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# “Religious history in the making”

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JÖRG RÜPKE, translated by David M. B. Richardson, *PANTHEON. A NEW HISTORY OF ROMAN RELIGION* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 2018). Pp. xv + 551, ills. 64. ISBN 978-0-691-15683-5. \$39.95.

The dust jacket of this English-language translation of J. Rüpke’s new history of Roman religion, also entitled *Pantheon* (Munich 2016), captures the perspective of a viewer gazing up from the floor of the Hadrianic temple through the circular oculus in the coffered ceiling to a flight of birds on the wing against an azure sky. Tropes about books and covers notwithstanding, the image marks an auspicious opening to a work that is more about re-thinking our approach to the study of ancient religion than it is a systematic introduction to the structures and practices that have traditionally formed the focus of the subject. Behind the dust jacket one discovers that the sky is not cloud-free, and beneath the cover the book is not without faults, but the image captures the challenge of trying to comprehend a complete picture of a phenomenon as complex as religion through a window that allows us to see only part of the evidence.<sup>1</sup>

No one has done more than Rüpke over the past quarter-century to transform the study of Roman religion from an antiquarian pursuit of specialists to a vibrant field at the heart of the cultural and material ‘turn’ in ancient Mediterranean studies. The focus of Rüpke’s interest has always centered on the heterogenous nature of the practices conventionally grouped under the heading of “religions of the Roman empire” and on analytical methodologies derived from the social sciences. Wide reading and restless dissatisfaction with a division between traditional antiquarian approaches to the subject and the modern study of world religions are the hallmarks of his prolific output over the past three decades. Traces of a simmering discontent with the existing scholarship were evident already in his Tübingen doctoral dissertation on the religious construction of war in classical Rome, completed during the momentous year (1989-90) of German re-unification, when he fulfilled his military service at the Office of Military Historical Research, in part by compiling a massive data-base of sources and bibliography on Roman religion.<sup>2</sup> Soon after came a brief but incisive monograph on the last major work of the brilliant German philologist Eduard Norden, composed during the increasingly stifling intellectual climate in Germany of the 1930s and published at the end of that decade (1939);<sup>3</sup> next (1995) came a large *Habilitationschrift* on the Roman calendar in its cultural context, which uneasily combined learned, often insightful, if more or less conventional, analysis of the epigraphic and literary sources with dense sociological theory applied unsparingly and unrelieved by aids for the uninitiated.<sup>4</sup> Shortly thereafter a cluster of more clearly articulated dissatisfactions began to emerge,<sup>5</sup> which soon coalesced into a set of challenges to the *status quo* that inspired the

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1 The subtitle of the original German edition misleadingly characterized the work as a “history of ancient religions” (*Geschichte der antiken Religionen*); the English version more accurately describes its focus, but neither subtitle fully captures the ambitious aim enjoined by the publishers that the book serve “both as a narrative of religious changes and as an examination of the mechanisms of religion in antiquity in general” (xv).

2 *Domi militiae: die religiöse Konstruktion des Krieges in Rom* (Stuttgart 1990).

3 *Römische Religion bei Eduard Norden: die “Altrömischen Priesterbücher” im wissenschaftlichen Kontext der dreissiger Jahre* (Marburg 1993).

4 *Kalender und Öffentlichkeit: die Geschichte der Repräsentation und religiösen Qualifikation von Zeit in Rom* (Berlin 1995). Reviewers balked at the language and approach: e.g., M. Clauss, *Numen* 43 (1996) 113: “an abstract vocabulary far away from reality or a mere jingle of words”; J. Linderski, *CJ* 83 (1998) 464: “a miscarriage of a mésalliance between sociology and antiquarianism”; cf. P. Herz, *Gnomon* 71 (1999) 525.

5 Notably in Rüpke’s contribution to a conference volume of 1997, in which he critically reviewed the history of scholarship on Roman religion, found it generally wanting, and called for a re-opening of the subject: “Römische Religion und ‘Reichsreligion’,” in H. Cancik and J. Rüpke (edd.), *Römische Reichsreligion und Provinzialreligion* (Tübingen 1997) 3-23.

formulation of a 5-year project (2012-17) at the University of Erfurt, eventually co-directed with R. Raja; the goal was to rethink the conceptualization of the religious world of the ancient Mediterranean from c.150 B.C. to A.D. 300.<sup>6</sup>

### “Lived Ancient Religion” (LAR)

Framed around the concept of “Lived Ancient Religion”, the project challenged three underlying, if unspoken, premises of the traditional focus on civic cult, festivals and priests:

- that the influence of “religion” on the lives of inhabitants of the empire was more or less equal and constant throughout the classical period (“the ‘*homo religiosus*’ fallacy”);
- that collective institutionalized practices constitute the proper focus of the subject (what we might call the “civic compromise fallacy”); and
- that Judaism and Christianity existed in wholly different worlds from classical Roman religion and therefore have no place in the study of it (“the Judeo-Christian exceptionalism fallacy”?).<sup>7</sup>

The last and most pernicious is in origin less a premise than a consequence of a disciplinary division of labor that originated in the neo-humanism of the late 18th c. and has dominated and divided study of the religious history of the Roman empire ever since. Together, the three interconnected fallacies have increasingly segregated the study of Roman religion (and ancient Mediterranean religion generally) from the mainstream of the study of religions worldwide, where many of the conceptual categories that still govern classical approaches to the subject have been abandoned.

