

**Literature and
Religion at Rome**

*Cultures, Contexts,
and Beliefs*

Denis Feeney

Cambridge University Press

Literature and Religion at Rome

ROMAN LITERATURE AND ITS CONTEXTS

Rather than asking how religion is transmuted into literature, we should, Denis Feeney argues, be thinking in terms of a range of cultural practices, interacting, competing, and defining each other in the process. Capitalising on recent revaluations of Roman religion by ancient historians, which have stressed the vitality and creativity of the Romans' religious system throughout its long history of continual adaptation to new challenges, this book argues that Roman literature was not an artificial or parasitic irrelevance in this context, but an important element of the dynamic religious culture, with its own status as another form of religious knowledge. Since Roman culture, both literary and religious, was so thoroughly Hellenised, the author also makes a case for a reconsideration of the traditional antitheses between Greek and Roman literature and religion, arguing against Hellenocentric prejudices and in favour of a more creative model of cultural interaction.

ROMAN LITERATURE AND ITS CONTEXTS

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*For my parents,
who first taught me literature and religion*

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Preface

I had thought it would be easier to write a short book than a long one, but I was mistaken. As I explored this large topic, I was assisted by many friends and colleagues, who generously commented on drafts, responded to questions, or made it possible for me to read their own work in draft or proof: Alessandro Barchiesi, Mary Beard, Peter Bing, Susanna Morton Braund, Jason Davies, Mary Depew, Julia Dyson, Larry Earp, Elaine Fantham, Kirk Freudenburg, Polly Hoover, Jonas Jølle, Robin Lane Fox, Jennifer Larson, Jacques Lezra, Charles Martindale, Barry Powell, Simon Price, Christopher Rowe, William Sax, Neil Whitehead, Peter Wiseman, Susanne Wofford, Tony Woodman. Among these, I owe a special debt to the careful reading and editorial acumen of Julia Dyson and Tony Woodman. I have tried out ideas, especially from the first two chapters, on many audiences: first, the Roman Society in London, and then the Universities of Chicago, Emory, Harvard, Iowa, Ohio State, Oklahoma, Pisa, Princeton, Stanford, Texas (Austin), Verona, Virginia, Washington. I trust it is not invidious to single out the following members of those audiences for special thanks: Gian Biagio Conte, Karl Galinsky, Robert Kaster, John Miller, Niall Slater, Richard Tarrant, Richard Thomas, Peter White, and Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (for his injunction '*rem tene*', which I have tried always to remember). I have only myself to blame if I have not made proper use of the aid which all of the people mentioned here have given me.

My principal debt is to two friends: my co-editor, Stephen Hinds, and Terry McKiernan. To my great good fortune, from the start of my thinking about this book they have encouraged and enlightened me in many conversations and written comments on drafts; they have invari-

ably understood better than I what the argument should be. Stephen Hinds in particular commented on successive drafts at a time when he was himself very busy; although most pages here could have a footnote acknowledging his insight, I must acknowledge, especially, how much I owe to his comments on the section on hymns in the first chapter.

My editor, Pauline Hire, has been an admirably patient and encouraging midwife. I owe her a particular debt of thanks for agreeing to the idea of the series; I will always cherish the memory of the revolving bar over Broadway in which she and Stephen Hinds and I met to plot *Roman literature and its contexts*.

In the spirit of the series I have tried to minimise documentation; but I have referred throughout to the most important secondary sources from which I have learnt, so that others could learn from them as well. I have had to cut a lot of Gordian knots; especially, I have ended up citing Feeney (1991) more often than I would have wished, but in such a short book economy had to triumph over modesty.

I began trying to put my thoughts on paper during a semester's leave at the Humanities Research Institute in Madison (Spring 1993); my warm thanks to the Senior Fellows for electing me, to my department for releasing me, and to the other Fellows for stimulating, astringent, yet friendly criticism of my ideas. It is a pleasure once again to thank the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin—Madison for summer support in 1993, and also the Vilas Fund for summer support in 1994 and 1995.

