

# The Fetiales, the Pantheon and the form of society

JoshuaRayJongema.Com

## I. Introduction

Throughout history, leaders have solidified their rule through a remodeling of society based on their preferences. Their preferences were themselves expressed based on the progress of developing technology in the form of architecture, education, religious communication, government, and eventually, modern law. Civility and Spirituality in ancient and Roman times stabilized the form of society, majorly enabled by the invisible technology of religious communication. Priests, gods, temples, and emperors were powerful icons in the societies of the Egyptians, Greeks, and Etruscans, all later revived in Rome under Augustus.

Augustus used the Pantheon to personify a God-Emperor, as leaders had done before him, using architecture and art such as statues, and overt references to the sun. Many levels of visible and invisible technologies were interwoven in the Pantheon at the time of Augustus, enabling society to be molded around temple activity including ritual work and ancient rites. Rites and rituals related to the authority to wage war have shaped human society in powerful ways, from perhaps pre-ancient times unto the present day. Such rituals have been enshrined in social activity and hierarchy, carried through time by Emperors of Rome and others.

Control over warfare has been carried forward within various social institutions and has transformed over time, enshrined today in the form the United Nations Charter (Delahunty, Yoo. 2012). Law is today, a well developed pillar of society, but the remnants of spirituality, rights and rituals are apparent in modern social mores and cultural perspectives. Rather than replacing other parts of society, modern law has stood as a complementary addition to the society that saw its basic model of order exemplified in Augustus' Rome.

## II. The Pantheon

The Pantheon was not the first building devoted to a pantheon. It was the second. The first has been credited to 'probably' a Seleucid king in the third century BCE. Bouwers in 2012 writes, "The Seleucids...attempted to construct a new world order in which kings acted as intermediaries between the Greek gods and their people."

In the time of Augustus (23-63CE) as Emperor of Rome many visible and invisible technologies had been mastered which powered and enabled Roman society. One noteworthy visible technology of the time was concrete. Religious communication was an invisible technology used and enshrined in the construction of art within the Pantheon.

"The Pantheon of Agrippa has been decorated by Diogenes of Athens, and the Caryatides, by him, which form the columns of that temple." (Pliny the Elder. ~76)

Augustus did not have the Pantheon built, rather it was designed and dreamt up by others, and built as a gift to him and his new role as Emperor. The Pantheon was built by Agrippa, a General of Augustus, who finished the Campus Martius in 26CE and dedicated it to his Emperor. An important figure of this history is "Vedius Pollio, who left a good share of his inheritance to Augustus with instructions to build a public work of great beauty." (Dolley, 1918)

Augustus' Pantheon was used as a microcosm of society itself, engineered as a combination of many, or perhaps as many as possible, technologies which had different meanings for individual citizens and groups. While common faithful might worship deities, "for political actors, vertical reference was ideally suited to the creation of a communicative space beyond the gens, one that would emphasize shared interest and yet enable them to use religious activity as a field in which to compete and, potentially, obtain distinction." (Rupke, 2020)

Society is only a sum of the activities of its members. The Pantheon gave people in Roman society a place to do social things. In a sense, a shared workspace may be the very foundation of society itself. The groups which relied on symbols found in the Pantheon, used them for their own private interactions and their activities had a major impact on the power of the emperors themselves.

### III. Augustus & the Fetiales Ritual

The Pantheon was a symbol of respect for the pluralism of truth. It was a sacred place where all people in society could perform rituals and rites related to Augustan-era Gods peacefully in the same space. Sacred places gave purpose to settlement-based societies and, "a huge amount of time and resources was devoted to the building and maintenance of these sacred structures, which in turn increased the demand for people with specialized skills that precluded them from agricultural work," (Ede, A. 2019). In fostering the creation of classes above those in agriculture, the Pantheon enabled and engineered society around religious functions and facilitated the worship of the Emperor.

Varro (116-27 BC) was a prolific Roman author, and in one of his scholarly works he called for a revival of religion in Rome, blaming the sad state of Roman affairs on the decline of religious activity. Augustus played a major role in the revival of religion in Roman society, for which the Pantheon and Augustus both took center stage. Augustus revived social institutions and built a new roman empire (Dolley, 1918). Augustus' model of power was a recreation of past models of Greek and Egyptian societies and relied on the ancient fetiales ritual to be granted permission to war with his own personal enemies, equating them with enemies of Rome.

The fetiales was an ancient rite and a group of priests who ensured all wars were just in the eyes of the Gods. One ritual the fetiales priests carried out was the throwing of a spear tip toward an enemy camp to initiate war, and this is argued to have predated the iron age, carried over into use in Rome beginning at least with the 3rd King of Rome (Weidemann, 1986). The fetiales were a college and cult, devoted to war and to the mystical, (Dolley, 1918). Due to

political conflict related to the fetiales the college was banned in 54BC but, “Augustus restore(d) the authentic ancient rite as part of his general restoration of traditional religion.” (Weidemann, 1986).