The explicit aim of the LAR project was to reverse this trend by considering the subject anew with analytical tools and approaches drawn from the social sciences. Under this new perspective, concepts such as “gods” and “priests” are replaced by “human” and “super-human” agents or actors; “cults” and “festivals” are approached as communicative strategies and are seen through the lens of mediality. The principles of selection, appropriation and competition are important, as are the ideas of contingency and agency, but the key component of the idea of “religion in the making” that above all expresses the guiding impulse of the LAR Project is the process of ongoing construction and reconstruction by individual actors.<sup>8</sup> The rôle of the individual is central. Indeed, the interests of the LAR project naturally intertwined with those of an existing research group within the Max Weber Centre investigating how processes of individualization have shaped religious identities historically across the globe.<sup>9</sup> Rüpke’s explorations

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6 Hosted by the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt and originally financed by the European Research Council, the project “Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning ‘Cults’ and ‘Polis Religion’” eventually became implicated with a long-standing research group on “Religious Individualization in Historical Perspective” funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft: see infra n.9. I am grateful to Richard Gordon for helpful background information about the two projects and for other useful comments.

7 The aims and early results of the LAR Project were reviewed by J. Albrecht *et al.*, “Religion in the making: the Lived Ancient Religion approach,” *Religion* 48 (2018) 568-93 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2018.1450305>). The final publication of the group, emanating from a final conference attended by previous participants, has just appeared: V. Gasparini *et al.* (edd.), *Lived Religion in the ancient Mediterranean world. Approaching religious transformations from archaeology, history and classics* (Berlin 2020). For the concept of the “civic compromise”, see A. Bendlin, “Looking beyond the civic compromise: religious pluralism in Late Republican Rome,” in E. Bispham and C. Smith (edd.), *Religion in Archaic and Republican Rome and Italy* (Edinburgh 2000) 115-35, which anticipates Rüpke’s argument for viewing the religious “economy” of Rome as a competitive marketplace of consumers and providers.

8 The phrase “religion in the making” is taken from the title of the Lowell Lectures of A. N. Whitehead, published in 1926, which questioned the stability of religious dogma. Rüpke’s borrowing emphasizes the dynamic quality of “religion”: see his “Ancient Lived Religion and the history of religion in the Roman Empire,” in M. Vinzent and A. Brent (edd.), *Studia Patristica* 74 (2016) 1–20; Albrecht *et al.* *ibid.* 569-70.

9 The aims of this research group, initiated in 2008, are usefully summarized by M. Fuchs and J. Rüp-

of “religion in the making” with these projects over the past two decades, represented in more than 85 of his publications listed in the bibliography, inform this new narrative history of Roman religion and, more explicitly, the narrative of religious change over the first four centuries of the empire that always represented a long-term goal of the LAR project. In this sense, they represent “religious history in the making”, of which the ambitious book under review, presented in a manner accessible to non-specialists, constitutes a first offering for general consumption. It is bound to be read by many — by anyone broadly interested in the culture of the ancient Romans or in ancient Mediterranean religion generally, even perhaps by some wholly uninterested in classical antiquity — since it promises to answer a question of far larger import than even its subtitle portends: “How was a world well beyond the understanding of most of us transformed into a world very like our own, at least in one particular?”<sup>10</sup> The particular, of course, is “religion” and the answer to that question, we are told, is “no straightforward story”. The question here is: How well does the book succeed in telling it? or, How compelling is this new narrative and to what extent does it stand to replace our traditional conceptions and understanding of the subject?

### Pantheon

First, let us be clear what the book is not. It is not an introduction to Roman religion, traditional or otherwise — nor does it claim to be; nor is this a book for beginners or the mythical “general” reader, despite the accessible manner in which it is presented and translated. A basic knowledge of classical history and of Mediterranean cultural practices is presumed, and the book bristles with the names of ancient authors and political or religious figures whose identities and general stories are taken to be familiar. Nor does the book fully meet the requirements of a traditional scholarly monograph with systematically documented argumentation and critical assessment of earlier views. One senses that the competing aims of investigating the mechanisms of religion in antiquity in general, writing a compelling narrative of historical change, and advancing a novel argument in places outmatched the goal of accommodating the general reader. Sometimes, Rüpke seems to be conversing with students of the subject already familiar with its well-studied texts and monuments: Pompey’s temple to Venus Victrix in the Campus Martius, for example, is alluded to in passing but never explained (200: “even theater-temples such as Pompey had built”); or in a brief aside in the Epilogue, the reader is advised to “remember the Mani Codex from Cologne” (389), but no previous mention of that document has been made.

