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Diploma Programme subject in which this extended essay is registered: WORLD RELIGIONS  
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Title of the extended essay: Explore Ancient Grecian religion, in particular Greek mythology, and compare it to the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. From this analysis, determine why Greek mythology is not considered a religion in today's society, whereas the three Abrahamic religions are.

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**Assessment form (for examiner use only)**

Criteria	Achievement level			
	maximum	Examiner 2	maximum	Examiner 3
A research question	2	0	2	
B introduction	2	0	2	
C investigation	4	1	4	
D knowledge and understanding	4	1	4	
E reasoned argument	4	1	4	
F analysis and evaluation	4	1	4	
G use of subject language	4	1	4	
H conclusion	2	0	2	
I formal presentation	4	0	4	
J abstract	2	1	2	
K holistic judgment	4	1	4	
Total out of 36		7		

# World Religion Extended Essay

Explore Ancient Grecian religion, in particular Greek mythology, and compare it to the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. From this analysis, determine why Greek mythology is not considered a religion in today's society, whereas the three Abrahamic religions are.

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Advisors Name:

1 March 2013

Word Count: 3,523

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## Abstract

The topic of this World Religion Extended Essay is the comparison of Greek mythology to the three Abrahamic religions; Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. The question posed is “Why is Greek mythology not viewed as a religion in today’s society, while many other belief systems, including the three Abrahamic religions, are?” In the Extended Essay, many different aspects that are shared by all religions are discussed, and from this the similarities and differences between the Abrahamic religions and Greek mythology are analyzed. Because the three modern religions are practiced worldwide, the geographic scope covers the entire world. The time period spans from 900 B.C. all the way to the modern day. Throughout the essay, it becomes more and more apparent that there are enough similarities amongst the modern religions and Greek mythology for Greek mythology to be classified as a religion. After all the analysis, the conclusion that Greek mythology is not classified as a religion in today’s society not because of the differences, but rather the fact that there are almost no people who follow it as a religion today. Because of this, society and other religions classify Greek mythology as completely fictional, even though it has the base concepts necessary for it to be viewed as a religion.

Word Count: 209

## Introduction

Throughout all of time, the many peoples and civilizations of the world have developed the basic concepts of belief often relating to the creation of the world and life after death, into a social and ideological base known as religion. In today's world, there are three religions that are known as the Abrahamic religions, whose source was the prophet Abraham: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. It is from these three religions to which the ancient Grecian religion will be compared. Henceforth, these will be referred to as the modern religions, however it should be noted that there are a vast majority of other religions, and the sole basis for choosing these three religions over any others was that that they shared a common pool of beliefs.

Throughout history, religion has changed greatly, and at any given time, different regions and peoples of the world had varying beliefs; that is to say at any one time there has never been one solitary religion that all humans adhered to. From 800 B.C. to 500 A.D. people of Grecian decent adhered to a quasi-religion which today is referred to as Greek mythology. From the etymology alone, one can see that this "religion" is now referred to as a myth, meaning "an unproved or false collective belief that is used to justify a social institution" (Dictionary.com). From this one can see that, in current social context, this belief system is disregarded as fictional, whereas other belief systems, namely the three Abrahamic religions, are socially accepted. Because of their popularity, it is not common to view these religions as purely fictional, but rather something that is simply "unexplainable." Included within what is accepted as a religion is a creation story and a higher power of some sort. Though Greek mythology is not accepted as a viable religion by most today, the beliefs of the Ancient Greeks

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have a large conglomerate of base concepts that fit into the realm of modern religion, including but not limited to its inclusion of a beginning of time, a creation of Earth and its inhabitants, and the idea of there being a higher power(s).

## Discussion

### Base Beliefs

To ascertain complete understanding of the comparison of Ancient Greek mythology to modern religious views, one first must have an understanding of the beliefs of the Ancient Grecians, and what was encompassed in their beliefs. The largest sources from which Greeks drew their beliefs were from oral tales of events, from such tales as Prometheus stealing fire from Mount Olympus in order to give it to humans so that they could become the masters of the Earth after his brother Epimetheus gave all physically beneficial aspects to the other creatures of the earth, to Zeus poisoning Kronos in order to save his siblings and killing the great titan Kronos. It was from these stories that the Greeks formulated a set of beliefs, creating a religion. However, due to its oral based transmission, it would be impossible to discern the Grecians set of beliefs, had not the epic poets Homer and Hesiod compiled a large portion of the tales into their works. Had this event not transpired, one could say that the idea of Greek mythology and religion as we know it would not exist, and would rather be a massive assortment of many small religious cults. The differences in beliefs that would cause these cults can be attributed to one key cause, the concept of the Deity of a City-State. For each city-state in Greece, there was chosen a deity to whom the residents of that city-state would inherit as



