Review of: Jörg Rüpke / Greg Woolf, (eds.): Religion in the Roman Empire

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This is a consequential volume of essays written by scholars who participated in or were affiliated with an ERC funded project entitled "Lived Ancient Religion," conducted 2012 to 2017 at the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt. The unique approach to religion the volume takes up, which is unfortunately in no way signaled by its title, relates to the ways in which rituals and relations with the divine intersected with everyday life and took place within and were shaped by the material and social conditions of antiquity. In other words, the book does not concern itself with abstract beliefs about the gods in the Roman Empire or general discussions about rituals and settings typical of other similarly named books, but rather the ways in which religion was lived. The book soundly rejects the idea, current in some quarters, that use of the term "religion" should be jettisoned as an analytical category in the study of antiquity on account of it being an Enlightenment construction that anachronistically imports western and Christian ideas to describe organized systems of beliefs and practices onto the past. Rüpke and Woolf in the introduction correctly argue that rather than dropping the category, one should develop an understanding that promotes a more dynamic and situated approach. "Succinctly, religious activity is present at time and place where, in a particular situation, at least one human individual includes such agents [i.e., divinities or gods, angels or demons, the dead or the immortal] in his or her communication with other humans, whether by merely referring to those agents or by directly addressing them" (p. 12). In a later chapter, Heidi Wendt incisively argues the case for use of the term along similar lines, in a way that should obviate concern deploying it and repays the attention of anyone who conspires against its usage (pp. 142–51). Even as this approach sidesteps an anachronistic orientation to the topic of religion, it also rejects the notion of "polis religion" that has dominated the study of antiquity from the nineteenth century onward, namely that religion was co-terminus with and a product of the interests of a given citizen

body. As this view has resurfaced in recent years under the guise of an evolutionary theory that religion was a means to marshal social cooperation and for rulers to exert control over others, this account, too, repays the attention of those who might be persuaded of the historical accuracy of such notions. Amongst the many things that single this volume out as an excellent collection is that seven of its ten installations are collaborative essays composed by colleagues who have worked together over several years to develop the lived ancient religion approach. This results in a red thread that binds the essays together in a way that makes the collection greater than the sum of its parts. The contributors, many of whom are household names in the field, offer a richly textured and accessible set of discussions oriented toward a non-specialist audience, but which will also be of benefit as supplemental readings for both graduate and undergraduate courses in classics, archaeology, and religious studies.

Following the introduction, which introduces the method of the study of lived religion and offers a brief sketch of the rise of the Roman Empire, Greg Woolf and Miguel John Versluys in "Empire as a Field of Religious Action," assess the role that Empire played in the religious practices and experiences of individuals in the many settings where religion was practised. They describe the Roman Empire as "an interaction sphere" (p. 30) by which they mean that it created a space for the movement and interaction of religious ideas and actors that would otherwise not have been possible. "Shifting and overlapping imperial spaces, diasporic populations, and interlocking networks of roads and seaways provided the hardware across which religious innovations flickered back and forth, most lost within a year or two, but just a few enjoying spectacular success" (p. 36). The essay introduces the theme of portability, migration, and mutual influence many of the subsequent essays carry forward. This is the case with William Van Andringa's essay, "The City as a Field of Religious Action Manufacturing the Divine in Pompeii," where he explores the site to analyze the many ways in which humans and the gods interacted with and lived alongside one another in "a precarious harmony guaranteed by the celebration of regular rituals, in temples, in the public square, in the streets, in houses or on graves" (p. 59). Andringa helpfully accompanies his discussion with images that illustrate these various aspects and locales of lived Pompeiian religion to help give a feel for a city where gods were everywhere all the time. The ubiquity of divine images Pompeii preserves helps modern readers to imagine what religion in the cities of the Roman Empire looked like and the degree of proximity between gods and humans. Whereas there is a tendency to view the pantheon of Greek and Roman deities as made up by fixed and monochrome characters, closer examination of them shows they had shifting, and plural identities tailored to the needs of local actors and situations which helped to make them accessible and capable of being present or made to be present in the multiple spheres of daily life. This essay would be an excellent companion for instruction in helping students comprehend the omnipresence of the gods in every aspect of life as well as the vitality of ancient religion.

