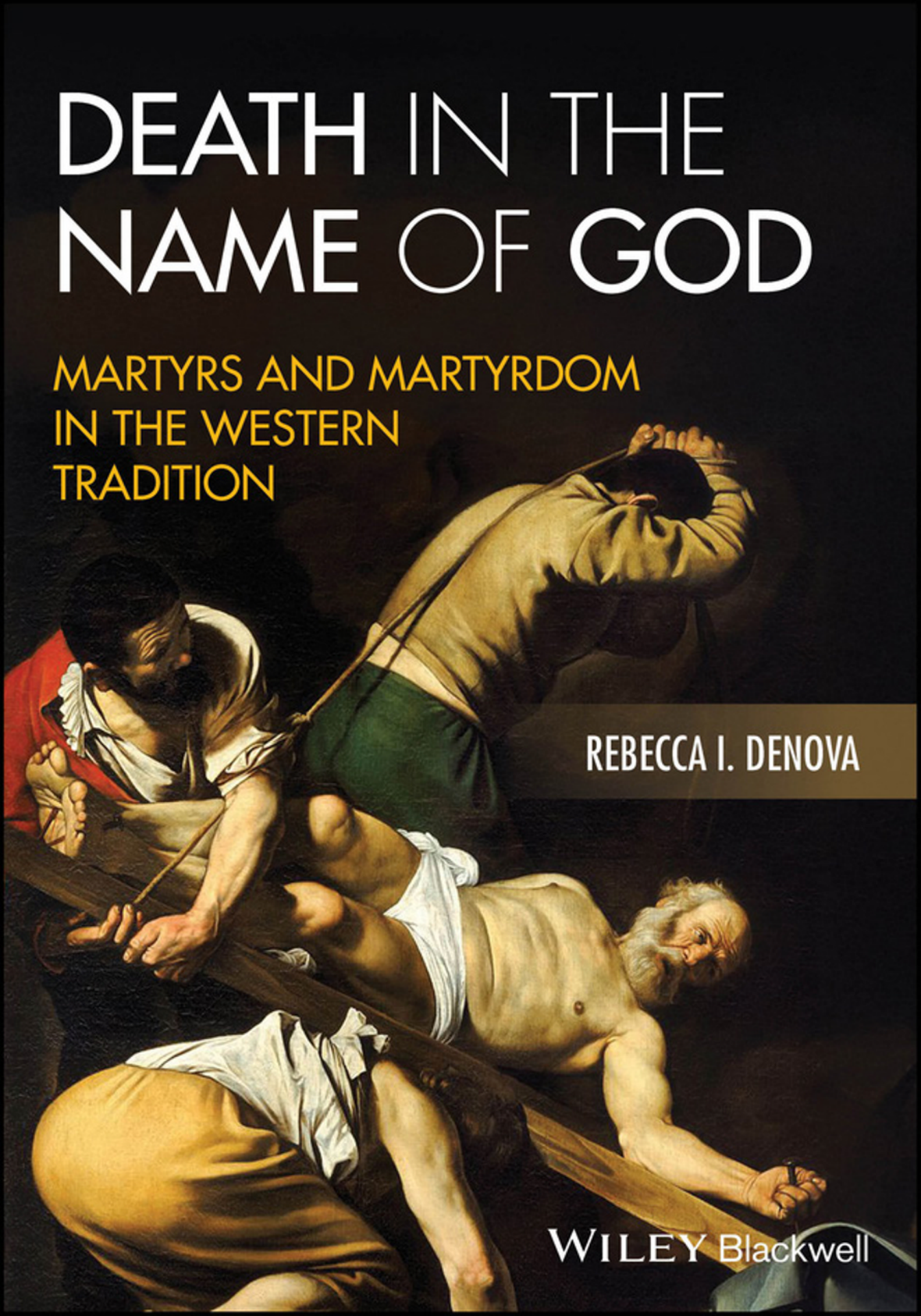


DEATH IN THE NAME OF GOD

MARTYRS AND MARTYRDOM
IN THE WESTERN
TRADITION



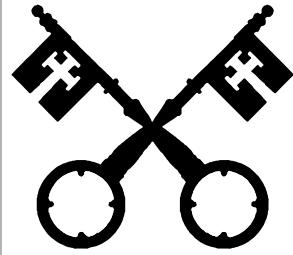
REBECCA I. DENOVA

WILEY Blackwell

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Rebecca I. Denova

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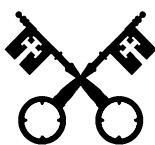
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PREFACE

Most often associated with being an element of the ancient and medieval worlds, the concept of martyrdom became shockingly present in the modern world on September 11, 2001 with the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. The members of the Islamist al Qaeda group who hijacked the planes were labeled terrorists by outsiders since they acted on their concepts of martyrdom.

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines a martyr as (1) “a person who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty of witnessing to and refusing to renounce his/her religion”; (2) “a person who sacrifices something of great value and especially life itself for the sake of principle (a cause)”; (3) “a victim of great or constant suffering.”

Those who suffer “for the sake of a principle or cause” has become the modern concept of what we deem secular martyrs, most often associated with assassinated political leaders and those who die or who are killed for a social cause. Great or constant suffering now includes victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and abuse, social activists, and cancer sufferers. Secular, while distinct from religion, nevertheless incorporates social values that arose from religious traditions. These people’s deaths are memorialized as a “sacrifice.”

The title of this book, *Death in the Name of God: Martyrs and Martyrdom in the Western Tradition*, reflects the emergence of concurrent elements that promoted martyrdom. Dying to defend the dictates of the God of Israel resulted in the reward of being transferred to Heaven in the afterlife. But killing the perceived enemies of God resulted in the same reward. This dual concept of death in the name of God continues to provide validation for violence by some participants in the Western traditions.

In the modern world, many people are convinced that religion breeds fanatics and absolutism, hence modern attempts to separate religion (private) from the state (public). Theorists have labeled violence and violent attacks motivated by religious views as arising from a human proclivity for what is described as “ultimate concerns.” Such ultimate concerns have very high stakes. There is a conviction that individuals and the world will not be saved, variously defined, unless there is obedience and conformity to a determined set of divine beliefs and behavior.

