

Rüpke, Jörg, *Pantheon: A New History of Roman Religion*, tr. David M.B. Richardson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2018. Pp. xv, 551 \$39.95 ISBN 9780691156835.

Ancient historians and scholars of Greek and Roman religion will benefit from this recent translation of Jörg Rüpke's *Pantheon*. The original German edition was published by Verlag C. H. Beck oHG (München 2016). David Richardson has produced an excellent translation.

This is not, it must be said, a typical history of Roman religion with an emphasis on priesthoods and cults, the festival calendar and its rituals, along with attention to the arrival of new foreign divinities and their worship during the late Republic and early Empire. While Rüpke gives some attention to such concerns, his main focus is the development at Rome of the very phenomenon of religion and the changing nature of its dynamic from the late Bronze age, through the Iron Age starting in the ninth century, and into the fourth century of the Imperial period.

Rüpke begins with a hypothetical reconstruction of emerging religious practice, then explores its elaboration over many centuries with the addition of specialized personnel, cult sites, architectural enhancement, religious literature and even recognition by the ancients of religion as a valid field of scholarly study. He deals with "Writing about Religion" in the second to first century BCE, including the *Disciplina Etrusca*. The chapter on Cicero, Varro and other writers on Roman religion is a significant contribution. Rüpke offers a penetrating analysis of "Lived Religion" in the first and second centuries CE. The book, of course, includes discussions of Constantine, Christianity and the Jewish community at Rome, as well as numerous other topics.

The journey culminates in the Imperial age, during which we witness the development of a widespread conviction that people can *belong to* a particular religion — and to that religion only. This exclusive relationship became a prime factor in an individual's self-identification. Religion in this highly developed state encompassed mandatory doctrinal belief and pursuit of knowledge rather than almost exclusively cultic practice. Rüpke endeavors to show how this evolution to the notion of a "lived religion" took place, through the complex interaction of people with various dynamic factors that can change over a long period of time.

The author's concern is Roman religion but his attention extends to the influence Rome exerted and — equally important — to the religious trends the city absorbed from other cultures and societies. Rüpke (p. 5) observes that "one decided advantage attaches to a focus on Rome. Already in the Hellenistic Age, the final two centuries BC, Rome was probably the biggest city in the world, growing in the early Imperial Age to a population of half a million, many say one million inhabitants . . . When it comes to the function of religion in the life of the metropolis and the role of megacities as intellectual and economic motors, Ancient- and especially Imperial-Age

Rome provides a historical ‘laboratory’ with which few other cities in the ancient world can compare. The closest would be Alexandria....”

Rome has given us the word *religio*. But few if any major religious movements began in Rome. The city of Rome was never a Jerusalem. The Tiber was never a Nile. Nonetheless Rome, with its cosmopolitan culture, absorbed and nurtured religious traditions born elsewhere, then passed them on, often in a vigorously organized and thus more stable form, throughout its sphere of influence. Religion gradually became an indispensable cohesive force in the social order that Rome fostered during the Imperial age.

But what, in essence, is religion? How are we to define this phenomenon that we are investigating? Rüpke offers much reflection upon this essential question. At its heart, he suggests, religion can best be understood as a form of communication. This definition, because the author allows sufficient elasticity in what the term ‘communication’ can embrace, on the whole works well. Communication, of course, can even require the need for a certain place and perhaps for a specific time to make contact; thus, place and time are essential pieces of the communicative process. Ritual, too, communicates meaning and intention. And in a more developed phase, written documents — scriptures — are communicative in a formal sense.

Rüpke, starting his inquiry at an early phase, creates an imaginary ninth-century figure, an ordinary young Roman, whom he names Rhea, and places her in the context of an environment suggested by the archaeological evidence that we now have. We can imagine Rhea conferring a sense of specialness, even wonder, upon certain objects and activities in her everyday life, perhaps in some way ‘communicating’ at home and at the tombs, by addressing and making gifts to the indistinct figures of ancestors, spirits or other supernatural forces which Rüpke describes as ‘not indisputably plausible actors.’ This phrase recurs throughout much of the book, evidently to stress the presumed vagueness of belief (as we usually call it) in the earlier phases of Roman religious experience.

Yet it seems to me that the valuable resources increasingly dedicated to cult sites from an early period probably imply that a strong conviction — even belief — about the existence of certain divinities had a long pre-history in Rome and its environs. While it is difficult to reconstruct the precise nature and intensity of such convictions in the preliterate period, folk belief — if we can call it that — surely did not reach the level of dogma that categorizes much of later “lived religion.” There was no “Capitoline Catechism” or “Nemi Confession”! But the Capitoline triad, as specialists in comparative mythology have convincingly argued, had strong affinities with Indo-European triadic analogues; and Diana of Nemi replicated the formidable ancient Mediterranean nature goddesses. In both these powerful cults, each with a spectacular temple and sanctuary, the Romans were reaching out to draw first the Latin League and then an increasingly wider world into their sphere.

Rome's appropriation of these ancient religious ideologies for its own advancement began quite early in its history. And this type of outreach became a long-standing, successful pattern. This special genius in matters religious is a fundamental component of Rome's character. Rüpke, although he does not discuss these two cults as such at any length, does elucidate Rome's religious talents in various other ways. His treatment of the Augustan "Saddle Period" is outstanding in this respect.

The book is on the whole quite readable. The narrative is in general straightforward but does occasionally slip into a style that I find redolent of an academese from a bygone era, with opaque sentences or even whole paragraphs that do not readily yield up clear meaning. Part of one rather difficult paragraph reads (pp. 120–121): "Civic religion' as this category of religious practice is often called, was precisely *not* the binding smallest common denominator, but rather the largest common multiple that covered the fragility of compromises with the vision of an additional level of religious communication, while not casting doubt on the religious practices of individuals, families, or clans, or networks based on trade, commerce, ethnicity, or gender. These latter networks were not controlled, but appropriated." With effort, I was usually able to unpack these puzzles but in some cases I sadly gave up the quest. Perhaps, after all, a bit of mystery is to be expected when the subject matter is religion.

The book will be an invaluable resource for scholars and others who have a basic knowledge of the field. The notes and bibliography come to nearly 150 pages. Professor Rüpke is vice-director and permanent fellow in religious studies at the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt.

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