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# VARRO'S *TRIA GENERA THEOLOGIAE*: RELIGIOUS THINKING IN THE LATE REPUBLIC

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For writers in the Roman Empire, for Christian apologetics, Varro's *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* supplied the canonical description of traditional Roman religion. In a way that still holds true. Quite a number of literary sources for Roman religion point or lead back to Varro, whose books themselves had mostly not been preserved. It is already the sheer influence of his work that makes Varro's use of the term *theologia* – today a central term in the descriptions of religion – a matter of large interest. And yet the existence of an ancient *theologia* should not be taken for granted. The analysis must be situated in a wider framework: Why did a religion that could primarily be identified as ritual action develop discourses at all that termed themselves theology? Thus in analyzing Varronian theology we have to analyze a whole process that leads to a restructuring and – a defining element of what should be called 'theology'<sup>1</sup> – systematization of a specific area of a society's knowledge.

I should like to start with a presentation of the general structure of Varronian theology (1). Then, secondly, I shall try to clarify his concept of 'civil theology' (2). This leads to a reconstruction of the development of late republican religious discourses (3), my third section. A closer look at an example taken from the *Antiquitates* (4) and a short summary (5) will end my paper.

## 1. THREE TYPES OF THEOLOGY

As Godo Lieberg had tried to argue, already a Greek doxography of the late 2nd century BC had developed a concept of a *theologia tripertita*,

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<sup>1</sup> For a definition see the articles in STIETENCROON 1986, in particular GLADIGOW 1986, as well as RÜPKE 2001a, 119 ff.

of a threefold theology.<sup>2</sup> This thesis had found wide approval, but I would like to point out that neither the term coined is to be found in any ancient source – Tertullian comes closest in speaking of a *tripertita dispositio*<sup>3</sup> – nor is there any reason to disclaim Marcus Terentius Varro's authorship of the concept. It is this encyclopaedist and Roman magistrate, who lived from 116 to 27 BC, to whom the sources give credit, even if we put the concept also into the mouth of the slightly older Pontifex P. Mucius Scaevola.

Varro's definition of the three types of theology has survived only by being quoted by a Christian author, in Augustine's *Civitas dei* (6,5), fragment No. 7 Cardauns:

*Tria genera theologiae ... esse, id est rationis, quae de diis explicatur, eorumque unum mythicon appellari, alterum physicon, tertium civile ... Mythicon appellant, quo maxime utuntur poetae; physicon, quo philosophi; civile, quo populi.*

“There are three types of theology, that is of reasoning about the gods, Varro said. One of them is called mythical, the second physical, the third civic. They call mythical the kind that is especially used by the poets; physical that is used by philosophers; civic that is used by the peoples.”

Already on the basis of this quotation one can see how much these terms are informed by Greek discourses. ‘Theology’ itself is a Greek word, no central term, but used to denote philosophical thought about the gods since Plato.<sup>4</sup> Aristotle in particular employed the term and its derivatives in his *Metaphysics*, the *philosophia theologike* proper.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Such is the thesis of LIEBERG 1982; Varro also continued the Greek terms, solely the *theologia civilis* replaced any Greek original completely. The retranslation of Augustine with *politice* (Aug. *Civ.* 6, 12 = Varro *Ant. rer. div.* fr. 6 Cardauns), as BENDLIN (1998) makes plausible, is probably failing. On the history of reception of the resulting term of ‘political theology’ see CANCEK 1983.

<sup>3</sup> After PÉPIN (1956) especially LIEBERG (1973 and 1982) popularized this term; Y. LEHMANN (1997) stretches the connotation even further and speaks also of *religio tripertita* (193). Here every relation to the antique linguistic usage (that knows a *Tripertita* as the title of a commentary to the Twelve Tables) is lost. Tertullian, in the polemical second book of *Ad nationes*, initiates the summary of the Varronian theory like this: *triplici enim genere deorum censum distinxit* (2, 1, 9). Then, the following chapters are dedicated to *genus physicon* (2-4), *gentile* (5-6, s. 5, 1, 1: *de communi omnium sensu*) and *mythicon* (7-8). This is summarized by the term *tripertita dispositio* (2, 9, 1) – not *theologia*.

<sup>4</sup> Plat. *Rep.* 379a.

<sup>5</sup> Arist. *Metaph.* 1026a19 and elsewhere.

