
Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price (BNP) have set themselves the enormous task of surveying more than a thousand years of religious life at Rome. The eagerly awaited result is a splendid achievement and will be valuable for a long time to come.

Instead of treating religion as a distinct area of ancient life in the manner of W. Warde Fowler’s *The Religious Experience of the Roman People* (London, 1911) or Kurt Latte’s monumental *Römische Religionsgeschichte* (Munich, 1960), BNP attempt to set Roman religion in its full political, social and cultural context, commencing with the primitive hamlet of the eighth century BC and proceeding through changes of the republican and imperial periods to the cosmopolitan, multicultural society of Christian Rome. The narrative account in Volume 1 is structured around a series of broad themes: how to interpret the Romans’ own theories of their religious system and its origins; the relationship between religion and the changing politics of Rome; the religious importance of the layout and monuments of the city itself; changing ideas of religious identity and community; religious invasion—and, ultimately, revolution. Considerable attention is given not only to official cults of the Roman state religion but also to elective cults including Judaism and Christianity; and the net for evidence is cast as widely as possible, so that visual material is employed equally with the evidence available from texts.

There are eight chapters, of which the first three cover the period of the Monarchy and the Republic. Those familiar with the authors’ previous scholarship will not be surprised to learn that they reject the traditional picture of an agrarian, Italic ‘core’, which was gradually overlaid by the ‘accretions’ of a more sophisticated, urban mindset (see CAH2 for earlier versions of ch. 1 [J.A. North] in vii. 2; ch. 3 [M. Beard] in ix; ch. 4 [S.R.F. Price] in x). They prefer to see ‘change’ or ‘innovation’ rather than ‘decline’ in older forms of worship, and link religious with social change, so that the rise of new groups at Rome coincides with the introduction of new religious ideas, and the demise of the power and identity of older
groups results in their deities and rituals receding from view. This is an absolutely natural consequence of the nature of ancient pagan religion—where there was no rigid doctrinal basis, where the concentration was upon behaviour (correct ritual performance) rather than belief, and where religion helped to define a particular social group and to structure its relations both internally and with other groups around it. BNP believe that religion and politics were naturally linked too: they were not separate spheres of activity as in the modern western world but were each concerned with the systematic articulation of power. Consequently, it is no surprise to see political figures of the middle and late Republics employing religion in what may seem to us a cynical manner, motivated by their own advantage. Although there are notable expressions of scepticism and cynicism from writers as different as Polybius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Cicero and Varro, the conviction of political figures appears to have been genuine in many case: e.g., Catiline must have been acting against the gods because he was opposing Cicero and the will of the Senate; Bibulus could expect to find something untoward in the heavens because Caesar’s legislation and behaviour was so abominable. Similar reasoning determines that an earthquake or pestilence resulted from some failure to recognise properly either an established or yet-to-be-established deity; a military disaster indicated a similar problem of failure or lack.

Chapters 4-7 cover the first three centuries of the Empire. The preoccupation of the imperial age with ‘place’ is explored in Chapter 4. Augustus promoted Rome as the heart of the empire, the prime ‘place’ for the gods, temples and rituals of Roman religion. Just as they are unconvinced by the theory of ‘decline’ during the Republic, BNP argue that claims of an Augustan ‘restoration’ successfully obscured the extent of change and restructuring in the system: not as a cunning obfuscation but as a crucial way of relating the Augustan present to its republican past. Even the rituals of ‘imperial cult’, which are often treated as something new because they centre upon the person of the emperor, are related by BNP to the general restructuring of the traditional religion.

The chapters that follow concentrate upon later periods, extending the investigation of the Augustan system to consider the religious self-definition of the Roman élite, the significance of official cults in the life of the city of Rome, the ‘popular’ and ‘oriental’ religions of Rome, and the relationship of Rome to the outside world. In Chapter 5 BNP show how
the Roman élite defined 'proper' and 'improper' religious activity (as part of the process of defining their own position in the state), and how they took legal steps to defend the Roman system against real or imaginary enemies of religion. Their discussion serves as a welcome antidote to the simplistic view of Rome as a power 'tolerant' to the religions of conquered peoples. Chapter 6 looks explicitly at the religious life of the city of Rome, continuing the theme of earlier chapters; but at the same time it examines many of the new religions, with their roots in more distant parts of the empire, that flourished in the capital over this period (from the cults of Jupiter Dolichenus and Mithras to Judaism and Christianity). Chapter 7 returns to the empire at large, to trace Rome's impact on the religious life of the provinces. The role of religion as one way of defining Roman identity is emphasized once more.

The final chapter deals with the fourth and fifth centuries AD. As a result of the actions of Constantine paganism underwent a change of status rather than a defeat, and the traditional cults thence became a matter of choice, an elective religion—'entered, that is, not by virtue of race or social position, but through individual choice, with no qualification for their adherents (at least in theory) other than personal religious commitment' (245).