A second element of the dual nature of martyrdom is the word itself. From the Greek for “witness,” the original context was as a witness testifying in a court of law, testifying to the “truth.” The members of the martyr’s community also serve as “witnesses” to the martyr’s death and his/her claims concerning God.

The Purpose of This Textbook

Death in the Name of God: Martyrs and Martyrdom explores the origins and history of the concept of martyrs and martyrdom in the Western traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is designed for syllabi in courses on the history of these traditions in their historical contexts. Context determines content. In an evolutionary process, each of the Western traditions utilized and built on ancient roots but with updated variations as their historical circumstances and culture changed in various places over time. Many courses on the history of religion often require an extensive amount of reading in the various traditions. Having the basic materials in one book will help with the organization of educational resources. A second purpose is an introduction for participants of non-Western traditions and lay readers.

Theistic and Nontheistic Religions

The emergence of the social sciences of anthropology, sociology, archaeology, and psychology in the nineteenth century led to the academic categorization of world religions. The Western traditions are described as theistic, systems that are revealed by a creator god or gods, and nontheistic, systems that promote ethnic and moral codes of conduct.

We also use the descriptors of linear for theistic systems and cyclical for nontheistic systems. Theistic, revealed systems begin with creation myths (a beginning of time) and subsequently progress to concepts of an end, the final days of the universe and life on earth. The Western religions share a concept that God will intervene in human history one last time and then manifest his kingdom on earth, his original plan in Eden. Nontheistic systems utilize cycles of birth, life, death, and rebirth, determined by the concept of karma, one's actions, and reincarnation, recurring cycles of rebirth. The measure of one's life ultimately leads to release from the cycle and the attainment of enlightenment. Nontheistic systems include concepts of martyrdom, but in this book we focus on the Western traditions.

Methodology: The Academic Discipline of Religious Studies

Religious Studies is a more recent discipline in the academy in the last century. It is important to recognize the differences between theology (the study of God) and religious studies. Western theology involves the study of the nature of the God of Israel and the way in which God and humans interact. Theologians address such issues from preconceived faith convictions. There are thousands of books and articles on the theological development of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Religious Studies (often referred to as “the academic study of religion”) focuses on the origins of religious authority (institutions), beliefs, rituals, sacred texts, and ethics. Absent value judgments on which religions are right or wrong, religious studies examines the people and societies who created religious traditions and the way in which such traditions functioned in daily life.

Religious Studies utilizes a multidisciplinary approach and methodology that incorporate all the liberal arts and social sciences: classics, history, literature, anthropology, archaeology, sociology, philosophy, and psychology. In addition, the study of religion analyzes economics, politics, ethnic studies, ritual studies, gender studies, the arts, global studies, and cross-cultural approaches. Religious Studies explores the human experience of religion in specific cultures over time, as a “system of meaning.” This is the approach utilized in this book. Working in tandem, a Religious Studies approach also sheds light on the origin and evolution of theological concepts.

Each of the Western traditions is analyzed here through three methods of analysis:

- The *descriptive dimension*. This includes the historical, cultural, social, and religious context of each tradition and its concepts of martyrdom.
- The *comparative dimension*. In relation to a variety of religious options, which elements of the original were retained? Which elements were rejected and why?
- The *critical dimension*. In what way was the development or reinterpretation of traditions deemed necessary? In other words, what was happening in these ancient cultures that necessitated a new or adjusted understanding?

The Revealed Traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

The foundation story for what became Judaism, Christianity, and Islam began with “the call of Abraham,” when a deity subsequently identified as the God of Israel ordered Abraham to create a separate nation (Genesis 12). Described as a “revelation,” God’s intentions were consistently repeated and added to over the course of Jewish history.

But religious systems do not arise in a vacuum. All religions are social constructions that provide meaning to daily life. Ancient cultures had “covenants,” contracts from the gods, that dictated religious rituals, social behavior, and gender roles. The divine source provided validity as to why these covenants should be obeyed. Obedience to the contracts was rewarded with prosperity and procreation, while disobedience was punished. A dominant theme in ancient cultures was survival: survival of people, crops, and herds. The survival of people was assured through the social unit of the family, which extended to the clan and the tribe. Thus, we describe these societies as communal.

Martyrs also do not arise in a vacuum. A martyr cannot declare himself/herself as such. The recognition must come from a community. Communal

recognition includes anniversaries of the martyr's death, community reenactments of his/her life and suffering, pilgrimages to the tombs of the martyr, and public memorials. Martyrologies, biographies of the martyr, remain popular literature.

The communal element is expressed in concepts of collective reward and punishment. The actions and speeches of martyrs address contemporary sins or social crises. This serves as anticipatory ways in which to avoid the wrath of the God when he eventually institutes his kingdom on earth. At the same time, the experience of martyrdom, that of suffering, persecution, and ultimate death, is offered as a reversal to the continuing problem of the existence of evil in daily life.

The Chapters

Chapter I: Shared Concepts of Culture and Religion

The opening chapter includes a survey of cultures in the areas of the ancient Mediterranean and Middle East and their shared elements of religious concepts and practices. For our purposes, we consider here those areas bordering the Mediterranean Sea that facilitated trade and cultural interaction.

We define the basic terminology and concepts (sacrifices, rituals, divination, etc.) that are used throughout the text. We survey the traditional social conventions of economic class and status and the law codes that evolved in ancient societies. Including the terms in the first chapter avoids repetition in subsequent chapters.

Chapter II: The Origins of Concepts of the Afterlife/Funeral Rituals

Martyrdom cannot be fully understood without the emergence of ancient concepts of what happens at death and the afterlife. The idea of a continuing existence after death, either in body or soul or both, led to the conviction that the dead continued to influence their descendants, for either good or harm. Placating dead ancestors led to funeral rituals. Funeral rituals helped the dead on their journey to the afterlife, but also kept them there. Ultimately dead martyrs were understood to have continuing influence on earth. We highlight the evolution of the earlier traditions of death and the afterlife in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Canaan, and Persia.