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the main god or goddess that they would worship, and from this there was great diversity and differences in each city-state due to the difference in style of worship or festivities that related to each individual deity. Thus, without the works of Homer and Hesiod, there would not be one generally accepted account of these tales, and rather than there being thousands of variations of one religion, there would have rather been a countless number of religious cults that, though containing the same figures, had altered views of the Greek gods, and the tales that accompanied them. However, these writings are not considered to be scriptures; an aspect shared by the popular religions around today. These books have no religious message that is handed down from the gods, but rather just an account of the oral tales told by the Grecian civilians in regards to the gods. In the Judaic Torah, however, the writings are from prophets who have divine inspiration from God, and the writings are considered holy books, and is from what the Jewish people base their faith. For Greeks, the writings of Homer and Hesiod did not serve as a rulebook of sorts from which religion was taught, but merely a compilation and source of reference.

## Polytheism

From the works of Homer and Hesiod, we can discern the base beliefs of the Ancient Grecians. First, the Grecian religion was polytheistic, with a total of 370 different entities, from which there are 14 key gods, who were known by nearly all Greeks, regardless of which city-state they resided in. A belief in higher power is indeed comparable to almost all religions of the modern world, but polytheism is a practice that is not commonly practiced, though Hindu and Buddhist beliefs do have polytheistic tendencies, they are not solely polytheist in nature.

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However, in less widespread religions, there are still modern examples of polytheism being followed. In the African religion of Serer, the polytheistic belief is upheld, with many lesser gods, and a more supreme god, Roog. The concept of having a large collection of lesser gods and a more revered god or set of gods can be seen in both Grecian and Sereren religions. In this, one can see that the ancient Grecian religion does indeed vary from the current main religions, but in less widespread religions, there is still a polytheistic belief system. For the three key religions of today however, there is one and only one God, or Allah. The praise of any god other than the one true God, or Allah, would be deemed unacceptable, but the Grecians would not dream to honor solely one God, for each God and Goddess represented a different, but equally sacred thing. Though there was one being considered to be the King of Gods, Zeus, all who reside on Mount Olympus (the Grecian Heaven of sorts) are gods, and were treated as such. Thus, one can see that there is a common similarity in that there is a higher power; it is simultaneously different in that in Grecian religion, there are many gods.

## Creation of Universe and Man

In current religions, the creation of the universe is almost identical. From nothing, God, or Allah, created the entire universe and Earth and all other things. However, the topic is not clarified to a high degree, and the believers rely on faith to trust the rest of the story. The Greeks have on record a tale much more in depth and with more details on the subject of the creation of the universe. In the beginning there was nothing, and then Erebus, where death

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resides, and Night appeared from nothing. Mysteriously Love appeared, and Light and Day came forth from Love. With the creation of Light and Day, Earth precipitated in the form of Gaea. Gaea solely created Uranus, the sky and heaven. Uranus and Gaea then procreated and Gaea birthed 12 Titans. One of these Titans was Kronus, whom birthed the beginning of the gods. Kronus and his sister Rhea produced a total of six children, the first five of which were swallowed by Kronus as to ensure that they would not overthrow him, as was prophesized. However, at the sixth impregnation of Rhea, Rhea became unwilling to give up yet another one of her children to Kronus. Accordingly, she hid her sixth child, Zeus, and allowed him to grow to a size large enough to incapacitate Kronus. Zeus then received a specially concocted beverage that would induce vomit from the one who drank from it. Gaea then convinced Kronus to allow Zeus to be his cupbearer, with which Zeus could poison Kronus. Once Kronus had been poisoned, he vomited the unharmed gods, which was due to their immortal state. After a fierce battle between the Titans, and later the Giants, the gods were firmly established as being the rulers of all. In this elaborate sequence of events; one can see that the creation of the world was very vividly and expressly defined, much in contrast to that of the modern religion. In much the same way, the creation of man was done by God, or Allah, in modern religion, but in depth descriptions are not present. Once again, the Grecians went further in depth on this issue as well. However, it should be noted that there are two very different tales as to how man was created. Hesiod wrote an 800 line epic poem, titles "Works and Days." In this epic, Hesiod discusses five ages of man; Golden, Silver, Bronze, Heroic, and Iron. These ages devolve piece by piece, and we are currently in the Iron Age, the worst of all. Homer, on the other hand, tells the tale of Prometheus creating and shaping man which was previously referred to in this essay.

