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I

A History of Mediterranean Religion

1. What Is Meant by a History of Mediterranean Religion?

It is the intention of this book to tell the story of an upheaval epochal in its impact. This is the story of how a world well beyond the understanding of most of us was transformed into a world very like our own, at least in one particular. To put it succinctly: we will describe how from a world in which one practiced *rituals*, there emerged a world of *religions*, to which one could belong. This is no straightforward story. The changes I shall relate were not inevitable; no one could have foreseen them. Nor were they irreversible: quite the contrary.

To speak of religions—in the plural—seems to us today quite normal. We may in fact define ourselves in terms of *a* religion. A religion may open doors for us—access to officialdom, to the mass media, to tax offices when it is a question of tax exemptions—or in some cases the doors of a prison. But, although we as individuals may belong to one religion, we can no longer “unthink” the plural form of the term as a concept for describing both present-day and historical societies. And yet, with ever-greater frequency, trends arise that defy such categorization. “New Age” has been one such concept. “Spirituality” increasingly appears to be another, and “mysticism” has a long history as a phenomenon of this kind. Countless Christians, Muslims, and

Hindus talk quite straightforwardly of themselves as belonging to one (only rarely several) of many religions, but there are good grounds for wondering whether, in many cases, we should not speak of culture and cultural differences rather than of membership of different religions.

When a concept has many different meanings, windows of comparison are opened across space and time, and in many cases it is only then that a meaningful conversation becomes possible. A history, moreover, can be communicated successfully only when the number of concepts in play is limited, when recognizability is vouchsafed to all participants, despite small differences; otherwise, we are faced with a multitude of disparate, sometimes conflicting histories, with results that may be entertaining (think only of the “Thousand and One Nights”), and thoroughly informative and revealing (a thousand everyday stories adding up to a “microhistory”), but with no end, no “moral.” This is all the more true of a long history such as the one being attempted here, where the actors change repeatedly, or at least often more frequently than the parameters of religious practices and concepts.

Conceptual harmonization can, of course, add to the difficulty when an effort to achieve such harmony superimposes an appearance on continuity that masks on-going changes and transformations. It then becomes critical to refine our concepts, to notice differences. We begin to see that the world we are describing comprises many geographical spaces, where many different kinds of development are underway: a change that we note in one location may also have taken place elsewhere, but there is no guarantee that it had the same consequences in both settings. Thus, although a history of Mediterranean religion is not a universal history of religion, it must nevertheless always take into account other geographical spaces, must ask what happened there, and must notice instances where ideas, objects, and people broke through those walls erected in our imagination by the metaphor of separated spaces.

My Mediterranean narrative recognizes that comparable transformations with similar outcomes (in religions, in assemblages of practices, in concepts, and in symbols) took place in other epochs and in

other realms, where they were perceived by the peoples they affected as being distinctive. I think particularly of western, southern, and eastern Asia. And yet, in the past half-millennium, religion in many of these regions was very different. I maintain that the institutionalization of religion characteristic of the Modern Period in many parts of Europe and the Americas, and the conflict-ridden rigidity of the “religions” or “confessions” of which one may be a member—but only one at a time—rests on the particular configurations of religion and power that prevailed in antiquity, and on their legal codification in Late Antiquity. Not only the Islamic expansion, but above all the specifically European developments of the Reformation and the formation of national states, reinforced the confessional character and institutional consolidation of supraregional religious networks. This model was exported to many, but certainly not all parts of the world in the course of colonial expansion, and frequently in a spirit of arrogance.¹

It is circum-Mediterranean and increasingly Euro-Mediterranean history post-antiquity that draws our attention to Rome. But our choice of Rome as a hub is mistaken if it is origin myths that we seek. Ancient polytheism and its narrative worlds did not develop anywhere near Rome, but rather in the Middle East, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. The monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam connect in Jerusalem, not in the city on the Tiber. Moreover, we have Athens to thank, not the Seven Hills, for the polemical separation of philosophy and religion, virtually a unique marker of Western religious thinking. Even the Latin-language codification of the law, the *Corpus iuris civilis*, which left its mark on many modern legal systems, emerged from Constantinople, the Rome of the Byzantine Empire, and not from its Italian predecessor. Certainly, the word *religio* had its origin in Rome. But that has only slight relevance to the change that is the subject of this present narrative.

