

Contrary to popular belief, the ancient Romans were a religious people. I suppose it was hard not to be: a polytheistic population provided possibilities for multiple persuasions. Of course people did grow tired of the Twelve Olympians, Jupiter, Juno and company, from time to time, but one could dabble in many other religions and worship deities like the exotic Egyptian Isis and Osiris, the Persian Mithras, the naughty Priapus, a wild Cybele, or specialized deities such as Aesculapius when one was ill, or Venus or Hecate if one wanted to seduce or curse someone else. And there were many others to choose from.

Some deities were worshipped with a simple prayer and offering, such as Vesta, the hearth and home goddess to be found in every single Roman home. There were occasional religious festivals, such as the very archaic Lupercalia held every year, near February 14, in the Roman Forum near the Palatine. Young boys of noble birth sacrificed animals, then ran naked around the Forum beating young women with februa, a leather thong or whip. The modern month name in fact comes from februa. This particular festival seems to have been connected with both atonement and fertility, at least in antiquity. Incidentally, two martyrs, both named Valentine, were later associated with the day. The church fathers' attempt to make this day more respectable and less sexy has only partly worked. And of course there were the big, staid and sombre state festivals (the ceremony depicted on the Ara Pacis of Augustus is an example) and also the state cult of Vesta, located in the Forum in the Temple of Vesta and the nearby House of the Vestals. Hanky-panky was not tolerated here.

The modern word "priest" (minister, pastor, etc.) has no real equivalent, at least in function, in ancient Roman society. To begin with, the ancient priest could be a man or a woman, although not always in the same cult: some deities required male priests and others required female priests, while others required or allowed either (such as the rites of early Christianity). The position was often highly political, and was even in some cases elective. Members of all social classes could be priests, although some cults were reserved for only aristocrats, or for only servile priests. The priesthood was rarely a full-time occupation; a notable exception was the state cult of Vesta with its full-time Vestal Virgins in attendance.

Perhaps the most important difference between modern religion and ancient Roman religion is that in Roman society almost all individuals were given opportunity for priestly participation. Not everyone might wish to do so, and slaves in silver mines probably did not have any opportunity, but under normal circumstances an individual could expect to officiate on at least an occasional or part-time basis in cult, festival or ceremony. And, of course, for the members of the Senatorial class, the nobility, it was mandatory and virtually part of the cursus honorum. The ancient priest did not have any moral responsibility for his "flock", since Roman religion was largely a matter of intercession, propitiation or just plain old-fashioned duty, and religious observance was something which every one just performed, whether they understood the ceremony or not. The virtually universal participation in Roman religion was certainly a cohesive element in Roman society, especially since almost all religious activity was connected to the state.