The types given by Augustine can be more precisely described by using the other Augustinian quotations that form the core of any reconstruction of Varro's *Antiquitates*.<sup>6</sup> Philosophical thought is characterized by the reductionism of the empirical philosophy of nature: The gods stand for the elements (fr. 23), Iuppiter for instance is the ether, Iuno the air, Neptune water or sea, Pluto the earth (fr. 28). The theology of the poets, that is mythology, offers the largest space for speculations and is subject to the least control. At the same time it is closest to ritual if you think about dramatic productions that are staged within the ritual framework of games only during the Roman republic.

It is less easy to define the 'theology of the citizens'. The term seems to denote the whole of norms and practices of public and private cult; hence it would signal a normative, not a discursive theology. As such it embraces everything thought necessary by the political unit, that is, its leading class, necessary for a correct cult of the gods, necessary to keep the *pax deorum*, the "peace with the gods" at Rome. The *principes civitates*, the political leader, are the agents of civic theology according to a statement given by Varro to Mucius Scaevola;<sup>7</sup> other fragments name the individual people, hence a city's citizens for the same role. As far as contents is concerned, this 'theology' is rather traditional, comprising rules for rituals as well as rules for religious specialists.

It is quite common to term this body of rules 'sacral law', *Sakralrecht*, but that is no ancient concept. The Latin phrase of *ius divinum* denotes the gods' disposal of their property. Roman ruling on cults and priests is part of the *ius publicum*, public institutional law. Some other bodies of law do exist, the *ius pontificale* for instance. But this is nothing more than a collective term to describe all regulations concerning the pontiffs – in the same manner the *ius parietum* comprises all the regulations about walls.<sup>8</sup> The Roman culture did not entertain a unifying concept of religion – as is demonstrated by the Varronian plurality of theologies.

It is quite natural to suppose that Varro did conceptualize himself as theologian and even more as representative of civic theology. The first is confirmed by Servius in his commentary on the Aeneid, who characterized

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<sup>6</sup> The decisive edition comes from CARDAUNS 1976; before that AGAHD 1898.

<sup>7</sup> Aug. *Civ.* 4, 27; the passage originates maybe from the Varronian *logistoricus Curio* (see CARDAUNS 1958, 34-38: fr. 5).

<sup>8</sup> See Cic. *Leg.* 2, 47 f.

Varro by the phrase *praecellat in theologia*; here Varro is compared to Nigidius Figulus.<sup>9</sup> Further evidence can be offered. Varro's *Antiquities* were addresses to Caesar the *pontifex maximus*.<sup>10</sup> The priests are – *pace* fragment 9 – especially in need of the body of knowledge conferred by the third type of theology.<sup>11</sup>

Fragment 2 might stem from the preface:

*Se timere ne pereant [scil. dei], non incurso hostili, sed civium negligentia, de qua illos velut ruina liberari a se (dicit) et in memoria bonorum per eius modi libros recondi atque servari utiliore cura, quam Metellus de incendio sacra Vestalia et Aeneas de Troiano excidio penates liberasse praedicatur.*

... that he fears that the gods would vanish, not by hostile attack, but by the negligence of the citizens, of which they would be freed by him as of a ruin; and by means of such books they would be refounded and preserved in the memory of good men, thus deploying a more useful care than Metellus, who is praised to have freed the cult items of Vesta from destruction by fire, and Aeneas, who is praised to have freed the household gods from the destruction of Troy.

This quotation offers an explicit comparison of Varro's achievement of writing these books with the achievement of the *pontifex maximus* Caecilius Metellus who had evacuated the sacred things from the burning temple of Vesta. Most explicit with regard to my qualification of Varro as representative of civic theology is Fragment 11, relating the three types to one another.

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<sup>9</sup> Serv. *Aen.* 10, 175.

<sup>10</sup> Lact. *Inst.* 1, 6, 7; Aug. *Civ.* 7, 35; see also CARDAUNS 1978. From that does not follow that the *Antiquitates* must have presented a program of reform (in this I follow, regardless of the question of dating, the position of JOCELYN 1983; again differently LEHMANN 1997, 166-170 and CANCIK 2001, 4): For a senator the assertion of the perspective of realization is always also a figure of justification. LEHMANN's (1997, 166-169) arguments for the early dating of the work in the time around 60 BC are not convincing.

