

RASNET  
Conference 2025  
Unit 1 AOS 1.1  
Ancient Greek and  
Roman religion

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# Plan for today

- Focus points from Study Design
- Key issues, concepts, questions about the nature and purpose of religion over time
- Question time
- Section 1: Greece and Rome
- Question time
- Section 2: Greece and Rome
- Question time
- Where to next?
- Concluding remarks

# Interrelated aspects of religion

Beliefs

Ethics

Rituals

Sacred stories

Social structures

Spaces, places, times and artefacts

Spiritual experiences

Symbols

Texts

(Study Design 2023 p 10)

# Unit 1: The role of religion in society

In this unit students explore the spiritual origins of religion and understand its role in the development of society, identifying the **nature and purpose of religion over time**. They investigate religion, including the totality of phenomena to which the term 'religion' refers, and acknowledge religion's contribution to the development of human society. They also focus on the role of spiritualities, religious traditions and religious denominations in shaping **personal and group identity over time**. (SD 2023 p11)

# Area of Study 1 The nature and purpose of religion

In this area of study students are introduced to the nature and purpose of religion in general, exploring the **role of religion in shaping and giving meaning to individuals and communities**. Religion has often been drawn on to provide **explanations for all phenomena, offering a means for finding answers to the big questions of life and answering such questions**. Students examine the aspects of religion in general, and then apply the aspects of religion as a framework to further examine spiritualities, religious traditions and religious denominations. They also study the interrelation of these aspects generally, and apply the aspects to spiritualities, religious traditions and religious denominations studied. They **investigate how the aspects may vary between spiritualities, religious traditions** and religious denominations.  
(SD 2023 p11)

# Key knowledge

- the nature and purposes of religion over time
- the aspects of religion and how they are interrelated
- answers to questions about the origins of life and existence offered by religion
- spiritual and religious narratives that explain truths of all existence
- the role that religion can have in shaping and giving meaning to particular needs of individuals and communities
- the role of religion generally in giving expression to beliefs through the other aspects of religion (SD 2023 p12)

# Key skills

- discuss the nature and purposes of religion over time
- examine the aspects of religion and their interrelationship
- apply the aspects of religion to spiritualities, religious traditions and religious denominations
- analyse the ways that spiritual and religious **narratives** can explain truths of all existence
- describe the role of religion in shaping and giving meaning to the particular needs of individuals and communities
- interpret, synthesise and apply **primary** and secondary source material (SD 2023 p12)

# PREPARATION

- Identify content on which you will focus in your teaching of AOS 1
- Explain how this material will enable you to address the key **knowledge** and **skills** requirements





# Unit 1: The role of religion in society

- A range of examples is studied throughout the unit. For all areas of study, students explore detailed examples from more than one spirituality, religious tradition or religious denomination. These may be from one or more of the groups below. In addition, for Areas of Study 1 and 2 further shorter illustrative examples should be selected for study from across all the groups below:
- Spiritual and religious ideas in prehistory (associated with, for example, hunter-gatherer societies, Çatalhöyük, Göbekli Tepe, Jericho, Lascaux, Stonehenge)
- Religious traditions of **ancient civilisations** and empires (such as Babylonia, Canaan, Ancient China, Ancient Egypt, the Indus Valley civilisation, **Ancient Rome**, Sumer) (SD 2023 p11)



# Religion and/or spirituality?

- What is the sacred?
- Are religion and spirituality the same?
- How do religious beliefs shape cultural practices and values?
- What is the role of personal and collective experience in religious belief and practice?
- How are religious beliefs transmitted within cultures?



# What is religion?

- An organised body of doctrine and practice
- Religious tradition: ‘a **belief** and **practice** that comes from, and leads to, a human recognition of an ultimate reality and which is perpetuated, interpreted and communicated by an organised believing **community**’ (Tuohy, Green, Samuel and Valladares *Religion and Society* xiv)
- Greece and Rome?

# What is spirituality?

- Transcendence
- Sense of numinous
- Sacred
- Beyond ordinary and physical
- Beyond the rational?
- ‘the act of being open to the perception and experience of everything being interconnected through an **ultimate reality**’ (Tuohy, Green, Samuel and Valladares *Religion and Society* xv)
- Spiritual experience: ‘when a **powerful emotion** is stirred by an encounter affecting one’s beliefs, emotions...’ (Tuohy, Green, Samuel and Valladares *Religion and Society* xv)

# Ways of engaging

Ritual

Story

Material and visual culture

Natural environment

# Questions asked across time, societies and cultures, to which religions respond

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What is the purpose of life?

