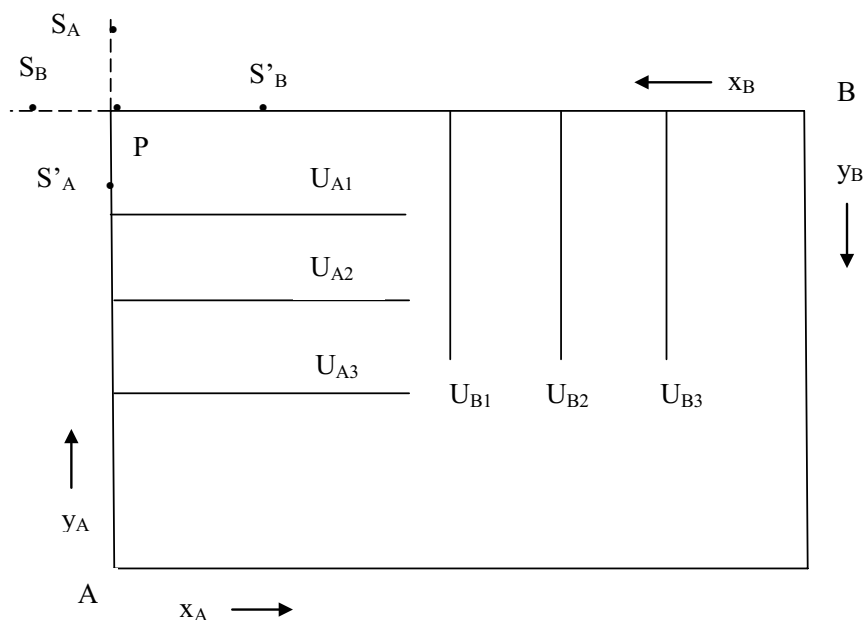


Fig. 1 Specialized gods: A cares only about y , B cares only about x

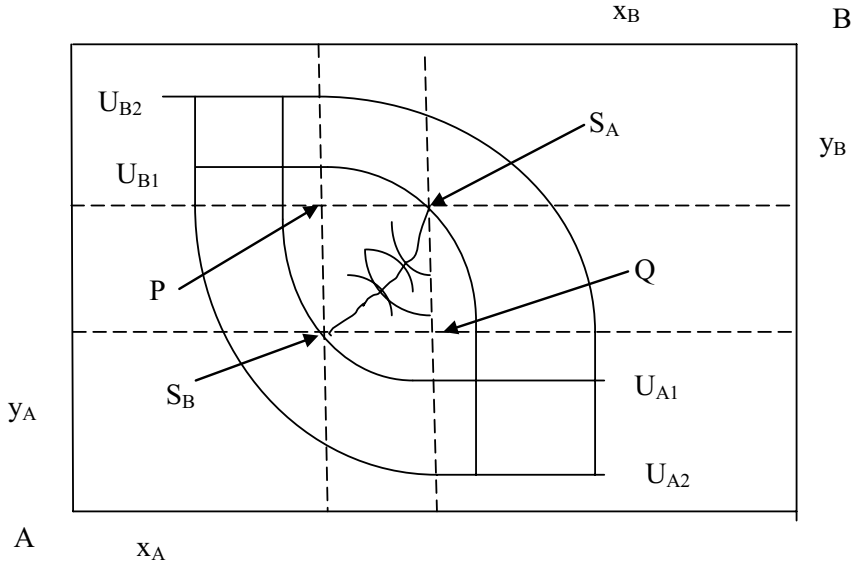


Fig. 2 Rival gods: both A and B care about both x and y

only about x . Then their indifference curves will be horizontal and vertical lines, respectively. If scarcity prevails and the satiation points are beyond the supplicant's resources, like S_A and S_B , he will choose the NW vertex of the box (point P) as his optimal bundle, exhausting his available resources. If, however, the satiation points were S'_A and S'_B , the supplicant would be in a state of bliss: both gods could be satiated without using up all the available resources. In either case, no "trade" of offers between the gods is necessary or feasible. Of course, in the latter case an excess of resources is being needlessly tied up in religious offers, violating (1); to maximize his utility, the supplicant should reduce these to the benefit of secular consumption, thereby downsizing the box to $\bar{x} = BS'_B$ and $\bar{y} = AS'_A$.