Augustus invoked the fetiales ritual to justify transforming a civil war against the Julians into a ‘just war’ against a perceived, external threat to the empire (Weidemann, 1986). Augustus achieved this by conflating Julians with the camp of a foreign actor (Solerno). In pushing out the lingering power structures of previous emperors, Augustus created a cult to himself that fostered order in his society.

It has been argued that the purpose of the Pantheon is majorly a “tribunal for the emperor,” (Thomas, 2017). The details of this have been exhaustively described by many, but one mentionable artifact within the Pantheon’s structure was its obelisk. “In Rome, this obelisk, brought from Heliopolis in 10 B.C., is dedicated to the Sun and therefore to the god Apollo, the Augustus’ protector,” (Nicoletta, 2016). In ways beyond art, Augustus used the Pantheon as more than a beautiful public work, but as a means of achieving greater power.

One key religious change made by Augustus heralded the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the Roman Empire- his personal adoption of, “the position of pontifex maximus, a kind of high priest,” which, “became central to the identity of the princeps and was filled by all his successors at least until the late-4th century,” (Garland, R.). The language of this title for an emperor is very similar to the language used to describe the pontiffs, or Roman Bishops and Popes of later centuries, and so is evidence of a connection between the Pantheon, the religion of Rome, and what became the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church.

#### IV. Hadrian’s Pantheon

In the 2nd Century Emperor Hadrian (76-138CE) revived the strength of Rome’s civic institutions through renovation and construction projects all over the city of Rome, including the renovation of the Pantheon. Hadrian repurposed the Pantheon in the image of the model set by Augustus.

“...two points are clear: that Hadrian himself set great importance on the religious aspects of his imperial program; and that he consciously took Augustus as his model, even to the extent of inviting comparison with his great predecessor.” (Walton, F. Jan. 1957)

Hadrian was initiated in the Eleusian mysteries. “For his Eleusian initiation he chose the Sabasteios tribe – namely, the tribe that remembered Augustus.” Hadrian, “seems to have opened new perspectives for the various cults of the empire, including Christianity.” (Rizzi, M. 2010)

“In the Hadrian’s Pantheon, there are 16 niches like the number of the directions in the Etruscan organization of the space; in fact, Hadrian’s architecture is very influenced by Etruscan ideas.” (Nicoletta, 2016)

Hadrian had revived and carried on the legacy of Augustus, in his own way, and achieved power through his acts. Over the centuries that followed, Rome's power waned. Christianity became the religion endorsed by the Roman State, and the State became the church's protector.

## V. The Roman Catholic Church and Just War Theory

By the 4th Century Rome had become dilapidated, following the transition of the capital from Rome to Constantinople in 330CE. By the end of the 4th Century, the imperial government banished huts that littered the Campus Martius. (MacDonald, 1976).

Under Constantine (306-337CE), "the (Christian) church and its clergy first received certain privileges and exemptions from the State, and...the State began to clothe itself in Christian forms and ceremony," (Armstrong. 1964). At some time in the 5th century CE, Rome fell apart, but the religious ceremonies and control over the rite to warfare Rome had envisaged evidently became adopted at some time by the Roman Bishops and new priesthood which later became Popes or pontiffs.

"After Constantine's conversion, theologians such as St. Ambrose began to view the Empire as the protector of Christianity, and military service and war as the necessary shield for civilization and peace." (Delahunty, Yoo. 2012)

In being given to the Pope in the 6th Century AD, the Pantheon was once again repurposed as a civic institution under control of the Roman Catholic Church. "Pope Boniface IV (608-615CE)," did, "ask the Byzantine emperor Phocas, in Constantinople, to cede the "temple" to the church in the early seventh century," (Marder, Jones. 2015). Roman Catholic priests carried on the function of the fetiales ritual for society, in the form of just war theory, maintaining a sort of social order across Rome's collapsed empire.

One Catholic priest was credited with conceiving of just war theory. Mattox in 2006 wrote it is, "in the case of 'just war', the theory of which Augustine [354-430CE] is regularly said to be the father." Delahunty and Yoo in 2012 pointed out, "The Christian just war had a broader, punitive dimension that sought not only to make the state whole, but also to punish the wrongdoer for violating moral principle."

The Pantheon became known in the 7th Century as Santa Maria Rotunda (MacDonald, 1976). While some have remarked on the United Nations Charter as a continuation of Just War tradition, Delahunty and Yoo in 2012 aptly note that, "the central purpose of the Charter is to prevent war, not to promote justice or correct injustice." Still, control of war seems evidently central to the structure and direction of human society throughout history.

## VI. Conclusion

The form of global society today resembles the societal structures of the past, as was the case of the Pantheon itself. The unbroken development of society around the fetiales ritual, leading to the Just War Theory of the Christians, and the International Law of modern times are evidently

intertwined, while having their own unique take and degree of effectiveness at controlling war. In a sense, perhaps at least some of these rituals have been mere excuses for war, as some critics have pointed out. Perhaps they have been the just defense of civilized humanity, as some contend. Perhaps the argument of what defines just will transform in a new way over the course of the next century and millennium.