Chapter III: The Traditions of Judaism

The story of Israel is related in the Jewish scriptures, which shared religious concepts with neighboring cultures. Over several centuries, Israel suffered several national disasters. It was left to the prophets of Israel to reveal God's purpose in these events. At the same time, they offered a message of hope, in that contemporary suffering would ultimately be alleviated. These texts remain central to the later emergence of Christianity and Islam.

Excursus I: The Origins and Evolution of Satan

The evolution of the existence and the character of Satan, the Devil, addressed the continuing problem of evil on earth. What became the concepts of Heaven and Hell, one's destiny in the afterlife in the Western traditions, emerged over time and were adapted from some neighboring cultures. Martyrs became important heroes in combating the work of the Devil.

Chapter IV: Greco-Roman Concepts of the Noble Death and the Afterlife

We survey Greco-Roman concepts of the afterlife that were added to ancient traditions. Suicide in the ancient world was never deemed a sin, nor as anything negative. We explore the idea of self-death, elevated as the concept of a sacrifice. Social aspects in the ancient world were based on the polarity of honor/shame and the public persona of an individual. We span from Homer to Plato, with the story of Socrates as the template for the "noble death." A fundamental criterion for a noble death and eventually martyrdom was the element of choice.

Included in this chapter is a survey of voluntary cults, deemed the Mysteries, which required the initiation of participants. The most popular were the Mysteries of Isis and Osiris, Demeter, and Dionysius. The focus of the cults included the suffering, death, and rebirth of divinities as transformative models and a shared, enlightened experience for the participant.

Chapter V: The Maccabee Revolt

The conquests of Alexander the Great in the region (ca. 330 BCE) imposed Greek government, education, philosophy, and religion in the Middle East. When the Hellenistic Syrian ruler Antiochus IV banned the "ancestral customs of Jews" in 167 BCE, the Jews rose in revolt and drove the Greeks out. This was the Maccabee Revolt, which produced the earliest texts that utilized the concept of martyrs ("witnesses") and their deaths as an atoning sacrifice "for the sins of the nation." The reward for those who died was "resurrection," "standing in the presence of God."

In this chapter we also explore the emergence of what became religious "sectarianism." Various groups of Jews, described as "sects," accepted the basic tenets of Judaism, but differed on elements of daily life, governance of the group, and ways in which to integrate cultural elements (or not) under foreign occupation. Sectarianism continued as an aspect of both Christianity and Islam. Different sects evolved different criteria for martyrdom.

The next several chapters focus on the emergence and history of Christianity. In modern, Western culture, the Christian template became and remains the most influential understanding of concepts of martyrdom.

Chapter VI: The Letters of Paul

Our earliest evidence for what became Christianity is found in the letters of Paul, a first-century Pharisee who became a believer in the Christian movement. We examine both his claim that he “persecuted the church of Christ” and, following his revelation, his experiences of being persecuted, “suffering for the cross of Christ.” Subsequent stories of martyrs all begin with parallel descriptions of their persecution, either by individuals or by the state.

Chapter VII: The Story of Jesus of Nazareth in the Gospels

The experiences of an itinerant Jewish preacher, Jesus of Nazareth, were related in the gospels of the New Testament. We introduce both the figure of Jesus in his historical context as well as the traditions that were later incorporated into Christianity. The suffering and death of Jesus became the ideal model for Christian martyrdom.

Chapter VIII: The Acts of the Apostles: The Inclusion of Gentiles and Persecution

The author of the third gospel, Luke, wrote a sequel, Acts of the Apostles, describing how the movement traveled from Jerusalem to the cities of the Eastern Empire. A major change in the demographics was the inclusion of some Gentiles (non-Jews) who became believers. The Acts of the Apostles remains the prototype for the Christian claim that it was oppositional Jews who persecuted early Christians.

Chapter IX: The Imperial Cult and Life and Death in the Roman Arenas

Instituted by Augustus as the official recognition of Julius Caesar as a god after his death, the Imperial Cult became embedded in the state cults of Rome. It was nonparticipation in this cult that led to Christians being persecuted and executed in the arenas, beginning with the reign of the Emperor Domitian (r. 81–96 CE). Christians were convicted of the charge of atheism, disrespect, and nonparticipation in the imperial cult. This was equivalent to treason. The executions included dramatic, “fatal charades,” which became the concept of “political theater” as an element of martyrdom.

Despite Christian tradition, there is scant evidence for “thousands” of Christian martyrs. Persecution was sporadic and only arose during times of crisis in the Roman Empire. Atheism, “angering the gods,” imperiled everyone. The chapter surveys the known periods of persecution in various parts of the Roman Empire.

Chapter X: Institutional Development and Hierarchy of the Christian Churches

The first Christian communities developed a hierarchy in the form of bishops and deacons. A group of bishops, retrospectively designated the “Church Fathers,” began the formation of what became Christian dogma (a set of principles that all participants should believe and practice).

During this period, the clergy became elevated above other believers by adopting the ideal concepts of chastity and celibacy. As such, they were understood as having “sacrificed a normal life” (marriage and children) in a new concept known as “living martyrs,” which did not necessarily require death in the arena. From this point on, retrospective stories of the earliest Christian martyrs included their life-long chastity and celibacy.

Chapter XI: The Invention of Orthodoxy and Heresy

In the second century CE, Christian leaders created the innovative concepts of “orthodoxy” (“correct beliefs”) and heresy (from *haeresis*, the term for schools of philosophy). All subsequent martyrs were judged on their conformity with or divergence from these concepts. The status of martyr was denied to heretics and became a subsequent criterion for official martyrdom by the later institutional Church.

Chapter XII: Christian Martyrs

In this chapter we highlight some of the most famous early Christian martyrs and the circumstances that resulted in persecution. But not all Christian leaders agreed on the criteria and status of martyrdom. What kinds of problems did martyrs create for the Christian bishops in light of their relationship with the Roman Empire?

Chapter XIII: Martyrdom in Judaism: The Rabbinic Tradition

After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by Rome (70 CE), some Jewish leaders began the formation of what became Rabbinic Judaism. This was a way in which to apply the dictates of God now that the Temple no longer existed. They created schools, first in the upper Galilee and then in the many cities that contained Jewish populations.

