Rituals or Beliefs? 'Religion' and the Religious Life of Rome

Andreas Bendlin

W. Mary Beard, John A. North, Simon R.F. Price, *Religions of Rome.* Volume 1: *A History.* Volume 2: *A Sourcebook*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xxiv + 454 pp. and xiv + 416 pp., illustrations and maps. ISBN 0521 3040 16 (v. 1), 0521 4501 52 (v. 2).

J.A. North, *Roman Religion*, Greece and Rome, New Surveys in the Classics No. 30, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000. 99 pp. ISSN 0017 3835, ISBN 019 922433 1.

For decades the religions of Graeco-Roman antiquity were subjected to academic marginalisation; during the last thirty years they have again moved centre-stage. Indeed, such is the shift of emphasis in Classical Studies that work on ancient religion has assumed proportions which would have astounded most scholars thirty years ago.

This shift of emphasis may be accounted for partly by the disenchantment with traditional modes of political history — a disenchantment which a new generation of scholars began to voice in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[1] In their search for new vistas apparently more in accord with the *Zeitgeist*, and challenged by the developments in such other academic disciplines as social history, sociology, anthropology and literary studies, these scholars began to absorb critical terms which signified realms beyond the scope of the merely political such as *culture* or *identity*; they rediscovered ritual as a symbolic system by means of which past and present societies expressed their cultural norms and values.[2]

In this intellectual climate, the revival of religious studies followed naturally. To be sure, classicists and anthropologists of the nineteenth and the

---

1 Cf. C. Conrad, '"Kultur" statt "Gesellschaft"? Die aktuelle Diskussion in der Geschichtswissenschaft', in S. Fröhlich (ed.), *Kultur — Ein interdisziplinäres Kolloquium zur Begrifflichkeit* (Halle 2000), 117-24.

2 The rediscovery of ritual studies in the 1960s is discussed by J.N. Bremmer, '"Religion", "ritual" and the opposition "sacred vs. profane". Notes towards a terminological "genealogy"', in F. Graf (ed.), *Ansichten griechischer Rituale*, (Stuttgart/Leipzig 1998), 9-32, at 22f.

first half of the twentieth century had always been attracted by the religions of the ancient world; but such was the disastrous impact of totalitarianism in the twentieth century that academics after the Second World War focussed rather on the working mechanisms of political systems. It required another paradigm shift before the next generation of classical scholars came to distance themselves from traditional political history and explore alternative means of expressing social, ethnic or cultural identities. Discovering the tenet of neo-functionalism (Talcott Parsons) and cultural anthropology (Bronislaw Malinowski; Clifford Geertz), namely ritual's integrative function in society, these classical scholars began to investigate religious ritual as one of the most powerful symbolic expressions of identity in the ancient world. It is not coincidental that systematic work on Greek and Roman religion over the last thirty years has predominantly moved in this ritualistic, or symbolistic, direction. Its recourse to the view, attributable to the late nineteenth century (W.R. Smith, J.G. Frazer, J.E. Harrison), that ritual was primary while myth and exegesis came second has resulted in studies with a decidedly ritualistic turn; by way of contrast, cognitive aspects of religious life have until quite lately received only marginal treatment.

Hence, Walter Burkert's *Griechische Religion der archaischen und klassischen Epoche* (Stuttgart 1977), translated into English as *Greek Religion. Archaic and Classical* (Oxford 1985), arguably the most influential modern account of Greek religion, has a clear ritualistic outlook;[3] that outlook, also adopted by subsequent work such as, among others, Robert Parker's *Athenian Religion: A History* (Oxford 1996) or Simon Price's *Religions of the Ancient Greeks* (Cambridge 1999), is indicative of the importance that individual scholars attach to ritual as the privileged parameter through which the Greek religious system ought to be described. By contrast, to an intellectual tradition exemplified by Jean-Pierre Vernant and the Paris School the cognitive endeavour of Greek myth-making is much more central; and it may be no coincidence that continental European scholars in particular in their accounts of Greek religion have attempted to balance a ritualistic perspective with these cognitive aspects.[4] Incidentally, recent work

---

3 B. Gladigow's review, in *Göttingischer Gelehrte Anzeigen* 235 (1983), 1-16, discusses this aspect in detail.

4 E.g., J.-P. Vernant, *Mythe et société en Grèce ancienne* (Paris 1974). 'Mythology' receives detailed treatment in, e.g., L. Bruit Zaidman, P. Schmitt Pantel, *La religion grecque* (Paris 1989 [²1991]), 103-26, 143-75; J.N. Bremmer, *Greek Religion* (Oxford 1994), 55-68.

again stresses the role of private religious experiences and moral concerns among the ancient Greeks.[5]

As regards the inquiry into Roman religion, past scholarship always emphasised the ritual dimension of the Roman religious experience rather than a possible cognitive dimension, books like J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz's *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford 1979) being the exception rather than the rule. Publications which choose to investigate cognition among the ancient Romans do so in a rather apologetic fashion: hence, the telling title *Mythos in mythenloser Gesellschaft* (ed. F. Graf, Stuttgart/Leipzig 1993) of a book that quite significantly lavishes its attention on the exploration of myths in the highly literary and sophisticated elite society of Late Republican and Augustan Rome but has little to say about earlier periods of Roman history or the role of mythology beyond these elite circles. Thus, it may be more than a mere coincidence that John North's *Roman Religion*, published as an introduction in the *Greece and Rome* New Surveys in the Classics, unlike J.N. Bremmer's *Greek Religion* of 1994, appearing in that very same series, contains a synchronic chapter-long treatment of deities and another of ritual but none of mythology. No depreciation of that book's originality and usefulness is intended when I suspect that for most users it will serve largely as an *epitome* of the much more comprehensive *Religions of Rome* which John North, together with Mary Beard and Simon Price (hereafter BNP), has authored for CUP.