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Is there continued existence after physical death?

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If so, what is it like?

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How is it achieved by the individual?

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How did the world and the cosmos come to be?

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Is there an ultimate reality or being/s which relates to the created world?

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Is this being/s morally good and powerful or capricious and judgemental?

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How do I relate to the ultimate reality?

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Why is there suffering?

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How do I know how to behave towards other people and the natural world?

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# Some relevant terms

- Theism – belief that God exists
- Atheism – belief that God does not exist
- Agnosticism – belief that there is insufficient knowledge to know whether God/gods exist or not
- Henotheism – worship of one god while accepting the possibility of the existence of other gods
- **Polytheism – worship of many gods**
- **Anthropomorphism – representation of gods in human form**
- Theriomorphism – animal form as representation of the divine
- Pantheism – belief that the whole natural world is identical with God
- Secular Humanism – world view based on the value of human experience and reason without belief in transcendent spiritual powers

# Communication of ancient beliefs

**Oral**

**Textual**

**Visual**

**Material**



# Textual and visual sources in Greece and Rome

**MYTH** – oral or written narrative, usually involving supernatural beings and addressing fundamental human questions regarding existence and behaviour

**EPIC** – long poem narrating the deeds of mythical or historical figures, often aetiological and didactic

**DRAMA** – tragic and comic plays

**PHILOSOPHY** – tracts and discourses

**ART AND ARCHITECTURE** – sculpture, vase painting, wall painting, temple structures

**SACRED LANDSCAPES AND FEATURES**

# Greece – specific examples of sources

- Epic – *Iliad/Odyssey*
- Tragic dramatists e.g. Sophocles - *Oedipus Rex*
- Histories e.g. Herodotus
- Philosophers – Socrates, Plato
- Religious festivals, including Olympic and other games
- Architecture e.g. Parthenon, Delphi – oracle
- Sculpture: Athena Parthenos, Nike of Samothrace, Zeus/Poseidon of Artemision, Aphrodite/Venus of Melos
- Vase painting
- Natural environment e.g. Dikteon Cave

# Herodotus

- Herodotus (c490/480 – 425 BCE) born in Halicarnassus, south-west coast of Asia Minor
- *The Histories* Book 8, Ch 143 and 144 (de Selincourt p 574-5)
- ‘...putting our trust in the help of the gods and heroes whom he (Xerxes) despised, whose temples and statues he destroyed with fire.’ p574
- ‘...the first and greatest is the burning of the temples and images of our gods – now ash and rubble. It is our bounden duty to avenge this desecration with all our might...there is the Greek *nation* – the community of blood and language, temples and ritual; our common way of life...’ p575



# Before the Olympian pantheon there were Titans

- The children of Uranus (Heaven) and Gaea (Earth) and their descendants.
- 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE poet Hesiod *Theogony* – cosmology describing origins and genealogy of Greek gods
- According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, there were 12 original Titans: the brothers Oceanus, Coeus, Crius, Hyperion, Iapetus, and Cronus and the sisters Thea, Rhea, Themis, Mnemosyne, Phoebe, and Tethys.



# Olympian gods

- Aphrodite, Apollo, Ares, Artemis, Athena, Demeter, Dionysus, Hephaestus, Hera, Hermes, Poseidon, Zeus
- Local variations
- Anthropomorphic
- Family relationships e.g. Zeus brother of Poseidon and husband of Hera

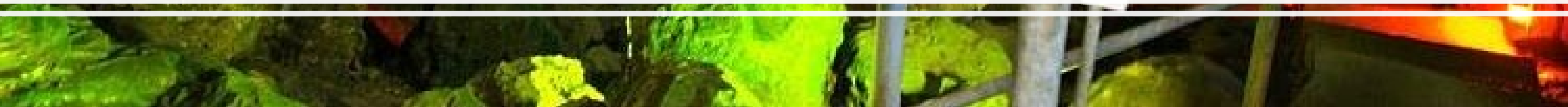


# Greek and Roman gods

Greek	Roman	attributes
Aphrodite	Venus	Love, passion
Apollo	Apollo	Sun, light, prophecy
Ares	Mars	War
Artemis	Diana	Hunting, wilderness
Athena	Minerva	Wisdom, warfare (Athens)
Demeter	Ceres	Harvest, agriculture
Dionysus	Bacchus	Wine, ecstasy
Hephaestus	Vulcan	Blacksmith, craft
Hera	Juno	Queen, marriage, family
Hermes	Mercury	Messenger
Poseidon	Neptune	Sea, storms, earthquakes
Zeus	Jupiter	King, sky, thunder, lightning, justice
Hestia *	Vesta	Hearth, domestic life (* sometimes included instead of Dionysus)