Many Jews suffered as martyrs during the Second Jewish Revolt, the Bar Kochba Rebellion (132–136 CE). How does the Rabbinic tradition interpret such suffering in light of the circumstances of this particular conflict, and how does that differ from the point of view found in earlier Jewish material? In this period, rabbis began retrospectively declaring some earlier Jewish heroes as martyrs.

Chapter XIV: The Christianization of the Roman Empire

Christianity was not recognized as a permitted *collegia* (a religious group that had the right to publicly assemble) for 300 years. That changed when the first Christian emperor, Constantine I, granted that privilege to them in the Edict of Milan (313 CE).

A Council meeting at Nicaea in 325 CE established what became the concept of the Christian “Trinity,” as well as the designation of a “creed,” which defined the parameters of Christian belief and behavior. Any alteration was condemned as heresy and was a crime of treason. Subsequent centuries saw variation on the granting of martyrdom, depending on the theological views of individual emperors and bishops.

Chapter XV: Monasticism and the Cult of the Saints

With the legalization of Christianity, opportunities for martyrdom diminished. This coincided with the earlier Christian institution of monasticism (monks and nuns), beginning in Egypt in the third century CE. Having sacrificed a normal life (marriage and children), these men and women also became “living martyrs” and their lives personified the philosophical ideal known as asceticism (Greek *ascesis*, “discipline”). Ascetic lifestyles (sometimes extreme) became an essential element in determining a martyr.

Combining ancient Greek concepts of the worship of hero cults, the concept of “patron gods and goddesses,” and the template from the Maccabee literature, the “cult of the saints” began in the fourth century. The graves of the earliest martyrs were identified and opened, and became sites of Christian pilgrimage. As the martyred “saint” still existed in Heaven, saints became mediators in appeals to God and Christ. This included the practice of collecting “relics” (body parts and paraphernalia) of the saints, which became a medieval industry. Famous earlier apostles, bishops, and monastics as martyrs were retroactively deemed “saints.”

If all Christians went directly to Heaven after they died, it would diminish the sacrifice of the martyrs. We begin to have the concept of purgatory (“purging”), an interim place where lesser sins could be atoned for to ultimately reach Heaven.

Chapter XVI: Augustine and the Western Tradition

Considered the greatest of the Latin Church Fathers, Bishop Augustine (353–430 CE) established what became the Western tradition of Christianity. His innovative interpretation of Paul resulted in his concept of original sin. While maintaining traditional concepts of martyrdom, Augustine condemned any martyrdom that was a “self-death,” suicide, as a sin.

Chapter XVII: The Emergence of Islam

Beginning in the sixth century CE, Islam emerged as a reform movement of both Judaism and Christianity under the auspices of a prophet from Arabia, Muhammad. This chapter surveys the concepts of martyrdom in both the Qur'an and the Hadith ("Teachings of the Prophet"). We highlight the concept of the greater and lesser *jihad* ("struggle" in the defense of the faith) of Islam.

Excursus II: Martyrdom in Sunni Islam and Shi'a Islam

After the death of Muhammad, two main Islamic sects differed over the succession of the movement. While sharing the basic tenets of Islam, the sects held different views on martyrdom. We explore the history of this division of Sunni Islam and Shi'a Islam after the death of Muhammad, and the continuing distinctions and practices in the contemporary world.

Chapter XVIII: Martyrdom in the Middle Ages

What ancient aspects of martyrdom were upheld in the Middle Ages? What new ideas were added and why? Awaiting the kingdom of God, monastic orders of flagellants and mendicants became the new "living martyrs," sacrificing a normal life as ideal models. A new phase of institutional development arose with the creation of the Inquisition in the thirteenth century, which produced a plethora of martyrs and added further definitions of heresy.

The Middle Ages saw an increase in persecution against Jews. "Passion plays," reenactments of the trials and suffering of Jesus, motivated violence against Jews. Should a Jew commit suicide when forced to convert? Did suicide upend the concept of martyrdom? We consider such questions in this chapter.

Chapter XIX: The Protestant Reformation

Ancient cultures had no distinction between religious concepts and the secular world. But with the beginning of what became "nation-states" in Europe, martyrs absorbed elements of politics, issues involving "church and state." Who represents the "kingdom of God on earth" while awaiting the return of Christ: the church or the monarch? With the emergence of the Protestant Reformation, how did Catholics and Protestants define their individual martyrs?

The period of the Reformation coincided with the exploration of and exposure to other cultures in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The motivation to convert Indigenous populations created new ideals for martyrs. The great sacrifice was not only the risk of death but the willingness to abandon civilized society, "to live among the heathens," for the greater purpose of "spreading the word of God."

Chapter XX: Modern Martyrdom

This final chapter highlights some specific case studies in modern history to analyze both traditional concepts and adjustments: the victims of the Holocaust as martyrs; the self-sacrifice of Muslims in the post-World War II Middle East; cases of assassinated leaders, particularly Martin Luther King, Jr., and John F. Kennedy, as well as Bishop Romero of El Salvador in the context of the rise of modern Liberation Theology; and the victims of 9/11.

The criterion of voluntary choice for a martyr no longer applies. Those who die through domestic and sexual violence against homosexuality, mass shootings, and school shootings have become elevated to martyrdom as “innocent victims.” Modern sites of such violence are now sacred, communal memorials.

Features of this Textbook

Between the chapters there are Excurses, which feature a more detailed examination and summary of a topic or point of view. Examining the ancient world as well as scholarly methods of analysis often necessitates a vocabulary that is beyond the average reader. You will notice that some words and concepts appear in **bold print** and these are found in the Glossary.

Understanding the background and particulars of ancient society and ancient texts requires years of study and analysis. Boxes are provided in the chapters that summarize issues or add detail to the material. Some boxes also highlight ancient literature and material remains used both to construct and critique our historical sources.

Figures and timelines also appear within the chapters and highlight maps, schematics, and archaeological sites associated with the development of the Western traditions. Each chapter concludes with “Suggestions for Further Reading” for those who wish to explore the material in depth. The suggestions include both traditional studies and more recent articles and books.