Abbreviations of periodicals follow the system of *l'Année Philologique*. Citations of works and collections follow the system of *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (2nd edn), with two exceptions: for Cicero's letters I use the numbering system of Shackleton Bailey, and for the fragments of Varro's *Antiquitates rerum diuinarum* I follow the numbering of Cardauns (1976). The abbreviation BNP refers to Beard—North—Price (forthcoming), portions of which I was able to read in typescript thanks to the great kindness of Mary Beard and Simon Price.

Introduction

Someone writing a book on Roman literature and Roman religion would do well to begin by acknowledging that the Romans had no word corresponding to 'religion' and no word corresponding to 'literature'. Rather than being dismayed by this fact, however, we might use it to help refocus the familiar observation that in no society is there an isolated sphere, called 'Religion', set over against another, called 'Literature'. 'Literature' is not a category in nature, and nor is 'Religion' a given, which literature then addresses or reflects. Rather, when we tackle the interaction between what we call 'religion in real life' and what we call 'religion in literature', we encounter the same difficulties of referentiality and representation that have become familiar topics amongst Latinists in recent discussions of love or politics or friendship in 'real life' and in 'literature'.

In all of these areas, as G. B. Conte in particular has clearly argued, we must recognise that the 'naked facts' beloved of the empirical historicist are always 'clothed': there is no unproblematic background of reality — religious or otherwise — against which to plot the different reality of literature, since 'real life' is itself 'the locus of cultural images and models, symbolic choices, communicative and perceptual codes'.¹ In Rome there are many literary modes and there are many religious discourses, each with its own distinctive associations and semiotic features. Rather than asking how religion is transmuted into literature, then, we should instead be thinking in terms of a range of cultural

¹ Conte (1994), 108–10; cf. Kramer (1989), 114–15; Kennedy (1993), Ch. 1, esp. 7–8; Barchiesi (1994), esp. 'Introduzione'.

practices, interacting, competing, and defining each other in the process.

This book is written in the conviction that most Latinists are still not doing justice to the way religion and literature interact within these manifold cultural practices. The basis for that conviction, however, has shifted as I have gone along. When I began the book, I thought that the main challenge would be to argue persuasively for taking the religious aspects of the culture seriously. The process of writing it has made me realise that the main challenge is actually to find ways to counter the unspoken prejudices against taking the literary aspects of the culture seriously.

For there are many reasons why Latinists might be ill-disposed to rethink the study of Roman religion and literature. Partly, they are intimidated or unimpressed by the battery of techniques that have been evolved for the study of Greek religion and literature. Partly, they are the inheritors of a patronising attitude to Roman religion. The main reason, however, is that they are the inheritors of a patronising attitude to Roman literature. The dominant tradition of reading amongst Latinists has always been highly formalist. As a result, Latinists have tended to isolate literary texts and transform them into self-sufficient products of an autonomous and inward-turning literary tradition, cutting them off from a larger cultural context — and when that cultural context is a religious one in particular, a vicious circle makes the formalist approach appear even more natural, because tenacious conventional preconceptions about Roman religion have militated against taking that religious system seriously in the first place.²

Paradigms Old and New

At the risk of buttressing a polarisation I am anxious to undermine, let me sketch some of the preconceptions about Roman religion that have moulded the way many critics of Roman literature have traditionally read their texts.³ These preconceptions issued, in large part, from as-

² The issues and prejudices are very similar to those involved in the study of post-Classical Greek literature, for which see Hunter (1993), 1–7; Parsons (1993), 154–5.