Origin is not everything, however. Rome was situated in a part of the world with a long history of absorbing cultural impulses rather than initiating them. From the end of the 1st millennium BC onward, the city exported multiple conceptions of religion throughout the Mediterranean.² And with the destruction of Jerusalem, Roman power politics

became a central factor in the history of various religious identities. The growth of the empire into a multicultural space with a newly stratified power structure, the accelerated exchange of ideas, goods, and people within such a space, the attraction its center had for prophets no less than for philosophers, all of these factors combined to assure that Rome would be a focal point of the first millennium AD. In the centuries prior to this, Rome is to be seen more as one *instance* of Mediterranean development, one with its own history and timeline, with the consequence that we must constantly question what is to be regarded as typical and what is untypical for other regions. The distinctive strand that will be represented by Rome in the present narrative will thus only slowly emerge from a consideration of Italian and Mediterranean beginnings.

Our attention is thus set free to range widely over religious conceptions, symbols, and activities, an entire spectrum of cultural practices from ancient oriental high cultures to Late Antiquity (and beyond), viewing them all as they undergo substantial processes of development, and all with a multitude of facets in common. From a long-term and global perspective, the development of particular forms in the fields of architecture and the media here assume considerable importance. The Buddhism that emerged from India owes a considerable degree of its imagery to Greek modifications of Egyptian archetypes as can be seen in the art of the Gandhara region. Moreover, the concept of a “pantheon” of deities interacting in a hierarchy, a concept that once again originated in western Asia and the ancient Orient, played an important role in defining the form and personification of Greek and Roman conceptions of the divine, and their adoption in Christianity. The religious history of the Roman period had far-flung ramifications. In the Mediterranean world we have the formation of Judaism with the emergence of Christianity from it, and the dissemination of Christianity’s Romanized form via Rome and Constantinople, while Islam arose at the southeastern periphery of the same world, and, with its expansion across the south, increasingly toward the east and even the northeast of that space, in many ways marked the end of antiquity. The processes of dissemination, or more precisely

those of mutual exchange on the eastern frontiers and along routes of contact—the Silk Road to Central Asia, shipping routes to southern India³—still lie in the shadowy regions of scholarship, and frequently lack even elementary appraisals: a situation that cannot be altered by a focused history such as is intended here.

In any event, however, 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. Such numbers would not be equaled until the High Medieval Period, with cities such as Cordoba in Moorish Spain and Bian (now Kaifeng) in central China, or Peking in the Early Modern Period. 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, the new foundation of Alexander the Great and cultural melting pot on the Nile Delta, and perhaps Antioch, with Ptolemaïs and Memphis next in size. The Latin pejorative term *pagani* did not describe people merely as non-Christians, but also identified them as country folk. The sentiment that whatever is important takes place in cities—and especially metropolises—is not new, but it has never been thoroughly studied in the case of religions. And so my story of religion here ventures onto new ground. But what exactly *is* religion?

2. Religion

When it comes to describing transformations in religion, unexamined preconceptions should not be allowed to stand. We normally base our thinking about religion on its plural, “religions.” It is even maintained by some that religion actually exists only in terms of that plural form. Religions are understood as traditions of religious practices, conceptions, and institutions, in some contexts even as business or business-like enterprises. According to an important

strain of sociological thought that goes back to Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), we are dealing here with social products, products of societies⁴ comprised of groups of people normally living together within a territory, for whom the central core of their common existence, their shared orientation, is shielded from daily discussion by being vested in symbolic religious forms. There emerges a system of signs whose immanence is safeguarded by the performance of rituals, and which seeks to explain the world in images, narratives, written texts, or refined dogma, and to regulate behavior by the use of ethical imperatives or by an established way of life, sometimes by recourse to an effective apparatus of sanctions (for instance through the power of the state), but sometimes even without that implied threat.

Such a conception of religion can explain a lot; it meets its limits, however, when it seeks to explain religious pluralism, the enduring coexistence of different, mutually contradictory conceptions and practices. It can find itself at a loss also when it must decipher the quite distinctive relationship between the individual and his or her religion. It is repeatedly accused of being too closely oriented to “Western,” and above all Christian religious and conceptual history, and criticized for its unquestioning “colonialism” in superimposing Western concepts onto other cultures.⁵ There are similarly problematic ramifications when we seek to apply this conception to antiquity.⁶ The reason for this, too, lies in the present. The dissolution of traditional allegiances that we so frequently observe in our time is read as religious individualism or as the decline of religion, or even as the displacement of collective religion by individual spirituality.⁷ This perspective then becomes associated with the complementary assumption that early societies and their religions must have been characterized by a high degree of collectivism. We shall see how this assumption, already problematic in respect of the present day, creates a highly distorted picture of the past.⁸

This does not, however, compel us to abstain from speaking about religion. What we need, rather, is a concept of religion that enables us to describe, with precision, changes both in the social aspects of religion and in its significance to individuals. This can be achieved successfully

by conceiving of religion from the standpoint of the individual and of his or her social environment. I shall not focus on the mental systems that have been constructed by both insiders and external observers, for these can in any case never yield more than fragmentary and incomplete particulars about a religion.⁹ Instead, my starting point is lived ancient religion—in all its variants, its differing contexts, and social configurations.¹⁰ Only in rare instances—and these will, of course, be given due attention—do the activities of people dealing with one another coalesce into networks¹¹ and organized systems, or find their way into written texts, so that they take on a life of their own and develop into the massive, autonomous, and often long-lived structures that we normally categorize as religions.