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### Description of the God(s)

One of the most interesting aspects of the ancient Grecian religion is the portrayal of the gods. In all of the large religions in modern times, the higher power(s) is portrayed as being at a higher moral level than humans, and are often portrayed as the embodiment of perfection. An example of this can be seen in the Christian prophet Jesus, who is God the Son, which means that though he did walk on Earth as a mortal, Christians believe that once he was crucified he rose to heaven, became immortal, and was a part of God. In the Grecian religion, however, the gods are portrayed as immortal beings that in many ways embody the common human, rather than perfection. For a god to embody the common man is a truly unique approach which involves the gods and goddesses do things that would not be considered perfect. Examples of this are widespread, including the famous tale of Io and Zeus. In this tale, Zeus becomes attracted to the mortal Io, daughter of Inachus. Zeus subsequently went down to Earth disguised as a mortal and attempted to gain her attraction. Io was in great fear and attempted to run, however Zeus tricked Io and was able to ensnare her. Because of this, Zeus's wife Hera, a goddess, became extremely jealous and confronted Zeus about his actions. Zeus, in great fear, quickly transformed Io into a heifer, and then Hera, seeing through his trick, asked for the heifer as a gift. Because he could not refuse to avoid suspicion, Zeus gave Hera the heifer and Hera quickly put it into the care of Argus, who was a creature with 1000 eyes. Through deception, and with the help of his son Hermes, also a god, Zeus was able to free Io from her guard. However Hera was still jealous and cursed Io, still in the form of a heifer, with a gadfly, which would sting Io endlessly, causing great pain. In the end, Hera softened her heart and allowed Io to return to human form, and she promptly birthed a child, with Zeus as the father.

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She soon became a highly regarded queen, but Hera in her endless jealousy, ensured that Io's son would be stolen away from her, only to return to her years later due to Zeus's benevolence. From this story, one can find a large number of examples of just how human these gods were. One can see that Zeus is unfaithful, deceitful, unrelenting, and had not one problem with relations with mortals. And of course there is Hera, whose unrelenting jealousy can be seen time and time again, along with Hermes, who tricked creatures of the Earth. These attributes that are almost solely reserved for humans, and assuredly not gods in major religions of today, were considered nothing out of the ordinary for the Greek gods. However, one must not only look at the humanlike flaws, but also the humanlike things that are positive. From that same tale, you can derive Hermes as being a helping son, Zeus as showing regret for his actions, and Hera as slowly realizing that she is being too cruel and lightening the punishment upon Io. In the same manner, though in opposite context, the Grecians portrayed their gods as being very quasi-human so that they could learn from the gods not only how to live a better life, but also see mistakes that they made so as to learn through hearing the stories, what not only to do, but what not to do as well. It is from this dual display of the higher beings, that Grecian religion inherently separates itself from the common religions of now.

## Divinely Powered Beings

Another concept of religion in which variations between religions of today and the Grecian religion is the purpose of those who are divine but on this Earth. For Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, these people are known as prophets, and they serve as messengers of God, or Allah, and were not conceived directly by the higher power. For the Greeks, though, the

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divine humans were referred to as demigods rather than prophets. These demigods were conceived by one god or goddess, and one mortal. Though these people were still mortal, they had godlike abilities, particularly in athletic prowess and strength. There are a very large number of these demigods, whereas the number of prophets in all three religions of today is at a significantly smaller number. These Greek demigods performed incredible feats, similar to prophets of modern religion. However, whereas Jesus turned water into wine in order to assist those in need, there is no overt religious duty for the demigods to fulfill. Accordingly, they often fought in wars or quested after highly desirable objects. The most famous of these demigods was Herakles, and his most famous quest was to fulfill the 12 labors of Herakles. Because Herakles had fulfilled a great number of feats prior to this event, his fame was well known. He had a total of 6 sons, whom, in a fury driven rage precipitated by Hera, he slew. As soon as the rage wore off, Herakles could not deal with his sins and sought atonement for them. He went to an Oracle, which has the ability to cleanse sins if one follows what is said to do of them. This concept is similar to the Christian concept of praying for forgiveness of all sins. He was told to serve King Eurystheus for 12 years, and do whatever labors the king so desired. By following through with this, Herakles would be granted immortality. King Eurystheus forced Herakles to do a total of 10 tasks, however after Herakles was done, Eurystheus decided that two of the tasks were accomplished by cheating, and accordingly made Herakles complete two more. After those two tasks were accomplished, Zeus granted Herakles immortality. As one can see from this, the concept of demigod and prophet vary not only in title, but also in style. Demigods were not created by gods in order to gain followers, but rather just a fulfillment of desires, and to prove to mortals the strength of the gods, even if the demigod was only half of one.

