God, emperor worship and society: Contemporary experiences and the book of Revelation

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ABSTRACT
This paper discusses and explains some aspects of emperor worship. Two limitations in terms of evidence are observed by focussing on the cities mentioned in Revelation 1-3 and remaining within the first century. Emperor worship was a very important way of conceptualising reality, that is society and politics under Roman rule. More fundamentally it reflected a certain perspective on God. These two facets explain something of the conflict experienced by contemporary society and some Christian groups at the end of the first century in Asia Minor.

Emperor worship as the religio-historical context of the book of Revelation is a commonly accepted point of departure. But moving beyond this obvious point it becomes extraordinarily difficult to explain what the imperial cult was all about. The modern researcher faces several obstacles when trying to understand the imperial cult.

1 SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS

1.1 There never was such a thing as the imperial cult. Bickerman has even called imperial cult a modern invention of scholars (see the discussion in den Boer 1973:26-30). His criticism should be taken seriously. There was a numberless variety of cults with different religious meanings and social functions that despite a common denominator (honouring the or a ruler) will defy all analysis if grouped together unproblematically (cf also Habicht 1973:42-50; Liebeschuetz 1979:72).

Charlesworth (1935:8) has suggested that "the phrase Benefactor-Cult would be a better title" which in a very real sense expresses a most important aspect of these phenomena. However, as a descriptive title it is also one-sided and leads to vague and indiscriminate grouping together of evidence and interpretations.

Two things should be kept in mind when discussing emperor worship. "Each city, each province, each group worshipped this or that sovereign according to its own discretion and ritual" (Bickerman 1973:9). Obviously this makes a thematic discussion somewhat unrealistic. No ancient would have shared all the beliefs outlined in such an attempt; some might have held some
of them. The ideal is to find a balance between concrete specific evidence and interpretation.

Secondly, one should be sufficiently sensitive to contemporary nuances and distinctions. To ignore the complexities of the thoughts and symbolic universes revealed by the sources is to be wholly unhistorical. Our sources reveal a fascinating picture of hesitations and ambiguities in the relationship perceived between emperors and gods.

1.2 There is a lack of complete and unambiguous literary texts about imperial ritual (cf Price 1980:29; Bowersock 1982:172). There are a few general descriptions and a vast abundance of non-literary material (archaeology, numismatics and inscriptions). But the evidence is scattered in time and place and remains fragmentary: contexts are difficult to determine, interpretation notoriously unsure. Remarks found in literary traditions provide little illumination (after all: what we want to know was accepted as common knowledge) and reflect the attitudes of the elite and/or highly individual intellectualist opinion (Phillips 1986:2755).

However, the value of the sources we do have should not be underestimated, as the important studies of Simon Price prove. Quite a lot can be gleaned from the personal inscriptions of the secular priesthoods, the fragments of imperial and regulatory documents, the architectural arrangements of temples, scenes imprinted on provincial coins and depicted on monuments, dedicatory inscriptions and literary references to ceremonies and rituals celebrating and honouring the emperor.

1.3 Of the most difficult problems to overcome are our prejudices and modern assumptions. "To us the offer of worship to living or dead men may seem absurd. It is clear that it did not seem so to the Romans" (Liebeschuetz 1979:65) - nor to the other people of the empire, especially the Greek speaking eastern provinces.

A general reluctance to accept emperor worship as a genuine and valid religious expression permeates studies of these cults. It is usually seen as something that served primarily political ends (Lohse 1976:220) with no religious belief implied (Balsdon 1969:189-190; 1974:93-94; Taylor 1931:35,212,237-238; Bleicken 1978:110-111,163; Ferguson 1970:95). Influential in this regard has been the distinction formulated by Nock (1934:481) that the

*dedications and acts of devotion to deified rulers... are all of the nature of homage and not of worship in the full sense, for worship implies the expectation of blessing to be mediated in a supernatural way.*

This rationalising approach, by seeing the significance of the cult as belonging to the realm of practical government, makes it a phenomenon of exploitation seen from the emperor's side and an opportunistic activity for scoring
diplomatic profit when seen from the subjects' side. It follows that the cult must then have been something quite absurd, involving "an appalling amount of hypocrisy" (Liebeschuetz 1979:75).

