Categorising and comparing ancient religions to modern groups: teaching with taxonomy worksheets

by Paul Robertson

Abstract

This article introduces an approach to teaching ancient Mediterranean religions by using types of classification to compare ancient to modern groups. A brief narrative introduces pedagogy challenges around understanding the multi-various intersections of ancient group affiliations with other aspects of society. Different modes of classification and comparison are presented as a way to enable such understanding. Finally, worksheets meant for copy and classroom use are presented, explained, and detailed for their potential in Classics pedagogy at both the secondary and tertiary levels.

Keywords

Ancient Mediterranean Religion, Group Affiliation, Taxonomy, Worksheets

Introduction – The Challenge

I teach introductory Classics courses at a relatively large, secular university in North America, and this is my seventh year offering classes that in some way directly engage ancient Mediterranean religion. My students tend to be vaguely Judeo-Christian, with some religious background and education when they were younger. However, they no longer practise such as by attending church or other place of worship, and they mostly describe their religious beliefs as atheist, agnostic, or most commonly that phrase encapsulating millennial religiosity, 'I'm not religious, I'm spiritual', by which they seemingly mean 'not institutionally religious'. Major Pew Research surveys, such as a major group of findings in 2015, bear out this attitude as increasingly the norm across generations, with millennials being simply the culmination of a wider trend.[1] Given this context of decreasing modern religiosity, I've identified three particular challenges in the classroom around my students' understanding of ancient Mediterranean religions, ranging from Mithraism to the Eleusinian Mysteries to different early Christianities. In talking with many colleagues teaching at both the secondary and tertiary (high school and college/ university) levels over the years, these challenges seem to be widely shared.

First, many students often have difficulty understanding strong religious affiliation. The idea of venturing on a demonstrably dangerous pilgrimage braving high seas, banditry, violence, and even disease all to come to sit at some faraway shrine, perhaps filled with healing snakes, makes little sense to them. Given their general dearth of religious practice on a daily, weekly, or even yearly basis, they understandably couldn't relate to, and therefore struggled to understand, religious affiliation so strong that it would take precedence over all of their other grand summer plans.

Second, and undoubtedly related, many students struggle to understand the *richness* of religious affiliations in the ancient Mediterranean. By richness I mean the myriad ways that ancient religion intersected with so many other spheres of life: politics (High priest as senator/ consul? 'Imagine Trump as the Pope!' I exclaim, as all my non-political and non-Catholic students give me a puzzled look), economics ('Who needs to swear by the gods when you have formal, written contract law?'), family ('You literally would go to cemeteries and hang out and pour drinks into the ground to honour your dead grandmother?' 'Yes'), sex (students either thought of sex and religion as mutually exclusive, pertaining to marriage in some way, or suggesting some wild sex cult), ethnicity or tribe (the idea that your family, group, or city would have a preferred spirit that uniquely looked out for it seemed improbable, to say the least), profession ('Based on your job, when you went to a temple you did different things and prayed to different people? What does your job have to do with your religion?'), and so forth. Whereas the modern West typically compartmentalises spheres of life – separating work from family, religion from politics, economics from tribe – the ancient world by contrast saw many rich affiliations across and between all these different areas. To understand religion in the ancient world is to understand not a particular sphere of bounded activity, but rather an interweaving between a host of purportedly separate spheres.

Third, and related to the above, I've seen a final layer of conceptual difficulty around the polytheistic and hierarchical nature of ancient Mediterranean religion. Not only are there multiple gods, a strange if not *entirely* foreign notion given the presence of angels, demons, and so forth even in the Christian worldview, but these gods have a complex relation to one another, with different areas of potency at different times, some closer to humanity than others, and so forth. This polytheistic complexity was further confusing when mapped onto ancient society, whereby some religions were public while some were private, some religions were foreign and imported while some were local and purportedly chthonic, some religions were wrapped up in official, state, institutions while others were based around wandering individuals, miracle workers, and healers. I found some traction explaining these complex hierarchies with modern analogues such as a large, televised Catholic mass versus a palm-reader on a local tourist drag, but without my students having much stake in either I again found I could get only partially there.

