

## **Religion and politics in ancient China and Rome**

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Divine sanction baptized political institutions with authoritative aura. In ancient China and in Rome, the political ruling class was also the priestly class. The dual role, however, did not lead to intolerance. In his comparison of governments in world history, Finer writes, “the Han Empire was in another respect tolerant: it did not interfere with or persecute religious opinions. It is quite otherwise for those that followed: the Christian Roman Empire, its successor states in Europe, Byzantium, Sassanid Persia, and the Caliphate.”<sup>1</sup> Absent from his list of intolerant states is pre-Christian Rome, where, according to Gibbon, “toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious accord. . . . The Greek, the Roman, and the Barbarian, as they met before their respective altars, easily persuaded themselves, that under various names, and with various ceremonies, they adore the same deities.”<sup>2</sup>

Religious toleration in early imperial China and the pagan Roman Empire obtained without the separation of church and state revered in modern Christendom, which would be made necessary by the insufferable lessons of bloody inquisitions and holy wars produced by political despotism coupled with the organized church of an exclusive religion. Specialist priests or shamans existed but functioned only as advisers and auxiliaries. The chief religious duties belonged to the political ruling class. The Chinese king offered sacrifice to heaven and earth in four directions, the lords offered sacrifices to local landmarks, and lower ministers to more restricted deities. “The great services of the state are sacrifice and warfare,” observed a sixth century BCE Chinese minister.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps a similar assertion, with the priority of the two reversed, can be made of Republican Rome. Roman magistrates took the auspices of divine approval before all public actions and the consuls offered numerous sacrifices to various deities, which jammed the political calendar.<sup>4</sup>

Religious beliefs expressed the characteristic worldviews of the two realms. Religion was less integrated with political life in China than it was in Rome, where temples were among the most important public buildings. Roman religiosity had impressed Polybius the Greek rationalist, who wondered how fallacies for other peoples became an adhesive for the Roman

commonwealth.<sup>5</sup> Among a firm belief of the Romans was divine determinism of empire. “What was most novel in the Roman attitude to their empire was the belief that it was universal and willed by the gods,” remarked a modern historian.<sup>6</sup> To the Romans, the correct religious ritual that secured the gods to their side was the sole ground of justice for a war. Cicero, a most enlightened Roman, wrote, “it was by our scrupulous attention to religion and by our wise grasp of a single truth, that all things are ruled and directed by the will of the gods, that we have overcome all peoples and nations.”<sup>7</sup>

Most religious rituals were familial and private matters for the Chinese, whose ancestor worship was more intense than that of the Romans. As to the relation between religion and universal rule, the Chinese were less certain. The notion of *tianming* 天命, the mandate of heaven, appeared almost a millennium before empire. Tian or Heaven was originally anthropomorphic, although more aloof than the Roman sky-god Jupiter. Surveying four quarters of the world for the welfare of the people and deciding that the clan of Shang had misgoverned, Tian withdrew its *ming* or mandate from Shang and bestowed it on the clan of Zhou. The story appears often in the *Poetry* and *Documents*, the two most ancient and venerated texts. In distinction to usual winner’s propaganda, it is often accompanied by admonitions:

The mandate is not easy to maintain.  
Do not bring on your own destruction.  
Promulgate brightly your virtue and fame,  
Remember the verdict Tian passed on the Shang.<sup>8</sup>

“The mandate of heaven is not constant.” The warning to derelict rulers did not diminish when Tian morphed into the impersonal heaven *tian* that functioned “without sound or smell” and expressed its will mainly through the people: “*Tian* hears and sees through the people’s audition and sight; *tian* rewards and reprimands through the people’s incentive and castigation.”<sup>9</sup> The depersonalized *tian* has four meanings: sky, fate, nature, and the primordial cosmic principle. In all senses related to the supreme, it retains the inclusiveness and impartiality symbolized by the heavenly vault.<sup>10</sup>

Divination, by which one tries to fathom the wills of gods or spirits and learn about the future, was a part of political decision-making. The Romans read signs from the flight of birds or behavior of sacred fowls. The Chinese interpreted cracks in oracle bones or counted stalks.<sup>11</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup>. S. E. Finer, S. E., *The History of Government from the Earliest Times, Vol 1*. Oxford University Press (1997), pp, 525, 23-8.
  - <sup>2</sup>. Gibbon, E., *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Vol. 1*. Penguin. (1994), pp. 56-7.
  - <sup>3</sup>. *Zuozhuan*, Cheng 13. *Liji* 2, 5. B. I. Schwartz, B. I., *The World of Thought in Ancient China*. Harvard University Press (1985), pp. 34-7.
  - <sup>4</sup>. M. Beard and M. Crawford, *Rome in the Late Republic*. Cornell University Press (1985), pp. 27-9, 30-32. A. Lintott, *The Constitution of the Roman Republic*. Oxford University Press (1999), pp. 182-3.
  - <sup>5</sup>. Polybius 6.56.
  - <sup>6</sup>. P. A. Brunt, *Laus imperii*, in P. D. A. Garnsey and C. R. Whittaker eds., *Imperialism in the Ancient World*. Cambridge University Press (1978), pp. 162, 178. P. A. Brunt, *The Fall of the Roman Republic*. Oxford University Press (1988), pp. 58, 293, 302.
  - <sup>7</sup>. Cicero, quoted in Brunt 1978: 165. Harris 1979: 119-20, 123, 166-75. Beard and Crawford, *ibid*. p. 31.
  - <sup>8</sup>. *Shijing* 235; 《詩經·大雅·文王》。 *Shangshu*, Junshi, Zhaogao. 《尚書·君奭, 召誥》。 Liang Qichao 梁啟超. *Xianqin Zhengzhi Sixiang Shi* 先秦政治思想史 (*History of Pre-Qin Political Thinking*). Dongfang Cubanshe.(1996), pp. 26-35.
  - <sup>9</sup>. *Shijing* 235. *Shangshu*, Gaotaomo, 《尚書·皋陶謨》。 *Mengzi* 5.5, 《孟子·萬章》。 . .
  - <sup>10</sup>. Fung, Y-L. *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, tr. D. Bodde, Princeton University Press (1952), pp. 30-1. Liang, *ibid*, pp. 23-6. Schwartz, *ibid*, pp. 46-53.
  - <sup>11</sup> J. Rüpke, Roman religion, in H. I. Flower, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic*. Cambridge University Press (2004), pp. 180-181. Beard and Crawford, *ibid*, pp. 27-9. M. Loewe, *Faith, Myth and Reason in Han China*. Hackett. (2005), Ch. 9.