Figure 2 illustrates the case of *rival gods*, where each god is perceived to have jurisdiction over both issues. The pair of horizontal and vertical dashed lines drawn through each satiation point divide the (x, y) space into an area where both goods are below satiation levels and indifference curves are monotonically increasing in utility and strictly convex to the origin (the SW quadrant from the satiation point) and the rest of the space where one or both goods are above satiation levels and indifference curves become straight lines. Two such indifference curves are drawn for each god. It is easy to check that a move from a point anywhere in the box to a point within the rectangle $S_A P S_B Q$ represents a Pareto improvement whereby one or both gods increase their utility. Within this rectangle, both sets of indifference curves are strictly convex, i.e. both goods are scarce for both gods. The $S_A S_B$ curve connects indifference curves U_{A1} and U_{B1} (A's indifference curve through B's satiation point and B's indifference curve through A's satiation point) and is the locus of tangency points between pairs of indifference curves; hence, a move from a point anywhere in

the rectangle to a point on the curve represents a Pareto improvement. Thus $S_A S_B$ is the “contract curve” between the two gods, i.e. the set of Pareto optimal allocations of offers between them. It depicts the trade-off faced by the supplicant: in increasing his offerings to placate one god, he may incur the displeasure of the other god. Along the contract curve, the gods are indeed “jealous” of each other as any change in allocation that makes one god better off will make the other worse off; the supplicant will be wise to choose as his offer allocation a point on the contract curve, not outside of it, in order to minimize the harm from such jealousy, but he can do no better than that. The “hungrier”, or more demanding, are the gods, the further apart are their satiation points and, given the total resources available, the worse is the supplicant’s dilemma.

The contract curve implicitly defines a “utility possibility frontier” of the gods, where the supplicant will want to choose his preferred point based on his beliefs and attitudes to risk; in a standard case of risk aversion, he will typically pick an interior solution, thus diversifying his portfolio of offers and spreading the risk. Modeling this would be straightforward but would add little of interest for our purposes.

Readers can satisfy themselves that if the satiation points for A and B in Fig. 2 were swapped, the supplicant could fully satiate both gods without using up all of his resources. Thus it is the gods’ rivalry over jurisdictions, joined with scarcity in a critical subset of the offers space, which creates the potential for divine competition and the supplicant’s dilemma. This highlights a final possibility: a *single god*, having exclusive jurisdiction over *both* fields (there may well be other gods overseeing other fields).⁶ If only god A existed and had the same satiation point as shown in Fig. 2, he could be fully satisfied within the bounds of available resources and the supplicant would be “sure” to get what he wants. There would be no dilemma.

This discussion can be understood as a stylized description of the story of ancient polytheism: the jurisdictional overlap, implying the potential for rivalry and jealousy among gods, was there from the beginning, and was only bound to increase in the course of time as new gods kept coming in and making the pantheon ever more complex and confusing. The effort at order and hierarchy made early on by Hesiod’s *Theogony* soon proved inadequate to keep track of all the new developments.

5 Taking the Theory to History

We have seen that under the Empire old gods travelled with their worshipers to new places and a few new gods established themselves through conversion (Jupiter Dolichenus, Mithras). So in the course of time the divine mix available to supplicants in any one place widened. We should be wary of inferring from this that the decision problem of the average person or city grew in direct proportion to the number of

⁶ This possibility should not be confused with monotheism, which is generally not based on a quid pro quo exchange of offers for blessings. See the discussion below.