Taxonomy and Ancient Religion

There is certainly more to say about these challenges, namely to identify more of them and detail further why they exist. But I'd like to move directly on to how I've tried to address and solve the challenges I've identified, which is to say, how I've tried to help my students toward an understanding of ancient Mediterranean religion in ways that can be useful for other classrooms at both the secondary and tertiary level. As we will see, these methods can be used to understand and teach ancient Mediterranean groups more broadly, moving beyond religion to apply these methods to any situation of rich, complex affiliations and ties. Through this type of classification and comparison, students de-familiarise modern notions of religion as a bounded entity, and re-familiarise ancient religion through an understanding of diverse affiliations, practices, and characteristics.

I have found success in teaching ancient Mediterranean religions by using a polythetic taxonomy via second-order

categories. Polythetic taxonomy, a type of classification, facilitates a clear, transparent, and multi-part description of different religious groups that can be easily executed in a single classroom. Furthermore, this type of classification also facilitates a clear and straightforward comparison not only between different ancient Mediterranean religions, but between ancient Mediterranean religions and modern groups. Many modern groups, with which students are very familiar, tend to possess similarly rich and abundant affiliations in which modern, secular, western millennials participate.

Essential to this group-to-group comparison is a description and understanding of the theory itself, what we might call 'polythetic taxonomy via second-order categories'.[2] Taxonomy is simply a particular scheme or framework of classifying something. Polythetism is the notion that we should classify a piece of data according to a wide set of characteristics, none of which are necessary or sufficient for a piece of data to belong to a particular class. A polythetic mode of classification can be compared with monothetic classification, whereby one or a small number of characteristics are used, all of which are necessary and sufficient. Monothetism is the classic Aristotelian mode of classification.

By way of example, our classification of 'mammal' is monothetic. An animal is considered a mammal when and only if they possess *all* of the following characteristics: warm-blooded, mammary glands, and the presence of hair/fur. Meanwhile, our classification of a phenomenon such as religion can be considered polythetic. Something is a religion if it possesses a plurality of characteristics: a belief in god(s), ritual, moral/ethical frameworks, an afterlife belief, a notion of supernatural causality, and so forth. In a polythetic classification, there is no specific threshold of characteristics beyond which something is automatically considered to be the member of a class. The two can be summarised thus:

Monothetic: a narrower set of characteristics, all of which are necessary *and* sufficient to belong to a class

Polythetic: a wider set of characteristics, none of which are necessary *or* sufficient to belong to a class

When we talk about 'essentialised' categories of identity, of which we are well and increasingly sceptical in our scholarship, we are referring to monothetic classification. Basic binaries like Greek/Jew, literate/illiterate, western/eastern, and so forth are monothetic, and we should be just as sceptical about using monothetic classification as we are of using firm binaries. Polythetism, by contrast, is a much more nuanced way of classifying things that allows for complexity, flexibility, and fuzziness around the edges of a category, befitting the messiness we find in areas such as history, society, and identity (Needham, 1975). Polythetic, non-essentialised taxonomy also has the advantage of a very useful history of theorisation, ranging from Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblances' which he applied to language (Wittgenstein, 2001 [1953]), to biological speciation, with recent and widespread challenges to the notion of species as having any essential characteristics, in favour of polythetic notions of hybridity, fluidity, and so forth around the edges of species classification.

Essential to this type of classification and comparison is second-order thought, which are etic (as opposed to emic) categories. Etic categories are those derived by the scholar based on their research questions, and which do not reproduce the explicit categories and/or names of the society, culture, or data in question. Popularised in the study of religion by Smith (2004) and others,[3] second order categories allow us to 'flatten' data, which is to say to make data look a bit more alike, even when separated by vast distances of time, geography, and culture. When we talk about the economy of Homeric Greece, we are using an etic category from the modern world to ask a particular set of modern questions; we are not using a concept with a direct analogue in Homeric texts.

There are many different and equally viable possibilities for types of second-order categories, which depend simply on the types of questions you're interested in asking and the kind of work you are trying to do. Having tried several different permutations, I've found the greatest success in focusing on the various *attributes* and *functions* of ancient as well as modern affiliations. These attributes and functions can be generalised in a second-order way to both (1) describe social

groups polythetically, and then (2) facilitate comparison between ancient and modern groups.

To summarise my approach: productive pedagogy arises from (1) describing the various *attributes* and *functions* of group affiliations in second-order categories, which can be used to then (2) polythetically describe these ancient and/or affiliations, and thus (3) facilitate comparison between modern groups and ancient Mediterranean religions.