How, then, is religion to be comprehended? We can only hope to gain a perspective on changes in religion, on the dynamics embodied in it and how these produce changes in the social and cultural contexts of religious actors, if we do not assume at the outset that what religion is self-evident. We must, then, seek out boundaries for our subject that take in what it is about religion that interests us—namely those aspects of it that conform to our view of the subject—but at the same time the boundaries must be broad enough to include the deviant, the surprising in the religious practice of a particular time. I see the religion of the epoch we are considering from a situative perspective, as including actors (whether they be described as divine or gods, demons or angels, the dead or the immortal) who are in some respect superior. Above all, however, their presence, their participation, their significance in a particular situation is not simply an unquestioned given: other human participants in the situation might regard them as invisible, silent, inactive, or simply absent, perhaps even as nonexistent. In short, religious activity is present when and where, in a particular situation, at least one human individual includes such actors in his or her communication with other humans, whether by merely referring to those actors or by directly addressing them.

Even in ancient cultures, communicating with or acting in relation to such beings was not simply accepted as a matter of course. In respect of the present day, this will scarcely be disputed: the assertion

that transcendent actors¹² are participants, either actual or to be invoked, would be viewed askance in many parts of Europe, would indeed appear quite implausible to many people. Even when a particular human actor is firmly convinced of the immanence of a god, or of something divine, in the presence of others he or she will frequently abstain from making such a claim, in either word or action, for fear of inviting ridicule. Since, in my view, religion consists primarily in communication, I would have to say that in such a situation religion does not occur. The reluctant modern European believer I have described is, however, not a universal figure. The presence of the transcendent is entirely noncontroversial in other regions, and was so in other epochs.

Nevertheless—and this is my point—making such an assertion and/or taking actions compatible with it would be problematic even in the ancient world. It would risk damage to the credibility of the speaker and might put his or her competence into question. This is because the assertion would never be couched as a general statement that gods exist. Instead it would take the form of a claim that one particular deity, whether Jupiter or Hercules, had helped or would help the speaker or other individuals, or that Fortuna (fate) stood behind the speaker's own actions. Such a claim might be borne out, or it might not. "You of all people?," "Venus?" "We want to see that for ourselves!" "But you're not normally so very pious!": the possible demurrals were legion. And religious authority could not simply be acquired by mere prayer: some individuals were successful in their claims and earned a livelihood by them; for others, priesthood remained a spare-time occupation, and in the end might not even secure election to the local council. Ascribing authority to invisible actors and exercising corresponding circumspection in one's actions appears, as postulated by evolutionists, to have been conducive to survival and accordingly favored in human development;¹³ but it was a tactic that provided an opening for challenges by fellow humans and its systematic use could provoke organized dissent.¹⁴

In a Germany (and to some extent a Europe) that, with either satisfaction or horror, sees itself as largely secularized, it is easy to forget

that regular church attendance and church marriage, knowledge of the catechism, and generalized church tax were not widely imposed until the nineteenth century, and that this was done in an attempt to use religion as an instrument of social discipline, to instill in all and sundry the awareness of belonging to a particular Confession, and to make church membership and services available and obligatory for everybody, even in far distant places.¹⁵ It is not simply the case that the past was more pious. Countless thousands brought small gifts to Roman temples to show their gratitude or to give emphasis to their requests; millions did not. Millions buried their deceased children or parents with care, and even provided them with grave goods; countless millions contented themselves with disposing of the corpses.

The question we must ask in respect both of present-day religion and the religion of the past, of the ancient Mediterranean world, is: In what ways did religious communication and religious activity enhance the individual's agency, his or her ability to act, and to carve out a space for initiatives? How did it strengthen his or her competence and creativity in dealing with everyday problems and with problems that went beyond the everyday? In other words, how did reference to actors who were not indisputably plausible contribute to the formation of collective identities that would enable the individual to act or think as part of a group, of a social formation that might vary greatly in its form and strength, no matter whether it existed in actuality or only in the imagination or fevered awareness of a few people? If we are speaking of strategies here, however, we must think not only of dealings with other people, and of implied learning processes and gains (or losses!) in social status, but also of strategies for dealing successfully with those who stood outside the everyday, or who intervened unbidden in that everyday; namely, of the transcendent actors, the gods. Their attention must be sought. They must be called to listen. A divine "power" about whom and with whom nobody speaks is not a power. Without invocations or ritual, inscriptions and religious infrastructures, visible images and audible priests, religion does not happen. And this has consequences. In a society without institutional memory, religious

developments (and not religious developments only) can very quickly dissipate.