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### Purpose of Worship

One of the defining aspects of the Ancient Grecian religion was that the gods and goddesses were meant to be feared. Though the concept of fear of the higher power is somewhat present in modern religion, it is far more subdued, and is certainly not the main point of worship. For the Grecians, on the other hand, the almost sole purpose of worshipping was to honor and respect the gods, and they often sacrificed parts of their meals to the gods in order to ensure that they would not be upset or perturbed. This concept of sacrificing for safety is not present in today's religions, due to the reasoning behind making a sacrifice, for example Ramadan. The purpose of Ramadan, during which worshipers of Islam fast from sunrise to sunset for a month, is to obtain greater contact with Allah, not to avoid smiting by him. In regards to Greek mythology, one of the more famous tales proving that one must always honor the gods to avoid severe punishment comes in the tale of Arachne. Arachne was an extremely talented mortal, who could weave better than any mortal ever was able to. However, this talent made Arachne quite cocky, and she openly refused to attribute, even partially, her success to the Greek goddess Athena, the goddess of, among many other things, crafts. Athena became so infuriated as to challenge Arachne to a weaving challenge. As both weaved incredible images, Athena realized that both works were truly flawless. However, she was still enraged, and tore through Arachne's loom and touched her on the forehead so as to make her feel extreme guilt. Arachne did indeed feel the guilt, so much so that she hung herself. Athena then somewhat softened her heart, and turned Arachne's dead body into a spider. This story is a perfect example of just how dangerous it is for one to question the power and authority of the gods, and that it is far wiser for one to admit humility, and praise the gods for the talents

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they gave, lest they might punish one for not doing so. For the Grecians, sacrificing and rituals were more so ancient traditions that were followed to keep in favor of the gods, rather than to gain access to heaven, which is a concept shared by all three current religions. In the current religions, one is meant to pray and live an honorable life, in order to gain access to heaven, rather than to go to hell. The belief currently held, is that heaven is a place that literally defines perfection, whereas hell is the embodiment of eternal suffering and torment. Heaven is associated with being high up, whereas for the Grecians, that was Mount Olympus where only the gods could live. Only those who were of low moral standard or nonbelievers would be sent to hell, which is associated with being underneath the Earth. In the case of the Greeks, the underworld, also underneath the Earth, was where all of the dead went, regardless of the lifestyle they led. However, there is still the similarity amongst both the Ancient Greek religion and the modern religion. In both situations, the concept of judgment after death is present. For the modern religions one either is sent to heaven or hell after being judged, and for the Grecians, one is either sent to the Field of Asphodel if one was deemed to be a neutral soul, to Tartarus if one is deemed evil, or, finally, Elysium if one was considered to be considered a positive or good soul. With the exception of the addition of a neutral zone, and location, the concepts are exceedingly similar.

## The Final Answer

After all the analysis of the differences and similarities of Greek mythology and the three Abrahamic religions, it can be determined why Greek mythology is not considered a religion in modern society. When comparing the religions, it is apparent that they all share



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common traits, but Greek mythology has slightly altered views. However, it is not because of the differences in beliefs, but rather that it is not practiced by a wide enough portion of the population. Because of this, no one respects it as an acceptable religion, but rather views it as entirely fictional. There is great irony in this, however, because all religions are founded upon beliefs rather than hard facts. Thus, the sole reason that Greek mythology is not accepted today, is based on the fact that it is not a belief held by a large portion of the world population.<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusion

When looking at the Islamic, Christian, and Jewish faiths in comparison to the Ancient Grecian religion relying mainly on mythology, one at first finds the comparison almost solely relying on contrasts with the only similarity being that they are or once were religions. And though it is very true indeed that the comparisons have very few exact similarities, the bones behind the body of the religions are fundamentally the same, with a creation theory, writings on the religion, the belief of a higher power, having those with divine powers on Earth, and a place to be sent after life on Earth is complete. Within each of these concepts, or bones, the tissues and cells are highly differentiated, with few similarities, for the Greek religion and modern religions are indeed very different. By examining the similarities and differences of the old and current, one can see that great changes occur over time, while at the same time almost nothing has changed at all.

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