However, this is to assume "that an examination of overt initiatives and of the interests served by the cult exhausts the significance of the phenomenon" (Price 1984b:16). Living with the heritage of the Enlightenment we have difficulty in accepting and conceptualising the existential power and value of rituals. Imperial rituals were much more than simply honouring someone special. As religious activities they articulated the complexes of symbols making up the intersubjective world of common understandings that not only shaped the world experienced by the ancients but induced distinctive moods and motivations in the individual (cf Geertz 1975:87-123).

It follows that it is dangerously subjective to depict the imperial cult as something empty; as irreligious, impious adulation. That is to approach the problem with the answers ready. Not only is it intolerant but it also keeps one from seeing one's own convictions and beliefs realistically (cf Phillips 1986:2681-2697).

The hermeneutical aspect of historical research deals with two problems: on the one hand the irreducible strangeness of the past and on the other the fact of continuity in history - which after all is the story of human beings. Careful attention to these aspects will help to keep one from disrespect for an experience of reality with no demarcation between the religious and the secular, or to see the value of others' experiences only when they validate one's own.

1.4 A few remarks are necessary to develop a possible framework with which to approach the imperial cult.

Emperor worship was not enforced with Rome as an official persecutor creating a critical confrontation for the church (as eg Hemer 1986:87). It was quite a voluntary and unforced institution (Enslin 1970:126; Liebeschuetz 1979:74). This is well illustrated by the cities competing for the honour of erecting imperial temples (e g Tac Ann 4.15; 4.56). Certainly the general imperial acceptance of civic cults and the possibility of penalties for non-fulfillment of promised cults combined to create considerable, covert central pressure for the establishment and continuation of cults (Price 1984b:66), but the fact remains that the imperial cult had an incredible vitality and persistence existing well into the Middle Ages (and even into modern times in some forms of nationalism). Even the christianising of the Empire did not stop it but only slowly changed it from the end of the fourth century onwards.

Emperors did not promote the imperial cult because they had a cynical concept of human motivation, or because they consciously created an ideology for their own purposes. The phenomenon was part of their reality. It was what there was (cf Geertz 1975:10-30).
The emperors were commonly regarded as "being set apart from ordinary mortals and standing in a special relationship with the gods of the community" (Fears 1977:2). Emperors and subjects believed the ruler to be a manifestation of divine Providentia.

The very function of the emperor was the possession of power, which necessarily meant disguising his actual human frailty and associating with symbols accentuating his awesome authority. This ambivalence between "real" and "appearing real" was very much part of the reality in which the Roman Empire "existed" (Wallace-Hadrill 1982; Gordon 1979).

Emphasis should also be placed on the benefactor/benefaction mentality that permeated Hellenistic culture. This mentality fostered a "reciprocity system", a "generic cultural experience" of benefaction and gratitude (Danker 1982; Jones 1964:16; MacMullen 1980:12-14; Charlesworth 1935:8-16). This mentality is succinctly stated by Pliny the Elder: "To be a god is for a mortal to aid a mortal, and this is the path to everlasting glory" (NHist 2.18).

The history of Sardis is an apt illustration. A tremendous earthquake in 17 C E (Tac Ann 2.47) had a profound influence on Sardis' history, and on more than its physical foundations. "Survivors of the disaster saw the temple of Artemis and Zeus, and probably that of Meter, overthrown and lying in ruins for half a century, the gods unable to protect them. Not unnaturally, from gods that had failed them, they turned to the præsens divus, the 'present god', the emperor who was the first to help them in their dire plight" (Hanfmann 1983:135). A statue base calling Tiberius "Founder of the city" was found there in 1979 (Hanfmann 1983:160,275 n28). The ideology and the practice of the Empire was that the emperor was as a básoi leitōs accessible to his subjects in a way which now seems incredible; in a very real sense σωτήρ and final help (cf Millar 1977:11).

