

## BOOK REVIEW

*On Roman Religion: Lived Religion and the Individual in Ancient Rome.* By JÖRG RÜPKE. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2016. Pp. x + 198. Hardcover, \$49.95. ISBN 978-1-5017-0470-3.

The concept of individuality is traditionally considered to belong to the domain of modernity, especially as it applies to religious behavior. As the standard explanation goes, the modern concept of individuality emerged during the Renaissance and was then connected to religion in the Reformation, during which time religious choice became the defining factor for individuality. This theoretical approach practically requires that ancient religion be defined as collective rather than individual, which has generally been the practice. In this book, Rüpke deconstructs the modernity of religious individuality by examining Roman religion through the lenses of individual appropriation (the act by which someone makes a religious practice their own) and lived religion (the idea that religions are constructed from the everyday practices of a community). In doing this, he provides not only a fresh perspective on ancient Roman religion but also a valid criticism of the supposed uniqueness of modern religious self-definition.

This book is part of Cornell's Townsend Lecture Series, which means that each of the eight chapters corresponds with one of the original lectures, thus creating chapters of easily digestible scope. The body of the text is framed by a brief yet informative introduction and conclusion. Chapters begin with a discussion of the theoretical and methodological considerations for the specific study that will follow, each of which shows Rüpke's depth and comfort across a wide range of theories and modes of analytic discourse, from performance studies to the sociology of ancient magic and beyond.

In Chapter 1, Rüpke presents a history of the concept of individuality, in which he emphasizes what is unique about the modern concept while also establishing that Roman society had its own ways of defining religious individuality, which, though different from the modern, are still valid. Rüpke argues that rather than use religious institutions as the yard stick by which to measure individual behavior, one should instead see religious institutions and traditions as the sum of

the individual appropriations of the members of a society. Even so-called 'collective' rites of worship can be seen as the product of the combined individual actions of the participants.

After this theoretical excursus, which draws profitably on research in sociology and anthropology, Rüpke turns to individual case studies. Of the following chapters, the most effective are those that provide unique readings of texts. In Chapter 3, Rüpke uses Propertius 4.2, with its multiple descriptions of the god Vertumnus, to illustrate the Roman concept of individual appropriation, arguing convincingly that each successive description of the god represents a different individual use of Vertumnus, all of which are equally valid within a polytheistic culture, a concept lost on modern monotheism with its inborn search for orthodoxy.

In Chapter 4, Rüpke presents the reader with a survey of magical elements from across Propertius' corpus, concluding that the poet presents magic as an option for religious adoption, but one that can be seen as either overlapping or standing in opposition to standard religious activities. This conclusion is certainly valid as far as Propertius is concerned, but it may be too bold to claim that Propertius' view is typical for Augustan society without corroboration from other authors (see page 65).

In chapter 5, by using reader response theory to establish the ideal reader for Ovid's *Fasti*, Rüpke illustrates how antiquarianism provided a broad range of practices and beliefs for individual appropriation.

*The Shepherd of Hermas* is the text under analysis in chapter 8, which, as Rüpke argues, represents a system of para- or even contra-institutional religious appropriations. One of the unique aspects of this text is that the intended use of the text is written into it, which helps illustrate how the copying, distribution, and use of texts was an act of religious appropriation in its own right. By the Christian era, writing had become a means of individualization in lived religion.

Chapters 3–5 and 8 collectively illustrate one of the unique aspects of this volume: it is through insightful textual analysis rather than archaeological analysis that Rüpke establishes the concept of individuality in Roman religion.

Chapters 2, 6 and 7 branch out from the single text/corpus approach. Chapter 2 analyzes the activity of the priestly colleges in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. BCE for evidence of individual actions based on social order. In chapter 6, performance theory

is used as a means to understand the relationship between ritual, text, and individual appropriation. A few minor errors appear in this chapter, but none of them detract from the validity of the arguments.<sup>1</sup>

In Chapter 7, Rüpke sifts through pertinent epigraphic data to argue that the increase in religious specialists over time in the imperial period led to a decline in dedications and votive offerings by regular people. While the arguments in these chapters are generally sound, they lack a certain focus that is laudable in the chapters grounded on textual analysis.

Overall, in addition to providing insightful new readings of individual texts, this volume presents scholars of Roman religion with a useful and unique perspective on ancient religion, namely the validity of the concept of Roman religious individuality, a contribution that will doubtlessly encourage future scholarship on this newly illuminated facet of Roman religion.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. page 104 – *ante diem nonam kalendas septembres* trans. as Sept 22 rather than Aug/Sext 22; page 108 reads *pueribus* rather than *puberibus*