

BOOK REVIEW

Legible Religion: Books, Gods, and Rituals in Roman Culture. By DUNCAN MACRAE. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. Pp. 272. Hardcover, \$49.95. ISBN 978-0-674-08871-9.

The past decades have witnessed the recuperation of Roman religion from a reductive intellectual history. Duncan MacRae's *Legible Religion* contributes to these efforts by clarifying the impact of republican theological writings on Rome's shifting religious landscape. The production of "civil theology"—his collective term for texts preoccupied with excavating the histories and logic of Roman cults—amounted neither to pagan scripture, as Christian polemicists would insist, nor to pedantic antiquarianism. Rather, MacRae argues, this literature projected a semblance order on the myriad divine beings, practices, and institutions found at Rome and throughout its empire. In these intellectual discourses we are able to glimpse the emergence of "Roman religion" as a systematic and rational entity, although one with a complex relationship to religious belief and practice on the ground.

At the most general level, *Legible Religion* offers an intellectual and social history of learned books on Roman religious culture, which flourished in the late Republic and included the writings of Varro, Cicero, and Nigidius Figulus. Although not the first to investigate their intellectual projects, MacRae offers a nuanced theorization of what motivated civil theologians and for whose benefit they wrote. Proceeding from the discovery of the books of Numa—the legendary king and putative architect of Roman religion—in 181 bce, he proffers Varro's account of the episode as evidence of a growing imperative to "textualize" traditional cult by employing "a characteristic constellation of rhetorical habits and intellectual tools" (29). Employing such methods, civil theologians not only documented religious practice, but also stripped away accretions of obscure knowledge to reveal the "original" meanings or purposes of Roman rites and institutions.

That the genesis of "Roman religion" occurred at this moment was a function both of Rome's new territorial and cultural horizons, and also of the

circumstances of the writers in question. All, MacRae notes, held different statuses within “a sociologically messy and profoundly competitive elite society” (55) that placed a premium on learned performance. Civil theology became an ideal venue for displays of specialized knowledge and the alternative modes of distinction that these afforded, particularly for men without illustrious pedigrees. While not every theologian was an outsider to the aristocracy, many secured places among the sociopolitical elite through their intellectual activities. Demonstrations of expertise did not supplant traditional avenues for elite competition, but literary production could underwrite other forms of distinctiveness.

Lest one think these were uniquely Roman dynamics, MacRae turns to the Mishnah, whose priorities and arrangement of material, he proposes, reflect a similar textualization of Judaism. The accommodation of multiplicity and dissent in both civil theology and the Mishnah suggests that these collective discursive enterprises—with participants playing by the same rules in pursuit of common interests—were more important than interpretive consensus. Likewise, both corpora were tendentious projects that excluded many modes of relating to the gods, even if their survival has inflated the importance of texts and intellectuals. Not that civil theology was a purely academic undertaking: Literary constructions of Roman religion forged a precedent for emperors from Augustus onward to pose as the restorers of ostensibly traditional cult, with earlier texts continuing to legitimate imperial action even as the production of civil theology dwindled. And yet, the composition and reception of these writings remained a largely elite endeavor, and one whose relative importance vis-à-vis other religious activities is difficult to gauge.

These distinctions may seem slight but, at a time when many question the validity of “religion” for antiquity, they underscore the need to differentiate normative commentaries about practices involving the gods from the phenomena they parsed. All the more so since the construal of civil theology as Roman religion was the stratagem of polemicists such as Tertullian and Augustine, who fabricated paganism, and also Judaism, as foils in kind to Christianity. Cast as pagan scripture, the writings of Varro and his ilk bore witness to the irrationality and hollowness of the traditions they preserved; the Romans emerged as a religious community heavily invested in texts, yet ones lacking biblical sanctity.

Legible Religion is commendable for disentangling civil theology from the distortions of Christian reception to restore its place in the history of religion. MacRae offers nuanced comparisons of Roman, rabbinic, and Christian writers in a manner that dismantles impressions of essential difference between them. There is space, however, to push his arguments further. He takes for granted the authority of “scripture” among Jews and Christians, when it might have been the very phenomenon of textualization that gave rise to such a category, namely, by accruing value to texts in the context of religious activity. We might ask, then, how an intellectual climate fueled by expectations that literary criticism could disclose philosophical or divine mysteries invested certain writings with “scriptural” qualities. Hence, Judaism and Christianity might be reimagined not as parallels to but outgrowths of a trend in Roman religion.

Likewise, apparent differences between writers may be less a function of religious affiliation than the historical circumstances whence MacRae selects his comparanda. Even if Jews and Christians operated from different social locations than his Roman examples, they participated in networks of literate intellectuals that transected civil status. This is especially true of figures such as Josephus or Justin Martyr, who are absent from *Legible Religion* but whose setting and priorities align more closely with the civil theologians’ than do those of the rabbis or Augustine. I raise these points not as criticisms of the book, but as potential avenues for bringing its insights to bear more fully on a normalized account of Jewish and Christian phenomena in the Greco-Roman world.

HEIDI WENDT

Wright State University, heidi.wendt@wright.edu