To my mind the recognition that the imperial cult expressed genuine religious content must be the starting point of a serious discussion thereof - a point stressed by several studies (Pleket 1965; Bickerman 1973; Hopkins 1978:197-242; Price 1980; 1984b; Phillips 1986:2752-2757).

The imperial cult was designed to express ἐυεξίβεια (contra Bowersock 1973:182-184). Many inscriptions witness to the fact that acts of imperial devotion were seen as a display of piety (Price 1984a:88-89). This implies that the emperors were classified with the gods, but with nuances and distinctions. Nobody spoke of Deus Jupiter or Zeus Theos (cf Walbank 1981:217-8). The cult remained isótheoi timai.

Because mankind address him as Sebastos in accordance with his honour, they revere him with temples and sacrifices over islands and continents, organised in cities and provinces, matching the greatness of his virtue and repaying his benefactions towards them (Nicolaus of Damascus FGH 90F.125, cf Price 1984b:1).
2 ASPECTS OF EMPEROR WORSHIP

2.1 Architecture

When one thinks about the realia of emperor worship it is usually the temples that come to mind. Temples, however, make up a relatively small part of the wide range of civic architecture honouring the emperor. In the cities of Asia Minor in which imperial temples or sanctuaries have been identified it is quite clear that they possess a remarkable imperial presence in stone.

In Ephesus there were four imperial temples (and in the second century a massive Antonine altar was built), a σταόν βασιλική and four gymnasia associated with the emperor, an impressive number of imperial statues (both in public buildings like the theatre and council house and in the streets), fountains with statues and gates dedicated to the emperor (in the first century probably only one dedicated to Augustus, cf Domitian's arch in Hierapolis - Price 1984b:136 n12). In fact, the whole upper square at Ephesus was redesigned during the reign of Augustus and developed further under Domitian.

Keeping in mind that spatial phenomena can and do reflect people's conception of their social structures - architecture as a reflection of people's experience of personal and social symbols and values (Kuper 1972:411-415; 419-421) - one quickly realises that the imperial architecture was not the cold grandeur of an alien authority. The imperial cult was incorporated into the everyday life and institutions of the communities (cf also Taylor 1931:245; Price 1984b:233). Imperial structures were generally located in the most prominent and prestigious places available; a permanent expression of the emperor being at the heart of the community.

A prominent feature of Hellenistic culture was the construction of porticoes on the main squares of cities. These buildings had a wide range of civic uses (from trading to sheltering). Some of them also served religious and cultic purposes. Once again Ephesus serves as illustration. On the upper square, in front of the magistrate's building and council chamber (with a temple of Roma and Julius Caesar in between) a σταόν βασιλική was built at the beginning of the first century, and dedicated to Artemis, Augustus and Tiberius. Two hundred metres long it was "das beherrschende Bauwerk des Stadtzentrums". On the east side it ended in a temple of Augustus, with over life-sized statues of Augustus and Livia (Alzinger 1970:1634-1636; Knibbe & Alzinger 1980:817). The whole setup was a vivid expression of the incorporation of the emperor into public life.

This is also illustrated by the existence of imperial cult activities in the gymnasia of several cities. Also a civic institution with multiple functions the gymnasium served in the Roman period "as the chief centre of the educational and social life of the community" (Yamauchi 1980:38). Not only were athletic competitions held in honour of Roman emperors, but imperial
sacrifices were also made and banquets held (Price 1984b:110). Pergamum had seven gymasia, Thyatira had three and Ephesus four. It is possible that in these gymasia special rooms were used for this cult.

At Pergamum the so-called "middle" gymnasium had several rooms that probably related to the imperial cult in one way or another. An inscription was found recording the building of a base for cult statues dedicated to the divine emperors, Hermes and Heracles (the gods of the gymnasium), whose statues probably stood there. A similar dedication was found in a room in the "upper" gymnasium. Although no really clear-cut evidence for these "imperial rooms" has been found

*enough evidence survives to make it clear that the imperial cult was fitted into gymasia in various ways as into other civic centres of the Greek city* (Price 1984b:144).