In the next chapter, "Sanctuaries – Places of Communication. Knowledge, and Memory in Roman Religion," Rubina Raja and Anna-Katharina Rieger focus on the places of ritual in space and time. Sanctuaries were not inert but "living spaces for living people and their living gods" (p. 61). They were arenas for differing kinds of experience specific to individual situations, occasions, gender, social status, and so on. Sanctuaries bound gods to places, a relation the authors illustrate with examples from both town and countryside and which they use to

show they were shaped by ethnic identities, local customs, political interests, and administrative structures. An increasingly important "field of action" of the sanctuary was the imperial cult which was interjected in subtle and highly visible ways in both old and new sanctuaries. New Testament scholars will benefit from the sensible treatment that avoids the "one size fits all" understanding that plagues the "imperial turn" in biblical studies. An examination of sanctuaries as hosting various kinds of visitors, religious specialists, rituals, as well as experiences helps to flesh out such spaces as dynamic places of engagement between gods and humans where a variety of needs was expressed. Their existence across generations also meant that they were locales for preserving memory through various media. Raja's and Rieger's discussion could be expanded through an intersectional analysis showing the ways that gender, social status, and so on shaped different kinds of orientations to, expectations, and experiences in sanctuaries.

The dramatis personae of sanctuary and other rituals are taken up by Georgia Petridou and Jörg Rüpke in "People and Competencies," a chapter whose chief points overlap with and are expanded by the following one by Heidi Wendt entitled "The Gods and Other Divine Beings." Both chapters consider the role of "religious specialists" and "religious entrepreneurs" (Petridou and Rüpke) and "freelance"/ "self-authorized religious experts" (Wendt) in religious practices that unfolded in temples and other spaces. The former chapter identifies various types of ritual officials and practices, as well the role of philosophical experts, in shaping how religion should look and be conducted. This included large scale enterprises such as healing cults and smaller ones like Mithraic and Dionysiac groups, as well as philosophical schools. Readers of this journal will want to pay close attention to insights concerning the Epistle to the Hebrews' celebration of Jesus as a high priest. The authors expand the traditional contours of the relationship of the letter to the Tanakh by noticing ways in which priestly language can also be understood against the backdrop of priestly practices, offices, and ideology associated with the emperor. Wendt's chapter engages "the prominence of religious 'experts' who were intensely preoccupied with matters of philosophy, cosmology, the systematization of theology, and abstract, universalizing ideas about divinity" (p. 141). She considers the roles of such entrepreneurs in a series of locations: households, voluntary associations, amongst different ethnic groups, in Christ religion, mystery cults and invites consideration of ways heno/monotheistic phenomena may have prompted competition and innovation amongst them, especially "intellectualizing religious experts" who used books, reading, writing, and philosophical traditions to promote their ideas. This is a suggestion that finds ready application in New Testament and extracanonical writings. Importantly, Wendt reveals the degree to which New Testament entrepreneurs were not special cases; they were part of a wider marketplace of religious/philosophical phenomena in which practices and ideas competed with one another for consumers.

Richard Gordon's incisive, well-written, and entertaining chapter, entitled "Managing Problems: Choices and Solutions," relates appeals to a multitude of "'invisible quasi-personal agents', i.e., 'powers' very variably instantiated in local polytheisms and individual imaginations/performances" (p. 167) that families and individuals of the Roman Empire used to cope with a level of challenges to daily life and health that most western readers will have a hard

time imagining. Mainstream options included popular medicine, dreams via ritualized incubation at shrines, divinatory shrines, and funerary practices such as ritual meals. Non-mainstream options were furnished by a host of "minor ritual specialists" (p. 188) that included a variety of services encompassed under the general theme of divination as well as herbalism. Alongside these were people who relied on written sources for their rituals or who purveyed materials with writing on them to achieve desired ends. Gordon's discussion complements Wendt's account of competition amongst these minor experts and thickens it by noticing their ubiquity in everyday life. Lived religion also included widely shared knowledge of charms, the procurement of curses, and the purchase of readily available amulets for protection. This chapter demonstrates the insights of the lived religion approach and the degree to which a modern western person enters an unknown world when one considers what religion in antiquity entailed. Gordon insightfully directs attention away from systems of belief to consider the vast diversity of actions and rituals that were part of every person's strategies for meeting daily challenges.

