
I am a student of rabbinic literature, and my subjects are observers and critics of Roman practice of all kinds — including the practices which are lumped together under the heading of “Religion.” My interest in what is called Roman religion stems from a need to understand the relationships my subjects, the rabbis and their followers, had with it. What did they “borrow” from the Romans in their religion? What did they reject? In what ways was rabbinic worship a Roman cult, and how was it decidedly not Roman? How did Jews who were not rabbis perform “Roman-ness” in their religion, how did the rabbis do so, and what did they have to say about it?

For students of the rabbis, Roman religion is often thought of as a constant. It is a yardstick against which we measure changing conceptions and ideas of the rabbis. But we would do well to remember that the period in which the rabbis, writ large, were active, is one of the headiest periods of religious change and upheaval in the Roman Empire. Jörg Rüpke’s book starts in the 9th century BCE but narrows to focus on this period—the first to fourth centuries CE. These are
the centuries in which the rabbinic movement came into its own, and also the centuries which saw the rise of Christianity as yet another religious movement in the empire.

Religion is a fraught term, and Rüpke’s book is essentially a history of the concept that this term describes. It is not, however, a history of the term: unlike many Anglophone authors, Rüpke does not begin his book with a methodological or etymological discussion of what “religion” means, how it shifted in meaning over time, and what ideological baggage it carries today. He does not begin with an etymology of the Latin *religio* or with philosophical discussions on religion. Rüpke instead just uses the term “religion,” and its adjective “religious,” attaching to it a unique definition of his own. In this review I follow his usage and simply use “religion;” readers are advised to add any and all asterisks to this term as mandated by their own training and preference. Similarly, the term “history” might invoke similar critiques. What Rüpke does in this book might more accurately be called a genealogy or an archaeology.

Rüpke does discuss many of these questions — but the reader needs to wait until the end of the book to understand that this is what he is doing. Instead, the book starts with a meticulously researched and documented discussion of the archaeological record of the religion of the earliest inhabitants of the place we now call Rome, looking for practices that indicate a communication with “not undeniably plausible” actors. This, for Rüpke, is what “religion” is, and it is under this heading that he groups together practices such as dedication, prayer, sacrifice, necromancy, magic, and others.

Starting from the bottom allows the reader to begin their acquaintance with the development of Roman “religion” from its very beginnings. Roman “religion” develops, grows and changes with the city of Rome itself. Thus we can appreciate that dedication — of useful or representative objects, first without inscriptions and then with — is an earlier and more fundamental part of Roman religion than animal sacrifice. We realise that works on Roman religion are centuries later than the physical manifestations of the communications with the “not undeniably plausible” actors, and thus perhaps less useful for understanding it than previous generations of scholars thought. We remember, again, that Roman religion is not “of the book,” and it did not begin as an attempt to implement or approximate a series of rituals revealed to the Romans in writing.

What it does not do is clue us in to why exactly Rüpke is doing all this. Although he offers some methodological thoughts in chapter 1 (pp. 5-11), the real work of explaining the project occurs in the epilogue, chapter 13. Here, finally, Rüpke shows his hand. For the Romans, he says, “religion,” used to mean something that one *did*; and then, slowly and haltingly, began to mean something that one *was*. Community coalesced around religious practices until religion itself became a community, and then, again — slowly and haltingly — an exclusive community.

I thus finally understood that this was the project Rüpke set for himself: to document the shift from religion as *practice* to religion as *community*.

As I noted above, *Pantheon* starts from the bottom, literally. The book begins with an impressive survey of the archaeological finds of Iron Age Rome, grouped under the title of “Religious Media.” Here we meet the ritual deposit and the image, the burial practices of the earliest Romans and the gods themselves invoked by name. Chapter 2 goes into the fifth century and discusses practices. As someone schooled on the dichotomy between blood sacrifice and prayer, prevalent in rabbinic literature and in its scholarship, it was striking to see how many religious
practices are neither this nor that: rituals, calendars, prayers, dedications and other “modes of communication.” In this chapter we meet the separation of the sacred from the secular, which became a linchpin of Roman law and politics for the centuries ahead.

The making of the res publica was also the making of hierarchy and bonds between haves and have-nots; as Rüpke notes, its role was primarily the redistribution of wealth (pp. 111-112). Religion played a central role in this redistribution, and so it became a tool in the hands of elites (chapter 5). Specialists come onto the scene slowly: Flamens, Vestal virgins, pontiffs and augurs — and soon in the early republic we can see people becoming members of priestly colleges as part of a successful public career. Temples are built and dedicated, as are games and wars.

Only around the midpoint of the book do we meet others who wrote about religion (chapter 6). This is striking. Rüpke manages to bypass the bias scholars of written words have and truly recreate a vivid picture of what non-bookish religion looked like. He does this using a combination of material findings and testimonia on rituals — as opposed to reflective studies of religion — and comparative work. This is what enables him to successfully engage with the scholarly attempts to account for and explain what was by this time a centuries old set of practices with disparate origins and ends. An illuminating example are the two model livers with little inscriptions used for divination, one Latin, the other cuneiform, printed side by side, on pp. 162-163. One does not need book learning to do “religion,” Rüpke reminds us, but with book learning came a dual effort to both record and reform “religion,” to make it more intelligible.