names of gods that were being marketed: first, because many “new” names were epithets, or personifications, of the same god, and secondly, because of the practice of “polyonymy”, i.e. the fastening of many divine names onto one and the same deity in inscriptions, like Zeus–Helios–Serapis or Isis–Aphrodite–Persephone, as if to signify that the god under three different names was really one (MacMullen 1981, 90–91). Even so, the long-term increase in divine variety undoubtedly increased the areas of jurisdictional overlap and the range of deities that would overlap on the same issue space. In theory, this should have heightened the competitive pressure and the incentive for some of the cults to aggressively displace and take over their competitors, thereby shrinking the available range and moving the system towards increasing concentration, if not unification. For the rival gods of traditional polytheism, this would have involved e.g. god A displacing god B and becoming the sole provider of goods x and y, at the same time as god C displacing god D and becoming the sole provider of goods z and w, and so on. For a god of an elective cult, claiming universal jurisdiction over all fields (x, y, z, and w), it would have involved displacing all of A, B, C, and D and establishing himself as supreme—perhaps contending with another all-encompassing god for such supremacy. This last bit of competition could be seen as rivalry among providers of different brands of universal religion—a monopolistically competitive market with product differentiation—as long as they did not claim or enforce exclusivity (which, as we have seen, they in fact did not).

Yet, apparently, none of this happened. Paganism continued to evolve and change and accommodate variety and mixture to its very end, without showing signs of decline, crisis, or concentration and reduction of its diversity. Importantly, some philosophers’ criticisms notwithstanding, animal sacrifice remained central to pagan cult to its very end (Lane Fox 1988, 70–72). This has been taken as testimony to the vitality of paganism; yet at the same time “[t]he sum was confusion. No counterforce for order existed” (MacMullen 1981, 102). But when the empire got past the crisis of the third century, the Tetrarchy, and the Great Persecution of Christians, what emerged triumphant was Christianity, not the traditional civic religion nor Isis nor Mithras—that is, the one religion that had been unswervingly exclusive in its monotheism (unlike the elective cults), had a proselytizing disposition toward the whole world, even when not actively missionizing (unlike post-Destruction Judaism), and was run by a professional, full-time, exclusive clergy. The story of the rise and triumph of Christianity, and the reasons for its success, are topics that fall outside the scope of this paper.⁷ But its consequences are clear (Beard et al. 1998, ch. 8). After Emperor Constantine’s endorsement of Christianity in 313 AD, and even after Emperor Theodosius’ proclamation of Christianity as state religion in the 390s and his disestablishment of the traditional cults, most of the elite across the empire unobtrusively continued their pagan observances well into the fifth century, slowly converting to the new faith as the prospect of taking up the new priestly offices to replace the old ones became attractive. The elective cults too went under, and that

⁷ The reader is referred to MacMullen (1984) as a basic reference. Ferrero (2008) offers a series of economic models to analyze the doctrinal struggle engaged by Christianity in its underground, competitive period and the theological radicalization that attended its success.

must have been a harder blow to their devotees; but there is no evidence that the cult of Mithras survived beyond the fourth century or outside the empire. So there were frictions and protests at different points in time and space, but nothing like a general uprising or organized resistance to the Christian takeover. More important, and despite Emperor Julian's short-lived, top-down attempt to restore the traditional religion, there was nothing like a last redoubt where the diehard of paganism would hold out forever, celebrate their glory days, and faithfully await for the time to be ripe for a comeback. Slowly and unevenly, paganism died out and that was the end of it—perhaps rather like a coral reef, which can thrive and grow only within fairly narrow environmental conditions (MacMullen 1981, 128–137).

Our model of the previous section suggests that a single god is like the shopping mall vis-à-vis a collection of street stalls or boutique shops: you find everything you need in one place, saving your time and search effort and staying clear of the petty squabbles among vendors vying for your business. This simply relies on the observation that buying from a single outlet involves smaller transaction costs than buying from multiple outlets. The value added of the Edgeworth box analysis is to show that the boutique system involves a range of allocations where there is rivalry between the gods and the supplicant is faced with a dilemma—for the gods, unlike the boutique owners, are thought to be able and willing to retaliate and punish an “unfaithful” supplicant. So on the consumers’ or supplicants’ side there are definitely welfare gains to be had from simplification of the divine landscape, cult concentration, and elimination or reduction of the wasteful competition—that is, from one-stop shopping.⁸ In short, the industrial organization of pagan religion was inefficient, even though offerings to the different gods might have been allocated efficiently.⁹

