Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity

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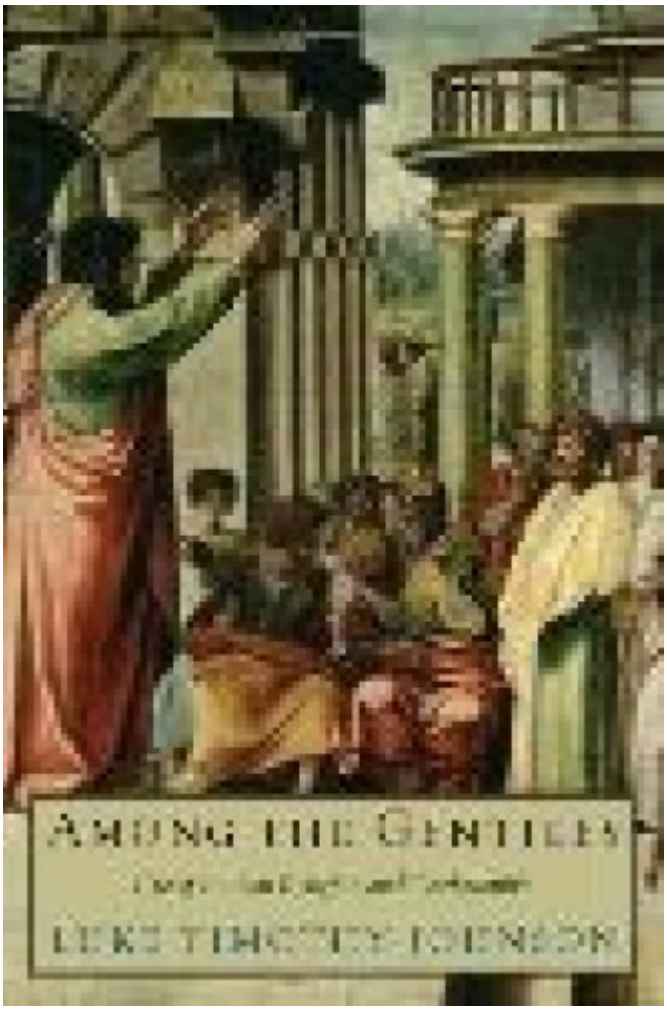

Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity

Luke Timothy Johnson
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One of the greatest challenges for Christians today is to move beyond simply acknowledging the growing religious diversity in our rapidly shrinking world to embrace religious pluralism, that is, to promote religious diversity and interreligious conversation as a means of enriching society and culture. That's challenging enough in relation to Judaism and Islam, which are genealogically related to Christianity. But it's even more difficult in relation to the many religions that have little or no historical connection to Christianity and that, until recently, were almost entirely unfamiliar to most Christians.

On this front, our canons of scripture and doctrine have been more hindrance than help. A fierce distrust of the gods and religions of the Canaanites and other non-Israelite peoples pervades most of the Hebrew Bible. And in the New Testament, especially in Paul's letters, the "pagan" religions of the gentiles are projected over against true faith as idolatry, even demon worship. In both testaments and in early Christian theology, religious identity is constructed and reinforced through "othering": *we* proclaim our God and our religious practices over against *them* and the *other*—and false—gods they serve. Unfortunately, it is this early Christian discourse against other Greco-Roman religions that provides the demon izing vocabulary for so much of today's conservative Christian rhetoric against other religions.

Granted, there are gestures toward universalism in the Prophets, and the baby Jesus was visited by adoring Persian astrologers who were probably Zoroastrians. Still, the way forward will not be based on a new religiously pluralistic interpretation of Christian scriptures. That would require more than a little wagging of the dog. What we need, and what acclaimed New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson offers in *Among the Gentiles*: *Greco-Roman Reli gion and Christianity*, is an approach drawn not from theology but from comparative religious studies that allows us to contextualize and reframe those texts in hopes of opening a new conversation that can uncover commonalities between early Christianity and its religious others.

Johnson begins not with the New Testament and early Christianity but with its larger context of Greco-Roman paganism. He identifies four different forms of "Greco-Roman religiousness," each reflecting a different way of perceiving divine power.