<sup>11</sup> The assumption that Varro because of his historical-religious knowledge must have been *Quindecimvir* s. f., which was formulated by CICHORIUS (1922, 197-200) and accepted almost without exception (also by RAWSON 1985, 96; instead see GAGÉ 1955, 700), is without any foundation. The publication of e.g. the *commentarii pontifici* as *annales maximi* (see FRIER 1979), or their broad use in antiquarian literature, shows that in relating to such texts – this is even true for the *libri reconditi* (LINDERSKI 1985, 233) – there was no secrecy. On the career of Varro, which lead to the praetorship and different political and military special tasks, see shortly ARKENBERG 1993, 335 f.

*Ea, quae scribunt poetae, minus esse quam ut populi sequi debeant; quae autem philosophi, plus quam ut ea vulgum scrutari expediat. Quae sic abhorrent ... ut tamen ex utroque genere ad civiles rationes adsumpta sint non pauca. Quare quae erunt communia cum populis, una cum civilibus scribemus; e quibus maior societas debet esse nobis cum philosophis quam cum poetis ... physicos ... utilitatis causa scripsisse, poetas delectationis.*

That one, which the poets write down, offers less than what the peoples need to follow; which one, however, the philosophers write down, offers more than what the common people need to investigate. These are that incompatible ... nevertheless not a few items have been adapted for civil use. For that we will describe all that that is common to (all) people together with the civil things; out of it the more intense contact should be with the philosophers than with the poets ... the natural philosophers have written for the reason of usefulness, the poets for pleasure.

Augustine criticizes Varro's attempt at establishing *theologia civilis* as a genre of its own and his confusion of the different types, a confusion enacted by Varro from the point of view of civic theology.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. VARRO, THE CIVIC THEOLOGIAN

Yet, what is a civic theologian?<sup>13</sup> The answer is suggested by fragment 2: To save and to conserve are the leitmotifs, reconstruction and documentation. This conforms to the title: *Antiquitates*, antiquities. But now, one starts to become suspicious: Might Varro be no theologian, but a mere antiquarian? Yet, what is an antiquarian? I have to insert an excursus.

The ritual rules collected by Varro within the first triads of books claim to be legitimated by their supposedly high age. However, as all oral traditions they are not as fixed as they claim. Within a society that is subjected to massive transformations even traditions become 'liquid', adapt themselves to new contexts or start to experiment in a rigoristic manner, that is attempt at an autonomy of religion that affects other realms

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<sup>12</sup> *Quare quae erunt communia cum populis, una cum civilibus scribemus; e quibus maior societas debet esse nobis cum philosophis quam cum poetis.*

<sup>13</sup> With this combination I would like to avoid the reception of the Varronian term as 'political theology'. On the history of definition see ASSMANN 2000, 15-31.

negatively.<sup>14</sup> To give an example: At some point of time in the late republic the *Flamen Martialis* and the *Flamen Quirinalis*, two types of priests, gained permission to take over provincial positions that imply a sustained absence from the city of Rome.<sup>15</sup> To the contrary, shortly before 218 BC succeeding *Flamines Diales* lost their priesthood because their caps fell from their heads while being outside<sup>16</sup> – something which obviously was cared for afterwards. At the beginning of the 2nd century BC one of the Scipiones halted a military expedition for those days that witnessed rituals of his priesthood, the *Salii*, at Rome.<sup>17</sup>

The reaction to the ‘liquidifying’ of traditions that was due to increasingly accelerated cultural change<sup>18</sup> was manifold. One of the important and fairly widespread elements was *writing*. Since about the time of the First Punic War the prestigious colleges of public priesthoods started to take minutes. These texts were records, they were neither normative nor systematic, but they could be used for controlling and regulating by pointing to precedents or to the documentation of membership by recording dates of entry or death.<sup>19</sup>

By the end of the 3rd century BC a systematization of Roman myths and of gentilician claims to consular ancestors started that took the form of Greek historiography. The process started with Greek texts that must have been destined for private reading but was soon supplemented by Ennian epic and public lists of magistrates added to calendars that recorded Roman generals’ victories by way of the founding days of votive temples.<sup>20</sup> Since the second third of the 2nd century BC the first incipiently

<sup>14</sup> On the term of ‘rigorism’ see GLADIGOW 1993.