How do these two publications relate to current trends in the study of Greek and Roman religion? Distancing themselves from the view, long dominant among scholars, that Roman mythology did not exist, BNP suggest, in a very brief but characteristically concise section (i. 171-4), that Roman myths, unlike Greek ones, were essentially 'myths of place'. In this respect, *Religions of Rome* shares the view that the modern concept of 'mythology', developed with the Hellenocentric perspective of the nineteenth century in mind, is not capable of explaining the lack of independent Roman cosmologies and theogonies or the relatively recent date of most, if not all, of Rome's aitiologies. In order to overcome such a Hellenocentric perspective, scholars construct Roman mythology as a domain which is markedly distinct from the Hellenic mythological experience and therefore, so they argue, must be viewed in separation from the Greek models.[6] By

---

5 Th. Harrison, *Greek Religion. Belief and Experience* (London/New York 2001).

6 Cf., e.g., F. Graf, 'Einleitung', in id. (ed.), *Mythos in mythenloser Gesellschaft. Das Paradigma Roms* (Stuttgart/Leipzig 1993), 1-5; D. Feeney, *Literature and Religion at Rome. Cultures, Contexts, and Beliefs* (Cambridge 1998), 47-75.

investigating the mythological narrative's function in Late Republican and Imperial Roman society rather than its origin, BNP too concentrate on the relevance of those 'myths of place', as 'stories of Rome', for the native location of particular places, rituals and religious practices in the conscience of the urban population. On BNP's account, these myths are exegeses to complement and reinforce ritual as the symbolic expression of the Roman religious and cultural system. As it happens, the emphasis on ritual's — and myth's — integrative force (the tenet of neo-functionalism) and the stress on the 'Romanness' of these cultural norms and practices (the influence of cultural anthropology) are *leitmotifs* of both BNP's *Religions of Rome* and North's *Roman Religion*.[7]

However, this revaluation of Roman mythology leaves this reviewer, for one, wondering: the fact that the question of a myth's origin or age can be exposed as an unsuitable category may indeed draw our attention to Roman mythology's validity as a means of native interpretation. But does this insight, valuable as it is, not imply that any assumption about the supposed difference between the respective functions of mythology in Roman and in Greek society should be questioned? For it is unclear whether a modern Hellenocentric concept of mythology could with any justification be applied to the Hellenic world either. Rather, a Panhellenic perspective diverts our attention from the fact that Greek mythologising, like myth-making in Rome, was characterised by the adaptation of a flexible mythical canon to different local contexts, and that the creation of individual foundation stories and aitiologies which accompanied ritual activity was the norm rather than an exception.

There is still another problem with this functionalist, or symbolist, perspective as presented by BNP. For does *Religions of Rome*'s emphasis on the communal relevance of ritual and myth and on the Roman element which these two domains purportedly define in the *mémoire collective* of a changing Roman society not domesticise the motivational world of ritual performance and myth-making at Rome? When BNP attribute the function of making communal sense of places, names or ritual behaviour to the literary narratives of Late Republican antiquarians like Varro or Augustan poets like Ovid, do they not imply that Roman mythology was, after all, the secondary creation of a late and sophisticated culture, 'profitable if not indispensable

---

7 For models of this position, see, e.g., M. Beard's own paper, 'A complex of times: no more sheep on Romulus' birthday', in *PCPhS* 33, 1987, 1-15; J. Scheid, 'Myth, cult and reality in Ovid's Fasti', in *PCPhS,* n.s. 8, 1992, 118-31; id., 'Cultes, mythes et politique au début de l'empire', in Graf (n. 6), 109-27.

for religion and society'?[8] And do they not thereby tacitly reinforce the view, already outlined above, that it is ritual rather than myth which really matters? To the reviewer, myth-making — an integral part of the religious discourses of the Romans centuries before the first century BCE — exploits the restrictions of ritual communication by providing explanations and exploring possible tensions at a much more autonomous level where cognition is no longer directly related to ritual. Thus, the socialization of religion through mythologies does not merely mirror the religious knowledge of society at large, but complements this knowledge with the individual's personal myth-making, however constrained by societal expectations or cultural norms and practices it may be.

