



RELIGION: PUBLIC DISPLAY AND PRIVATE WORSHIP

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Ersin: The remains of ancient temples dominate the city of Rome and tell a powerful story about the central role religion played in Roman society. Its all-pervasive presence is visible in the temples, sculptures, literature, monuments and homes. But what did religion mean to the people living in this city?

The Roman calendar was full of publicly performed festivals and rituals. To maintain *pax deorum*, peace with the gods, the citizen body, led by religious officials, had to constantly observe an elaborate set of rites.

These rituals were performed at the temples of all the gods, with officials reading prayers and performing acts in exactly the same fashion every year, making sure to make no mistake. Missing just one word from a sacred text, would mean starting the whole ceremony from the beginning again.

The Romans let religion influence their most important decisions: without good omens from the gods - as observed by reading the entrails of sacrificed animals, or by studying the flight of birds - Roman officials would decide not to pass a law, hold an assembly, or even go to war. Stories of men ignoring these signs warned against the dangers of crossing the gods.

Claudius Pulcher showed his scorn of religion during a naval engagement off Sicily. When he took the auspices and discovered that the sacred chickens were not eating, he cast them into the sea, saying 'If they do not want to eat, let them drink.' And then he engaged the enemy in battle. Needless to say, he lost.

Roman religion was all about tradition and taking part in these public rituals.

Ersin: So Hannah, what did it mean for the everyday citizen taking to take part in these religious ceremonies?

Dr. Hannah Price: So this is one of the ways in which you express the fact that you're Roman. So the whole community is coming together in a very public space, in front of the temple, to participate in a shared ritual.

Ersin: So who would have been in charge of these rituals, priests or politicians?

Hannah: Well actually the priests and the politicians are the same people. So those who are holding the priesthoods, they're all part of the same aristocracy from which we have the senators and magistrates. So when we get a Roman emperor we see this intertwining of religion and politics really coming into focus. So the first

emperor, Augustus, it's very important to him that he acquires all the different priestly roles and he takes on the position of *Pontifex Maximus*, the Chief Priest, and he broadcasts this throughout his coinage. But it's - he's setting himself up as the mediator between the Roman people and their gods.

Ersin:

The state religion was made up of public rituals and ceremonial acts and not necessarily a display of faith and personal 'belief'. But within homes is evidence of more private and personal worship. Each house, rich and poor, would have had its own *lararium*, a shrine to worship the household gods, the *Lares*. Here, the family would pray for the safety and success of the household, and people would have also hoped for personal exchanges with a god.

There was also a social aspect to religion. Tiberius Claudius Fortunatus set up this altar to Silvanus, and here, the inscription reads: *epulam dedit*, he 'gave a feast'. Clearly this altar was not just about worshipping the gods; it was also an opportunity for a big meal and celebration with friends and fellow-worshippers.

This tiny inscription in the Ashmolean Museum, made by punching the metal with a pointed hammer, directly addresses Hercules. It reads: '*For the god Hercules, Marus, tribune of the 20th legion, made this.*'

It was dedicated by a Roman army officer stationed in Britain to Hercules, an apt choice for a military man maybe hoping for some heroic strength and glory.

As Rome's empire continued to grow, there came a great influx of foreign peoples along with their ideas and religions. The cult of Mithras offered an opportunity for individuals to experience religion in a more personal way as part of a special group of worshippers. In contrast to public rites, the worship of Mithras was held in small cavern-like structures, often underground, and would have been accessible only to the individuals who had completed part of the seven-stage initiation.

Mithraeas such as this one can be found spread across the Roman empire and in this dark space you could really feel part of something special. But there needn't be any sense that being a worshipper of Mithras would stop you from taking part in the public religious rites of Rome. Initiate cults like this one would offer an opportunity to be part of a community of believers, and also a life after death.

Religion in Rome was always changing, and accepting diverse and foreign cults into its folds. These were practised alongside the public rites of state religion. From the first century, Christianity became an increasingly important 'initiate cult', that would ultimately supplant the state religion and other cults entirely.