The Communal Nature and Common Features of Martyrdom

Declaring someone a martyr is a decision by a community. Within each of the Western traditions, criteria were established for acclaiming someone as a martyr:

- *Heroism.* The martyr as hero is a person of some renown who is devoted to a religious concept or cause and is deemed admirable according to religious and social criteria at the time.
- *Opposition.* The views of the martyr/hero are opposed in some manner, either by individuals or by the governing authorities. The opposition views the martyr as a dangerous challenge to the status quo, upending sacred/cultural traditions.

- *Foreseeable risk.* The martyr/hero is aware that his/her continuing activity may result in suffering and torture. This can be mental or physical pain, financial ruination, or loss of status and reputation. The martyr/hero persists despite the risks; the concept or cause is more important than the individual. This acceptance is a deliberate, voluntary choice on the part of the individual, in the full knowledge that his/her views could result in death.
- *Future status.* The future status of a martyr is often demonstrated during their lifetime with stories of their miraculous birth, experiences of visions, and the ability to perform miracles.
- *Recognition.* Modern, secular martyrs are no longer held to miracles, but are celebrated in recognition of their body of work or lifetime achievements in a common social cause or opposing government oppression.

The State of Our Evidence

The problem for the historian of any age is to carefully balance extant literature with material remains (archaeology). But what we know about the past derives from the writings of a small percentage of the educated classes of Jews, Greeks, Romans, Christians, and Muslims. The difficulty remains in understanding the literal living-out of religious and social law codes “on the books” in actual practice. Modern archaeological methods can confirm some of this material, but material remains alone cannot confirm what the majority of ancient people were actually thinking as they went about their daily lives and participated in religious rituals. Then as now, these “systems of meaning” were individually selected and interpreted.

Anachronism

What is anachronism? It is placing something out of its own time and place in another time or place. The best way to understand this is to compare it what are known as “gaffes” in Hollywood movies, for instance watching a movie that takes place in the 1970s but where people are using cell phones. Anachronistic examples are also used to highlight contrasts through the juxtaposition of similar events or ideas to either change or reverse the original meaning. But historians often apply anachronism to help the reader identify similar concepts. For example, Mark wrote that Jesus died “in the ninth hour,” which was the way people measured time in the Roman Empire. English Bibles automatically translate this as “three o’clock in the afternoon.”

Anachronism is related to context, the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs. When we say something “is out of context,” it means that a point being argued is removed from its original time or meaning. Different contexts result in different explanations, arguments, and explications.

Anachronism and context can be challenging for historians. This is because we are human. It is difficult to set aside our own experiences and knowledge so that we can be entirely objective. We expect objectivity from historians, but it is virtually impossible. All historians must decide what they think is important, and so there is immediately subjectivity in the selection. Knowing the end of a story always influences analyses of the past. For example, it is exceedingly difficult to write a history of World War II and ignore how it ended.

Complicating our reconstructions of the ancient world is the fact that theologians and historians have centuries of theology and history that is “read back” into the early texts. But a medieval, martyred saint was not the same as a first-century victim of the Roman arena. We often find this in the speeches in martyrologies. Many later stories of first- and second-century martyrs contain references to Christian dogma that was only created in the fourth- and fifth-century institutional councils, for instance.

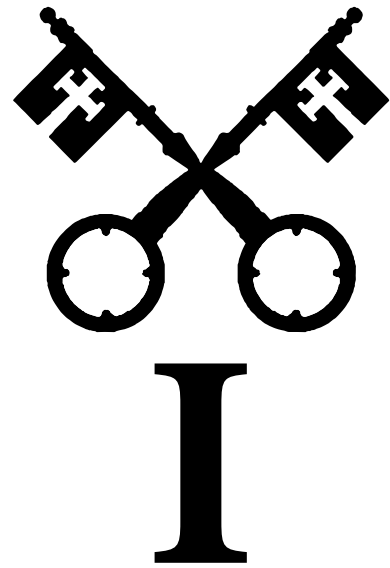
Contradictions

As moderns, we tend to bemoan the fact that ancient literature is full of contradictions, especially ancient religious texts, including the Bible. We spend an inordinate amount of time attempting to determine “what really happened.”

The ancients did not share our obsession with the problem of contradictions. This was because there was no centralized, authorized body that had the authority to mandate “what everyone should believe and practice” (unlike the later Christian creeds). What we have are various beliefs and narratives that arose in towns and cities over the centuries, in different contexts and then updated over time. The ancients considered variations as different points of view. They understood the purpose of myths as explanations of the origins of the gods and society that elucidated and validated *contemporary* society and were not necessarily literal history. Poets and dramatists in Athens freely adjusted and added details to the older myths of Homer and Hesiod, just as later editors of the Bible updated earlier traditions through the centuries.

And finally, I have taught courses on the origins and emergence of the Western traditions for over thirty years. Some students enter the course with more background than others, usually from Bible study programs in their synagogues and Christian churches and the study of the Qur’an in mosques. In the beginning there is often a level of anxiety over the fear that a historical method will uncover something that will challenge aspects of their faith. Faith by its very nature is not subject to verification or scientific analysis. The purpose of this textbook is not to attempt to challenge anyone’s belief in martyrs and martyrdom. It is to provide an understanding of how those concepts evolved in the ancient world and their continuing meaning in our modern world.

SHARED CONCEPTS OF CULTURE AND RELIGION



Concepts and Terminology

Religion

The Universe

**Religious Pluralism and
Conversion**

Polytheism and Monotheism

Myth

The Concept of Sin

Acts of Worship/Rituals

Cult

Religious Festivals

**Divination: Astrology,
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Religion and Society

Social Class

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Slavery

**Ancient Concepts
of the Afterlife**

Monism/Dualism

Funeral Rituals

Death in the Name of God: Martyrs and Martyrdom in the Western Tradition,
First Edition. Rebecca I. Denova.

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Funeral Games

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

**Judaism/Jews, Christianity/
Christians, Islam/Muslims**

- Recognize the complete integration of religion and society in antiquity.
- Become familiar with the shared religious views and rituals that benefited both individuals and communities of the ancient world.

Languages/Scriptures

Polemic and Rhetoric

Old Testament/Canon

Gentiles and Pagans

Faith versus Rituals

Creative Writing

Concepts and Terminology

Before we begin the rest of the book, there are several concepts and terms that are utilized throughout. Listing them at the start helps to avoid repetition in each subsequent chapter.