Diktaion Cave, Crete – birthplace of Zeus



Parthenon: Temple  
of Athena Parthenos  
on the Acropolis in  
Athens







# Athena Parthenos

- 438 BCE
- sculptor Phidias
- 12 metres tall gold and ivory
- replica

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/introduction-parthenon-and-its-sculptures>



# Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum

- Made between 447BC and 432BC they consist of a frieze which shows the procession of the Panathenaic festival (the commemoration of the birthday of the goddess Athena); a series of metopes (sculpted relief panels) depicting the battle between Centaurs and Lapiths at the marriage-feast of Peirithoos; and figures of the gods and legendary heroes from the temple's pediments
- <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/parthenon-sculptures>

# Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum





# Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum



# Delphi: Temple of Apollo

- Delphic Oracle



Aphrodite of Knidos  
Praxiteles 4th century BCE  
(Roman copy)

<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/61600/statue-of-the-aphrodite-of-knidos>





# Apollo Belvedere, Vatican Museum

- 2<sup>nd</sup> cent CE Roman copy of  
Greek 4th cent BCE original



# Olympic Games – a religious festival

Every four years from 776 BCE to 395 CE

Held in Olympia

To honour Zeus

Pilgrimage to the sacred grove of Altis



## Other Games

Pythian games – Delphi – Apollo

Isthmian Games – Corinth – Poseidon

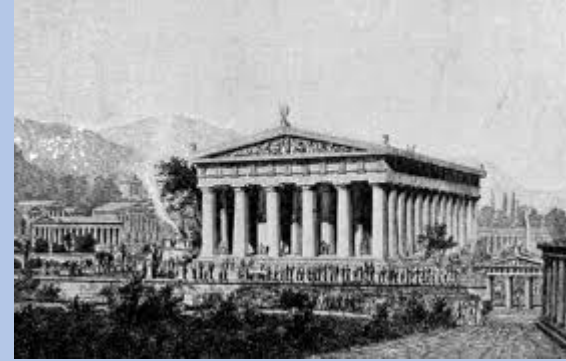
Nemean Games – Nemea - Zeus

Religious festivals

# Olympic Games

- traditionally founded 776 BCE
- held every four years at Olympia
- Olympic truce – first one, then two, then three months when participating states were forbidden to fight or engage in legal disputes
- This was to ensure games were not interrupted and competitors and spectators/pilgrims would be safe to journey
- Held August or Sept when harvest finished

# Olympia and Zeus



# Olympic Games

- In 5th cent festival lasted 5 days
- Sacrifice at altar of Zeus
- Procession from host city of Elis to Olympia
- Ceremony where athletes and officials swore to uphold rules
- After events – victory celebrations with processions and banquets
- main sacrifice preceded by pentathlon and horse races and followed by boys' contests, foot races, wrestling, boxing, pankration (combination of boxing and wrestling with kicking, strangling and twisting – strict rules enforced by umpires – biting and gouging forbidden except in Sparta – Pausanias – kicking in stomach, breaking fingers and twisting foot out of socket allowed, all neck holds allowed) and a race in armour

# The reward - Nike

- Winged Nike of Samothrace 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. BCE



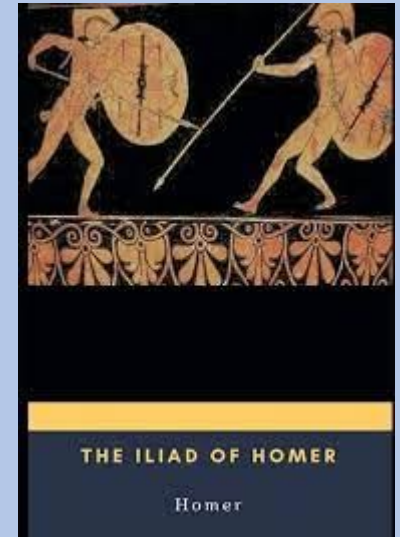
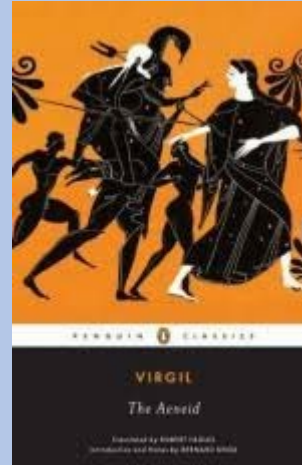
# Literature