Similarly, I wondered whether the functionalist perspective inherent in BNP's views on ritual could not be problematised in the light of more recent sociological and ethnological research (incidentally, comparativism is largely absent from *Religions of Rome* and *Roman Religion*): the understanding of a ritual's 'meaning' may change not just over time (this diachronic perspective is well brought out by BNP) but different people can make different sense of ritual even at one and the same point in time (this synchronic perspective seems underplayed in BNP's account). And the assumption that rituals and mythological exegeses can tell a master-narrative of Roman cultural values (whose narrrative?) seems to fall victim to the fact that communication is an inferential and messy process rather than a straightforward semiotic affair, particularly when the communication of an alleged religious 'meaning' through under-determined ritual structures is concerned.[9]

These questions and problems have their place in an academic tradition that is perhaps not the Anglo-American one; hence, they are pursued in neither *Religions of Rome* nor *Roman Religion.* Neither do BNP think that certain topics which could follow from such questions are relevant to the study of Roman religion; for instance, the role of personal morality, a topic which has been discussed lately.[10] The story of *Religions of Rome* and of *Roman*

---

8 Quotation from Scheid, 'Myth, Cult and Reality' (n. 7), 124.

9 For this issue, still under-researched as far as the religions of antiquity are concerned, cf. P. Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas. A Cognitive Theory of Religion* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1994), 185-223.

10 By, e.g., T.P. Wiseman, *Historiography and Imagination. Eight Essays on Roman Culture* (Exeter 1994), 49-53; W.J. Tatum, 'Ritual and Personal Morality in Roman Religion', in *Syllecta Classica* 4 (1993), 13-20; id., 'Roman religion: fragments and further questions', in S.N. Byrne, E.P. Cueva (eds), *Veritatis Amicitiaeque Causa* (Wauconda 1998), 273-91.

Religion is a very different one but it is told with the knowledge and vision which we have come to expect from BNP from their previous work, listed in the bibliographies (valuable research tools in their own right) to the two volumes of *Religions of Rome.*

These two volumes have been in the making for a while. In the meantime, students of Roman religion have been well served by publications covering various aspects of Roman cult and theology, both in Rome and its Italian hinterland and throughout the Roman Empire.[11] In addition, the uninitiated can now choose between several recent introductory surveys for guidance.[12] These introductions, however, must now take second place to BNP's syntheses. Even those who, like this reviewer, on occasion disagree with BNP will learn and profit immensely from their contribution. John North's *Roman Religion*, apart from the two synchronic chapters mentioned above, contains a brief outline of the religious developments from the time of archaic Rome until the rise of Christianity. These developments are treated in much more detail in vol. 1 of *Religions of Rome*, called *A History*, which continues the narrative thread down to the fifth century CE. Vol. 2, *A Sourcebook*, presents central areas of Roman religious practice in a synchronic perspective — the deities of Rome as the addressees of cult; the practitioners of cult: individuals, priests and diviners but also religious groups such as the worshippers of Mithras, the Jews and Christians (has there ever before been a general account of Roman religion which dedicated so much space to these and to various other similarly important religious groups?); the places of cult and the occasions when cult was required; and, last but not least, the mechanisms of ritual itself — in a judicious blend of literary and epigraphic texts (in translation) as well as of selections from the material evidence in fine illustrations, all expertly annotated.[13]

---

11 For a survey, see N. Belayche *et al.*, 'Forschungsbericht Römische Religion', in *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 2.2 (2000), 283-345.

12 Notably J. Scheid, *La religion des Romains* (Paris 1998) and J. Rüpke, *Die Religion der Römer* (Munich 2001). J. Champeaux, *La religion romaine* (Paris 1998) and the contributions by Y. Lehmann, 'La religion romaine traditionelle' (177-246), and G. Freyburger, 'Les religions à mystères dans l'empire romain' (247-347), in Y. Lehmann (ed.), *Religions de l'antiquité* (Paris 1999), are altogether less innovative. The same goes for R. Turcan, *Rome et ses dieux,* (Paris 1998) and even more so for R. Muth, *Einführung in die griechische und römische Religion* (Darmstadt ²1998), which are too generalizing, and occasionally outright misleading, to be of much help.

13 But I strongly feel that we are much poorer for having texts only in translation in *A Sourcebook* rather than in the original languages. Incidentally, ii. 241,

As for this arrangement of the topics in *A Sourcebook*, I was faintly reminded of the principle of arrangement in Varro's *Antiquitates Rerum Divinarum* as presented by Augustine (Varro *RD* fr. 4 Cardauns). In all other respects, however, *Religions of Rome* has a surprisingly post-modern ring: a phrase such as '*as far as we can tell*', occurring right at the beginning of vol. 1 (i. x), at once signals BNP's general agnostic attitude towards the sources and provides a highly salutary reminder that there may have been dimensions in the religious experience of the inhabitants of the city of Rome which we can no longer reconstruct. Throughout *Religions of Rome,* BNP remind us that a narrative different from theirs might be conceivable (i. 12-13, 49-50, 98; ii. 231, 233-4). Later the authors abandon the possibility of providing any one definition of 'religion' that could suit modern and ancient Roman conceptions, advocating instead an 'open textured' approach which reminded me, for one, of the post-colonial approaches now fashionable in Cultural Studies. As a consequence of these methodological premises, BNP do not wish to see *Religions of Rome* as a *handbook* in the traditional sense (although the two volumes may be used as just that by many readers), that is an encyclopedic synthesis to replace Georg Wissowa's *Religion und Kultus der Römer* (2nd ed. 1912; the first edition, incidentally, dates from 1902, nearly a century ago) or that manual's arguably less satisfactory successor, Kurt Latte's *Römische Religionsgeschichte* of 1960. BNP's decision not to write such a handbook seems wise considering how earlier attempts to proffer encyclopedic treatment were marred by the use of the conceptual categories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in defining the essential character of Roman religion in its allegedly pure and original state. Indeed, the modern insight into the constant change and accommodation of the religious system at Rome – an issue which *Religions of Rome* and *Roman Religion* repeat time and again — may mean that a truly satisfactory encyclopedic inquiry in the traditional sense is impossible, and hence unlikely to