³ My debts to North (1986) and to Beard and Crawford (1985), 28–39, will be clear; cf. Scheid (1987); Phillips (1991a) and (1992). The traditional view is embodied in such works as Warde-Fowler (1911), but its influence continues even in such comparatively recent standard authorities as Soullard (1981).

sumptions based on either a Christian model of what counts in a religion (salvation, morality, belief) or a Greek one (ritual and mythology of corporate significance). Against these yardsticks, Roman religion was regularly viewed as oddly or quaintly formalistic, barren of emotional and ethical interest, devoid of genuine collective significance, and lacking even narratives about its divinities. Originally there may have been an admirable piety, linked to an agricultural and communal life, with simple forms of worship directed towards pleasingly primitive *numina* or aniconic deities. As time went on, however, foreign influences grew more powerful, supplying deficiencies in the system (mythology from the Greeks, personal spiritual nourishment from the Eastern mystery cults, which would eventually culminate in Christianity), but at the cost of corrupting the original nature of Roman religion into a hybrid form. The result, by the late Republic and early Empire, was a system in decline: the elite who produced and read literature, having acquired an educated scepticism from their Greek mentors, were estranged from their religious traditions, maintaining them only for the purpose of political exploitation, to fox their opponents and bamboozle the plebs. They kept their tongues in their cheeks before the old rituals of crucifying dogs and watching chickens feed, or the new hypocritical pomp of the emperor cult. The texts they read drew on a foreign mythology and did not impinge on the real world. The Hellenistic philosophical systems catered to the few who felt the need to enquire into deeper questions about human life. Genuine Roman religion survived, if at all, only in domestic or rustic piety.

This is a sketch that no one Latinist will ever have subscribed to in its entirety, but its outlines will be familiar to all. Though this model is rapidly passing out of favour, it has a powerful inertia. As far as the reading practices of many Latinists are concerned, something like this model has survived the revaluation of Roman religion that has been in full swing for the last fifteen years. Since my own working assumptions about Roman religion have been conditioned by this movement of revaluation, I should offer here a sketch, however simplified and reductive, of the emergent new model (in the full awareness that the picture is changing all the time as a result of vigorous on-going debate).

The opening salvo was fired by Jocelyn (1966), who questioned the value of judging Roman religion by the criteria of Christianity or of the Romans' Greek contemporaries, and attacked the consensus view that

Roman nobles were all religious sceptics, arguing that this view was based upon testimonia from a tiny, and not necessarily representative, group of self-consciously intellectual individuals (these issues of scepticism and belief will claim our attention in Chapter 1). He demonstrated how integral the religious system was to the functioning of the state and, especially, how important it was to the Roman nobles, who might be priests and augurs as well as governors and generals. According to Jocelyn, Roman politicians 'must have felt that the traditional rites and ceremonies were not immutable duties owed to the powers of another world but rather means of utilizing certain kinds of power in their own world. This was a state of mind not easily shaken by rationalist criticism.'⁴ Subsequent studies have continued to stress the interpenetration in the *res publica* of the 'political' and the 'religious' (categories precipitated out as separate terms only by modern Western thought), emphasising that it was the elite themselves who paid for and oversaw organised religious activity and who were most affected by its operation.⁵ These eminently practical and busy people devoted enormous amounts of time and money to their religious practices, constantly innovating and reforming, in elaborate and complex ways. Far from being desiccated and pointless, the various forms of public religious activity were among the elite culture's principal venues for individual self-advertisement and corporate self-definition.

Simultaneously, the concept of 'decline' has been called into question by scholars who have argued for the flexibility and responsiveness of the system in the face of the transformations which Roman society underwent in the evolution from Latin city-state to world empire.⁶ The Romans' obsessive talk of conservation and tradition has obscured the imaginative power with which they responded to their centuries-long series of encounters with the new and strange (as often, a parallel with the Japanese suggests itself). Religious adaptation is a part of this process, and was so from the very beginning, so that the search for an original, 'natural' Roman religion, pure of foreign influence, has come to

⁴ Jocelyn (1966), 101.