Iliad (Homer)

Odyssey (Homer)

Aeneid (Virgil)

Oedipus Rex (Sophocles)



# ORAL EPICS

- The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (2nd half of 8th cent. BCE) were
- originally intended to be recited to an audience and transmitted orally.
- In many cultures, literate and non-literate, hearing sacred stories was and is fundamental e.g. oral traditions in indigenous cultures and in Celtic and Norse contexts and hearing passages from the Bible read aloud in churches and synagogues.



# Oedipus Rex (Oedipus the King)

## Context

- Author, Sophocles c 496-406
- Play written c 429 (430-426)
- Plague in Athens 429
- Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta 431-404

## Characters

- Oedipus – king of Thebes
- J(l)ocasta – wife of Oedipus, queen
- Creon – brother of Jocasta
- Tiresias – blind prophet
- Antigone and Ismene – daughters
- Laius – father of Oedipus, first husband of Jocasta



# The story of Oedipus Rex

- Laius receives oracle from Apollo that son will kill him
- Orders shepherd to expose baby Oedipus on Mt Cithaeron, shepherd takes baby to be brought up by Polybus and Merope, king and queen of Corinth
- O warned by oracle he will kill his father and marry his mother, so he leaves Corinth
- At a road junction he kills Laius, solves riddle of Sphinx, marries J(I)ocasta and becomes king
- At beginning of play Thebes devastated by plague – oracle says caused by polluting presence of L's killer
- O pronounces curse on killer and begins investigation
- When truth is revealed J hangs herself and O blinds himself

# Key questions in Oedipus

- To what extent do human beings have free will?
- Can destiny/the will of the gods be avoided?

# Questions across time and cultures addressed in ancient Greek and Roman literature

- Teleological – purpose of life
- Ontological – nature of being
- Cosmological – nature of the universe
- Theological - nature of the divine
- Immortality
- Good and evil – personal and societal ethics



# The Iliad

## Judgement of Paris

- Eris (discord) not invited to wedding of Peleus and Thetis (parents of Greek hero Achilles), threw golden apple ('to the fairest one') into guests, Hera, Athena and Aphrodite agree Paris (son of Priam and Hecuba, King and Queen of Troy) will judge which of them is most beautiful
- Aphrodite bribes him with Helen (wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta)
- Greeks attack Troy to bring her back
- Aphrodite, Apollo, Ares, Artemis support Trojans
- Athena, Hera, Thetis support Greeks
- Poseidon supports Greeks but intervenes to save Aeneas from Achilles so his destiny can be fulfilled



# Publius Vergilius Maro (Virgil) (70-19 BCE) Roman poet

## The Aeneid: Roman origin myth - Written literary text

- Aeneas (son of Trojan Anchises and Aphrodite/Venus) flees from defeated Troy and travels to Italy where he founds a city and becomes the ancestor of the Romans. This is the will of Jupiter (Zeus), king of the gods.
- On the way Trojans shipwrecked on coast of North Africa by storm caused by Juno (Hera). Aeneas falls in love with Dido, Queen of Carthage.
- Jupiter sends Mercury (Hermes) to remind Aeneas of his duty (Roman virtue) to journey to Italy.
- Dido subsequently commits suicide after pronouncing enmity between his people and hers – Punic Wars – Roman Republic and Carthaginian (Punic) empire (three wars 264-146 BCE)
- Bk 6 Aeneas descends to Hades sees shade of his father and souls of those who have died and of great Romans of the future yet to be born – Romulus, Julius Caesar, Caesar Augustus