---

BNP's rendering of *ILS* 112 '... if anyone wishes to sacrifice an animal *but does not expose the entrails*' and their comment 'in some rituals the entrails (*exta*) were exposed in a pit *(magmentarium)* ...', possibly misled by Cic. *Har. Resp.* 31, is one rare occasion where they uncharacteristically misrepresent the original. '*Qui magmentum nec protollat*' must imply that the person offering the sacrifice was not obliged to sacrifice the *magmenta*, the further parts of the sacrificial animal, together with the *exta*, but could use them possibly for consumption. But with only the English texts in *A Sourcebook* to hand, who can check and compare unless they have *ILS* or a complete set of *CIL*, or at least Latte's *Römische Religionsgeschichte* (Munich 1960), 389, in their library?

happen. Perhaps BNP's post-modern stance is caused by the realization of this unlikelihood: surely, neither Wissowa nor Latte could have conceived phrases like 'the history of Roman religion (our history, Gelasius's history ...)' (i. x) or would have thought of 'their' Roman religion as consisting of 'many voices' that 'are to be heard best in the dialogue between the two (volumes of *Religions of Rome*)' (i. xiii). But if BNP are not in competition with Wissowa or Latte, what narrative do *Religions of Rome* and *Roman Religion* offer instead?

Previous scholarship presented the interpenetration of religion and politics in Rome as a decisive proof of the former's abuse by cynical elites, and argued that the religious institutions in the ancient city-state were mere impostures. Thanks to a generation of scholars including BNP, we have come to appreciate how the interrelation of religious and political roles and spheres — priesthoods and magistracies — in the ancient world are not to be explained by an anachronistic modern dichotomy of 'sacred' versus 'secular'; rather, these two domains were inextricably linked to such a degree that religious roles were utilised in the definition of a person's socio-political position. Thus religion's place in ancient society has been reassessed by these scholars; the reassessment of religious action in antiquity followed. The old cliché of ritual formalism and dreariness, of a certain punctiliousness over ritual detail — a cliché employed with particular reference to Roman religion but one, incidentally, that is uttered by theologians, clerics and scholars whenever ritual action *per se* in any religion is debated — implied a dichotomy between dreary ritual utilitarianism on the one hand and proper religious feeling on the other. But thanks again to BNP and others, it is now accepted that the stability of ritual forms, ritual's 'orthopraxy', is compatible with the fact that the 'meaning' of these forms can be altered over time: their openness to creative change and adaptation is a prerequisite of their preservation. As a result, this issue of religious change, innovation and its accommodation figures most prominently in both *Religions of Rome* and *Roman Religion.*

A further point seems more debatable: for BNP argue that the negative appreciation of formalism in Roman religion is due to the application of modern and inapplicable notions of 'religion' and 'belief' to Roman cult and ritual. Those scholars who deplore the absence of individual belief systems or private mental states from the religion of the Greeks and the Romans are accused of succumbing to anachronistic assumptions guided by 'Christianising' conceptions. BNP, by way of contrast, have been instrumental in

building a new consensus:[14] traditional religious activity in the Graeco-Roman world did not provide any distinct or clearly differentiated religious biographies, individual moral value systems or any kind of private spirituality; in other words, religion did not constitute an autonomous domain for the individual in ancient society. Any religious identity was synonymous with a wider societal identification. Just as the individual was embedded in the institutions of the civic realm, so was his or her religion. In this account of the religious life of the traditional Roman city-state, the intellectual stimuli of the late 1960s and 1970s, discussed above, are most clearly apparent.

BNP's title reveals their conceptual framework: *Religions of Rome* focusses on one particular local religious system. Such writing of a 'local religious history' is in accord with recent trends; the concept itself is not new but dates back to the Hellenist Karl Otfried Müller, who in the early nineteenth century suggested that deities and their cults must be understood in the context of the local environment in which they were located. Wissowa and later Latte in their manuals followed Müller's lead; what distinguishes BNP from these scholars is signalled by the plural in *Religions of Rome*: treatment is given not only to the traditional civic cult (though as we shall see, civic cult figures most prominently in BNP's account) but also to the many other cultic options that happened to inhabit a place in Rome's sacred landscape.

BNP's insistence on the plural, however, serves still another agenda: as is implied by their refusal to define the term 'religion' or by their discussion of the Latin words *religio* and *superstitio* (i. 215-19),[15] the concept of 'religion' as we use it is a development of the seventeenth century; in antiquity there was just no single equivalent to express this modern concept.[16] As a

---

14 Add M. Linder, J. Scheid, 'Quand croire c'est faire. Le problème de la croyance dans la Rome ancienne', in *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 81 (1993), 47-61; J.-L. Durand, J. Scheid, '"Rites" et "religion". Remarques sur certains préjugés des historiens de la religion des Grecs et des Romains', *ibid.* 85 (1994), 23-43.