Attributes and Functions

The process of deriving the characteristics could theoretically be done by advanced students, but it is best done by the professor ahead of time given your expertise and ready access to the best scholarship. Descriptive secondary scholarship tends to provide overviews from which these characteristics can be culled. Also tremendously useful is the coding of characteristics in the 'Database of Religious History',[4] a free and easy tool that categorises religious practice across global place and time according to a host of specific criteria. You can also derive the characteristics yourself if you are especially comfortable with a given religion or social group, reading primary sources deductively and using induction to abstract more general categories for use in description and comparison.

The list that follows is the one I've found most useful, which I've generated over the years through iterative cycles of addition, editing, and subtracting. The list is not meant to be exhaustive, but is rather meant to be used, modified, and adapted by any scholar as they see fit. The goal in using a polythetic taxonomy is that its characteristics can be applied, tested, added to, rejected, and modified as one gets a better sense of a given category's complex nature. Society, of course, is a fantastically large, intricate, and shifting thing, and as such we should always be questioning and editing our polythetic taxonomy without remorse. For each item on the list below, I've listed its name, given a brief definition, and provided some guiding questions/glosses for students to help them know how to categorise the group they're analysing. An abbreviated version of the below is found

in Appendix II, intended for printing, copying, and distribution to students for work during in-class group work or an individual assignment outside of class.

Rituals:
> How do meetings begin, and end? Are there activities that happen every meeting, or around certain special meetings, such as the first meeting of the year?

Clothing:
> Does the group have a 'uniform'? Do people wear it, and which people? When?

Food:
> Is food a regular part of the group? Does the group meet over food, or perhaps associate with a certain type of food, even informally? Think of anything from 'meeting over lunch' to 'ordering pizzas and watching films' to 'talking over beers at the pub'.

Initiation Practices:
> How does one enter the group? A vote? Hazing? A formal declaration?

Meeting Place (Location):
> Where does the group meet? The same place, a changing but definably particular type of place, or any place?

Power Structure (Hierarchical vs. Democratic)
> Who makes decisions, leads the group, and holds the power? Popular vote vs minority, small group vs big group, etc.

Dispersion (Single vs Multiple)
> Is there only one single node of the group, or are there many in different places?

Recruitment:
> How are members added? Are there active and public recruitment drives (tables, posters, emails) or does the group let new members come to them (e.g., word of mouth, invite only)?

Un/Official (Status):
> Does the group have official status in the college? Or is it just a meeting of like-minded people?
> Related: Does the group have an official title, offices, a set of bylaws, and a regular meeting time written down? Or is it organised informally?

Personal/Institutional (Organisation):
> Was the group conceived around the interests of a single person, from the grassroots level? Or was the group top-down, as part of the institution?

Public/Private (Openness)
> Can anyone join one of the group's meetings or activities, or is it limited to only official members of the group?

Relation to Existing Affiliations:
> Does the group have formal or informal relationships with other groups? Do members of that group tend to belong to members of certain groups? Was it formed as a breakaway of another group?

External/Internal (Direction of Focus, e.g. charitability)
> Is the group's goal outward-looking, such as creating some type of change outside the group, or inward-looking, such as sharing interests and adding joy to its members' lives?

Membership Costs:
> Are there costs to entry? Think not only financial, but in terms of time, commitment, energy, and perhaps required output (e.g., a written report).

Employment:
> Does the group have some relationship to the job you currently have, or hope to have? What, for example, would a prospective employer at your dream job think about your membership in this group?

Romance:
> Does dating occur within the group? Is dating encouraged within the group? Would it be weird to date someone in the group, or someone outside the group? Does your sex/love life enter the conversation or activities at group meetings/gatherings?

Social Relationships:
> Are you friends with everyone in the group, or only some? Does the group help form friendships, or is it a more official group where friendships are secondary, or perhaps even undermined by things like active participation and strong debate?

Morals/Norms:
Does the group have a formal and/or informal set of values? Does it express these formally? Are they necessary for membership? Do they attempt to pass along these values to others?

Politics:
Does the group have a political stance, either explicit or implicit? Does this stance revolve around a party, or one or more specific political issues? Think about this: how would the group react if you took a strong political stand on one side or the other around a contentious political issue, such as the Iraq War, abortion, or voting rights?