⁵ Weinstock (1971); Liebeschuetz (1979), 15–20; MacMullen (1981), 24–5, 129; Price (1984), 15–16; Scheid (1985), 12–13; Phillips (1986), 2708–9; Beard (1994), 729–34. On the inapplicability of our categories of 'political/religious' to, e.g., Islam, see Asad (1993), esp. 28–9.

⁶ North (1976); Wardman (1982); Beard (1994), 739–45.

look more and more fantastic: in religion, as in other spheres, one must acknowledge the power of T. J. Cornell's observation that 'an independent or autonomous Latin culture never had a chance to emerge'.⁷ Interaction with foreign religious systems, although varying in degree and nature at different times, is an integral part of Roman religion, not necessarily a symptom of decline or inadequacy.

Similarly, the evidence concerning the late Republic which had conventionally been used to argue for a religious malaise has been reinterpreted in different ways. The emphasis on religious decline may be seen as an element of the crisis-atmosphere needed by the new principate to legitimise its continuance.⁸ Further, the very profusion of speculation is a sign of an explosion of knowledge and interest, which entailed its own paradoxical dangers: the process of supersession and decay, for example, natural in a longstanding polytheistic system, may appear alarming and novel once it begins to be documented by a new intellectual tradition.⁹ As a result of increased specialisation in Roman life, it was now possible to begin to define 'religion' as an object of enquiry for the first time; if critical or sceptical forms of enquiry were inevitably one consequence, we should not be misled into overlooking the intellectual and social creative energy which made such investigation possible in the first place.¹⁰ Besides, what we might regard as new-fangled scepticism is arguably one manifestation of long-enduring attitudes within the Romans' turbulent political life, where the meaning of divine signs had always been debated: 'it is likely that sophisticated scepticism with regard to purported divine signs was an integral part of Roman *mos maiorum*'.¹¹

The revisionists' emphasis on the importance of public cult was necessary as a reaction against earlier disparaging attitudes, ultimately grounded in Christian assumptions, which had often neglected public cult in a misguided search for a supposedly more genuine and meaningful religious experience in some private or domestic sphere. Recently, however, there are signs of a newly dynamic interest in the interactions

⁷ Cornell (1978), 110; cf. Tomlin (1974), 156, on Japan: 'there has never been an authentic Japan which was not also a Japan avid to assimilate outside influence. That *is* the authentic Japan' (original emphasis).

⁸ Edwards (1996), 49–50.

⁹ North (1976); Wardman (1982), 8.

¹⁰ Beard (1986) and (1994), 755–61; North (1986).

¹¹ Liebeschuetz (1995), 315.

between 'public' and 'private' religion.¹² Just as recent studies of Roman social life have been revealing the 'interpenetration of the public and private life of the Roman ruling class',¹³ so the boundary between private and state religion is looking increasingly permeable. Public and private cults could track each other in various ways,¹⁴ and the gods worshipped in the house were not divorced from the gods of public cult. The cult of the Penates involved domesticated deities from public cult (Jupiter and Minerva, Fortuna, Hercules), who were worshipped by the free members of the household;¹⁵ the Lares Familiares were worshipped by everyone in the household, including slaves. The picture is one of a continuum of linked chains: from the master's point of view, the Lares are primarily a focus for mediation and self-representation 'down' or 'within', while the Penates are a focus 'up' or 'outside'. As further confirmation of the '(to us) astonishingly public nature of domestic life', the main venues for display of domestic cult objects were places where guests would be expected, in the more 'public', not 'private' parts of the house.¹⁶ The house, and the house's religion, are not a private retreat for such people, for the religious categories of public and private are as porous as the social. Clearly, then, a new debate on what counts as private or public in Roman piety is beginning, one which looks set to transcend the earlier altercations over whether quintessential Roman religion was fundamentally public or fundamentally private.