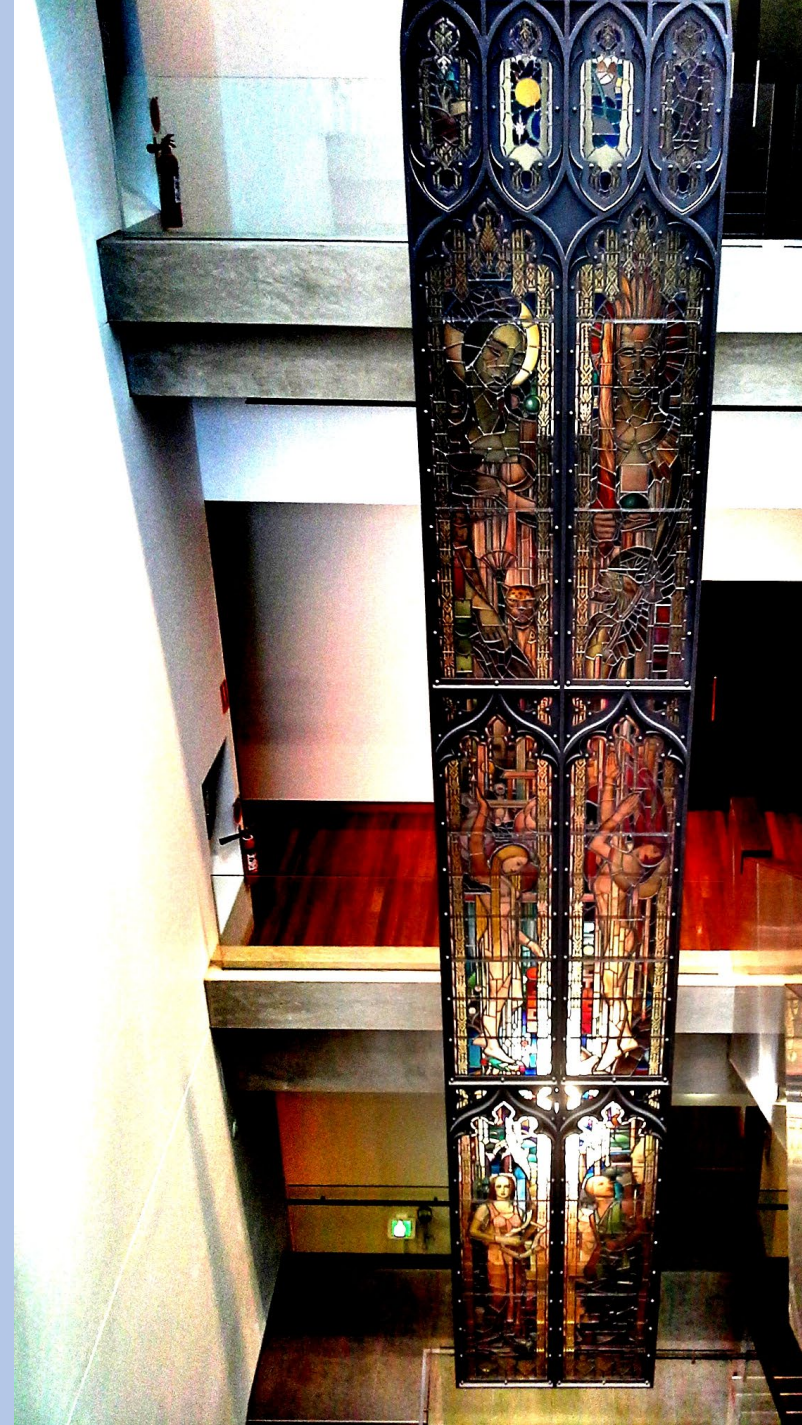
# Classical reception: Leckie window

- Stained glass window presented to the University of Melbourne in c.1935 by John E. Leckie (1853-1942)
- Designed by Mervyn Napier Waller.

Top: Days of creation in Genesis

Left panel: female figures Artemis, Persephone, Sappho

Right panel: Apollo, Prometheus and Pheidias







Leckie Window - detail



## Zeus or Poseidon of Artemision c 460BC, National Archaeological Museum of Athens.

- c 1940 cast bronze reproduction
- gift to the University of Melbourne from the Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne in commemoration of the 1956 Olympics.
- <https://art-museum.unimelb.edu.au/col/lection/untitled-zeus-or-poseidon-c-1940-cast/>





‘growing in the esteem of future generations’



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*Nike* – in Greek mythology winged female figure personified victory

## Key References

- De Sélincourt, A.(trans.)(1954), Burn, A. (rev. ed.) (1972). *The Histories*. Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, UK. (Original work, Herodotus)
- Fagles, R. (trans. & rev. ed.)(1984) *Oedipus the King*. (Penguin Classics: London, UK. (Original work, Sophocles)
- Fagles, R. (trans.)(1991) *The Iliad*. Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, UK. (Original work, Homer)
- Jackson Knight, W. (trans. & rev. ed.)(1958) *The Aeneid*. Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, UK. (Original work, Virgil)

## A question to consider

What relevance does the mythology and sacred material culture of the ancient world have for contemporary Australian society?