<sup>15</sup> See Tac. *Ann.* 3, 58 f. The case of A. Postumius Albinus from the 3rd century BC is comparable: Liv. *Per.* 19, Val. Max. 1, 1, 2 and Tac. *Ann.* 3,71; see VANGGAARD 1988, 70. On the limited absence of three days for the *Flamen Dialis* cf. SIMÓN 1996, 103-110.

<sup>16</sup> RÜPKE 1996, 267-271.

<sup>17</sup> Liv. 37, 33, 7; Polyb. 21, 13, 7-14. On the context of this event of the year 190 see RÜPKE 1995a, 325; cf. SEGUIN 1974.

<sup>18</sup> This is not only terminologically aimed at FUHRMANN’s ‘awareness of crisis and the therefore resulting intention for renewal’ (1983, 134), but also against the dating of the decisive processes in the late republican Augustan epoch (139 ff.). In my opinion, in Augustan time the process gains again a peculiar dynamism.

<sup>19</sup> See RÜPKE 1993, 164.

<sup>20</sup> On early Roman historiography cf. E. RAWSON 1976; UNGERN-STERNBERG 1986, 1989; CHASSIGNET 1996; SEHLMAYER 1998; for the sources: WISEMAN 1986, 1994, FLAIG 1995; especially for the *fasti* RÜPKE 1995b, in detail by MORA 1999.

systematic treatises appeared that formulated rules applying to particular magistracies: *De iure pontificali, de censoribus, de potestatibus*.<sup>21</sup> To judge from the few texts mostly stemming from a late period, these treatises were not yet systematic handbooks but collections of traditions, surely not without interpretation and modification. It is Cato's book on agriculture – a rather uncontroversial theme – that might give an impression of the genre.

The authors of these texts stem from the senatorial class, epic excepted. This is true also for the most important antiquarian – the usual and well-known designation for the person – M. Terentius Varro who intended to dig out and preserve traditions. Why, then, all the talk of theology, why philosophical reflections? What are the criteria of civic theology regarded as an intellectual enterprise?

These criteria are not true or false, but utility and functionality (fr. 8/9). The criteria depend on the place of communication. The theology of poets fits to the theatre, physical theology fits everywhere, civic theology fits to cities, fits Rome (fr. 10).<sup>22</sup> There are conflicts, though. Philosophy contains statements that should be uttered in the classroom rather than in the marketplace. Civic theology might integrate such universalistic contentions, but only with regard to utility (fr. 11). Unfortunately, the masses are prone to fall prey to poetic theology rather than philosophy (fr. 19).<sup>23</sup>

How are the different theologies exactly related to one another? Varro accepts that it is not the theologian who defines public utility. This is done by a founding hero, a lawgiver, a *nomothetes*. It is exactly in such a context that we could find the first attestation of theology, namely in Plato's *Republic*. Varro took up this line, but he opened a new perspective. At the very beginning of a society's history civic and philosophic theology, thus Varro, are identical. At this point in time the *dei certi et sempiterni*, the eternal gods of definable function, can be found (fr. 32). Varro clarifies the relationship by formulating a mental experiment (fr. 12): 'If he would found the community anew, he would define the gods and their names rather by nature's perception.' But Varro continues to stress the hypothetical character of the statement: 'Yet, as he is a member of an already

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<sup>21</sup> See SCHANZ, HOSIUS 1927, 234 f. for the 2nd century BC; in detail: E. RAWSON 1985; on the antiquarianism in general see also FUHRMANN 1983; MOMIGLIANO 1990.

<sup>22</sup> *Prima ... theologia maxime accomodata est ad theatrum, secunda ad mundum, tertia ad urbem.*

<sup>23</sup> *Magis ad poetas quam ad physicos fuisse populos inclinatos ...*

ancient people, he is obliged to keep the transmitted history of names and surnames ... this is the aim of writing and analyzing those things in order to motivate the masses to venerate rather than despise these gods.<sup>7</sup>

*Non se illa iudicio suo sequi, quae civitatem Romanam instituisse ... si eam civitatem novam constitueret, ex naturae potius formula deos nominaque eorum se fuisse dedicaturum ... sed iam quoniam in vetere populo esset, acceptam ab antiquis nominum et cognominum historiam tenere, ut tradita est, debere se ... et ad eum finem illa scribere ac perscrutari, ut potius eos magis colere quam despiciere vulgus velit.*

... that he himself, following his own judgment, would not follow those cults that the Roman community had institutionalized. ... If he would found a new society, he would go to dedicate the gods and their names according to nature ... But as he lives in an already old people, he must cling to the story of names and surnames as received by the ancients ... and he is scribing and researching all this for the purpose that the common people would venerate these gods rather than despise them.