The architectural emphasis on the emperor and especially imperial temples served an important sociological role. The Empire brought a new, cosmopolitan ideology that changed the traditional and ethnic boundaries and made religious and social identity a serious problem. The imperial cult was an expression of redefinition, of connecting new facts with old interpretations. This is probably why the emperor as god was associated with the traditional gods in their temples, but never replaced them.

2.2 Temples

The physical setting of imperial rituals was the temple, the Καταστήματα or Συμβολή. What exactly the functions and values of temples were we today no longer know. Any one temple could and did have a variety of functions, and the simultaneous conduct of religious and what today is called secular business is a very prominent feature. This fact is clearly illustrated by the almost endless list of possible reasons why temples were constructed and dedicated, and the range of activities that took place in the temples: festivals, cultic rituals, meetings of official bodies, the execution of civic offices, trading and banking and also serving as museums and libraries (cf Stambaugh 1978).

Strictly speaking one should distinguish between a sanctuary (τεμενός) - a site with imperial statues on a large base and with an altar, usually with no special buildings and a σεβαστείον with buildings (ναός). However, cult rooms inside larger structures could also be called ναοί, like the cult room in the council house of Ephesus. There were sanctuaries that the traditional gods and the emperors shared as well as structures devoted solely to the emperor. Different temples served the local cult and the provincial cult of the emperor.

When it came to erecting imperial temples there was more to it than simply building it. Especially the more public aspects of the cult had to have "official acknowledgement". An imperial temple was a rare and desirable honour for a city. Such offers of cult were often made in association with
requests concerning privileges and beneficia (Millar 1977:420-438) or to express loyalty to retain privileges. Imperial temples reflect the complex relationship and interaction between ruler and ruled. The many temples dedicated to Augustus - in Pergamum the Σεβαστεῖον of Roma and Augustus, in Ephesus the Augusteum in the Artemision (Wood 1877:152-4) and the temple of Augustus in the city itself (centre of upper square) as well as the temple for Augustus in Sardis (Hanfmann 1983:114) - clearly show the sense of security and confidence experienced as a result of the Augustan peace.

Although the city of Sardis had many temples (Ratte, Howe & Foss 1986:45 n1) only the remains of two have been found. One is the famous temple of Artemis (Hanfmann 1983:129 fig 178). The second is a large temple of high quality dating from the last half of the first century which may have been a provincial centre of the imperial cult, possibly built in honour of Vespasian (there is some numismatic evidence) - but no sure conclusion can be drawn at this stage (Ratte et al 1986). At about 140 CE the temple was destroyed by fire, roughly at the same time that a new Artemis temple was dedicated to the emperors. An interesting feature is that its architectural style (pseudodipteral) represents a conservative design adhering to the rigorously elegant and potentially monotonous regularity of traditional Hellenistic temples at a time when innovation was the order of the day. Domitian's temple at Ephesus also reflects this "Rückgriff auf hellenistische ... ältere Vorbilder" (Knibbe & Alzinger 1980:820).

It is tempting to speculate that the very conservatism of these buildings ... may have been thought to lend authority and dignity to the imperial cult (Ratte et al 1986:63).

More to the point however, is that this tendency is an articulation of a fundamental development: the incorporation of the fact of the emperor and the "new reality" of the Empire into traditional Hellenistic culture. Using traditional Hellenistic symbolic systems of divine power was one of the ways to represent the emperor to themselves in familiar terms.

Several imperial temples have been identified in the archaeological remains at Ephesus. According to Cassius Dio (51.20.6) Augustus authorised a temple for Roma and Julius Caesar for the use of Roman citizens of the province of Asia. It was placed between the magistrate's building and the council chamber (ὑδεῖον) on the upper square (Alzinger 1970:1648-1649); and is one of the few temples found with a clear Italian influence on its design, appropriate to a temple intended for the use of Romans.

