

STATEMENT OF PROPOSED STUDY

My proposed research project will explore the little-studied area of Dionysiac cult (associations which gathered to worship the god Dionysus). Dionysiac cult most notably came into direct contact with Roman officials in 186 BCE, when a public controversy compelled the Roman senate to ban these associations. For many scholars, this is where the story ends. Nevertheless, inscriptional evidence testifies to a different picture. Dionysiac associations, including those with a religious emphasis, did not disappear but proliferated. Moreover, as time went on, they became regular fixtures of public life and even engaged in dialogues with Roman emperors and other imperial officials. This evidence, however, is often overlooked or noted only in passing. No full study of the matter has yet been conducted, to the best of my knowledge.

One reason this topic has not received wider investigation has to do with how religion in the Roman Empire is characterized. Much scholarship on this topic has posited a dualistic approach, which sharply distinguishes between public religion and private cult (c.f. Jörg Rüpke, Richard Gordon). My project, however, will argue that such dichotomies are not only an artificial distinction, but that these two disparate poles are more related than previously thought, especially in terms of identity. Through the example of Dionysiac associations, I will demonstrate that these characteristically “private” religious groups did not function in opposition to “public” cult, but rather reflected the religious marketplace within which they were enmeshed, allowing their participants to claim a polymorphous religious identity. I will demonstrate this in three ways. First, I will support my thesis by examining inscriptional evidence which suggests that Dionysiac associations participated in several structures which brought them into conversation with the public sphere, something which closes the public/private gap and complicates clear-cut divisions of religious identity. Second, this examination of historical sources will be aided by a sociological approach that explores the nature of identity in the ancient world. For example, Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory is one possible tool with which to examine how worshipers of Dionysus could

make personal meaning for themselves within a variety of religious and secular contexts. Finally, such a project opens up the door to contesting current models of religiosity in antiquity. I will emphasize the pluralistic nature of the so-called religious marketplace, a concept which has been most notably advanced by Andreas Bendlin. My view is that Dionysiac cult was not something on the periphery of Roman life, but rather that it was one thread which contributed to the total fabric of Roman religion. (It should be noted that both John Marshall and Andreas Bendlin have agreed to supervise my project, in the event that I am accepted to the program.)

I have prepared myself for graduate work in a variety of ways. At the most practical level, I will enter my graduate studies with four years of ancient Greek and two years of Latin. In addition to my language training, I've undertaken two directed reading projects, one on Hermetic literature and one on curses and curses stories, so that I could learn more about these subjects and familiarize myself with the relevant scholarly debates and methodological approaches. In my time at York, I have acted as a research assistant for Professor Phil Harland on his Greco-Roman Associations project, which provided the opportunity to learn more about what inscriptions can tell us about ancient history. I also assisted on the York Christian Apocrypha Symposium with Professor Tony Burke, an experience which heightened my appreciation for the scholarship of non-canonical Christian texts. In addition, this past year saw the publication of my first peer-reviewed journal article, "Orientalism in Iamblichus' *The Mysteries*," as well as my first conference presentation. I hope to continue developing these skills and become more involved with these sorts of efforts as I move forward with my education.

The University of Toronto's Department for the Study of Religion provides the ideal environment in which to undertake graduate studies. It goes without saying that the program offers rigorous instruction by the top faculty in the field—something any aspiring scholar can appreciate. Moreover, the department's emphasis on methodological and theoretical approaches to the study of religion provides the objective training necessary for young scholars to produce their best work. For a student of ancient religion, there is simply no better place to be.