The Greek Model

If we try to fit the category of 'literature' into these discussions, we find ourselves, not for the last time, up against the problem of the Greek model. Of course, discussion of Roman culture in general has been handicapped by invidious comparisons with the Greek counterpart ever since the Romantic movement, when Rome became 'not-Greece', a system of lack.¹⁷ But when we come to judge the question of the religious element in literature, the Roman pan of the scales falls remorselessly, for long-engrained reading practices automatically attribute cultural power

¹² North (1989), 604–7 and (1995).

¹³ Wallace-Hadrill (1994), 60.

¹⁴ North (1989), 606.

¹⁵ Bakker (1994), 40–3.

¹⁶ Wallace-Hadrill (1994), 60; Bakker (1994), 179–80 for placement of cult objects.

¹⁷ Habinek (1992); on religion and mythology in particular, see Phillips (1991a) and (1992), esp. 60–3; Beard (1993).

to Greek literature in its religious dimension, and just as automatically deny it to Roman. In Greece, after all, or at least in pre-Hellenistic Greece (for periodisation is significant here), the *communis opinio* has it that there was an authentic, lived religion, in which an authentic art had its roots, nourishing and nourished by a rich religious discourse shared by the society as a whole. It does not matter how that religious discourse is redefined by the changing paradigms of modern scholarship; the result is always an organic way of reading Greek literature. Thirty years ago, for example, we used to be told that the Athenians gathered together once or twice a year at the tragic festivals to learn profound truths about theology; now, after the structuralist revolution, we know that they gathered together to learn profound truths about sociology. Whatever its other claims, structuralism has proved to be yet another way of furthering a project dear to European culture since Romanticism, that of maintaining a holistic interpretation of the Greek experience. Its great success in this is not to be wondered at, since its *modus operandi* is to show that everything in the system relates somehow to everything else, which is what Romantics have always wanted to believe about the Greeks anyway.

In Rome, on the other hand, the prevalent assumption has been, as we have seen, that there was no authentic religious experience in the first place. The contrast with scholarly attitudes to Greece in this respect can be revealed even in such tiny matters as the tense used for describing the practices of the different religions: the norm for scholars of Greek religion is the anthropological present, whereas the proper tense for descriptions of Roman religion is the antiquarian imperfect. If there was such a thing as an authentic Roman religious experience, according to the usual view, it was a humble piety that had either vanished before Roman literature began, or else, if it survived in any form, had no ties of any power with the Grecising formalist literature of the elite. The kind of natural symbiosis that scholars instinctively search for in the Greek world appears not to be part of the Roman experience, and the literature that touches upon religious concerns or myth must therefore be marked down as artificial, part of a fantasy-world, or even — harshest condemnation of all from a classicist — a 'literary exercise'. The traditional disregard for the cultural power of Roman religion joins in a powerful conspiracy with the long-engrained aestheticising tendency in the study of Roman literature. In this regard, at least, the revolution in the study

of Roman religion has left most Latinists' reading habits practically unscathed, despite some dramatic examples of attempting to cut the Gordian knot.¹⁸

The problems posed by this Greek/Roman antithesis will engage us throughout the book. The antithesis is not one we can avoid, for the assumptions of modern criticism and religious studies are so firmly grounded in it: the Greek/Roman antithesis remains our foremost example of the myth of imitative impotence, of an original which is then weakened. Whatever we say about the Roman experience in this department will be in dialogue with the Greek experience, and the dialogue might as well be voiced rather than mute. Nor, of course, was the antithesis one that the Romans themselves could avoid, since their own culture — however self-consciously Roman — was so radically Hellenised, most obviously in their literature, which they remembered as beginning when a Greek man translated a Greek dramatic script into Latin. One of the principal aims of this book is to suggest that we recast the antithesis in ways which do not inevitably project the Romans as 'secondary', passive and inert, but rather as participants in a dynamic and revolutionary cultural process. In this way, we may be able to see how Hellenism discharged for the Romans a function analogous to that which Jonathan Z. Smith describes Judaism discharging for the modern Christian student of religion, since it is:

close, yet distant; similar, yet strange; 'occidental,' yet 'oriental'; commonplace, yet exotic. This tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar, at the very heart of the imagining of Judaism, has enormous cognitive power. It invites, it requires comparison. Judaism is foreign enough for comparison and interpretation to be necessary; it is close enough for comparison and interpretation to be possible.¹⁹

¹⁸ Esp. Beard (1993).