The documentary apparatus of the book is equally puzzling. The bibliography is broad and impressively learned, comprising some 94 pages and including 87 of Rüpke’s sole publications, but it is also eclectic and idiosyncratic, omitting altogether names such as F. Cumont, G. Dumézil and A. D. Nock (G. Wissowa’s classic *Religion und Kultus der Römer* is listed but is cited rarely) and including numerous short notes on specific topics. In no sense does it represent a systematic reference bibliography of Roman religion or provide a comprehensive guide to the subject, although one fears that its sheer bulk may mislead the innocent into taking it that way. The notes comprise a mere 46 pages, less than half the length of the Bibliography; in many cases they consist simply of a bare citation of an ancient or modern source and at times are laconic to the point of obscurity. There is a cost to this sort of scholarship. Rüpke is a big thinker, with wide erudition and a restless intellectual drive — qualities evident throughout his writing and on ample display here. At times, however, one senses in the cursory documentation an impatience with the details of a discussion or the traditions of scholarship behind it, coupled perhaps with a reluctance to engage with arguments and interpretations deemed irrelevant. Thus one finds in the references and bibliography a preference for the recent and

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ke, *Religion* 45 (2015) 323-29 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2015.1041795>). The final publication of the project is M. Fuchs *et al.* (edd.), *Religious individualisation: historical dimensions and comparative perspectives* (Berlin 2019).

10 Rüpke, *Pantheon*, 1. The transformation, succinctly characterized, is one from rituals practiced to religions to which one belonged; cf. 385.

theoretical rather than, in many cases, older, more authoritative (or at any rate more widely accepted) works. There are exceptions, to be sure (e.g., 401 n.60 on *lustratio*; 402 n.89, on tomb-paintings; 418 n.167 on *lares*), but their rarity and irregular occurrence tend to prove the rule. The book is copiously but not well illustrated; 64 black-and-white images of indifferent quality and plans of largely well-known sites and objects which, minimally captioned, do little to enhance or to advance the argument (a notable exception is the juxtaposition of the bronze model of a liver from Piacenza [fig. 27] with a similar specimen from Sippar, Iraq, inscribed in cuneiform lettering [fig. 28], to illustrate commonalities in the divinatory practice of hepatoscopy). The index is prefaced by a curious statement that “the indexed practices, cognitions, and roles always concern/include both female and male agents as well as their agency”.

Let us assume as the best-suited reader, then, a reasonably well-informed, open-minded student of the subject willing to forego a thoroughly documented argument in favor of an innovative approach to resolving a central question about religious change during the first centuries of the present era.<sup>11</sup> What is new here for them?

### Approach and method

On first inspection, the approach does not seem radically different. Like other introductions to Roman religion, Rüpke’s narrative proceeds chronologically, breaking down its subject thematically according to the conventional political divisions of the Roman era.<sup>12</sup> In keeping with current trends in Roman historiography, the periods of development and change more often than not overlap, and divisions among them are not so sharply drawn, but the basic structural divisions of Roman history (Regal period, Republic, Early Empire, Late Antiquity) survive the theoretical overhaul intact. Thus an introductory chapter (I) on “A history of Mediterranean religion” that outlines the basic conceptual apparatus and establishes key parameters of the investigation precedes a chapter (II) on the indigenous traditions of Iron Age Italy (9th-7th c.), and is followed by chapters (III) on the Regal (7th-5th c.) and (IV-VI) Republican (5th-1st c. B.C.) periods. At the center of the book, as the fulcrum of the narrative, comes a chapter (VII) on “The redoubling of religion in the Augustan saddle period” (c.50 B.C. to 50 A.D.), and then the meat and potatoes, as it were (of both the LAR project and the book): four chapters (VIII-XI) covering the first three centuries, on “Lived Religion” (1st-2nd c. A.D.), “New gods” (1st c. B.C. to 2nd c. A.D.), “Experts and providers” (1st-3rd c.), and “Notional and real communities” (1st-3rd c.). A final chapter (XII) on “Demarcations and modes of community” during a transitional period of the late 3rd to mid-4th c. and a brief Epilogue conclude the volume.

“Religion” means different things to different people and historically has meant different things in different contexts. The definition Rüpke adopts here, in accordance with his avowed

11 This is perhaps the place to note the overtly Christianizing cast of the narrative, evident from the outset (4, 391 n.2) in the assertively defended use of “B.C./A.D.” to define the eras “before and after the birth of Christ”. The use of the title is pointed.

12 The work with which it is bound to be compared, and which often represents a silent foil for its arguments, is the now-classic *Religions of Rome* by M. Beard, J. North and S. Price (Cambridge 1998), which at the time of its publication offered a radically new approach to the topic that challenged long-standing paradigms and stirred controversy about how to study the subject: see the (mostly critical) review by J. Linderski at *JRA* 13 (2000) 453-63, reprinted with addenda in his *Roman questions II. Selected papers* (Stuttgart 2007) 501-14. Both surveys span about 1100 years of religious history, with Rüpke’s both beginning and ending a century earlier (9th c. B.C. to 4th c. A.D.) than *Religions of Rome’s* (8th c. B.C. to 5th c. A.D.). The slightly later cast of the latter’s survey allows the authors to trace the conventional Christian *versus* “pagan” controversy through to the age of Augustine and the dawn of a new religious era. Rüpke’s aims are different, and his endpoint serves his goal of leaving the outcome of the competition uncertain so as to focus on the moment when, in his view, the rules of the game fundamentally changed. Other introductory textbooks on Roman religion, such as J. Scheid’s *Introduction to Roman religion* (2003; French original 1998), even when they eschew a chronological organization, essentially focus on civic theology and the structures and rituals of the Roman Republic.