Religion

In the modern world, one's identity is often categorized by adherence to a specific **religion** (Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, etc.). What we mean by this word is a "system of belief" that includes concepts of the divine powers of the universe, law codes, rituals, social codes of behavior, and gender roles. But in the ancient world the concept of religion as a separate category did not exist in the sense that we understand it today. In fact, there was no word for religion in ancient Greek or Hebrew. The modern term, which came into use in the seventeenth century, derived from the Latin root *religio*, coined by the Roman advocate Cicero (106–43 BCE), as "those things that tie or bind one to the gods."

The Universe

Ancient cultures shared a three-tiered concept of the universe:

- The heavens (above), the realm of the **divine**. This was the abode of the all the gods, characterized by descending gradients of importance and relative to their functions in the physical world, such as originators or protectors of agriculture or craftsmanship. Many systems had the concept of a **high god**, or a "king of the gods," who ruled over diverse powers. The lowest levels of divinity, the demons or *daemons* in Greek, originally neutral, eventually came to be blamed for the exigencies of evil in life.
- The Earth. The abode of humans, animals, and plants, distinguished from the divine as consisting of physical matter.
- The underworld, the netherworld, the "land of the dead" for humans. Initially a neutral area, later concepts developed special areas for the righteous and wicked dead.

All ancient peoples believed in the total integration of the divine with humans and everyday life, from the moment you woke to your dreams at night. If you stopped someone in the street and asked them what religion they practiced, they would have no idea what you were talking about. Instead, the question should be, “What customs do you live by?” The typical response would be, “The customs of our ancestors.” These customs were what identified people as **ethnic groups**, passed on through the blood of the generations. Ancients were born into religious systems. Ethnic groups shared a common ancestor or founder, language, history, homeland, religious rituals, and mythology. All these elements were handed down by the gods and provided the basis for the governing authorities.

There was also no ancient concept of race as we now understand and define it through the disciplines of anthropology and physiology. Although people were fully aware of ethnic differences in skin color, facial structure, and hair, these were defined along the lines of geography and social class. There were notable differences among the people from the northern climates, the Italian Alps, Gaul and Germania, and those of the Middle East, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. But the differences were also aligned with social class. The rich had access to cosmetics that could protect them from the sun. Darker skin usually indicated lower social classes; these people worked outdoors, in the fields.

Religious Pluralism and Conversion

The ancient world is noted for its **religious pluralism**; people could fully participate in various native cults that promoted some gods over others without contradiction. Nor did this simultaneous activity require **conversion**. Our modern concept of religious conversion is understood as changing from one system of religious belief to another. In the absence of systematic theology in the ancient world, conversion in the ancient world meant changing one’s inherent customs and lifestyles. The best example of the concept of conversion was when someone from a native cult wanted to become a Jew. Judaism had unique, physical identity markers of circumcision and different dietary laws.

All ethnic groups shared common ideas and rituals concerning the divine, but there was no one authority to turn to; a concept such as the later Vatican did not exist. If you had questions, you could consult a member of the **priesthood** (specialized experts), although you could receive different answers from different individuals. **Sacred scriptures** varied from group to group and region to region. The closest concept to the Christian Bible was found in the works of Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Everyone in the Mediterranean Basin learned these stories, which included tales of constant interaction with the gods. Romans elevated their **foundation myths** as sacred (Romulus and Remus), with earlier traditions retold in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (first century BCE).

Polytheism and Monotheism

Polytheism (the belief in multiple deities), or sometimes **pantheism** (the belief in all powers), is always juxtaposed with **monotheism** (the belief in one god), understood in polar opposition. However, the terms are problematic because they are modern. No one in the ancient world would have identified with being a polytheist. The term was utilized to describe temples and shrines that held more than one image of the gods (poly-). More importantly, there was no such concept as modern monotheism in the ancient world, including among the Jews.

In Western culture, monotheism specifically refers to the God of Israel—the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This is demonstrated by the fact that this God is always written with a capital “G.” This designates the God of Israel above all other gods and assumes an element of faith. The God of Israel was simply one among the many thousands of deities that populated the universe. This text will continue to utilize the capitalization of God to differentiate this deity.

Like their neighbors, ancient Jews conceived of a hierarchy of powers in Heaven: “sons of God” (Genesis 6), archangels, angels (the messengers from God who communicated God’s will), cherubim, and seraphim. Jews also recognized the existence of demons and introduced the concept of a fallen angel who eventually became **Satan**, the Devil.

The foundational story for the idea that Jews were monotheistic was when Moses received the commandments of God on Mt. Sinai: “I am the Lord your God ... You shall have no other gods before me.” This does not indicate that other gods do not exist; it was a commandment that the Jews were not to **worship** any other gods. We combine “worship” with “belief” and “veneration” (modern terms), but *worship in the ancient world always meant sacrifices*. Jews could pray to angels and other powers in Heaven, but they were only to offer sacrifices (animals, vegetables, libations) to the God of Israel. This commandment was one of the major differences between Jews and the traditional ethnic cults. The Jewish word for the native cults was **idolatry**, the worship of idols (Greek *icons*), “images.” This was a collective, negative description of non-Jews. Participants in native cults never identified as “idolators.”

The Jewish texts consistently refer to the existence of the gods of the nations (Greek *ethnos*, ethnic groups), which were created by the God of Israel: Deuteronomy 6:14, “Do not follow other gods”; 29:18, “to serve the gods of those nations”; 32:43, “Praise O heavens, his people, worship him all you gods!”; Isaiah 36:20, “Who among all of the gods of these nations have saved their nations?”; and Psalm 82, “God presides in the great assembly; he renders judgment among the gods.” In the story of the Jews’ exodus from Egypt, God battled against the gods of Egypt to demonstrate who controls nature. This makes little sense if their existence was not recognized: “I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt” (Exodus 12:12).

While Jews only offered sacrifices to the God of Israel, they shared a common conviction that all the gods should be respected; it was perilous to anger or

revile the gods. Early Christians accepted these levels of powers in Heaven, and Paul often referred to the existence of the gods of the other nations in his letters. But he sometimes berated these powers (*archons*) because they were powerful enough to interfere with his missions.