In an innovative contribution to the theory of fiscal federalism, Frey and Eichenberger (1996) argue that a system of functional, overlapping, and competing jurisdictions (FOCJ) would enhance social welfare by allowing competition among governmental units defined along functional, rather than territorial, lines. At first blush, Greco-Roman polytheism fits the description of such overlapping functional units—in this case, functionally overlapping gods—which clients are free to join and leave. However, while the FOCJ are able to satisfy heterogeneous preferences of individuals and thereby increase welfare, they have no power to retaliate and punish those

⁸ Figure 2 implicitly shows these welfare gains from a single god. In our approach, the supplicant's utility is an increasing function of the utilities of all the gods involved in a particular transaction. If only god A existed he could be fully satiated, thus eliminating the supplicant's perceived risk, and the supplicant's total expenditure on offers would be less than the budget available for this transaction. While such cost savings would always be present, if the supplicant is risk averse the former factor would also weigh in.

⁹ As if arguing against this line of thinking, Lane Fox (1988, 34) remarks that despite the fact that pagans had never had a wider choice of gods than in the late Empire, “no pagan complained of it, and multiplicity had its strengths.... It helped people to explain their misfortune in external terms, by error, not by sin. Pagans might be neglecting one angry divinity among many, whose mood accounted for their hardships.” However, this make sense only if one takes the unbounded multiplicity for granted – as the only possible religious landscape; if so, then more gods rather than fewer might indeed have its use. But this pagan's view might have changed if he had ever been faced with a drastic reduction of such multiplicity – which, however, should have been a supplier's, not a consumer's job.

who leave them, so that people may, but need not, be members of several FOJ at the same time. Therefore the multiplicity of units and their competition for members can only be beneficial. By contrast, in paganism there was thought to be a high cost to leaving, or neglecting, one of the relevant gods—as pointed out above, gods’ anger and men’s fear of it was the defining characteristic of ancient polytheism. It is for this reason that multiplicity was bad and unification good from the social welfare point of view. The competition that would have benefited the system, and which did not happen, is one which would displace some of the gods and produce concentration, rather than support their coexistence.

Our findings fit in nicely with a well-established result in the theory of industrial organization: when two goods are complements in consumption, joint provision of both goods is Pareto-superior to independent provision because the independent producers ignore the effect of their individual decisions on each other, while the single monopolist internalizes this externality. In our setting, two gods’ perceived authority on the same issue or field—the overlapping of their jurisdictions—creates an externality that is costly to the supplicant because he or she must please both gods, hence his/her offers to each of the gods are complements. Merger or unitary provision internalizes this external effect and improves the supplicant’s welfare.¹⁰

It is worth noting that this was an (implicit) demand for unitary provision, not for monotheism as is so often claimed—for example it did not include, as far as we can tell, a demand for an afterlife, which may well have been created, rather than satisfied, by Christianity and other mystery cults (MacMullen 1981, 53–57; Beard et al. 1998, 289–91).¹¹ Precisely for this reason, the Christian triumph cannot be seen as the response to this demand, first because it was too much a product of political protection—the first time ever that the Greco-Roman world would face a true state religion—and second because even if it made a liberal use of magic, miracles, and exorcism in its initial period, Christianity eventually inaugurated a religion based on faith and morality and not—or at least not so brazenly—on gift exchange. So a response to the inefficiency should have come from the religious suppliers that paganism had to show—but it did not. Why?

Our description of the priestly organization suggests the answer. With few, scattered exceptions, priests were not full-time, dedicated professionals; hence they had no corporate identity as a priestly class and did not function as an interest group. They did not make a living out of it, often took up different priestly offices in their lifetime and even at the same time, and normally priesthood was joined with propertied class status and with political or military office to make up a lifetime career in the Roman senatorial class or in the provincial elite (*cursus honorum*). The only full-time, exclusive, professional priestly class was the Christian clergy—and indeed they showed they could be a very effective pressure group in the Christian empire.