starting-point of lived ancient religion and its underlying premises, is situational, being grounded in interpersonal communication between human and super-human (here “superior”) actors (7). Private thoughts about the afterlife, silent prayer, unspoken belief in a concept of divinity — these do not for him count as religion, since “religion consists primarily in communication” (8). Central to this conception of religion as a mode of communication is an idea of religious agency as a sort of sliding scale along which individuals situate themselves in relation to each other and to superior actors whose identity or existence is ambiguous but whose function, when invoked, is to enable human actors to expand their capabilities to act (11-13). In effect, communication between at least two humans is required, since religion, for Rüpke, cannot exist without witnessing.<sup>13</sup> Since contemporary witnesses of Roman religion are not available, where written texts are lacking, a basic heuristic finds recourse in material evidence, which is taken as proxy testimony to religious intent. A basic challenge, both for Rüpke and for any approach that relies heavily or exclusively on this sort of indirect testimony, is to avoid succumbing to the fallacy that the medium *is* the message and that only ideas that can be documented are real. A secondary challenge (not unrelated) is to avoid allowing the material evidence to dictate the terms of the discussion. These challenges Rüpke does not so much evade as embrace, doubling down on the conviction that the history of Roman religion (“telling the story”, “my narrative” [1-2, 23]; “our narrative” [386]) is best conveyed through analysis of developments in media — from terracotta votives to temples and architectural monuments, inscriptions, engraved calendars, coins, votive objects, amulets and the like.<sup>14</sup>

As a rhetorical strategy, focusing on material culture has obvious appeal — the evidence is visible and physical, therefore “real” — but as a methodology it has significant drawbacks, not least the risk of circularity. Rüpke is repeatedly explicit (e.g., 87) about the need for caution in attributing motivations and intentions to actors whose inner thoughts we cannot access, but, especially in the early chapters (II-IV), communicative intent is often presumed or asserted rather than demonstrated in any meaningful way: deposits in pits are regularly construed as “means of communicating” (84); coroplastic statuary and bronze figurines set up in “cult locations” are seen “in the context of religious communication” (84); traces of veils covering the backs of clay heads provide “clear evidence that the ordinary people who left the heads were in fact engaged in religious communication” (86). None of this is self-evident. Elsewhere, exclusive reliance on archaeological evidence leads to one-sided and potentially over-optimistic speculation: thus, stabilization of iconographic representation equates to “stabilization of identity” (74). *À propos* of the Roman adoption in the 6th c. B.C. of terracotta acroteria modeled by craftsmen from Veii, the medium limits the range of expression and thus, it is implied, the possibilities for religious action and communication: “patrons were dependent on the patterns offered by their suppliers” (77).

The risk of circularity is apparent in the discussion of the transition from the Bronze to the Iron Age, which focuses on social differentiation and urbanization, “processes that have left their traces in the archaeological record” (30), and dismisses evidence, even comparative

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13 “In short, religious activity is present when and where ... at least one human individual includes such actors in his or her communication with other humans” (7); “much of communication with the divine ... is also a message to the actor’s fellow humans” (15). In this, Rüpke’s concept of religion has much in common with Italian new-realist philosopher M. Ferraris’ insistence on the importance of witnessing for the recording of social acts: *Documentality. Why it is necessary to leave traces* (transl. R. Davies; New York 2013) 1-6.

14 Thus, e.g., of the Augustan ‘saddle’ era, “this lengthy period ... was central to the media presence of religion” (202), and “this redoubling [commemorating religious events in durable monuments] changed the character of religious communication in and beyond Rome” (203). Corpses, in the mourning ritual, become “a medium for the projection of [the] message” of individual or familial status (235-36). Application of this definition, however, is not always consistent; in places, it is clear that Rüpke is thinking of religion in the traditional ways the term has been used of the Greek and Roman forms (involving gods, civic priests, sacrifice, etc.); in others, it is unclear what exactly is meant (e.g., in a confusing section on “religion” (in quotes) at the end of chapt. VI [177-82]).

evidence, that “leaves no archaeologically discernible traces” and therefore “cannot be proven” (38). This basic methodological premise informs the discussion throughout and is upheld to the end, when the validity of “supposedly religious conflicts and violence in the texts of this period” [3rd-4th c.] is deemed suspect because “traces ... are not easy to confirm in the archaeological record” (385). The procedure is open to question when the goal is to identify behavior as “religious”, since claims for the “religiosity” of archaeologically discernible behaviors — e.g., the production of “princely tombs” (32) and grave deposits (33), or the identification of “cult locations” — often rest solely on traditional inferences and suppositions that cannot be independently verified (hence the reliance on assertive declarations — “must have been” — and appropriately hedged verbs of “seeming”).<sup>15</sup> At the end of his imaginative reconstruction of the experiences of a fictive Bronze Age woman named Rhea, Rüpke rhetorically asks (27): “What is it about these features [signs of behavior different from a norm] that makes them religious?”, before replying that “the question is falsely posed” and that “archaeological discourse has taught us ... that objects give rise to experience” (28). This methodological manœuvre is crucial to Rüpke’s argument.