The worship of the goddess Roma, for whom several temples were built in Asia Minor (Mellor 1975:138-144), was usually associated with Augustus. The temple of Roma and Augustus at Pergamum was the meeting place of the Koinon of Asia (Tac Ann 4.37) and centre for the provincial imperial cult for at least the first half of the first century. For this temple we have only numismatic evidence (Mellor 1975:141). The prominence given to Roma was more than acknowledging the power of Rome. The deified embodiment of
the presence of Rome was a connection between the "new society" and the traditional world-view. Roma's presence through temples, statues and religious institutions smoothed the way for the development of the imperial cult and evoked a disposition that connected Roman administration and religious experience and convictions.

A most imposing sight must have been the terrace and temple dedicated to Domitian in Ephesus (Bammer 1975:33-34; Alzinger 1970:1649-1650). Numerous cities of Asia erected statues and altars for Domitian around this temple (Ratté et al 1986:67). Why these massive constructions? Although specific evidence is scarce we do know that the provinces of Asia Minor prospered under the Flavians (Magie 1950:576-582) and especially Ephesus under Domitian (Knibbe & Alzinger 1980:816-821). A civic decree which seemingly reflects the dedication of the temple, mentions Σεβάσταια έργα which might refer to the buildings and harbour construction sponsored by the emperor (SEG 26:1245).

External decorations of sanctuaries and altars were probably used to propagate images of the emperor. The altar in front of the temple of Domitian has significant iconography, namely a collection of military motifs: spears, shields, armour, trophies and a bound captive. The other end of the altar shows a bull ready for sacrifice (Price 1984b:157). These motifs reflect the fundamental importance of the ideology of imperial victory: military power legitimised and sublimated by religion. This ideology is also reflected by the cult statues depicting the emperors dressed in armour, for which there is widespread evidence: the coins of Pergamum on which Roma crowns Augustus wearing military dress (Mellor 1975:141; Price 1984b:Pl 2b); the inscription on Domitian's temple at Laodicea "for victory", and coins depicting Domitian in military costume in the temple (Catalogue nos 179, 181-185); and the famous gigantic statue of Domitian in Ephesus also probably showed him in cuirass (Price 1984b:182). The ruler as warrior, as object of devotion illustrates how war and violence were interpreted with religious overtones. It reflects a coming to terms with the military basis of the Empire. These portrayals evoked an awe that patterned and sanctioned the maintenance of order and security by means of "institutionalized terror" (Wells 1984:278).

2.3 Statues and images
Some aspects of possible interpretations of the cult statues of the emperors have already been discussed. It is important to keep in mind that what we call "religious art" was quite something else to the ancients. We tend to think of statues in terms of "representation" whilst they could easily speak of statues that "are" gods. The ancient classifications of religious sculpture and painting are not readily translatable (Gordon 1979:11).

There was a basic terminological distinction between honorific (άνθρωπος, εἴκών) and religious images (άγολμα). All three terms were used
of imperial images, εἰκόνες most commonly, but significantly imperial ἀγώλματα referred to statues placed in sanctuaries and temples.

Some of the characteristics of imperial statues help to understand their meanings. The use of costly materials - gold and silver (again Domitian as example: Suet Dom 13, but this is at Rome) - relates the statue to the semantic field of "radiance" that is a marked feature of Greek conceptions of divinity (Rowe 1972:353-356). The size of imperial statues, especially those in temples, were larger than life (Domitian again! - the 8 metre tall statue in Ephesus) seems to be a reference to the idea that the "gods both are and are not human" (Gordon 1979:14) and can be represented within a temple but not confined to it (cf Strabo 353c).

Two common depictions of the emperor, both as priest - with a veiled head - and god, show the complexity of thought about the emperor. He could even be depicted as priest in his own temple.

Divine attributes added more variety: the emperor with thunderbolt and sceptre, or straightforward in the guise of a god, or naked like the gods (Domitian: Hopkins 1978 fig 3b). These representations clearly had the function of evoking the divine: the emperor as more than human, the very embodiment of the gods' power.