¹⁰ See Economides and Salop (1992) for analysis. We are indebted to Soeren Schwuchow for this insight.

¹¹ The assumption that such doctrinal promise, dubbed the “afterlife difference”, represented a key competitive advantage of Christianity as against paganism and Judaism is one of the main flaws of Ekelund and Tollison’s (2011) economic analysis of the rise of Christianity. See also the critique by MacMullen (2012).

The priests, or the highest initiation grades, of the elective cults were more dedicated to their task and could hold out a more encompassing theology, but even they (or their followers) could hold priesthoods of another cult or of a traditional god at the same time (MacMullen 1981, 92–93; Lane Fox 1988, 34–36); so not only the gods worshiped in these cults, but also their priests were not exclusive. In a nutshell, no one in late paganism seems to have had the material incentives—in the traditional religion—or the foresight and entrepreneurial ability—in the elective cults—that would have been required to try and turn around the confusion and disorder of the polytheistic system.¹²

So when the official Christianization of the empire began, everyone sought to adjust as best they could, and various social or occupational groups offered various degrees of resistance to the new regime; but there was no group that could even think of standing up to the new masters—admittedly, a formidable combination of imperial power and church authority—in *their capacity as a priestly class or a grassroots religious association*. The organization of Greek and Roman polytheism had so effectively disempowered religion and subordinated it to political power and class status that any capacity of religious agents to take on a life of their own was stymied at the roots. They would and could only swim or sink with the political system in which they were embedded; when the old order collapsed, they were doomed. Despite signs of economic stress among the upper classes that had always borne the brunt of the expensive, public structure of temples and ceremonies (MacMullen 1981, 128–130), ancient paganism as a religious system was alive and well when Constantine made the great turnaround, and were it not for that, it could well have continued indefinitely; but once it started to die, it was soon beyond recovery. In a sense, there was no one in charge of the “system”—no one that could or would heal its wounds when it was still possible, then provide for a proper burial, and finally, if need be, work toward a future resurrection. This may be a new angle from which to look at the death of paganism.

6 Summary and Conclusion

This paper has surveyed the main features of polytheistic religious organization in the ancient Greek and Roman world, emphasizing two aspects: there was substantial, multiple overlap between the jurisdictions of different gods, which increased over time and made the costs and uncertainty borne by supplicants ever more burdensome; and the priesthood was in general not a profession but a service undertaken,

¹² The deeper question that lurks beneath this state of affairs is why the elective cults never adopted exclusivity and started seeking converts. That question must remain unanswered here as no economic theory exists to explain exclusive dealings, or lack thereof, as a rational strategy – itself a difficult problem given that exclusivity is almost unknown in commercial markets and known only in (some) religious markets. Pyne (2013) offers the only extant model that explains exclusivity as a dominant strategy in religious competition; however, its scope for application is limited by the fact that it focuses exclusively on investments in “afterlife capital”, which prevents its application to, among other things, ancient polytheism.

or assigned, in addition to political or military office. The growth of elective cults in the imperial age further complicated the range of offers but did not create a class of religious entrepreneurs.

A simple economic model has shown that such jurisdictional overlap was inefficient and that supplicants stood to gain from concentration and unification of the industry—that is, from one-stop shopping. This did not happen until the very end of paganism at the hands of an alliance of emperors and Christian clergy; so competition within ancient polytheism did not work. The reason for this non-event has been found in the absence of a professional religious class with a vested interest in its occupation, one which could act as an interest group and profit from the unification of supply. This in turn suggests a nonstandard explanation of why ancient paganism died out without leaving a trace or any attempt at revival—unlike other polytheistic systems such as Hinduism, which was and is run by a priestly caste and which, unlike Greco–Roman polytheism under the onslaught of Christianity, was able to survive and recover under the onslaught of Islam. Such a comparative analysis is a promising task for future research.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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