To look back into the past from the standpoint of the present and detect traces of such developments is no simple matter. We must keep our eyes and ears open. A religious history of the ancient Mediterranean world must use multiple approaches and consult a wide range of sources. To unearth a lived ancient religion demands that we pay attention to the voices of individual witnesses, to their experiences and practices, their distinct ways of appropriating traditions, to the way they communicate and innovate. For example, the use of a god's name in a particular situation does not mean that there was a structured "pantheon" with fixed names and roles, although of course we must search carefully for other, similar utterances overheard by our particular witness, for comparable utterances known to him or her, and for later imitations or variations. Such information may be gleaned from ancient histories, poetry, memoirs, and plays; it may often comprise the imaginings or inferences of ancient authors, rather than direct attestations of other people's thoughts. Ancient religion, too, was rooted in individual experience and agency. At the same time, it was subject to constant change, in a constant state of becoming. In spite of the impressive traces it has left to us in the form of texts and monuments, and information about religious institutions, it stubbornly eluded attempts to freeze it, to fix it as a ritual system with a stable pantheon of gods and a rigid system of beliefs. Only by narrative can this ancient Mediterranean religion be called forth and given shape.

Before the advent of Judaism and, especially, Christianity, both religions that are strongly oriented to the individual,¹⁶ the notion of an individual religion was so foreign that some further clarifications may be in order.¹⁷ Ancient religion consists in what is said about it, what we tell of it. It does not simply lie to hand in the debris of archaeological digs, or in inscriptions and literary texts, waiting patiently to be expounded and revisualized.¹⁸ A description of what the lived religion of antiquity looked like, and how far its reach extended, will begin in chapter 2. Some readers may wish to jump ahead to this discussion.

3. Facets of Religious Competence

It is difficult to catch sight of an individual at a distance of two thousand years. It is only with difficulty that we can fathom the innermost soul of someone still living, even though we have available to us interviews and journals. The surviving remnants of an ancient everyday life and of its attempts at communication present us with far greater challenges. It is all the more important to develop at least a model conception of how ancient Mediterranean people went about developing strategies of religious behavior in their constant interactions with one another, to determine what facets of that process were of particular significance, and how these came to define religion in the final centuries of the first millennium BC and the first centuries of the first millennium AD. I will next look more closely at three facets of “religious competence,” by which I mean the experience and knowledge necessary for successful religious action, and the authority hence attributed by others. These facets—religious agency; religious identity; and techniques and media for religious communication—while closely linked, allow us three different perspectives from which to examine what appears to us as familiar and what seems alien in ancient religion.

Religious Agency

Interpretive social and cultural sciences have characterized human agency as a meaningful process, to be understood against a background of socially created meaning.¹⁹ The socio-philosophical theory called Pragmatism has refined such analyses: agency is claimed to be above all a process of problem-solving. The individual is constantly confronted by new situations, which he or she attempts to overcome in ways that are not entirely based on preconceived notions. The meaning of agency and its goals evolve in the very course of exercising agency, undergoing some measured degree of change despite the fact that the agent is restricted by social contexts and traditions. Within this concrete yet changeable arena of possibilities, creativity in actions is possible.²⁰

Competence in the exercise and scope of agency is developed in the course of exercising agency.²¹ Agency is in this sense “the temporally constructed engagement by actors with different structural environments . . . through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproducing and transforming those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.”²² It is the constantly renewed and also repeated interactions between people that create the structures and traditions that define and limit the subsequent exercise of agency, which in turn also alters or even challenges those same structures and traditions.²³