¹⁹ Smith (1982), xii. From this perspective my book is another chapter in the ceaseless debate about the Greek and the Roman in Latin literature, and behind the discussion lie such masterpieces as Fraenkel (1960), Williams (1968), and Griffin (1985). Every generation of Latinists has to reinvent this wheel, just as every generation of Romans did: see Ch. 3 ('Diachrony: Literary history and its narratives') of Hinds (1998).

Agenda

The issue of the Greek paradigm, although important throughout, will be most pressing in the first two chapters, 'Belief' and 'Myth'. The topic of belief is much larger than the issue of elite scepticism, which has traditionally engrossed so much attention. In examining what it means to speak of belief in an ancient religious context, we will need to pare away many layers of assumptions, beginning with the idea that belief is a constant feature of religious activity, or that an ancient society offered in the first place a unitary 'something', a 'religion', which is there to be 'believed in' and used as a homogeneous background for literature to work against. Following in the path of Paul Veyne, I shall document the variety of religious discourses in Rome and Greece, and then discuss the problem of how the diverse religious discourses interact both with each other and with the various literary discourses. Although it may appear that the co-existence of these different genres of belief is testimony to a lack of energy or significance in any one of them, I shall argue that the competitive interaction between the genres of belief is instead fruitful and dynamic, being productive of meaning. Roman literature is not parasitic or self-deprecatory in this regard, but self-conscious about the way in which it has functions and capacities not available to the other discourses. A major test case will be provided by the relationship between Augustus' *ludi saeculares* and Horace's *carmen saeculare*, whose performance was the culmination of three days of ritual.

When we come to 'Myth', deep excavation is also necessary in order to unearth the factors that have traditionally handicapped the study of myth in Roman culture. Most important of these are the usually unarticulated prejudices that have their origin in a Hellenocentric view of mythopoesis. The Romantic view of an organic and natural Greek mythic process has become naturalised in the culture at large and amongst professional scholars. The allure of the oral and the primary has smothered the study of myth in the aggressively literate and adaptive society of Rome. Here it will be necessary to question the value of this Hellenocentric model of myth, not only in its misapplication to the world of the Romans, but also in its own Greek context.

After belief and myth, we will turn to 'Divinity', a topic which even today many might regard as not particularly urgent in a Roman setting. A now outmoded view denied so much as anthropomorphism to the

earliest Roman divinities, speaking rather of *numina* or — yet more awesome — *mana*. Jocelyn's functionalist methodology, intent on elucidating the social dimension of Roman religion, rather depreciates the importance of the gods as entities to be encountered or negotiated with: 'the traditional rites and ceremonies were not immutable duties owed to the powers of another world but rather means of utilizing certain kinds of power in their own world' (above, p. 4). Yet an appreciation of how the Romans figured the gods as participants or persons, so far from being irreconcilable with a functionalist approach, might help to shed light on how they represented power and structure in the city and empire. This is a difficult undertaking, however, for the question of the gods' personalities remains problematic in many ways. They had their images, their houses (*aedes*), their couches, and their public parades; they were the addressees of prayer and the recipients of sacrifice; their nature, categories, and powers were much discussed. All these challenging forms of representation are put to the test in a wide range of literary and non-literary contexts. For a society that was well accustomed to manipulating such forms of representation, the nature of divinity takes on an acutely pressing importance when the most important men in the state begin probing at its limits, becoming objects of cult and inhabitants of temples themselves.