Rüpke has a very clear idea of the way religion works, and how communicative processes inform it, but he is less interested in arguing or convincing a reader of his vision than in laying out the hypothesis in full and complex detail. Thus, the practice of erecting terracotta heads inspired anatomic ex-votos through “a productive misapprehension” of the principle of synecdoche (*pars pro toto*) “of the kind common in learning processes that depend on observation-led imitation, the kind of imitation that is characteristic of religious communication in general” (88). Nothing in this reconstruction of a cognitive development constrained by material expression is inherently implausible, but neither is it more plausible than many other possible hypotheses. For all the theoretical positioning, a consistent methodology or approach to the evidence is difficult to articulate:<sup>16</sup> two pages of “methodological considerations” on the religion of the Early Iron Age gesture toward entanglement theory and conclude with the proposition that (27-28):

if under normal circumstances we perceive objects as special only by virtue of their extraordinary forms or materials ... we must nevertheless assume that individuation, or the subjectification of the individual, always occurred in specific contexts, in accord with a particular individual’s acquired degree of sensibility in dealing with objects. In this way, ancient religion too is capable of being constructed as ‘lived religion’.

Three footnotes refer us to studies by Rüpke and others for the concepts of “individuation”, “acquired sensibility to objects” and “lived religion”, and for basic introductions to post-processual archaeology (Cazzella and Recchia), “entanglement” (Hodder), and actor-network theory (Latour), but it is difficult to see what even Rüpke’s ideal reader will make of this particular methodological consideration in the absence of further guidance.

### Definitions and concepts

Readers willing to go along with Rüpke’s premises will need to accept — along with his functional conception of religion as communication and a readiness to identify communicative intent in a wide range of behaviors and material acts — a systematic and purposeful use of circumlocutions and abstract terminology to problematize our traditional conceptions, or to remind us of what material culture represents. Thus “gods” and “the dead” become “not indisputably (or indubitably) plausible actors” (e.g., 67, 103, 125); terms such as “temple” (64), “altar”, and “sacrifice” (68) are avoided as prejudicial in the evaluation of archaeological evidence for “religious infrastructure” of the 7th-5th c. B.C.; *mola salsa* becomes “a collective identity transportable in a casket or bag” (118); and so on. Rüpke is not insensitive to the sterility of these periphrases: “the reason I have persisted in using this clumsy expression [‘not

15 Long ago, A. D. Nock (*JBL* 73 [1954] 44) condemned a tendency to overinterpret enigmatic archaeological finds with the aphorism *omne ignotum pro sacro*.

16 Eclecticism is fundamental to the ‘LAR’ project: “‘LAR’ does not pretend to be either a distinctive methodology or a general theory of religion, but is an eclectic approach marked by a specific range of interests”: Albrecht *et al.* (*supra* n.7) 570.

indubitably plausible actor’]” (139) is precisely to remind us that “gods” represent only one class of the category, that, around much of the Mediterranean in antiquity, “gods, dead ancestors, demons, and the like were thought of and dealt with in much the same ways” (140).<sup>17</sup> The difficulty with such a broad definition — and with functionalist approaches to historical evidence in general — is that they tend to (and intend to) flatten distinctions and discrepancies in the data in order to arrive at widely applicable models for understanding behavioral phenomena. History, on the other hand, is by definition interested in specific contexts and change over time. A history of Roman religion that adopts as its definition of the concept a version intended to be timeless and universally applicable sets up obstacles for itself that can only be overcome by narrating, not a history of religion, but a history of manifestations of religion — that is, of communication. In America today, as any schoolchild can tell us, such a category of “not indisputably plausible superior actors” would naturally include beings such as the tooth-fairy, the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus. Indeed, the Romans too had such shadowy figures, whom Varro explained and Augustine (*Civ.D.* 6.9) ridiculed. The nuance of difference between “not indisputably plausible” and “arguably implausible” is a fine one, and we might reasonably ask whether it makes a difference for our understanding of religion in our own day or in that of the ancient Romans where we draw the line. If we can recognize that the “pantheon” of a modern American child is generally wider than that of an American adult, and that processes of education and acculturation tend to narrow rather than to expand the scope of the accepted and the acceptable, how do we apply this insight to the religious world of the Romans? Our own experience with “not indisputably plausible superior actors” leads us to believe that ontology somehow matters, but how? What are fair grounds for comparison, and to what extent do universalizing definitions apply transhistorically? These are among the interesting, worthwhile questions that Rüpke’s indisputably novel approach raises but does not fully answer.