It is characteristic of religion that, by introducing “divine” actors or authorities, it enlarges the field of agency, offering a wider range to the imagination and a wider choice of ways to intervene in a given situation. By attributing agency to “divine actors” (or the like), religion enables the human actor to transcend his or her situation and to devise correspondingly creative strategies for action—perhaps by initiating a ritual, or as a person possessed. But the converse is also possible. The same mechanism can also trigger a renunciation of personal agency, resulting in impotence and passivity, with agency being reserved for the quite “special” actors. Over time, agency thus comes to be delineated along increasingly definite lines and is enhanced in its effectiveness, so that ever more successful and sophisticated “schematizations” are undertaken. These are predicated on past exercises of agency; routines are thus established that facilitate ever more sweeping projections as to the future consequences of agency. This process happens in the context of hypothesis-framing and yields ever more apt “contextualizations” that aid in the practice-orientated assessment of the present state of the facts on the basis of social experience.²⁴ It is not the single actor who “has” agency. Rather, in concrete negotiation with his or her structural environment, the individual finds spaces for initiatives and is imbued by others with the responsibility to act. Structures and the individual as actor reciprocally configure one another.²⁵

On the basis of such reflections, we might now feel prompted to sift the evidence for forms of religious learning and means of acquiring religious knowledge. Where could young people observe religion,

and participate in it?²⁶ How did they learn to interpret experiences as religious? Where was training in self-reflexion, the contemplation of an autonomous self, to be obtained?²⁷ How could new religious roles or a religious name be assumed, so as to influence one's further interactions?

These and other questions will be addressed in the following chapters with an eye to opening new perspectives on religious agency.

Religious activity was also closely connected to the structuring of time by means of calendars, month-names, and lists of feast-days, a structuring based on "hypotheses" that designated particular days as especially suitable for communicating with the gods and reflecting on the affairs of the community. Contrary to common assumptions, we shall see that none of this was carved in stone; rather it was ever susceptible to innovation and adjustment.²⁸ Prophets and prophetic movements were able to exert enormous influence on future expectations, both individual and collective. But it is also true that "contextualizations" in the here and now provided considerable scope for the creative exercise of religious agency. The character of space and time could be changed by acts of sacralization; distant actors, too—enemies behind city walls, fugitive thieves, travelers—could be reached remotely by means of rituals, oaths, and curses, or by inserting pins into dolls.²⁹ By the transfer of religious capabilities and authority or the invocation of oracles, new directions could be given to political decision-making processes.³⁰

Religious Identity

The individual seldom acts alone. More often, he or she has the notion of acting as a member of a particular group: a family, a village, a special-interest group, or even a "people" or "nation"; a notion that may be strongly situation-dependent, emphasizing now the one, now another identity, as a mother, a worshipper of Bona Dea, an adept of the Bible or of Stoic philosophy.³¹ Such notions, even when vaguely formed, can influence individual behavior.³² But we must always be clear that these are first and foremost *notions* of belonging, often failing to take

into account whether the group in question exists in the notions of others, or whether others count this person as belonging to the group. It is thus a matter of self-classification; of the individual's assessment of his or her membership and the significance he or she assigns it, in common with others insofar as such membership is discernible by them. It is an identity forged from a felt emotional connection and dependence (to the extent of a considerable overlapping of the personal and this collective identity), and its importance rests in the degree to which membership is embedded in everyday practice and characterizes personal behavior. Finally, it consists in the narratives associated with such notions, and a knowledge of the values, defining characteristics, and history of the group.³³ In view especially of the gradual character of the development of religions in antiquity, it must be stressed that the term "group" does not imply an established association. A situation-dependent grouping of (not only human!) actors, among whom the individual in question does or does not number himself or herself, is sufficient. The many ancient inscriptions recording family relationships, citizenship, or place of origin can also be read as declarations of membership.³⁴ For many, of course, this could lead to highly complex collective identities, involving various affiliations (and also dissociations).³⁵

It is precisely when our evidence of "religion" is confined to a few archaeological traces, a statuette here, fragments of a vase there, dogs' bones, or the post-holes of a suspected temple, that we must beware of reifying and essentializing these groups and communities. They are not simply defined by the close distribution of houses, identical practices, the same language, or similar votive gifts or gods. "Community is . . . something that you do," and it is individuals who do it: ". . . how people feel linked to particular places, just as who people think they are, and equally who they are not, determines how they associate themselves with others in space and through time, over generations, in shared memories or in agreed forgettings."³⁶ The apparently archaic stability of the social context, of the locality, is often deceptive; it is only a snapshot of a reality in flux.³⁷ The history of

ancient religions cannot be described as a process that turned “tribal religions” into “world religions,” as handbooks have had it until very recently.

Religious Communication

The issue of competence in communication provides a third way of looking at how an individual brings “religion” into play in his interaction with other people.³⁸ But the fact that religion may at the same time be understood to *be* communication allows us to associate enhanced possibilities for communication with the growing variety of religious practices that existed in antiquity.