Imperial images were carried in processions of religious significance - that is smaller images: busts or portraits. At Ephesus some imperial images were part of the cult of Artemis. Another point of overlap of the cult of imperial images and traditional religious activity can be seen in imperial mysteries (cf the evidence for Pergamum and Ephesus discussed by Pleket 1965). In these celebrations a σεβαστοφάντας revealed during the ritual an imperial object - some symbol or form of portraiture - on which the μύετα gazed. This phenomenon is highly significant for the degree of attachment to the imperial cult. Mysteries (in general) made use of elaborate staging and special effects like light and fire signs, animated images and cultic markings to give the worshippers a sense of the supernatural and possibly a sense of identification with the divine. In the ritual piety of imperial mysteries "we are faced with an expression of the general dependence of man on the god(s) which come close to pious veneration" (Pleket 1965:347).

There also existed a strong belief in the power of statues, or rather the statues were perhaps experienced as extensions of the source's power: they could be the medium of divine portents (e.g CassDio 41.61.4; Suet Vesp 5.6) or even effect miracles. The technology and simulation used in mysteries - and perhaps also in imperial mysteries - enhanced the possibility of the supernatural behaviour of images. This should not be seen as cynical manipulation (that would be forcing our values on ancient experience) as it was part of the rituals.

These attributions of supernatural behaviour to imperial images probably explains the vision of the second beast out of the earth (Rev 13:13), that worked great σέμεια (cf Scherrer 1984). John clearly accepts the experiences
and power of the imperial rituals, but he redefines these experiences by interpreting their power as demonic.

It has become clear that the range of attitudes and expectations focused on the imperial images was quite extensive (cf Hopkins 1978:221-226), and difficult to understand today. There were great tensions and dangers associated with these images - from possible refuge for the prosecuted (e.g. Pliny Ep 10.74) to representing the absent ruler. Most important: they related the emperor to his subjects' own central values, the gods. This made the emperor "right" - part of the very stuff of being.

2.4 Imperial rituals
The key manifestation of the cult in action was the imperial festivals. In these Sebasteia or Caesarea the conceptual systems of temple, statue, image and sacrifice had their living embodiment. Imperial celebrations were occasioned by an incredible variety of instances both regularly and irregularly. In fact, the sheer regularity and popularity of these festivals reflect the permanence and stability of the Empire as perceived by its inhabitants (Price 1984b:107-126). However, concerning imperial rituals I want to discuss only sacrifice.

The importance of sacrifice in the imperial cult can hardly be overemphasised. But: "Few would be likely to dispute that the understanding of sacrifice is a difficult business" (Kirk 1981:41). Generally speaking it was an intense and valuable thing for the individual.

In the hands of skilled priests a sacrifice was probably both devout and moving. To witness the moment of death, whether of a human being or an animal, can be a highly emotional experience (Ogilvie 1969:50). Killing in sacrifice has even been interpreted as the most profound experience of God (cf Burkert 1983:2).

Imperial sacrifices were performed on a variety of occasions, public and private, by individuals or representatives of groups, a city or a province. Sacrifices could be libations or ritual cakes (cf the μυστήρα of the Hymnodes at Pergamum during which the εὐκοσμος gave Augustus cakes, incense and lamps - Pleket 1965:342; cf Liddel & Scott 1940:719); the standard offerings at public festivals were incense burning on special altars and the killing of a bull. Coins from Pergamum depict the sacrifice of a bull before an imperial statue or temple (Price 1980:30n19).

Antiquity distinguished between sacrifices to and on behalf of (e.g. Philo LegGai 357; CassDio 58.8.4; 59.4.4). To sacrifice to someone is to regard him as a god (CassDio 54.51.1). Although the emphasis of the sources is on sacrifice on behalf of the emperor, it is very problematic. Sacrifices were also made to the living emperor. In many of the cases where they were made on his behalf no specification was made to which of the gods was sacrificed. Sacrificial rituals in honour of emperors were also closely modelled on the traditional ways of honouring the gods. This allows the possibility that the
ambiguous relationship between emperor and gods was deliberately empha­sised, precise definition being evaded (Price 1980:33).