Myth

We often use the word **myth** to automatically designate “something false.” In the study of religion, myths are ways in which people understand experiences of the divine, through stories, images, **allegory**, and **metaphor**. These literary devices were most often applied by the schools of philosophy and educated writers, who read myth as containing symbols that went beyond the basics to promote ideals or universals. Stories in the Bible were allegorically interpreted over the centuries by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

By their very nature myths are not subject to verification, as they occur in “mythic time.” Myths are multivalent, meaning they are subject to many different interpretations. Myths help to create a worldview to explain the beginning of the universe, the creation of gods, humans, and the physical materiality of Earth. While arising in mythic time, their purpose is to validate the contemporary world. In other words, myths are rationalizations of why and how societies function in relation to the gods and each other. The first 11 chapters of the book of Genesis are often described as myth in the sense that they explain origins. Myths utilize **etiologies**, causation, or explanations (e.g., for words or the beginning of cities or agriculture).

The Concept of Sin

A **sin** in the ancient world was understood as a violation of the dictates and law codes given by the gods. The laws applied to individuals as well as the community. Retribution or punishment for an individual’s or a group’s violation was often utilized to explain events and sufferings of the individuals and the community, such as earthquakes, famines, plagues, and losses in battle. There were various rituals and offerings to undo such violations and to restore the relationship between humans and the divine.

Acts of Worship/Rituals

Ways to appease the gods and to rectify violations became foundational in the evolution of worship and rituals. **Temples** were the homes of the gods on Earth and were deemed **sacred space**. Unlike our modern places of worship, almost

all the activity took place out of doors. This is where the **altar** was located, around which people congregated. Because the temple itself was sacred space, one had to be in a state of **ritual purity** to enter it and participate. Ritual purity is a state of being. Experiences of daily life, such as sexual intercourse and childbirth, rendered a person impure or “unclean” for a temporary amount of time before he/she could enter sacred space. These elements involved semen and blood, the two sources of life that were given by the gods, and these moments were recognized as a suspension of normal activity. Another concept was the problem of **corpse contamination**. The dead ejected a miasma that was toxic and had to be eliminated through certain rituals and time. Most purity rituals involved washing, but the concept is not necessarily related to hygiene.

Overseeing all aspects of worship were **priests** and **priestesses**. Their function was to ensure that worship was done correctly (according to the ancestral traditions). Some communities had a priest elevated above others, the **high priest**. Unlike modern clergy, those in the priesthood were not charged with caring for the souls of the congregation; their first loyalty was caring for the god/goddess. A major difference in the priesthood in the ancient world is that with few exceptions, these were part-time jobs. Priests and priestesses served in rotation (sometimes for a week, sometimes for a month). When they had finished their term of service, they went back to their normal jobs or businesses. Conferring of a priesthood and the title were sought-out advantages for the ancients. Not only did this activity command respect, but it was an important element of one’s legacy (the memory of a person), inscribed on one’s funeral monument.

Priests and priestesses oversaw the **rituals** (Latin *ritus*, “doing things”), which included **sacrifices**, **prayers**, and **hymns** (prayers sung to music). The most important element of these rituals was sacrifices, which were crucial to maintaining the balance between gods and humans. These were communal events directed to the welfare and prosperity of the group. Sacrifices had to be something of value, which in the ancient world was often meat. Priests sacrificed sheep, goats, pigs, oxen, fowl, and wheat cakes if the person could not afford an animal. Thousands of temples had daily sacrifices. A portion of the animal was divided among the priests and then the rest was distributed to the people. This is likely the only time that the poor were able to eat meat.

Another element of rituals was specific to marking heightened stages in life: birth, puberty, marriage, death. The modern term for these occasions, which were all celebrated through religious rituals, is **rites of passage** (some of which became the later Catholic **sacraments**).

Cult

We typically apply the term **cult** negatively to religious ideas that differ radically from the majority. In the ancient world, *cultus* (derived from the Latin *colere*, “care or cultivate”) was a broad term for everything that was involved in the care

and maintenance of the gods. It referred to sacrificial knives, incense burners, and other implements of the rituals. *It did not indicate theology or spiritual differences.* In this text, we use **native** or **ethnic cults** as a category. Then as now, criticism of someone else's cult occurred often. We encounter this specifically in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic criticism of each other and the native cults.

Sectarianism

In modern sociological studies of religion we observe an evolutionary process. There is a basic mother religion, but some members decide that reforms are needed. This becomes a **sect** within that system. Sects maintain the original concepts but with updated reforms, most often in changes of authority or governance. (Think of the 65,000 denominations in modern Protestantism.) Later, the reformers may decide that more changes are needed, or new interpretations applied, and it is deemed a cult. Ultimately, the group can break with the original mother religion as an independent system or new system.

Christianity began as a sect within Judaism, became a cult in the Roman Empire, and eventually evolved into an independent religion. Islam began as a reform movement to fully explain and reinterpret the foundational elements of both Judaism and Christianity. Islam then became a fully independent, new religion.

Official Cults

Every village, town, and city in the Roman Empire had dozens of temples and shrines to older, local gods and then added the Olympian gods of Greece. Rome also added ancient Italian deities that aligned with the Olympians. Deemed "official cults," these were standard for what was deemed "good citizenship" in the empire.

Voluntary Cults: The Mysteries

Running parallel to the official cults was the option to participate in voluntary religious practices, usually limited to a group who had to undergo **initiation**. There was a public side to this worship, but initiates were able to gain more advanced knowledge. This knowledge took the form of how to achieve benefits in this world as well as the afterlife. Initiates took a vow never to reveal the secrets and thus these practices were deemed the **Mysteries**. What these cults had in common was an emphasis on fertility, the cycles of birth and rebirth.

Religious Festivals

Throughout the ancient world, **religious festivals** were community events, to honor either a specific god or goddess or a founding deity of the community.

These festivals were also coordinated with **calendars**, or the marking of **sacred time** as well as the agricultural cycles. Festivals could last from one or two days to a week. Religious festivals consisted of three elements: temple sacrifices, drama, and games.