We do not know how and how often the majority of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire spoke with their gods or their God, or what they spoke about. But we have a considerable number of ancient texts that describe such communication, and tens or rather hundreds of thousands of direct witnesses to it, in the form of the remains of gifts, as well as visible documentation, intended to be permanent, in the form of votive inscriptions and dedications. This points to the dual character of much, although not necessarily all communication with the divine: the religious act is also a message to the actor’s fellow humans, his audience or readership, to give witness by eye and ear. To cry *O Iuppiter, audi* (“Oh Jupiter, hear”), also means: “Look. I am pious. I am in league with the gods. Jupiter listens to me. Whoever is against me is also against the god and the divine order!”

We shall have to return later to the interpersonal functions of religious communication. It suffices at the moment to understand that this reaching out to the divine by participants in an action gets attention and creates relevance. In this latter term lies the key to understanding communication. In order for a communication to be successful, attention must be created by the promise of relevant information. This must be given credibly and audibly by the speaker, whose audience must indicate to him or her that they apprehend and believe the promise before the communication can proceed. In the rush and tumble of

everyday affairs, only the promise of relevance (whatever form that promise takes) can attract attention to a communication that then changes those addressed (in ways that are never predictable!), and in this sense meets with success.³⁹ It is not surprising that human beings extend these ground rules of communicative success to their communications with nonhumans.

To reach the gods, then, it is necessary to attract and retain their attention. The religious history of antiquity is also the history of how formal strategies were developed and employed in the Mediterranean world, in Italy and in Rome, to achieve that end, and how they were then refined or even radically questioned. In order, however, to understand these practices and the alterations they underwent, we must keep one ground rule in mind: “Hey, you . . .” is more effective than “I should like to say . . .” The key to success does not lie in making the correct selection from a catalogue of prayers, vows, offerings, blood sacrifices, types of processions, and circus games (all according to the size of one’s purse), but in how effective a combination of such communicative techniques one adopts. Here, the categorizations in classic Religious Studies texts give a quite false impression. Addressing a deity almost never involved merely a prayer, or only a sacrifice.

The very first consideration seems to have been location. An already established sanctuary testified to the success of others’ efforts to communicate. It suggested the proximity of a deity, who lived in this place, or at least visited it quite frequently. Naïve confidence in the presence of the deity might in rapid order be replaced by philosophical considerations as to what conditions were conducive to the presence of an omnipotent deity: repeated reports of statues nodding to a supplicant do not mean that the deity and the statue were equated in conversation outside the temple. It was common for a deity to be invoked in another’s sanctuary, and not considered unthinkable to document that successful act of communication by means of, say, an image of the alien god in that same place. On the other hand, it must be pointed out that the choice of an established time, perhaps the feast day of the particular sanctuary or god, was a far less important issue. The critical considerations were how urgent a need was, when a

cult site could physically be reached, and whether one was even available. In many towns, for example, cult spaces dedicated to Mithras were not accessible for individual worship, or certainly not all of the time; if someone nevertheless wished to turn to this god, other public sanctuaries were available, as dedications to Mithras left in them testify.

Well-nigh every choice of location was preceded by the question as to how the divine was to be brought into the place. Systematizers like Fabius Pictor in the second century BC and the subsequently much-cited Marcus Terentius Varro in the mid-first century BC sought to assign a specialized deity to cover every possible source of danger, sometimes perhaps inventing them for the purpose (or perhaps, more precisely, inventing names of divinities that could readily be invoked), but in everyday reality recourse was held to a manageable number of popular deities that were present either at cult sites or in the form of images. The situation might remain even more amorphous, especially in rural areas and in the northwestern and western European provinces, where the divine might always be addressed in the plural, as a set of related figures (*Iunones, Matres, Fata*), depicted in an idiosyncratic combination of iconographically standardized (and only thus recognizable to us as “identical”) figurations.⁴⁰ Accessing the divine in an architectural sanctuary, moreover, was not the only option, for a spring or a painted house-altar within one’s own four walls was still a viable and in some situations preferred venue.

The invocation to the god or goddess was not just one of several elements within prayer, but rather the very foundation of the act of communication. It required intensification and could be extended in many ways so as to arouse increased attention and further charge the act with relevance. Foremost among the methods used was acoustic enhancement. The invocation was isolated from the bustle of the everyday by stillness. It was not made in everyday language. Formal speech helped to ritualize the act of communication, elevating it above the ordinary. The effect was furthered by singing instead of merely speaking, and by instrumental music. By the choice of instruments, it was possible to connect with particular traditions, attract the attention of a specific deity, and signal that special connection to

those present. We often come across the double-reeded *tibia*; but trumpet-like instruments, organs, and percussion instruments were also used. It seems that there were actual musical themes connected to certain sanctuaries.