The first is "religion as participation in divine benefits," that is, organizing one's life in such a way as to experience divine power by means of various practices, including

rites of sacrifice, prayer, prophecy and healing. Central here is the belief that the divine is everywhere present and at work in the world, if only people will orient their lives to it.

The second is “religion as moral transformation,” which focuses not on accessing divine power through ritual practices but on transforming one’s life through moral effort in such a way as to imitate and embody divine agency in the world. Conversion to a new way of being in the world is central here, and the struggle to conform one’s life to the divine is often understood in athletic terms.

The third is “religion as a way of transcending the world,” which perceives divine power as residing in the immortal world of spirit. Through ascetic practices and, ultimately, death, one aspires to raise the fallen divine spark back to its divine source.

The fourth is “religion as stabilizing the world,” or “priestcraft as statecraft.” Whereas the other three varieties of Greco-Roman religiousness are concerned primarily with the individual, Johnson argues that this one is thoroughly social-political, focused on marshaling religion to secure and stabilize empire. It supports and fosters the other three modes of religion only insofar as they serve to maintain social and political order.

After giving examples of each of these religiosities in Greco-Roman pagan religion, Johnson shows how each is evident in Greco-Roman Christianity as well. Thus he helps us to recognize early Christianity’s familiarity with paganism, defusing the tendency to define paganism as Christianity’s idolatrous or demonic other. The tremendous wealth of insight and information he offers is beyond adequate summary here. But the upshot is that Johnson finds that the first two forms of religiousness, “participation in divine benefits” and “moral transformation,” were already central in first-century Christianity. The third form, “transcending the world,” emerges prominently during the second century, even while the other forms continue to be important to different individuals and communities. The fourth, the social-political form of religiousness, “stabilizing the world,” is well established by the third century, but comes to prominence after the Edict of Milan (313 CE) under Constantine “as the new sacrificial priesthood of the empire.”

By highlighting commonalities be tween early Christianity and other Greco-Roman religions, Johnson not only challenges the inner-Christian discourse of self-definition

over against religious neighbors, he also highlights differences and diversities within both paganism and Christianity of that time. Neither was anything close to monolithic. Indeed, Johnson makes very clear that the different forms of early Christian religiousness were far from harmonious or even mutually compatible. “Christians of one sensibility did not necessarily understand or appreciate those of another—or even recognize the legitimacy of their way of being Christian.” Religious otherness could be found within Christianity as well as outside it. It wasn’t simply a matter of us versus them, but also of us versus us and them versus them.

Among the Gentiles is one of those rare books that is at once an excellent reference work and a great read. As the former, it marshals an incredible amount of research in ancient texts, archaeological evidence and contemporary scholarship in biblical studies, Greco-Roman history and academic religious studies (nearly half the book is made up of notes and indices), and it presents it all in a well-organized and accessible fashion. As the latter, it promises to change the way most of us understand early Christianity and, in the process, invites us to reframe and refocus our contemporary context vis-à-vis other religions.

Too often biblical scholars, most of whom work in seminaries and divinity schools, remain segregated from the larger academic context of religious studies. *Among the Gentiles* not only demonstrates the tremendous value of desegregating but also offers a model for how to do it. Johnson’s own career path, from professor in Indiana University’s secular religious studies department to faculty member of Emory University’s Candler School of Theology, seems to have prepared him well to bridge those two worlds.

Of course, Johnson’s is not the final word on the topic of Christianity and Greco-Roman religion. It is, rather, an inauguration of a new conversation. As such, I expect it will invite new questions from other students and scholars of religion. For example, are Johnson’s four categories of religiousness adequate for comprehending the religious landscape of the Greco-Roman world? Might his schematic presentation make each one appear more discrete and distinguishable than it usually was in Greco-Roman culture? Relatedly, are there social-political aspects of the first three forms of religiousness that need more attention? And might there be disorienting and destabilizing Dionysian dimensions of Greco-Roman religiousness, even within its stabilizing forms? The generous spirit of *Among the Gentiles* welcomes such questions as continuations of the conversation.