Modern Affiliations

I've found the best place to start is to apply the above characteristics to modern groups and affiliations, and then move onto ancient religions and other such groups. By starting with modern groups, students get to thinking about the group affiliations with which they're comfortable, using the above second-order terms. By becoming familiar with thinking about and applying second-order attributes and functions, students can then more

effectively apply this sort of thinking to ancient data. The list details the modern groups that I've seen to be most effective for this sort of thinking. While it can obviously be expanded, applying second-order thinking to just a few of the below is sufficient to get the idea:

Sports:
What sports do you play? This can be a college team, an intramural team, or even a group that plays occasionally, such as in an annual kickball tournament.

Clubs:
What clubs are you a member of? Which clubs are you only a 'part' member of, participating just occasionally and in fits and starts?

Organisations:
There are a host of other organisations that are not student-run clubs, ranging from national organisations to community groups off campus, such as ROTC, Young Republicans, Sierra Club, etc.

Online Groups:
Do you belong to a Facebook group, or any other online group such as an online blogging community organised around a certain issue? What about a gaming forum, or a particular type of message board?

Cohorts:
Think about your cohort in terms of which year you came into the school – first, second, third, or fourth years. Is there something special that defines this group? Think also about smaller groups, such as your dorm building, your dorm floor, your suite, or your house – how are these affiliations defined? Other cohorts are also possible: transfer students, community college students, adult students, etc.

Fraternities/Sororities:
What official group do you belong to in terms of Greek life?

Ancient Affiliations

Below are some of the ancient religious groups I've analysed as part of this activity. Again, this list could easily be broadened to other religious groups, or other ancient groups more generally, e.g. philosophical schools, associations/*collegia* such as around trade or burial, etc. The information for their ancient religious group could be derived from a single document handed out in class (Pliny's Letter to Trajan), based on student readings from across the semester (a unit on Mithraism), or require independent student research of secondary scholarship

Worksheet on Polythetic Classification and Comparison.

Second-order characteristics

Clothing	None, N/A	Some / Occasionally	All
Cost(s)	None, N/A	Money	Concrete contribution
Direction of Focus	None, N/A	External	Internal
Dispersion	None, N/A	Single node	Many nodes
Employment	None, N/A	Vague, partial	Specific, defined
Food/Drink	None, N/A	General	Specific
Initiation	None, N/A	Informal	Formal
Location	None, N/A	Same type	Same place
Openness	None, N/A	Open	Closed
Organisation	None, N/A	Personal, bottom-up	Institutional, top-down
Politics	None, N/A	Implicit	Explicit
Recruitment	None, N/A	Public, active	Private, passive
Rituals	None, N/A	Periodic	Regularly
Romance	None, N/A	Encouraged	Discouraged
Status	None, N/A	Unofficial	Official
Structure	None, N/A	Democratic	Hierarchy
Structural Relationships	None, N/A	Overlapping, inclusive	Diverging, exclusive
Socialisation	None, N/A	Encouraged	Discouraged
Values	None, N/A	Informal	Formal

such as modern articles, encyclopedia, or books.

> Mithraism
> Lares & Penates
> the cult of Magna Mater
> Imperial cult
> early Christianity (cf. 1st/2nd cent. evidence to 4th/5th)
> Jewish Temple sacrifice
> Eleusinian Mysteries
> Roman augury
> Hero cults, e.g. Hercules
> Oracle at Delphi
> Temple of Asclepius

Polythetic Comparison

Once the students have several modern and at least one ancient affiliation selected and thought through according to the set of selected polythetic characteristics, it remains to compare these different groups. The best way to do so is surprisingly concrete: using worksheets that detail the various options for polythetic characteristics. See the worksheet below.

Using one worksheet per affiliation, the students colour in the boxes for each characteristic that are checked 'yes' for each ancient affiliation, and leave the boxes uncoloured for 'no'. For each modern affiliation, the students punch a every characteristic's box for 'yes', and leave the boxes for 'no' untouched (this can be done with a hole punch or simply a pen through the paper). In my experience, this tactile activity of marking the worksheets with different coloured pens and punching holes is notably satisfying for students.

Once they've completed this task for all the affiliations in question, they simply lay each sheet of modern affiliation over the ancient affiliation. When the 'yes' box on the modern affiliation has a hole that lines up with a 'yes' on the ancient affiliation, the student will be able to see the colour through the hole. Students then make note of how many overlaps they find out of the total amount of measures, a rough statistical counting measure. In my experience this process is enjoyably illuminating: 'My soccer team is 70% overlapping with Mithraism!' Students then also make note of which areas overlap and which areas diverge. A higher-level assignment question asks

about trends in terms of these measures, such as clustering overlaps around behaviour or belief or interactions with others.