15 But it is worth reminding oneself that prior to the 1st century BCE *religio* was no *terminus technicus* of Roman religious language, a meaning it first acquired at that time A. Bergmann, *Die 'Grundbedeutung' des lateinischen Wortes Religion* (Marburg 1998).

16 P. Biller, 'Words and the medieval notion of "religion"', *Journal of Eccl. History* 36 (1985), 351-69; E. Feil, *Religio*. Vol. 1: *Die Geschichte eines neuzeitlichen Grundbegriffs vom Frühchristentum bis zur Reformation*. Vol. 2:

consequence, historians of 'Roman religion' — a modern term which is not re-translatable by way of the early Christian phrase *Romana religio* (Tert. *Apol.* 24,1; *Acta Cypriani* 1,1f.) — face a dilemma: their area of research has no one unequivocal ancient linguistic equivalent; as a heuristic category — just like 'cult', 'ritual' or other categories central to the modern narrative of the ancient world — it is a modern invention employed as a scholarly construct.[17] Some scholars have therefore questioned whether this essentially monotheistic construct 'religion' should be applied at all when talking about the polytheistic religious systems of antiquity. According to Denis Feeney's recent *Literature and Religion at Rome* (see n. 6), for instance, there was 'no one Roman religious system existing essentially, inherently meaningful, waiting to be participated in' but rather a system 'compounded of all kinds of different forms of religious knowledge' (140). I do think that Feeney's cultural relativism, possibly indicative of his background in literary studies, would not be entirely to BNP's liking but his notion of 'religion' being 'a cultural practice' (1-2) mirrors their own statements: 'We have not worked with a single definition of religion in mind; we have worked rather to understand what might count as 'religion' in Rome and how that might make a difference to our own understanding of our own religious world' (i. xi). And later, in one of the central sections of *Religions of Rome* (i. 42-54), they describe 'religion' as being undifferentiated from other sectors of social or cultural life: according to BNP, there existed no religious identity at Rome which could be distinguished from one's identity within the civic realm, no private religious worlds which would not have been embedded in Roman society and 'culture'. As a result of this premise, BNP can claim that concepts like 'religious experience' or 'belief' felt quite different to a Roman from how they would feel to us, steeped in the modern denominational heritage. Hence, the 'otherness' of the Roman religious experience, as BNP axiomatically believe it 'to have been under the developed republican system' (i. 54).

Questions remain: if 'individual belief' can be marginalized, why should we stress that religious rituals had a plurality of different meanings (as BNP quite rightly do at i. 47-8) — for how would these develop into different interpretations, if differentiated belief systems did not exist? And can the separation between 'ritual practice' and 'belief', faintly mirroring the old dualism between ritual and myth, be sustained with any probability? Do

---

Die Geschichte eines neuzeitlichen Grundbegriffs zwischen Reformation und Rationalismus (Göttingen 1986/1997).

17 J.N. Bremmer (n. 2), 31f.

BNP not attack, just as others have done before them, a notion of religiosity as being inapplicable to the ancient world which is a creation of the nineteenth century — namely the Romantic notion of individualised religious feeling and spirituality located in the human psyche which, being an essentially non-social category, cannot be communicated to others? However, such a notion of religion is no more representative of the modern, or of any, religious experience at large than many other, and more social, aspects of 'religious-ness'. And finally, does the reductionism inherent in the phrase 'cultural practice' not necessarily marginalise evidence that, if a heuristic category of 'religion' rather than the holistic concept of 'public culture' were available, could provide an altogether different narrative of religious experiences and religious beliefs at Rome under the Republic?

The story of *Religions of Rome* might have been different if certain areas of religious activity that BNP mention in passing had been accorded more extensive treatment. To be sure, BNP themselves are aware of this dilemma: in vol. 2, in a chapter entitled *Individuals and Gods*, they preface the extraordinary account by Seneca (*De Superstitione* fr. 36b-37 Haase = 69-70 Vottero) of private worship in the temple of the Capitoline triad, discussed in vol. 1 as an issue of proper vs. superstitious worship, with the remark: 'This passage ... suggests that the elite literary sources may well offer an impoverished picture of the religious experience ... of ordinary Romans'. Quite so.

The wider implications of the fact that the city of Rome, at least from the time of Augustus, was a *metropolis* of nineteenth-century dimensions and of a most diverse ethnic and cultural background,[18] seems to me not sufficiently integrated into the framework of *Religions of Rome* or of *Roman Religion* either: would a place such as Rome, with its sheer physical dimensions and sordid living conditions, not require networking at a level below that provided by the civic realm, leading in its turn to religious affiliations more attached to smaller voluntary associations or the various local shrines which happened to be located in the different districts of the city? As regards those shrines, Mary Beard herself has made a strong case for according them more administrative and (and possibly also cultic?) independence.[19] As for various other issues currently debated among ancient historians — for instance the living conditions in the city of Rome, sanitation and high mortality, malnutrition and its consequences for the living standards and the life-expectancy of those living in Rome, the structure and fluidity of family life and, most

18 On which see now D. Noy, *Foreigners at Rome* (London/New York), 2000.

19 M. Beard, 'Documenting Roman religion', in C. Moatti (ed.), *La mémoire perdue* 2: *recherches sur l'administration romaine* (Rome 1998), 75-101.