### Writing and ritual

These methodological difficulties, as I see them, affect most seriously the early chapters of the book (II-IV), covering the period from the Iron Age down through the 3rd c. B.C., where Rüpke relegates to virtual obscurity the traditional project of integrating and reconciling the literary and archeological traditions in order to rely almost exclusively on material evidence.<sup>18</sup> Through chapters V-VII, covering the Middle and Late Republic and Augustan periods (c.300 B.C. to A.D. 14) and the traditional topics and categories of “Roman state religion”, Rüpke’s definition and approach enable him to introduce writing about religion relatively late in the story (VI.1, “The textuality of ritual”, 158-63), as merely another ritual practice, one initially designed to “have the effect of stabilizing and homogenizing changes in practices” (159). This helps set the stage for representing both the theoretical and historical writings about religion of Late Republican authors such as Cicero and Varro (180-85) and, more strikingly, the later textual practices of early Christian communities (XI.1, “Textual communities”, 329-39) as further developments in a constantly evolving system of religious communication. The reader is not

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17 This functionalist definition recalls J. Scheid’s pithy characterization of Roman sacrifice as the central rite of Roman religion, “quand faire, c’est croire” — a proposition that Rüpke wishes to refute — and is open to some of the same criticisms: see *Quand faire, c’est croire. Les rites sacrificiels des Romains* (Paris 2005), with C. Ando, “Evidence and orthopraxy,” *JRS* 99 (2009) 171-81.

18 At times, one keenly senses this loss, as, for example, in the cursory treatment of the story of the augur Attus Navius (115; cf. *Religions of Rome*, vol. 1, 23-24; vol. 2, 167 [7.1.a; cf. b, c]) or the absence of any mention of Romulus’ legendary vow and temple to Jupiter Stator (see F. Coarelli in *LTUR* III, 155-57, *s.v.*), which might have enhanced the discussion of the Temple of Castor and Pollux on the Forum (79; cf. 94). Both stories illuminate Roman conceptions of augural power and private vows, issues that Rüpke addresses briefly. For useful overviews of the ‘material turn’ in the study of religion and ritual in recent decades, see T. Insoll (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the archaeology of ritual and religion* (Oxford 2011), with separate chapters on many of the practices (monumentality, sacrifice, feasting) and themes (death, ritual, personhood and the body, ideology, gender, archaeologies of the senses, syncretism and religious fusion) surveyed by Rüpke for Rome.



immediately alerted to this purpose, but it lays the groundwork for the first of several minor revelations that transpire gradually over the last quarter of the book; the process, when it succeeds, engenders the experience of an epiphany and thereby enacts in the reader an aspect of its subject ("lived religion") in the marvelous way that only the best mystery-writing achieves. The icon at which Rüpke is tilting, of course, is the deeply entrenched orthodoxy according to which Christianity, as a "religion of the book", represented a radical break from a "pagan" world centered on cult. With the production and consumption of texts recognized as ritual practice, the dichotomy vanishes, opening the way for a more contextualized understanding of how the early Christian community evolved. This will come at the end.

Throughout chapters V-IX, focus is on the central period of Roman history (2nd c. B.C. to 2nd c. A.D.) and the main highlights of the subject as traditionally cast: civic priests, monumental building programs, foreign gods, imperial cult, "mystery" religions, household religion, cult of the dead, and so on. Rüpke's treatment of these subjects is selective and to some extent idiosyncratic in what it chooses to emphasize, but is nonetheless compelling for that.<sup>19</sup> He is shaping an argument rather than presenting a systematic overview. Readers expecting the latter should look elsewhere; those open to the former will find sections of insightful observation and argument nestled within a general survey of Roman social and cultural behavior designed mainly to demonstrate the myriad ways in which "religion" permeated the competitive culture of elite Romans of the Republic and how "lived religion" shaped the identities of individual Romans of the Early Empire around their homes and neighborhoods. In this he largely succeeds, but not without the loss of much contextualization, some of it needed.

"Lived religion", as it emerges more clearly in these pages, amounts to "performed religion", whether or not in material form. Thus, during the 4th and 3rd c. B.C., "although the construction of temples remained a field of activity, the games were more important" (137). The building of stone theaters and the use of seating divisions (architecture) to segregate society (1st c. B.C.), the rise of popular entertainments (chariot racing) and solo performers (mimes) (1st-3rd c. A.D.), and the so-called circus factions that delineated the political loyalties of city-dwellers in late antiquity are then characterized as "among the most momentous [developments] in Rome's religious history", even though "religious communication did not determine the substance of these productions" (139). Writing practices, similarly, since they often instantiate religious practice, therefore come in for repeated discussion, but it is not always clear that "religious communication", even as broadly defined here, is more than tangentially involved. The writers of funerary epitaphs, for example, are said to have "moved into a specifically religious mode of communication" in self-representation or in projecting the identity of another (242), simply by creating a document concerning the dead. Possibly, but this hypothesis ignores a large literature about who is addressed in epitaphs and much explicit testimony by epitaphs themselves denying any intent to communicate with the dead.<sup>20</sup> Inscriptions naturally form an important source of information about religious communication in antiquity, but one misses here any discussion of the nexus of interpretative challenges involving levels and types of ancient literacy, the contours of the rise and fall of the epigraphic habit (not only in aggregate but for specific types of text), and the pitfalls of epigraphic bias.

