

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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Themes in Aeschylus

## Religion

**Preface.** Religion, for the ancient Greeks, was a kind of action which took place in relation to the gods. In Hellenic polytheism, unlike the monotheistic 'religions' of the Abrahamic tradition, this relation which joined mortals to the gods was fluid--the human interacting with transcendent forces, as the Suppliants beseech mercy from the gods, Orestes comes on as a living prayer for sanity and moral order, begs for stability, or Prometheus hangs in there in an act of defiance which is also an act of definition tossed in the face of Zeus. Nothing in this interactive polytheism corresponds closely to the adoration posture of the Jew, Muslim, or Christian, facing the overwhelming presence of his/her creator, and beginning every day on his knees with static praise.

**Prometheus Bound.** The elusive and tentative point made above, about the inherent dynamism of the polytheistic cultural event, pervades the interrelation and interaction of Zeus the Father God with Prometheus, whose name means 'the one with foresight,' and who has, over and above any power Zeus has, the knowledge of 'the one who will overcome and replace Zeus.' It is this knowledge which keeps Zeus, no friend of mankind, from simply destroying Prometheus against his rock, rather than torturing him by means of an eagle, or by dispensing a carnival of tortured figures, reminding Prometheus that he is on the losing side. The secret that Prometheus retains keeps Zeus within the dialogical relation of the divine with the mortal. Prometheus is protected by the ongoing personal conversation with Zeus which he is.

**Eumenides** The psychotic horror of his punishment keeps Orestes in the locked grip of divine justice. In this play we first see the matricide at the temple of Apollo in Delphi, surrounded by the sleeping Furies, who need but a moment's reawakening, to render Orestes once again the desperate victim of divine retribution. This maddening awakability of the Furies keeps Orestes unnerved and shelterless until he makes his way to Athena's law court in Athens, where his trial for matricide takes place. The audience is to this point breathlessly caught up in the madness that punishes Orestes, but at the moment in court when a tie vote blocks the fate of the killer, we are introduced to divine law, Zeus, in its guise as mediator rather than punisher. This interposition of moral sufferer, Orestes, with father and creator, renders the religious transaction of the play incendiary. As happens, at enlightening moments of the God-human transaction in ancient religion, mortals' purview finds itself substantially elevated. Where the law had functioned as a tool of order, and even of oppression, it now liberates, a model of the way in which mercy can serve as a vehicle of understanding and knowledge.

**Suppliants.** The subtext of the *Suppliants* suggests that this play too, like the *Eumenides*, deals with a development within law, and that the development is part of the mutual development of social morality and religious sensibility. On the face of it, the law under which the Egyptians claimed the marriage rights to the daughters of Danaus were in this play shown to be primitive, needing to be superseded by the new Athenian law, which was vastly more civilized than the Egyptian, and which stipulated that widows, such as the suppliants in this play, were required to marry a brother or cousin of their deceased husband, thus keeping the family intact, and property within the family. The *Suppliants*, then, would like the *Eumenides* culminate in promoting a civilizing motif, while at the same time, aligning civilization with the religious, highlighting the origins of an important religious festival, the Thesmophoria, which according to Herodotus was brought by the daughters of Danaus from Egypt to Greece.