Care was taken over choice of clothing, especially when the act of communication involved a high degree of public visibility. What was critical might be the color of the clothing, as for example the wearing of white in processions dedicated to Isis; or the type of garment chosen, such as the toga worn by Roman officials in the late Republic and early Imperial Age, and probably by Roman citizens generally on festive occasions. These very examples show that it was less a question of indicating a specific affinity than of signaling simply that a special kind of ritualized communication was in process; the toga was in fact normally white. But, on the other hand, even the choice of foliage for wreaths worn on the head was capable of expressing fine distinctions.

The attention of both the deity and of any passers-by could also be attracted by coordinated movement. Processions, either small or large, walking in step, were common. In the larger cities there was scarcely any other way of drawing large crowds of both participants and on-lookers. Dances of highly varying degrees of exuberance, such as the “three-step” dances of the Roman *salii* (jumpers), and the more abandoned dances to Isis depicted on reliefs in Latium, also played a role. Self-flagellation, sometimes in public, was first practiced by monks in the eastern Mediterranean; and writers reported the castration of priests of Cybele; although this was surely not a public ritual open to observers.

Wide scope for communication was also provided by the custom, borrowed from the interpersonal realm, of bestowing gifts, which, by their material value, would heighten the relevance of the spoken message. These were chosen with a view to the intent of the communication (the fulfillment of a request, a demonstration of gratitude and praise, enduring harmony with the divine) and they had the capacity to secure that message in lasting form, at least until the object was cleared away. Both aesthetics and material worth could play a part in

the choice of gift, but mass-produced miniaturizations were not unusual, and were apparently sufficient to attract divine attention. But lasting visibility was not necessary. Small gifts (accompanying the utterance of an oath, or documenting its success) might also be directly deposited in pits, sunk into rivers, or thrown into the fire and so destroyed or melted down. These practices will be treated in the next chapter on the early period. Unlike inscriptions, written messages (on stone or wooden tablets) in such cases would no longer be legible to others, excepting deities. On the basis of a specifically theological judgment as to what religion should be, modern scholarship has wrongly postulated that the term “magic” could be applied to these variant practices.

The gift did not have to be durable. The burning of incense, the presentation of selected foodstuffs (many different kinds of cakes, for example), the odor from the preparation of animals that had been slaughtered and dedicated to the deity: all these were performance, enactments underlining the importance of the attempt at communication. Theatrical performances as gifts to deities were a specialty of the Greeks and then the Romans from the fifth century BC onward. They became quite elaborate, but were not without parallels in Central American and Southeast Asian cultures. In addition to dance and song, we should mention the phenomenon called in Latin *ludi* (games). These were competitions offered to the gods, usually to whole groups of gods, whose busts would be brought in procession to the circus and placed on special seats. Scaenic games (*ludi scaenici*) were dramatic productions staged for the gods; in Greece, and soon afterward in Rome also, we even find structures erected especially for these occasions.

We must keep in mind that such enormous architectural (and, of course, financial) endeavors were not funded by religious organizations, but as a rule relied on the initiative of individuals who wished, by such an undertaking, to give proof of their exceptional gratitude to and intimacy with a deity. Authorities such as city councils had to give their support for the projects and there was public wrangling over building sites, but it was individuals who took it upon themselves

to donate some of their war plunder or other gains to cover the costs, and it was they who decided on the architectural forms structures should take, and which particular deity would be honored. They thus established the religious infrastructure, and by their choices shaped the cult and decided which gods would be most easily accessible. In a word, they defined the “pantheon.” We must also inquire into the social rules that determined which particular forms of communication should be employed. Who had access to these modes of communication? Did access depend on ethnicity, the office an individual held, prestige, or simply financial means? What monopolizing forces were operative, from the burning of unauthorized oracles to decisions regarding the architecture of amphitheatres?⁴¹ We must never forget, however, that the broad range of religious practices we have just surveyed offered a wide field in which individuals could obtain success, authority, respect, or even simply a living that was not available to them in other areas of social, political, or merely domestic activity.

As ancient religion increasingly came to comprise visible public acts, the private religious communication of individuals also began to draw audiences, who might either be present at a proceeding or, if absent, could hear about the event through metacommunicative means, through discourse about the proceedings by word of mouth or via secondary media (such as inscriptions or texts). The animal sacrifice required a feast committee; vows were spoken out loud; and many forms of divination took place in public. As a result, the act of communication in addressing a deity was received by an audience beyond the intended addressee. The vow spoken aloud by the army commander not only reached the deity, but also demonstrated the commander’s religious competence to his soldiers, who were likewise his intended audience.