In this telling, reflection on religion is not the source of practice but just another step in the history of practice. Instead of starting with theoretical works, often Cicero's On the Nature of the Gods, and working into the material world, Pantheon reads them as historical artifacts in their own right. Scholars often thought of the gradual predominance of Christianity as a decisive break with a “pagan” past. Rüpke, however, does not even offer “Christianization” as an index term. The creation of a Christian ekklēsia (and for that matter, an organised synagogue) is for him simply another manifestation of the process in which religion became an anchor for community: something that you are, rather than what you do. The decisive moment, instead, is what Rüpke terms the "Augustan saddle period," (chapter 7) in which, through looking to the Republican past, the emperor took over Roman religion. Its forms were re-created, slowly and haltingly, and renewed. Texts were a central part of this process: the “codification” of Roman religion — its scientific study and systematic description — is thus part of a process not of recording religion, but of reforming it.

The chapter on “Lived Religion” (chapter 8) in the first two centuries CE (the book uses the term AD) should be used as a guide for the study of the rabbinic laws of idolatry. The map of the material world and its varying religious significances that it provides is a treasure chest for the student of the rabbis. It shows the ways in which almost every aspect of the lived world was, for the ancients, an opportunity to encounter the divine. Here Rüpke also takes the time to emphasise that there was little about Roman religion that was private or domestic; it was played out in public gatherings and public spaces, from stadia to street corners.

The territorial expansion of the empire — and the creation of the empire as a unit of reference — brought new gods to the scene. In chapter 9 Rüpke discusses the arrival of Isis and Serapis on the Roman scene and couples this arrival with the creation of the cult of the Augusti. (Interestingly, the Tannaim seem to devote special attention to both the imperial cult and the cult of Isis and
Serapis, pointing to both by name. Of all the non-biblical deities, this is a distinction that they share only with Hermes-Mercury). Surprisingly, this is the first chapter in which Rüpke devotes considerable attention to the cults of individual deities, and even here he downplays their importance, noting that their worship over other gods amounted to not much more than recognition and brand loyalty (these are my terms, not his). But as Rüpke himself notes at the end of this chapter, naming gods in different languages was a fraught and intense intellectual process. Addressing the correct god in writing or prayer was key to successful communication.

Becoming a member of “a religion” today means entering to a hierarchy and coming into contact with experts. These are not the experts of the rituals in chapter 5, but rather new experts: priests, prophets and “lawgivers,” or founders of religion. Rüpke discusses these experts and their function in chapter 10. The knowledge they produce and maintain offers different mechanisms for change in practice, e.g., through learned interpretation. Associating religion with authorised interpretation made religion an intellectual practice — the same kind of practice made familiar to students of ancient Judaism by the rabbis. Here Rüpke notes that making religion a practice of an interconnected scholarly élite created an impetus for the sharing of funds and resources among religious groups across territorial boundaries, further eroding the importance of the city and its public cult. Where Peter Brown, for example, stressed the rising importance of the poor and the church as a destination for additional income, Rüpke stresses not the destinations but the shifts in networks and the pipelines for this money that brought about what might be the most decisive shift in the urban landscape of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity and beyond.

Chapters 11 and 12 are rich and detailed descriptions of the rise of the community as the central locus of religion, and of religion as a mode of making community, from the first century to the fourth CE, where Rüpke’s story ends. Here we meet “our” heroes, Jews and Christians, who created communities built around sacred textual study, and brought philology into the orbit of the sacred. In these chapters, Rüpke shows how and where biographical narrative and historical inquiry became “religious.” Pages 349-354, on the Jews, and 355-358, on Christians, are important resources for scholarship and offer a narrative framework for these groups that brings them out of their parochial isolation into conversation with the broader empire and its workings. In Chapter 12, Rüpke discusses the Antonine Constitution (212), the Decian persecution (249) and the rise of Constantine (306) as steps in a march towards a religion that was aimed at cementing the unity and peace of the Roman empire. Religion is now the tool for community and identity building that, in Rüpke’s telling, exists until the present time.

Pantheon is not just a narrative: it is an indispensable reference work. Its almost 100 pages of bibliography are a comprehensive survey of studies of Roman religion. Rüpke keeps his notes short and to the point. Using the index or a search through the file for keywords, a reader can find a starting point in scholarship for almost any phenomenon related to Roman religion or to religion in the longue durée of antiquity (and beyond). It is a phenomenal synthesis of scholarship, served concisely (sometimes too concisely) by an expert in the field. Reading it is an exciting walk through a forest, but it is also a guide to each tree, shrub and bush in it.

Some notes on the publication and production: The translator, David M. B. Richardson, did a fine job translating. I only wish Rüpke’s curt German sentences and syntax could have been smoothed out more, and gaps between them filled out with the verbosity and additional explanation readers of English have come to expect from their academic writers. This would,
however, have likely resulted in the book being twice as long, but it may have been worth it. The book is handsomely produced and very well proofread. The visual effect of the ceiling of the Pantheon in Rome, with its famous *oculus* skylight on the dust jacket, cut out to reveal a sky-blue cover, complete with birds flying across the subtitle, is striking. It matches Rüpke's intellectual ambition quite nicely: to peer through structures and remains, to see out into the modes in which the Romans communicated with their not completely plausible actors — some of which, not incidentally, I am sure, were birds.