significantly, the implications of these data for the lives and rhythms of the urban population – the relevance of these issues for the study of Roman religion remains reserved for future inquiry. I am particularly attracted by Brent Shaw's suggestion that the marriage cycle of Roman women corresponded with the demands of an agrarian economy; if this claim of an alternative cyclical and pervasive pattern of behaviour can be substantiated, it would help to undermine the centrality which the elite sources assign to the religio-political amalgam embodied in *Religions of Rome* and *Roman Religion*.[20] However, BNP are the first to admit that 'the quest for an alternative' to the model enshrined in *Religions of Rome* and *Roman Religion* 'is well worth pursuing'; here, as elsewhere, one can only admire their open-mindedness as regards the interpretation of the fragmentary evidence.[21]

BNP's emphasis on the undifferentiated and embedded character of religion in the traditional Roman city-state — how much anyone apart from the Roman elite accepted or internalised this tradition remains very much a problem — appears in the first chapter of *Religions of Rome.* That leitmotif prepares the ground for the diachronic narrative of the following chapters of *A History*. The brevity of BNP's treatment of major religious innovations and changes prior to the third century BCE reflects their view that little of historical certainty can be extracted from the written sources; in view of various recent attempts to reconstruct Rome's religious history in the archaic period from an ingenious, if unprovable, combination of the written with the archaeological record,[22] such scepticism is highly laudatory. More of this sceptical attitude can be found in BNP's own account of Rome's archaic religion. Both the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' search for a pure archaic Roman religion undiluted by outside influences and reconstructable from the literary sources and George Dumézil's tripartite scheme of the archaic Roman pantheon are rightly dismissed. But surely less than two pages (i. 12-3) are not enough for dealing with the religious realities of archaic

---

20 B.D. Shaw, 'Agrarian economy and the marriage cycle of Roman women', *JRA* 10 (1997), 57-76.

21 Quotation from J.A. North, 'Religion and rusticity', T.J. Cornell, K. Lomas (eds), *Urban society in Roman Italy* (London 1995), 135-50, at 146. I have outlined an alternative in 'Looking beyond the civic compromise: religious pluralism in late republican Rome', E. Bispham, Chr. Smith (eds), *Religion in archaic and republican Rome and Italy: evidence and experience* (Edinburgh 2000), 115-35, but neither would I claim that outline to be the final word.

22 E.g., A. Carandini, *La nascita di Roma* (Rome 1997); id., R. Cappelli (eds), *Roma: Romolo, Remo e la fondazione della cittá* (Rome 2000).

Rome when there is so much more to be said.[23] For instance, while the archaic votive terracottas from Ponte di Nona outside Rome are mentioned as proof of a complex 'early' Roman religion, too little is made of that insight; hence BNP's marginalization of votive religion's fundamental importance for archaic and later Latium.[24] And given BNP's stress on the Roman elite's importance for the city's religious system, an account of how the monumentalisation of the urban space was connected to the rise of the Italian elites, and of how the system of civic religion had its origins in that elite's monopolization of the urban sacred space would have been helpful.[25] And both here and elsewhere in *Religions of Rome* I sensed a disproportion between BNP's account of the religious system at Rome and that of Italy whose precarious place in the history of Roman religion seems understressed. By marked contrast to BNP's usual agnosticism, the Late Republican *Fasti Antiates maiores* are utilised as a (more or less) reliable document of early Roman festivals and rituals; here, however, I would echo the sceptical view of J. Rüpke, *Kalender und Oeffentlichkeit* (Berlin/New York 1995), 245-88 (rejected by BNP) that no historically reliable assumptions about the ritual calendar of early Rome can be made on the basis of our sources.

Chapters 2 and 3 continue the diachronic thread down to the end of the republic. But while they also continue the story of a religious system that accommodated religious innovations and was characterised by its openness to change, the overriding narrative concern remains that of a religious system undifferentiated and embedded in the social and political structures of the city of Rome. That leitmotif — the dialectic of openness and innovation on the hand and of the assertion of an emerging Roman cultural and religious identity since the third century on the other — remains of central importance for the rest of *A History*. The second-century BCE interest in

---

23 F. Coarelli, *Il foro romano* (Rome 1983-85) and T.J. Cornell, *The Beginnings of Rome* (London/New York 1995), mentioned several times, are not used to their full potential. Most of the archaic data presented in, e.g., M. Cristofani (ed.), *Il grande Roma dei Tarquini* (Rome 1990), are not utilised. For recent accounts of what could be done, see, conveniently, the surveys in C.J. Smith, *Early Rome and Latium: Economy and Society c. 1000 to 500 BC* (Oxford 1996); id., 'Reviewing archaic Latium: settlement, burials, and religion at Satricum', *JRA* 12.2 (1999), 453-75.