The many sacrifices throughout the city during festival time resulted in quantities of leftover meat and cakes, which were then distributed to the public who feasted at communal tables. The myths of the gods were reenacted in plays during the same week. Athletic contests were added, the most popular of which were the chariot races. The combined events in the Roman Empire were labeled **ludi**, “games.” All these simultaneous events drew people into the city from the countryside. At the same time, they were occasions to honor **magistrates** (the governing authorities who paid for the games) and served as propaganda venues in the empire.

Divination: Astrology, Oracles, Magicians

The way in which humans communicated with the gods, and the gods with humans, was described as **divination**. This was done through **astrologers, seers, oracles, prophets, augurs, haruspices, wonder-workers, and necromancers**. Astrology (the study of the nature and power of the stars/planets) flourished. Stars and planets were identified as deities and elevated heroes and controlled the fate of people born under their influence. Knowing the time of one’s birth, these experts consulted star charts to determine which powers were dominant in one’s life.

Seers, oracles, and prophets went into an ecstatic trance and were possessed by a deity. The speech of the god was often in an unknown language, so a priest was usually required to translate. Oracle was the term for both the person as well as the place. There were hundreds of oracle sites throughout the Mediterranean Basin. One of the most famous oracles in the ancient world was the oracle at Delphi, controlled by the god Apollo. For the most part, oracles were consulted to determine if a decision that had already been made pleased the gods. The prophets of Israel were the Jewish version of oracles. When they spoke, it was the words of the God of Israel that were uttered.

Augurs in Rome adopted the ancient Etruscan methods of studying lightning and the flights of birds to determine good and bad omens. Haruspices (also influenced by Etruscan rituals) were experts in examining the entrails of a sacrificial animal. If the entrails were bad or diseased, another animal had to replace it.

Wonder-workers were popular throughout the empire. These were men (and sometimes women) who claimed special gifts that were granted by a god or goddess in relation to performing miracles. The result was physical cures for the disabled, the diseased, and the mentally ill. A common belief was that these problems were caused by demon possession. Wonder-workers were expert **exorcists**, or those who drove out demons.

From the Latin *miraculam*, “a wonder,” a **miracle** is defined as an extraordinary event, beyond human efforts and thus assigned to the intervention of a supernatural or divine power. Miracles in the ancient world were understood as the reversal of a negative problem or event. It is impossible to verify actual miracles in the ancient world, but scholars analyze miracle stories with the consensus that, true or not, everyone believed in them.

Necromancers were experts in communicating with the powers of the **underworld** (the land of the dead) as well as having the ability to conjure up the dead. Unfortunately, in the Western tradition wonder-workers and necromancers became grouped together under the term **magicians**. This term derived from Persian court astrologers, deemed *magi* (as in the visitors to the nativity in Matthew). Because of their knowledge of the universe and astrology, it was believed that they were experts in being able to manipulate the forces of nature, for good or for ill; hence our modern descriptions of white and black magic. The assumption that magic was a unique and separate category has influenced histories of the ancient world.

When scholars describe these specific rituals, they use terms such as “spells” and “incantations.” But these spells and incantations were simply the same as prayers and hymns applied in all the rituals. The difference was in the fact that they often appealed to the powers of the underworld. The latter are described by the modern term **chthonic** deities, who required special rituals and sacrifices (black animals instead of white). There is a misconception that the powers of the underworld were all evil (influenced by later conceptions of the Devil). For example, Hecate was a beneficent goddess whose role was to accompany dead souls to a blessed afterlife. Through Christian polemic, these practices were deemed superstition, and these deities were demonized. Hecate became the witch of medieval Halloween practices.

Religion and Society

The most dominating concern of all ancient cultures was fertility—fertility of crops, herds, and people. Without fertility, the clan/tribe did not survive. Thus, the gods were portrayed as male with a female consort or goddess. These pairs mated and produced offspring (Judaism did not have this concept; the God of Israel created through speaking, with no consort). “As in the heavens, so on earth”: ancient societies mirrored the heavenly realm by making the **family** the basic social unit. The family was an extended household that included parents, in-laws, children, slaves (and ex-slaves, freedmen/women), business clients, and dead ancestors.

Gender roles were defined by their importance in fertility. A man’s religious duty was to procreate for the good of the city-state and empire. The role of women was their sole contribution of serving as an incubator for the fetus. In theory, women had no political voice and no control of their social status beyond

procreation. However, we have many cases of women opening defying the conventional standards.

The way in which the family was promoted and validated was through extra-familial elements of society that were common to all regions of the Mediterranean Basin. One's social class defined the parameters of status and rank, while **honor** and **shame** established the codes of ideal behavior for both individuals and the community. Honor was not just a private goal of an individual but a public acknowledgment of one's worth or value to the community (Latin *dignitas*). A person with honor was one who adhered to social codes and conventions and respected the gods. This trait was crucially important for one's public persona, or one's reputation in the community. The polar opposite was shame. The male and father of the family was in control of the extended family and everyone's behavior. If his wife committed adultery, it meant he lost control and was diminished in his social standing.

The **patron/client** system (how things got done) provided the network for relationships necessary for the common good, including relationships between humans and gods. These extrafamilial elements became encoded in the self-perception of all classes and levels of society, both free and slave, in social morals and in one's relationship with the divine (cult). The upper classes had a religious duty to help the lower, and in return the lower classes supplied food and crafts. Such obligations were given to the gods (through prayer and sacrifice), with the expectation that the gods would reciprocate with benefits to the person and the community.

Social Class

When we think of class in the modern world, we automatically think of economics: upper, middle, and lower classes. In the ancient world, economics was an important element of the social classes but not necessarily the most important part; blood was more important than wealth. Our image of the upper and middle classes will usually include education, just as it did in the ancient world (although levels of education differed). But in ancient society slaves also had opportunities for education.

At the top of the social order was the aristocracy ("rule of the excellent"), where governing power resided in a small, privileged class who claimed descent from ancient, founding families. It was the bloodline that endowed nobility. Another class of males was equivalent to our middle or business class, who engaged in manufacturing, trade, and banking. They could not claim the same kind of ancestry as the aristocracy, but they could and did accumulate wealth. Intermarriage was permissible among the classes, with the tacit understanding that one should always marry up to a higher class to improve one's family's social standing.