In "Artefacts and their Humans: Materialising the History of Religion in the Roman World," Miguel John Versluys and Greg Woolf return with a second installment, this time focussing on material objects as "agents provocateurs of religious change" (p. 60). The authors ask, "*how objects make people and their religion*" (p. 229, emphasis original) rather than simply how actors use the material world around them. The chapter outlines a theory for a material study of ancient religion and then illustrates its application. It is especially instructive for those wanting to engage and expand the material approach underway in the study of Christ religion. Religious artefacts were not merely passive objects people used but also created possibilities (i.e., "affordances", p. 214) for different kinds of actions. Versluys and Woolf use the term "objectscape" to describe "'the repertoire(s) of material culture available at a certain site in a certain period'" in their analysis of these possibilities. They relate these objectscapes to "semiotic forms," namely the way objectscapes "differed in terms of action and (emergent) causation" (p. 215). New technologies and availability of materials (for example marble) made possible new kinds of objects that affected religious practices. While the discussion is sometimes heavily freighted with theory, it reveals the promise of a material approach to ancient religion.

Georgia Petridou and Jörg Rüpke return in "The Impact of Textual Production on the Organisation and Proliferation of Religious Knowledge in the Roman Empire." Rather than seeing texts as simple mirrors of Greco-Roman religion, they argue that they should be understood in a dynamic relationship with it. A two-directional approach asks, "how religious ideas and practices were constructed in and disseminated through literary and epigraphic texts" (p. 234). For example, in Rome, the production of literary texts via Roman calendars, the publication of religious statutes, and various kinds of writings about the gods were as much a means of formation of religion as they were records of it. Of particular use for the study of emergent Christianity is the discussion of the function of texts and exegesis for reframing and disseminating earlier religious ideas. Although Paul is not mentioned by these authors, he is an excellent example of this since he takes notions of Torah and their scripturalization and redeploys them in new ways to define his work amongst Gentiles and to outline their relationship to Israel's heritage. His letters do not merely record what the Tanakh has to say about

Jews and Gentiles, they construct them and – via exegesis – the Hebrew Bible in new ways. Petridou and Rüpke treat Justin and Tatian in the context of the Second Sophistic and their intertwining of religion and philosophy, as well as the production of martyrologies as further examples of religious invention by way of textualization.

The book ends with "Economy and Religion" by Richard Gordon, Rubina Raja, and Anna-Katharina Rieger. This is an instructive way to conclude the collection because it dislodges religion from the realm of theory, abstraction, and beliefs into consideration of everyday practical matters. The authors ask, who paid for religion and how much did it cost to practice it? Expansion of the Roman economy through to the Antonine period (160–195 CE) that helped to generate sizable middling income group comprising between 6 and 12% of the empire, representing 15–20% of the empire's total GDP alongside the 1.5% of elites who controlled a similar output, made possible increased spending during a period that saw an explosion of religion under various forms including grain and animal sacrifices, payment of priests and religious specialists, festivals, the erections of temples, pilgrimages, grave markers, the furnishing of meeting places for associations of various types, and so on. The scale of practices such as sacrifices and the upkeep of countless shrines, sanctuaries, urban temples, and pilgrimage sites, as well as the payment of officials incurred a massive expense that required administration and a rationalized means of payment. A detailed picture of the revenues and expenditures entailed in the practices of religion lies beyond the limits of the evidence. Nevertheless, some impressions are instructive and the chapter attempts systematically to identify financial aspects of religious practices that even if they cannot be answered in detail are important to consider, such as who paid for the upkeep of the countless shrines and sanctuaries and the equipment for sacrifices; who funded expenditures related to public cult such as the purchase of sacrificial animals; how did temples get their income and who managed their wealth; what was the relationship between temples and the craftspeople that produced items like tableware and votives for temple visitors; what did sanctuaries charge those who visited them and how did they collect their fees? The scale of religious operations must have entailed a contest for money and patrons; how did sacred sites compete with one another for funds and what practices did they generate to attract them? The advantage of these questions for scholars interested in early Christianity is that they will prompt researchers to locate Christ religion within an economy saturated with religious cults and practices and to ask how the new religion survived in a crowded field of competitors.

The space of a review cannot do justice to the rich content of the essays of this volume; the observations offered here barely scratch the surface. Students of the New Testament and early Christianity, including those who seek to contextualize their witnesses to and constructions of the ethics of everyday life in Roman antiquity will want to read and reread these essays and use them to think with in their examination of Christianity, Judaism, and other religions of the ancient world. For teachers of religion, these essays furnish an excellent resource to supplement textbook readings and for seminars.