24 Cf. J.W. Bouma, *Religio Votiva: The Archaeology of Latial Votive Religion* (Groningen 1996).

25 Cf. R.D. Whitehouse, *Underground Religion. Cult and Culture in Prehistoric Italy* (London 1992), which should be read in combination with A.M. Bietti Sestieri, *The Iron Age Community of Osteria dell' Osa* (Cambridge 1992).

religious matters, exemplified with respect to the first generation of Roman historians and antiquarians, is seen as the intellectual self-assertion of the native religious tradition, and is then related to contemporary socio-political moves to define the boundaries between Roman and foreign religious practices (i. 108-13); the choice of Latin deities in the temple-building programmes of the second century is made explicable with reference to that very same trend (i. 88-91). With regard to the age of the late republic, BNP may not be the first (Wilhelm Kroll or H.D. Jocelyn come to mind) to view elements of religious disruption and neglect as processes integral to a functioning religious system rather than as signs of the religious crisis decried by previous generations; nevertheless, it is BNP's account of this issue that I would recommend to all who remain unconvinced of the vitality of the late republican religious system (i. 121-34).[26] At the same time, however, BNP, when restating their claim of a system of religious expertise and access to the gods that functioned solely via the elite's control (134-40), are forced to postulate a changed religious atmosphere pervading the final decades of the republican system. 'The republic lurched to its collapse' (i. 120), and in all aspects of life there suddenly emerged threats to the 'undifferentiated politico-religious amalgam of traditional Roman practice' (161): foreign cults which the Roman authorities now had difficulty in controlling (160-6); and areas of cultural differentiation such as new and alternative forms of religious expertise or philosophical scepticism (149-56).

Some among these premises seem debatable. First, the civic model of an embedded and undifferentiated religious system in the traditional city-state, although an accepted concept in scholarship on Greek and Roman religion,[27] has its detractors: for instance, it is not quite clear whether the civic model outlined by BNP can account for marginal religious groups and individual religious concerns, or for the reasons for more fundamental change, without

---

26 One minor point: I would disagree with BNP's view that the Roman ritual of *evocatio*, epigraphically attested far away from Rome at the site of Isaura Vetus in 75 BCE, proves the changing conceptions of what might count as Roman in an expanding empire; rather, we should distinguish between a deity's *evocatio* and the separate issue of his or her — possible but far from required — transfer to Rome: A. Blomart, 'Die *evocatio* und der Transfer "fremder" Götter von der Peripherie nach Rom', in H. Cancik, J. Rüpke (eds), *Römische Reichsreligion und Provinzialreligion* (Tübingen 1997), 99-111, at 99-102, 107-8.

27 E.g., Chr. Sourvinou-Inwood, 'What is *Polis* Religion?' in O. Murray, S.R.F. Price (eds), *The Greek City from Homer to Alexander* (Oxford 1990), 295-322 (repr. in: R. Buxton [ed.], *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion* [Oxford 2000], 13-37).

resorting to *prima facie* marginalisation.[28] Secondly, and more radically, it has been argued that what we call the 'civic system' was an arena for the religious discourses of an aristocratic elite rather than representative of the religious life of ancient Rome in its entirety.[29] Thirdly, BNP, like other advocates of the models of 'civic religion', '*polis* religion' or '*Staatsreligion*', must envisage all religious developments within the strict limits of their models of civic religious practice in the ancient city-state; any development beyond these limits can be perceived only in terms of the system's failure to integrate increasingly differentiated choices. Such models must envisage religious development as moving from the embedded religion of the traditional city-state to the differentiated religion of a complex, empire-wide, and socio-politically fragmented, environment. In that sense, the story of *Religions of Rome* and of *Roman Religion* is also a story of the destabilisation and threatening dissolution of civic religion. However, how valid is a treatment of the religious history of the city of Rome which attempts to construct a close correspondence, as BNP have done, with that city's political history? An alternative story to that told in *Religions of Rome* and *Roman Religion* would, I assume, have to assign greater autonomy to the two realms of religion and politics. It is such an alternative story, I would think, which, untwined from the constraints of the 'civic model' paradigm, could at last concentrate on the continuities between the religious experiences of the Republican and the Imperial periods, or between pagans, Jews and Christians.

Fourthly, BNP's replacing of the category 'religion' by the concept of 'culture', mirroring (as we have seen) a more general trend in the study of ancient religions, is not unproblematic either. The fact that at the object-level there is no functional equivalent to the modern term religion does not exclude its use as a meta-level 'umbrella term' to describe various native practices and ideas.[30] For if an 'umbrella term' is not applied, the religious realm cannot even be identified in its potential distinctiveness by the observer; using 'culture' instead can lead only to relativism and obscurantism. BNP's

---

28 Cf. G.D. Woolf, '*Polis*-religion and its alternatives in the Roman provinces', in Cancik, Rüpke (n. 26), 71-84, at 76-83. But see the riposte by J. Scheid, 'Aspects religieux de la municipalisation. Quelques réflexions générales', in M. Dondin-Payre, M.-Th. Raepsaet-Charlier (eds), *Cités, municipes, colonies* (Paris 1999), 381-423, at 383-7.

29 J. Rüpke, 'Antike Großstadtreligion', in Ch. Batsch *et al.* (eds), *Zwischen Krise und Alltag. Antike Religionen im Mittelmeerraum* (Stuttgart 1999), 13-30.