With 'Ritual', we would seem to be on firm Roman footing, for the revaluation of Roman religion has put the spotlight on public cult in ways which would have astonished a Latinist of the last generation. Dismissed for so long as sterile and frigid, an empty formality, a poor substitute for the corporate self-expression of the festivals of the *polis*, Roman civic cult has become a trump card: if you can prove that something has a reference to cult, you are proving it means something. Hence, in part, the striking rehabilitation of Ovid's *Fasti*, a poem which even ten years ago was in effect out of the canon. But ritual is not a self-explanatory system, and it remains a challenge to analyse how Roman writers make the meaning systems of ritual part of the meaning systems of their texts.

The revaluation of ritual in a Roman context is to some degree a result of the feeling that this is one area at least in which the techniques and successes of structuralism can be transplanted from the Greek field. In fact, however, this new focus on ritual ends up perpetuating a longstanding assumption that the automatic place to seek for the 'essentially

Roman' element of religion is in cult. While attempting to do justice to the modern and ancient fascination with ritual, with Ovid's *Fasti* as the main focus, this chapter will argue that the effort to define ritual as the authentically Roman element in literature or in religion is liable to be a misguided exercise in nostalgia — although one which the Romans themselves were already cultivating.

Lastly (not firstly), 'Knowledge'. The Romans' religious system was vast and ramshackle, with no revealed text at its core and no overseeing body. The simple issue of how Roman writers got information about religion is interesting in itself, but since Foucault it has not been possible to think of knowledge as just a matter of information. What kind of knowledge-systems were there? How did they interact with and define one another? Whose interests did they serve? By the early principate there were mountains of written material on every conceivable topic, practically all of it now lost. You could read books on augury, extispicy, astrology, on thunder-interpretation, priesthoods, and deities native and foreign. Some of the priestly colleges had their own written texts. A consideration of how all these diverse forms of material relate to one another, and to the texts we call 'literary', will lead us back to the problems of the interactions between genres of belief with which the book begins.

Chapter 1— Belief

Twenty or thirty years ago it would have been relatively uncontroversial to state that educated Romans of historical times did not seriously believe in their gods or in state rituals or in emperor cult; that any core of real belief must have been located in domestic rites, not public ones; that no one believed in the foreign myths imported from Greece. All such statements have since become problematic, not so much because people now claim that the Romans did in fact believe in all these things and in all these ways, but because the meaning and relevance of the term 'belief' have been called into question.

The anthropologists have not omitted belief from their enquiries into the perils of transferring culturally bound categories from one society to another. Belief was the subject of perhaps the most famous such enquiry, that of Needham, who argued that there was no ground for 'the received idea that this verbal concept corresponds to a distinct and natural capacity that is shared by all human beings'.¹ 'Belief', according to this view, is a concept entirely specific to European Christian culture, the consequence of the great importance given in Christian religion to 'belief' in the central doctrines of resurrection and redemption. Warnings against 'Christianising' interpretations of Roman religion have therefore become topical in modern studies.² It is, indeed, arguable that

¹ Needham (1972), 191. Needham is much indebted to Wittgenstein's approach to the radically contextual nature of meanings of the word 'belief', on which see Malcolm (1994), 44–7.

² Price (1984), 10–15; Beard and Crawford (1985), 26–7; Phillips (1980, 26974–711 (with valuable reservations on the language of 'belief'). The danger in this antithetical construction of a monolithic 'Christianity' is that it papers over the fissures separating the High Anglican from the Southern Baptist; see further below, p. 15.

the very concept of 'religion' as an entity to be found in all cultures is itself the work of Christian presuppositions.³