This process can be repeated across however many ancient and modern affiliation worksheets the students have completed, allowing for comparison across findings: 'My UN club is more ancient burial cults than my soccer team is'. Again, higher-level analyses are possible: 'These two modern affiliations are quite close to this ancient religious group, but in different ways, which might be explained in one of two ways'. As suggested in the latter part of this hypothetical quote, an assignment prompt might ask a series of scaffolded questions for this activity: (1) description of one ancient and two modern affiliations according to the list of polythetic characteristics; (2) a summary of the comparison between this one ancient affiliation and these two modern affiliations in terms of counting statistics using the worksheets; (3) a comparison across the two modern affiliations, noting which are closer to the ancient affiliation and where; and (4) an explanatory suggestion or qualitative discussion for how/why the ancient religious group is closer to one modern affiliation than the other.

Questions for Polythetic Classification

Clothing:
> Does the group have a 'uniform'? Who wears it, and when?

Cost(s):
> Are there entry costs? Money, time/ energy, concrete output (e.g., a report)

Direction of Focus:
> Is the group's goal external (e.g., creating change outside the group) or internal (e.g., sharing interests and adding joy to its members' lives)?

Dispersion:
> Is there one single node of the group, or many nodes in different places?

Employment:
> Is the group oriented toward a type of job? Would an employer approve?

Food/Drink:
> Are consumables a regular part of meetings? Does the group meet over food or drinks, or informally associate with a type of food, like pizza?

Initiation Practices:
> How does one enter the group? Voting, hazing, or emailing?

Location:
> Where are the meetings? The same place, similar places, or any place?

Openness:
> Can anyone join a meeting or activity, or only official members?

Organisation:
> Origins from grassroots organisation, or top-down as part of an institution?

Politics:
> Does the group have a political stance, either explicit or implicit?

Recruitment:
> How are members added? Active and public recruitment, or passive?

Rituals:
> How do meetings begin and end? Are there activities that happen every meeting or around certain meetings, like the first meeting of the year?

Romance:
> Does dating occur within the group? Is dating encouraged within group? Would it be odd to date someone in the group, or outside the group?

Socialisation:
> Are you friends with everyone in the group, or only some? Are friendships encouraged, secondary, or perhaps undermined within the group?

Status:
> Does the group have official status in the college? Official titles, bylaws, etc.?

Structure:
> Democracy or hierarchy? Who runs meetings, holds power, decides?

Structural Relationships:
> Do members typically have official or unofficial ties to other groups?

Values:

Does the group have a formal and/or informal set of values, morals, or norms? Are they formally expressed? Necessary for membership?

List of Second-Order Criteria
Rituals
Clothing
Food
Initiation
Location
Structure
Dispersion
Recruitment
Status
Organisation (Person/Institution)
Public/Private (Openness)
Structural Relationships
External/Internal (Direction of focus)
Costs
Employment
Romance
Socialisation
Values
Politics

Paul Robertson, Ph.D., University of New Hampshire, Department of Classics, Humanities, and Italian Studies, paul.robertson@unh.edu Paul Robertson is Lecturer in Classics & Humanities at the University of New Hampshire. He teaches courses in Greek and Roman religion, ancient Mediterranean philosophy, classical mythology, and the history of western thought. A specialist in the intersection of ancient fields of thought and practice, he is the author of Paul's Letters and Contemporary Greco-Roman Literature: Theorizing a New Taxonomy (Brill 2016).

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[1]Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015. "America's Changing Religious Landscape". The findings are summarised here: http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/generational-cohort/younger-millennial/.

[2]An extended discussion of this theory and method as well as its application in specialised, comparative research can be found in my book: Robertson, P. (2016). *Paul's Letters and Contemporary Greco-Roman Literature: Theorizing a New Taxonomy*. Leiden.

[3]Smith, J.Z. (2004), *Relating Religions: Essays in the Study of Religion*. Chicago; Smith, J.Z. (2000), 'Classification,' in Braun, W. and McCutcheon, R. (eds.) *Guide to the Study of Religion*. London; Smith, J.Z. (1995), 'Emic/Etic,' in Smith, J.Z. (ed.) *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*. San Francisco.

[4]Database of Religious History. https://religiondatabase.org/landing/. This database can also be used for student projects, researching different religious behaviours and beliefs, and then comparatively analysing them.