Volume 2 has many merits and will surely prove a grand teaching resource. It presents an extraordinary range of documentary and visual material in a remarkably informative way. Not only are the many documents translated lucidly and insightfully, some for the first time, but each is given a brief introduction designed to alert the reader to some issues of interpretation, along with explanatory notes and (in most cases) a bibliography. The chapters are arranged according to various themes; changes in Roman religion are acknowledged, but it is Volume 1 which presents the chronological account. The reason for the synchronic treatment in Volume 2 is that BNP wish to suggest that certain significant constants (e.g. sacrifice, divination) remained in Roman religion despite great changes over the centuries. Certain limitations to the evidence are openly admitted, such as the fact that most of the material derives not only from Rome and Italy but from the period bounded by the beginning of the first century BC and the end of the second century AD.
Our guiding principle has been to use the texts we cite argumentatively, and to show that Roman religion was not a static body of doctrine, but a subject of debate, negotiation, definition and re-definition (explicitly or implicitly) for the Romans themselves.

Volume 2, therefore, could stand alone as a starting point for further study or as an indicator of the amazing richness of ancient Roman religion. There are 13 chapters which precede a 'Glossary', list of 'Deities and their epithets', 'Bibliography', and Indexes. The chapter titles are: 1. 'Earliest Rome'; 2. 'The deities of Rome'; 3. 'The calendar'; 4. 'Religious places'; 5. 'Festivals and ceremonies'; 6. 'Sacrifices'; 7. 'Divination and diviners'; 8. 'Priests and priestesses'; 9. 'Individuals and gods: life and death'; 10. 'Rome outside Rome'; 11. 'Threats to the Roman order'; 12. 'Religious groups'; 13. 'Perspectives' (the final chapter containing a series of texts in which various Roman authors reflect on the nature of their religion). Once again, Judaism and Christianity are treated not as separate traditions but as vital components of the religious experience of the Roman Empire.

An especially striking feature is the presentation of visual evidence in the form of coins, sculptures, temples, architectural plans, and so on. These are treated as full partners to the textual evidence and are equally informed by notes. BNP employ a system of numbered lines in order to highlight details such as the location of an inscription on a tomb façade (104) or the various figures on a coin depicting Sulla’s dream (219). Students should find this a decidedly 'user-friendly' book.

Perhaps the most enlightening feature of Roman religion to emerge is the level of ancient dialogue or debate, which was both consistent and sophisticated (‘how the Romans represented to themselves, defined and debated the nature of the religions of Rome’, II.xi). According to Denis Feeney (Literature and Religion at Rome: Cultures, Contexts and Beliefs [1998]; cf. my review in Prudentia 30.2 [1998] 50-5), it was through this process of constant dialogue that meaning was created. Well made, too, is the point that the history of Roman religion is a history of extraordinary change. It is slightly worrying that no formal definition of ‘religion’ is offered, and that a few other seemingly fundamental questions are left either implicit or unanswered e.g., the question of what constitutes religious change and how we can recognise it, and how to write a history.
of Roman religion that is not merely a history of outward form (cf. I.xi-xii).

Apart from this, I have a slight concern about the admittedly reactionary conception of ancient paganism that is conveyed. BNP emphasize the social function of Roman religion and argue that it should be approached as a group phenomenon rather than an individual one. In their reconstruction, the group responds quite logically, even academically, to any new or difficult external power which impinges upon it by establishing a new deity or ritual. Thus, religion is not an individual, emotional, even fearful, psychological response to strange forces that cannot be rationally understood. This is the underlying assumption of older, ‘christianising’ scholars and it leads to misunderstanding when applied to religious systems which were not based upon notions such as monotheism, faith, belief, doctrine, and a distinct gap between mortals and God. There is certainly reason to emphasize group behaviour to a considerable degree, but individual emotion and psychology perhaps deserve a higher profile, given the anxiety inherent in a world constantly threatened by famine, disease and myriad other dangers. Developments in agriculture and medicine make it very hard for us to imagine the level of this anxiety. Moreover, there is the fact that Christianity arose alongside, and in competition with, the pagan religions of the Roman Empire, so that the differences on both sides, exaggerated from motives of competition, have perhaps been overemphasized. Christianity probably caters more to the group, and paganism more to the individual, than has generally been allowed. The fundamental problem is really that our evidence for individual beliefs in the ancient world is either lacking or apparently contradictory or otherwise flawed. BNP know this, and it should be stressed that they are by no means extreme in their arguments: they do not suggest that religion was unimportant to any individual in ancient Rome (cf. esp. I.42-3). However, some combination of the old and new scholarship, of the individual and the group, which gave a slightly higher profile to the individual would be my preference.

Proofreading is of the highest standard and the price hardly seems outrageous for a work that is bound to become fundamental.

Tom Stevenson
University of Auckland.