Concerning types and rates of literacy and a propensity to leave inscribed monuments, one senses some inconsistency and uncertainty about norms. So, for example, unpainted, uninscribed coroplastic dedications of the 5th c. B.C. suggest "customers with limited purchasing power and a deficient level of literacy" (86), whereas "public literacy" is assumed in a general population of the Early Empire and is said (294) to have enabled a precision in the formation

19 In selecting illustrative examples, Rüpke appeals regularly and effectively to his detailed knowledge of the inscribed *fasti* and calendar (101-3, 143, 150, 159, 161, 176-77, 190, 198, 203-7, 288) and to the grove (*lucus*) of the Dea Dia where the Arval Brethren recorded their rites (177, 187, 189, 203, 283, 297-98). Among classical literary sources, besides Cicero and Varro (inevitably), Rüpke favors some more surprising personal choices, notably Ovid and "the historian" (!) Valerius Maximus (287).

20 See, e.g., A. Brelich, *Aspetti della morte nelle iscrizioni sepolcrali dell'Impero romano* (Budapest 1937); R. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin epitaphs* (Urbana, IL 1942) 78-82.

of gods’ names that the vagueness and variability of oral invocation could not easily achieve. Finally, continuous writing (without word breaks) is imagined to be a significant impediment to readers in the 2nd and 3rd c. “as it took years of experience to read even the simplest of texts” (330). Without qualification, none of these conclusions is warranted; collectively they add up to an improbable view of literacy rates and types across more than half a millennium of Roman culture. Greater contextualization is necessary.

**“The devil made me do it!”**

Offsetting these perceived weaknesses in the argument are many genuine strengths, passages of insightful analysis presented in a manner suitable for the least experienced readers and offering heady brew for even the most saturated experts. Appropriately, Rüpke is acute on the concept of the pantheon, and how one entered it. In summarizing the process that first led to the formation of the idea during the last two centuries of the Republic, Rüpke cuts through antiquarian obfuscation (ancient and modern) to lay bare the sociological truth: “human beings used religious action as a special form of problem-solving ... by resorting to a plethora of addressees” among a motley assemblage of deities, ranging from those embodying social values, such as Concordia and Piety, to “foreign” gods and goddesses of healing, such as Asclepius and Isis (125):

this company was not the organized ‘pantheon’ of a ‘civic religion’ but the unsystematic consequence of individual decisions arrived at on the basis of what was known and what was acceptable at the level of one’s family, region, or intellect.

There, in a nutshell, is an explanation of the title of the book: “a vision of the entirety of the religious landscape” (290). Later, this useful formulation enables Rüpke to sidestep a mare’s nest in discussing the way in which divinized emperors (*divi*) were brought into the pantheon (272-74):

Themes such as ‘ruler worship’ or ‘imperial cult’ are of less concern to us than the means by which new addressees become protagonists in religious communication.

That is not all there is to be said on the subject, but that is all that need be said here.

Among other passages noteworthy for their insight or conceptual clarity, I may single out: Chapt. I.3 “Religious agency” (11-13), on agency as a process of problem-solving and the rôle of “special actors” in expanding the scope of human action: “the devil made me do it!” III.2 “Temples and altars” (64-73), on religious communication in the Archaic period, terminology for religious apparatus, and the non-importance in native traditions of animal sacrifice; IV.2 “Sacralization” (96-99), on practices of sacralization and strategies for deploying them; V.4 “Banquet culture” (130-36), especially 131-33 on the feast of Lentulus described by Macrobius (*Sat.* 3.13.10-12), its sumptuousness and careful chromatic presentation; VI.2, the section “Myth and the critique of myth” (166-72), a clear, instructive discussion that steers a fine line between the quagmire of theory and the desert of storytelling, emphasizing the function of myth in uniting communities; VIII.1 “Individuals in their relationship with the world” (212-16), especially 213-16 on “self-world relationships”; VIII.6 “Lived religion rather than domestic cult” (255-61), on why “lived religion” is a more useful conception than “domestic cult”, and how individualizing religious communication could be exported outside the home by practices such as graffiti-writing, the wearing of amulets, the use of lamps, and portable *arulae*.

**The past as prologue**

The final three chapters make clear, over the last 100 pages of the narrative, why viewing religion as communication and approaching the question of historical change through the prism of “lived religion” had been essential to the initial project “to tell the story of an upheaval epochal in its impact” that transformed “a world in which one practiced rituals” into “a world of religions to which one could belong” (1). Here, many of the decisions made earlier about coverage and approach are, if not justified, at least clarified and contextualized. The argument

becomes more focused; many of the threads previously left dangling are woven together; and Rüpke's vision of a complex multicultural world ripe for exploitation (conversion?) by the right group of religious actors begins to materialize. Here the narrative flows seamlessly, the argument building inexorably toward a conclusion that, in retrospect, seems natural and inevitable. This is Rüpke's great achievement: to have shown convincingly how the cultural practices of Romans of the Early Empire laid the foundations for the growth of a new way of life that would ultimately engulf and absorb their own.