But the public character of religious communication not only had the effect of giving further levels of meaning to communication between humans and gods. Public exposure also played the role of a witness, lending extra weight to a communication that was otherwise so asymmetric and so liable to failure, or at least subjecting it to the scrutiny of socially tested rules of obligation, reciprocity, and deference.

Where the element of public witness was absent, written forms were available quite early in the Greco-Roman world, as is attested by curse tablets and inscribed votive texts.

4. Religion as a Strategy at the Level of the Individual

I have defined religion as the extension of a particular environment beyond the immediately plausible social milieu of living humans: and frequently also animals. Such an extension may involve forms of agency, ways of structuring identity, and means of communication. What enters into any given milieu that is beyond the “immediately plausible” can vary in ways that are entirely culture-dependent; plausibility, “worthiness of applause,” is itself a communicative rhetorical category. In one instance it might apply to the dead, in another to gods conceived as having human form, or even to places whose location is not fixed in terms of mere topography, or to humans beyond a sea. What in a particular culture may be understood as not normally plausible depends on the boundaries drawn by the student of religion observing that culture. This is evident in the concentration on “gods” discernible in my own examples; but it can also be seen in demarcations such as my radical rejection of a boundary between religion and magic.⁴²

A high degree of investment in the construction of initially implausible actors as “social partners” consistently produces in the person making that investment an “excess” of confidence, power, or problem-solving capacity, an outcome that in turn becomes precarious on account of the way it disadvantages others, who may then seek to defend themselves against it. Sacralization, declaring objects or processes in the immediately plausible, visible environment to be “holy,” is one element of such an investment strategy.⁴³ The investment metaphor can easily be illustrated by the enormous outlay religions regularly devote to media, cult images, and sanctuaries, as well as to complex rituals and texts as strategies for communication, a topic I touched on above, under the heading “Religious Communication.” We should also, however, think about the ways in which religion reinforces *inferior*

status. This is a process that some affected individuals counter by efforts at social change within the religious context, while others turn their backs on religion to pursue social mobility on their own (when they do not turn to quietism).⁴⁴

With these introductory observations, I have not sought to provide answers to the question of the great religious transformations, but rather to indicate the questions that still remain to be posed, the observations that yet need to be wrung from source material that is often all too sparse. I have also hinted at interdependencies and mechanisms of reinforcement in the field of religious development: the acquisition of competencies both strengthens communication and lowers the thresholds confronting it,⁴⁵ and a denser communication network intensifies the need on the part of the individual actor to develop more complex collective identities.⁴⁶

This is not to say that this model describes a stable pathway, a definite evolutionary trajectory, or a system in equilibrium. Rather, over the course of time in many of the areas we need to consider, it is possible to observe movement in different and even contradictory directions. The processes we observe—individualization, mediatization, and institutionalization—are all commonly regarded as indicators of modernization rather than as facets of the religious history of the ancient Mediterranean. But, by observing these processes, and working with the concept of religion as we have defined it, we shall be able to accomplish our goal; namely, to observe and explicate the highly unstable phenomenon that is the religion of the ancient Mediterranean world in all its guises: the entire Pantheon.⁴⁷ Time after time in the following chapters, we shall see how each of these facets turns into an epochal process.

Our attention will turn first from the Mediterranean and Italy to various locations in central Italy and Etruria (chapters II–IV), where evidence is to be found that will ease our understanding of Iron Age religious practices. Only then will the narrative turn to Rome under the middle and late Republic (chapters V–VI) and in the Augustan Age (chapter VII). But Rome was never isolated, as will be made clear time and again in these chapters. It engaged in exchange and

competition with other central-Italic centers and with actors around the Mediterranean. We will therefore turn our attention increasingly to this wider arena as we come to consider the Imperial Age, beginning with religious practices during the early part of that period (chapter VIII). Many developments regarding both the available store of religious signs (chapter IX) and the evolution of religious expertise and authority can be understood only in the context of the Mediterranean region as a whole, and the exchange of people, goods and knowledge that was given extra impetus by the Roman Empire (chapter X). This same broader context also becomes critically important when it comes to the self-conceptions and orientations of individuals and local groups, and continues to affect their religious conceptions and practices into Late Antiquity (chapters XI–XII). My narrative ends in the mid-fourth century: not with the end of Roman religion, nor with the privileging of Christian groups, nor with the expansion of Islam. Rather, the end-point, the culmination of all the far-reaching changes undergone in the course of history by the practices, conceptions, and institutions covered here, consists in the phenomenon now associated worldwide with the concept of “religion.” And yet my epilogue (chapter XIII) seeks to demonstrate how open the situation still was in the fourth century, and how contingent has been the historical course since taken.

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