3 THE INTEGRATIVE POWER OF THE IMPERIAL CULT

3.1 The ambiguous range of ritual practice and language used for honouring the emperor reflects the conviction that the emperor stood at the focal point between the divine and the human. It was impossible to consider the gods without reference to the emperor, just as to be reminded of the emperor was to be reminded of the gods. Conversely, the well-being of both individual and society was inextricably linked to the emperor as elected and manifestation of the gods. The imperial cult was tied up with the conflicts and ideals of contemporary society and with its political, social and economic structures. It represented part of the very fabric of reality. In the words of Price (1984b:248) “it imposed a definition of the world”.

Two further factors can illuminate its dynamics. The simple fact that the emperor was a visible authority in contrast to the gods should not be over­looked. In the words of the hymn sung to Demetrius Poliorcetes:

*Other gods are far away or cannot hear, or do not exist at all, or care nothing for us. You are present; we can see you, not carved in wood or stone, but real. To you we pray* (Athenaeus 6.253; cf Ferguson 1980:67; Walbank 1981:215).

And also:

*The association of an obviously powerful emperor with gods whose power was not so obvious might well reassure the believers in those gods* (Momigliano 1986:184).

Secondly the imperial cult, by presenting the emperor in the framework of traditional religious values, was a powerful force in confirming the status quo of society and in affirming the truth of those values. It helped people to ex­press their own interest in the preservation of the world in which they lived.

3.2 The book of Revelation is a polemical reaction to the imperial cult, *a particularly fierce and dualistic literary image of the insurmountable opposition between the servants of God and the servants of Rome* (Collins 1984:111).

Chapter 13 vividly portrays the author’s perception of the all-encompassing influence of the imperial cult. It also clearly indicates that to the author the only permissible action for Christians is withdrawal, total rejection of con­temporary society.

I have argued that the imperial cult was part of contemporary society’s self-definition. It follows that to question the cult was the same as rejecting the very structure of its experienced reality. Quite probably the people who had contact with apocalyptic Christianity had an inability to understand their reinterpretation of experience. The resentment felt by pagans for some
Christians becomes rather understandable. Not only was the basic recognition of what made one a full member of the Roman empire (Hopkins 1978:227) at stake, but also the deepest values that made sense of and gave purpose to life.

The hostility and persecution reflected in Revelation is an attempt at making sense of being rejected. This rejection was not so much by an official programme as by neighbours protecting what was important to them.

4 TWO BASIC EXPERIENCES OF THE DIVINE

4.1 It is possible to reduce the complex range of religious experience to two basic types: "confrontation" and "interiority" (cf Berger 1981:3-15). The first refers to a sharply polarised experience of the human and the divine. The divine is encountered as a reality utterly transcendent, confronting the human from the outside. The second refers to the discovery of the divine within the depths of consciousness, experiencing continuity between the human and the divine.

Of course this dichotomy is highly theoretical: the fluidity and complexity (even anarchy!) of human experiences defy easy analysis. A continuum between the two types is much more realistic. But using the two typologies as an analytic tool I think it possible to explain something of the "conflict" between apocalyptic Christianity and contemporary society that expressed itself through emperor worship.

4.2 The second typology of religious experience is fundamental to the manifestations of imperial cult in Asia Minor. In other words, an experience of the world as a plenitude of divine forces and beings, where the supernatural interpenetrates all empirical zones. It results in a sense of reality in which boundaries become vague and the continuity between man, cosmos and the divine forces is emphasised. There is some comparative evidence from imperial Japan, which also had deified emperors and believed "that God can be found everywhere" (McGill 1987; cf Price 1984b:19).

On the other hand, apocalyptic Christianity can be categorised by the first typology. Revelation clearly emphasises "die alles Welthafte übersteigende Erhabenheit Gottes" (Vögtle 1976:378). Resistance to anthropomorphism and stress on God that confronts his creatures are typical of Jewish apocalypticism (cf Rowland 1979).

4.3 Basic experiences such as these are fully interwoven with their respective symbolic universes, and exactly therefore determinative of how symbols function. They also serve to set boundaries, constructing "us" and "them". Both groups experienced a threat to their deepest value: their perception of the divine.
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