He opens the final act of the drama (chapt. X) by moving again across the religious landscape of the first two centuries A.D., focusing this time not on the religion "lived" by ordinary Romans inside and outside the home (VIII) or on the new gods of the imperial pantheon (Isis and Serapis, the *Divi Augusti*) (IX), but on religious entrepreneurs, the "experts and providers" who purveyed religious options to the urban populace in a cosmopolitan world now increasingly crowded with choices. By extending the chronological frame through the 3rd c. A.D., Rüpke is able to introduce, among the assorted (male and female) seers, diviners, astrologers, "primitive intellectuals", magicians, sibyls, prophets and the like, the organized groups of Jewish "masters" (*rabbanim*) and Christian "overseers" (*episkopoi*) who for the first time tried to change and to control the channels of religious communication. Rüpke's practice of recursively covering in successive chapters some of the same chronological territory pays off in spades in this final quarter of the book, since it allows him, here finally, to tell his story without interruption. In this chapter, emphasis falls on the variety of options and the plurality of purveyors who flooded the religious marketplace of the Early Empire, effectively turning religion itself into a commodity.<sup>21</sup> In the last two substantive chapters, Rüpke shows how textual practices, especially the construction of biographical stories, enabled the formation of religious communities around shared narratives (XI), and how communities then made themselves into the centers of religion and religious communication (XII).

Throughout these richly argued chapters, Rüpke draws adroitly on classical Roman, Christian and Jewish authors and texts to weave a synthetic narrative that contextualizes the textual world of the Romans within that of Early Imperial Judaism (349-54) and Christianity (355-58), and *vice versa*, to the benefit of students of both. Romanists not already familiar with them will thus be introduced to figures such as Hermas (228, 311-12, 323, 370, 381), Hermes Trismegistus (334-36), Irenaeus (364), Iuvencus (380-81) and especially Marcion (355-56) and Hippolytus (365-69), and to literary works such as the New Testament canon and heresiological texts (329-31), the Pauline letters (334-55), *Acts* (335, 355), the Nag Hammadi archive (335-36) and the *First Epistle of Clement* (342).

The hero of Rüpke's story is Marcion, a shipowner from Sinope, who in the later years of Hadrian's reign (the 130s) traveled to Rome and, in his desire to separate his group of followers of Christ from other local sects of Jews, first accomplished the objective of founding a new religious network around a shared text narrating a model life of an apocalyptic visionary and teacher (355-56).<sup>22</sup> By tapping into the psycho-social power of biographical narrative to evoke empathy, Marcion, in Rüpke's telling, may have been the first to recognize and to exploit a literary form that (345)

by its clarity, capacity for extension, and flexibility ... permitted authors to impart religious knowledge in a way that facilitated an emotional identification with the life retold, thus easing the recipient's way to appropriating the values and lessons embodied in the texts.

21 See now also on this rich topic H. Wendt, *At the Temple Gates. The religion of freelance experts in the Roman empire* (Oxford 2016), especially on Paul's place within the group (146-89)

22 Rüpke here follows the controversial view of M. Vinzent, *Marcion and the dating of the Synoptic Gospels* (Leuven 2014) that Marcion "created the new literary genre of the Gospel" (277) by combining Jesus's sayings with a narrative of his life; he thus adopts "the increasingly mooted, even if still radical position of a second-century date for the canonical gospels and the Acts of the Apostles" (355). One need not accept Vinzent's arguments for the priority of Marcion's Gospel in order to recognize the attractiveness of regarding the cultural milieu of 2nd-c. Rome, rather than that of 1st-c. Palestine, as the crucible in which the core narrative of the new religion was formed.

The setting of this foundational textual event in Rome is no accident. Rome during the first three centuries of the present era was “the symbolic and intellectual center of the Roman Empire” (362), a cultural melting pot that provided a notional and actual *locus* for religiously oriented polemic. Insofar as the former gave rise to communities first aggregated in the latter, Rome too is central to Rüpke’s story of “the invention of Christianity” (350, 355-58).<sup>23</sup> This is where his new history of Roman religion ends, at the dawn of a new era, when “we may begin to use ‘our’ concept of religion” (385) to characterize the seismic shift in cultural perceptions that would soon open fault-lines across a newly divided world.

### *Envoi*

In A.D. 609, Pope Boniface IV rededicated the Pantheon, closed since 395, as the church of Santa Maria ad Martyres, a consecrated status it still retains. Shortly after Hadrian dedicated the structure that he had rebuilt from the version erected by Agrippa, Marcion and his followers arrived in Rome. The stories are linked through the building that stands today. The way we choose to view it depends upon our perspective, on how our lived experiences have shaped our understandings. To a Roman of Hadrian’s day, the book’s depiction of a flight of birds through the oculus might have been taken as an auspicious sign, a proof that augural science had efficacy and that *auspicia* (“bird-watchings”) were real. To a visitor of Boniface’s day or our own, the same sight might be taken as a divine blessing — doves of peace, perhaps, or messenger angels of the Lord. Neither view is verifiable; both are ‘correct’ within the worlds they inhabit. As Rüpke elegantly shows in this alternately frustrating and exciting, thought-provoking book, religious communication, now as then, is most clearly seen through the eye of the beholder.

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23 Characteristically, Rüpke’s evolving interests, in this case in religion in big cities like Rome, fueled by his involvement in another research group funded by the DFG at the Max Weber Centre (ongoing since 2017), have already resulted in a first book on the topic: *Urban religion. A historical approach to urban growth and religious change* (Berlin 2020).