However that may be, when tackling the problem of what we call 'belief' in what we call 'Roman religion', we should — to put it most modestly — bear in mind that not all religions place as high a value on belief in key dogmas as does modern Christianity. The Japanese again suggest themselves as a parallel for the Romans; the very word for 'religion' in Japanese was coined only in the nineteenth century after contact with the West, 'to denote a concept and view of religion commonplace in the realms of nineteenth-century Christian theology but at that time not found in Japan, of religion as a specific, belief-framed entity'.⁴ According to Pettazzoni, the Shintoism of Japan belongs not with the 'modern' religions of Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam, which are characterised 'by the presence of a founder, by a soteriological ideal, by proselytism, by supernationalism', but with the 'ancient' religions of the Romans, Greeks, Hittites, and Aztecs, which remember no founder, seek no converts, and aim not at the salvation of the individual in a future life but at the preservation and growth of the community in this one.⁵

This is not to say that language of belief is never an issue when we are discussing the 'ancient' religions. It certainly is, as we shall see in detail. The point, however, is that it is not legitimate to proceed on the assumption that there is a discrete core of belief lurking somewhere at the heart of any religious system, or to measure the worth of ancient religious experience against a yardstick of how emotionally meaningful or beliefladen it was.⁶ A dynamically changing polytheistic system is an exceedingly problematic place in which to find the grounding for a question like

³ So Balagangadhara (1994): 'the reason for believing that India knows of religion is religious in nature' (149; cf. 260–1); cf. Asad (1993), esp. 40–3, 54, and Staal (1989), 393, on the Western '*creation* of so-called religions' (original emphasis). Balagangadhara (1994) makes thought-provoking comparisons between Indian and Roman conditions: 33–46, 486–90.

⁴ Reader (1991), 13; cf. Staal (1989), 335, 389–90, on the absence of belief or doctrine and the importance of ritual practice in Hinduism and Buddhism. On the Japanese as a parallel for the Romans, above, p. 4.

⁵ Pettazzoni (1972), 28–9; cf. Goodman (1994), on the different attitudes to membership and proselytising shown by pagans, Christians, and Jews.

⁶ Price (1984), 10–11; cf. R. Needham's introduction to Hocart (1987), 5–6, for a critique of explanations of social institutions that are grounded in individual psychology.

'What were the religious beliefs of Augustus?'. This man — as we at least describe him — was participant in and object of various new and traditional cults at Rome and throughout the Empire, and an initiate into the mysteries of Eleusis since the age of thirty-two. He was acclaimed in marble, bronze, papyrus and song as the descendant of Venus and the son of Divus Julius. He was the vice-regent of Jupiter, founder of a new temple of Jupiter the Thunderer, and always carried a sealskin with him as protection against thunderstorms. In which of these contexts is the 'core' of belief to be found?

Addressing the problem of belief is not simply a matter of tallying up all the evidence for scepticism in one column and all the evidence for credulity or allegiance to cult in another. For any given period, and for many given individuals, there will be numerous items in both columns. This anecdotal procedure, however, would not help us, partly because it is still locked in to Christian presuppositions (there is a core to which one accords, or from which one withholds, belief), but mainly because it does not provide a context for assessing these discrete items of information.

Brain-Balkanisation

Much the most helpful starting-point is provided by Paul Veyne's *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?*, with its 'plurality of modalities of beliefs', a notion which even in 1983 he could describe as 'too much of a commonplace for it to be necessary for us to dwell on it'.⁷ Drawing in an eclectic and undoctrinaire manner on the anthropological insights of Sperber (1975) and on the discourse-theory of Foucault, Veyne did not rest with the idea that truth-criteria are historically contingent, but went on to recreate a world which lived with various programmes of truth and 'modalities of belief'. His marvellous phrase 'balkanisation des cerveaux' ('brain-balkanisation') captures the capacity of educated Greeks and Romans of the post-classical era to entertain different kinds of assent and criteria of judgement in different contexts, in ways that strike the modern observer as mutually contradictory. These people are involved in very different activities when they sacrifice outside a temple, talk to the custodian of a temple, read the aretalogy inscribed outside the

⁷ English translation (1988), 135 n. 33; of. 87, 'truth is plural and analogical'. See now Buxton (1994), 155–64.

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