30 Cf. K. Rudolph, 'Inwieweit ist der Begriff "Religion" eurozentrisch?' in U. Bianchi (ed.), *The Notion of Religion in Comparative Research* (Rome 1994), 131-9.

language of religious differentiation to describe a process through which 'religion' becomes an autonomous sphere of societal discourse accentuates a crucial problem of their narrative: namely that their strategy of denying 'religion' an autonomous place in traditional Roman society can work only as long as it is possible to marginalise factors that introduce a certain kind of religious complexity; these factors, however, are part and parcel of the very processes of religious innovation and change to which BNP themselves constantly, and quite rightly, draw our attention.

The following chapters of *A History* focus no longer exclusively on the city of Rome but discuss the provinces of the Roman Empire as well; and as with the earlier chapters in that volume, there is much here too to admire and learn from. Chapter 4 traces the religious developments of the Augustan age in the city of Rome, devoting a good deal of attention to the restructuring of the religious system of Rome by the first *princeps*. This is a highly authoritative account and a must-read, as it already was when it first appeared (it has now been revised) in the 2nd edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. X. With regard to the deification of mortals — the imperial cult is discussed in various places in vol. 1 – *Religions of Rome* argues that in Roman society there existed an uncertainty about the status of those divinised, who inhabited a position between human and divine spheres (e.g., i. 140-8). Although this is a possible line of argument, it should be pointed out that an alternative line of argument is feasible too (for enough data can be cited in its favour), namely that the emperor was seen as a god;[31] perhaps future research will mediate more between these two positions, as they presumably are not as opposed to one another as they may seem. Chapter 5, in a predominantly synchronic treatment, explores the 'boundaries of Roman religion', trying to define what was acceptably and unacceptably Roman; gender issues, *religio* and *superstitio*, 'magic' and the early Christians are given extensive treatment. That chapter's implicitly Romanocentric focus — BNP's dichotomy of Roman and foreign is illustrative of a particular and far from unproblematic concept of culture whose emphasis on exclusivity occasionally marginalizes the fact that the spectrum of contact between these different cultural systems might have been more complex – is, among other things, also applied to the Constitutio Antoniniana: following the

31 E.g., S. J. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family* (Leiden 1993), 146-52; P. A. Harland, 'Honours and worship: emperors, imperial cults and associations at Ephesus', in *Studies in Religion* 25 (1996), 319-34; M. Clauss, '*Deus praesens.* Der römische Kaiser als Gott', in *Klio* 78 (1996), 400-33; id., *Kaiser und Gott: Herrscherkult im römischen Reich* (Stuttgart/Leipzig 1999).

wide-reaching interpretations of K. Buraselis, ΘΕΙΑ ΔΩΡΕΑ (Athens 1989), BNP see the rites mentioned in P. Giessen 40 as the embodiment of a particular concept of 'Roman religion'. Yet in the relevant passages the text seems too fragmentary to allow any conclusive interpretation.[32]

Ch. 6 deals with the various religions of imperial Rome, proffering an assessment of the cohabitation of different cults and deities in one place. The discussion focusses on the organisational and ritual structures of traditional and 'oriental' cults — BNP point out the unsuitability of the term 'oriental religions' — as well as of Judaism and Christianity; the implications of the methodological concept of 'polytheism', however, are investigated only sparingly. True to the agenda of *Religions of Rome,* chapter 7 focusses on the impact of 'Roman' religion in the provinces of the empire, that is Roman deities, functionaries, institutions and ideas. Presenting the Roman side of things, this chapter must be read as a valuable contribution to the ongoing Romanisation debate but I wonder if its argument is not compromised by the fact that it does not give a fuller and more contextualised picture of 'provincial religion'. Incidentally, a very different account of a new synthesis of native and Roman religious elements in a given provincial context, written with a pronounced emphasis on the natives' point of view, is presented by T. Derks' *Gods, Temples and Ritual Practices. The Transformation of Religious Ideas and Values in Roman Gaul* (Amsterdam 1998); with respect to such heuristic premises, G.D. Woolf, *Becoming Roman. The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul* (Cambridge 1998) can be placed somewhere between Derks and BNP. *A History* closes with the christianisation of the empire and the continuation of 'Roman religion', now fundamentally transformed, under the Christian emperors of the fourth and fifth centuries.

I have focussed on areas where I am in disagreement with BNP; this is not to depreciate the achievement of *Religions of Rome* and, to a lesser extent, of *Roman Religion*, which is enormous by any standards and stands as a worthy tribute to these three scholars. My critique of BNP's narrative indicates that I can envisage an alternative story but certainly not that I could write a more coherent one. Our dilemma is that the category of 'Roman religion' defies straightforward classification on the basis of ethnic, political, cultural or geographical criteria. 'Roman religion' and 'religions of Rome' are modern umbrella-terms for an assemblage of diverse ritual actions and possibly even more diverse belief systems. Using the monothetic construct 'religion' (as in 'Jewish religion' or 'Christian religion') for this assemblage

---

32 Cf. P.A. Kuhlmann, *Die Giessener literarischen Papyri und die Caracalla-Erlasse* (Giessen 1994), 217-39.

only accentuates our dilemma; using the plural 'religions' to describe what I see as an essentially polytheistic religious system cannot solve that dilemma either. No, the real value of the terms 'Roman religion' and 'religions of Rome' seems to lie in their imprecision. For any attempt to apprehend the 'identity' of a polytheistic system such as that of Rome generates an ever-increasing number of problems of various kinds, rather than providing comprehensive answers.

University of Erfurt