

THE MATTER OF THE GODS

Religion and the Roman Empire

Clifford Ando



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In honor of beloved Virgil—

“O degli altri poeti onore e lume . . .”

—Dante, *Inferno*

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PREFACE

What sort of knowledge did the Romans possess about their gods? What kind of information, of what status, motivated their religious actions? To those questions the first chapter of this book proposes simple answers: that in contrast to ancient Christians, who had faith, the Romans had knowledge; and that their knowledge was empirical in orientation.

The body of the book falls into two halves. The three chapters of Part 1 reconsider a set of problems in Roman religious history in light of chapter 1's conclusions. These are, first, the problem of materiality and representation in theology and cult; second, the relationship between naming and knowledge in Roman encounters with the divine in unfamiliar landscapes; and third, the influence on religious thought of doctrinal and theoretical developments in Roman law, and what these together might reveal about the metaphysical status assigned by Romans to their public institutions.

Part 2 contains a more strictly diachronic survey of the relationship between religious law and religious thought on the one hand, and different taxonomies and topographies of Roman, Italian, and provincial land on the other. It pursues this inquiry with an eye on two topics, the relationship between religion and imperialism, on the one hand, and the place of Rome in sacred topographies of the empire, on the other.

I was first provoked to ask what the epistemic basis of Roman religion

had been by reading Augustine's *Contra Academicos*. That text was written, I came to feel, in response not to Cicero's *Academica*, but to his *De natura deorum*, and it was a rereading of the latter in light of Augustine's concerns that drew my attention to the very different epistemologies to which Velleius, Balbus, and Cotta subscribed and the precision with which Cicero respects that fact. But Augustine's response to Cicero has modern echoes, too, and the remainder of this preface seeks to elucidate some of those.¹

. . .

For much of the twentieth century, the principal assumptions and often the principal questions motivating scholarship on Roman religion had to do with its demise: with some falling away from an originary state, during which process it came into contact with, and was corrupted by, first, Greek myths and Hellenistic philosophy and, later, Oriental mystery cults, one of which would ultimately supplant the cult of Jupiter Optimus Maximus in Rome and succeed the Roman empire in the West. Much of the work produced under this regime remains of great value, and I very much fear that, in dissenting from its terms of reference, we are in danger today of rejecting some great analytic work.

Then, in the 1970s, a group of scholars in England and France began to construct an alternative approach to Roman religion. Curiously, the same period witnessed a significant revolution in the study of Greek religion, which also took what we might describe as a ritual turn, but the theoretical affiliations of the new scholarship on Greek religion were profoundly different. For their part, those writing on Rome came to articulate their alternative in the first instance as a rejection of what they called the "Christianizing assumptions" of earlier scholarship. No target received more withering criticism than the twin pillars of Protestant historiography, namely the search for some Roman equivalent to Christian "faith" and the denigration of ritualism and its priestly devotees.

Where faith is concerned, we were instructed in those days, the search itself was misconceived. The Romans did not need faith; they had an orthopraxy. In John Scheid's terms, their religion was concerned with *savoir-faire*, not *savoir-penser*. On one level, this amounted to a reversal of the

1. Short essays on problems of method and the history of scholarship in the study of Roman religion, including much bibliographic material, may be found in Ando 2003b.

priorities of earlier scholarship: ritual itself became the privileged category, and faith was deemed irrelevant to Roman religiosity. And on another, this methodological turn harmonized with trends then emerging in functionalist anthropology, with its interest in the integrative function of rituals and their symbolic role as expressions of a particular cultural system.

. . . .

The subsequent quarter-century of scholarship on Roman religion has produced much of great value. But the way in which “ritual” became naturalized as an object of study—its justification self-evident by virtue of its antithetical position in relation to a so-called Christian emphasis on faith—has occluded problems of two kinds, one set internal to the study of Roman religion, the other an order removed.

First, how are we to explain change within a religion devoted to orthopraxy?² Indeed, how are we to explain orthopraxy in the first place? How did Romans explain it to themselves? Mere statements on their part—or ours—advocating or describing an adherence to conservatism or formalism of a particular kind amount to little more than the echoing of an ancient ideologically motivated discourse, which was, so far as I can tell, mobilized in the face of continual processes of innovation, alteration, and renewal.

Second, the rejection of “faith” on the grounds that it was not a technical concept or constitutive category within Roman religion has itself produced an impasse and was probably misconceived. For the mere fact that “faith” was and is such a concept or category within Christianity should have led people to ask not whether the Romans had faith, but what they had instead.

Put another way, the radical assertion that (Protestant) Christians have faith, whereas the Romans had rituals, might have appeared self-consciously historicizing in the best sense, but in practice it has amounted to an assertion of incommensurate difference. We thus call many things religions, but in their study we ask of each of them different questions. Christian-

2. Rüpke 1996b is one of the few essays known to me to study the causes and accommodation of change (other than the introduction of new gods) within Roman religion. Rüpke’s questions are very different from mine, but neither his method nor his answer is discordant with my own.

ity's concerns are doctrinal and existential; Roman religion's concerns were political. To a skeptic, the subsequent dominance within the field of what we now call the "polis-religion" model looks little different from earlier generations' cynical descriptions of Roman magistrates manipulating rituals for political ends, except that we now speak not of hypocrisy but of ideology, and not of politics but of power.

.

The analytic isolation in which we continue to place Roman religion—the assertion of its difference, even its uniqueness—raises in my mind two questions. The first concerns the derivation and justification for the theoretical constructs through which we render ancient experience intelligible, and the second the audience whom we address. These are naturally related. For in privileging what I might call the "terms of art" or jargon of any given religion—in adopting, in other words, the terms and categories that participants in any given cultural system would have themselves used of their own culture—we restrict our theorizing to a set of first-order categories, and we condemn our inquiry to a kind of antiquarianism in which ancient data, however abundant or difficult of access, are ultimately situated only in relation to each other. To do that is to speak in the end only to our fellow classicists.

To some, this may not appear problematic. But to others, Classics appears overdue for an existential crisis. The relevance of classical antiquity both to contemporary cultural production more generally, and to humanistic scholarship in particular, is no longer obvious. One solution, of a very limited kind, lies in trying to speak to nonclassicists. By that effort I do not mean what Americans might call "outreach," or "popularizing," valuable though these are. Rather, I ask how we should address ourselves—or how we should present the ancient world—to scholars, and in particular to scholars of religion, to whom the ancient world seems little more than a curiosity.

To that question there are, of course, many right answers. I concentrate here on one, namely the assertion of incommensurate difference and the theoretical problems to which it gives rise. One solution to them might lie in the devising of second-order categories of the kind that make comparisons meaningful and cross-cultural study possible.