Varro's presentation of the historical process would have been done in quite a detailed manner and would have given its due to contingencies.<sup>24</sup> Importance, for example, is given to imports. The Sabines, from whom Varro stemmed, added many a god to the Roman pantheon (fr. 36). Varro exemplifies the typical late republican Roman concept of Rome as a result of ethnical syntheses. But quite banal events could have lasting consequences: Once, Iuppiter and Summanus were equivalent gods, one directing lightning by day, the other by night. Yet when only Iuppiter received a large temple building, the other got, Summanus, dropped easily into oblivion (fr. 42).

Yet the reconstruction of Varronian thought is even more complex. Varro attributes the task to clarify whether particular gods were eternal or came into being at definite points in time to the *genus physicon* (thus fr. 8). That given, historical research is part of philosophy. The etymological method uses to clarify the character of single deities belongs to the realm

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<sup>24</sup> The preserved fragments hardly reveal the depth of the historical argumentation; it should, as CANCIK (2001, 5) shows, not be underestimated, and seems to have been carried on with the destruction of places of worship for Isis under the consuls Gabinius and Calpurnius Piso (58 BC).

of philosophy, too.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the differences between the types of theology are furthermore obscured. What, then, is the status of the model of three types of theological thinking, if it turns out to be without importance for the reconstruction aimed at? Primarily, the model seems to offer an instrument of justification or even polemics: The poets, Varro said, do offer less, the philosophers more than what is needed by the peoples (fr. 11). Is that worth the theoretical effort of formulating the model?

### 3. ROMAN THEOLOGY OF THE LATE REPUBLIC

What are, then, the pragmatics of the theory? To answer this question I have again to turn to the more general historical problem of the relationship between Roman cult and philosophical thinking on religion. The latter was seen by the Romans as a thoroughly Greek enterprise, the attempt to systematically clarify and explain questions that relate to our existence as such. Why did the Romans take interest in such a form of religious discourse? The answer has to be sought in the history of the third and second centuries BC, in the – primarily military – confrontation with a culture judged in many aspects as attractive and even superior: Greco-Hellenistic culture, to leave other encounters, with Egyptian culture and religion, for instance, aside for the sake of the argument.

The Romans – again a problematic generalization – felt forced to take a position, to attribute a new place to themselves and others within a world that had enlarged. They felt invited to participate in those cultures. No problems arose in a number of areas. Greek religious and honorific sculpture, decontextualized as ‘art’, was used as domestic ornament, thereby opening a new field of aristocratic competition.<sup>26</sup> Since the second century Roman generals boasted with complete libraries taken as booty. In fact, Greco-Italian sculpture, architecture or drama had been present before. Yet the sharpening social differentiation due to prolonged warfare and successful expansion singled out more and more areas of Hellenistic living the imitation of which could enable Roman *nobiles* to gain a lead in

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<sup>25</sup> On the ancient etymology see LERSCH 1838-41, shortly COSERIU 1975; for Varro in particular SCHRÖTER 1963.

<sup>26</sup> On the Roman art robbery PAPE 1975.

comparison to peers and the general population.<sup>27</sup> Emulation is not entirely directed towards the Greek but primarily towards their own folks. When Roman literature arrived at an explicit competition with their Greek counterparts in the first century BC, these counterparts were dead for centuries or even half a millennium, and the language of the competition was Latin – of course.<sup>28</sup>

Rome, I would like to continue my social sketch, had achieved a dominance on a far larger scale than ever before. The world dominated was close to universal and it presented a host of diverging geographical, historical, and political concepts of order. To deal with this situation demanded concepts and arguments that had not been produced by the urban centered Roman tradition. The intensified import of foreign cults from the whole Mediterranean (Cybele, *Mater magna*, for example),<sup>29</sup> that is the attempt at a symbolic presence of the whole world at Rome, did not offer a sufficient solution.

The presence of Greek philosophy heightened the pressure<sup>30</sup> and offered relief at the same time. Its arguments claimed to be universal, a universality that had been sharpened by the size and diversity of the Hellenistic world that for centuries had had to deal with the problems the Romans encountered now.<sup>31</sup> Another factor might have contributed to this universalizing quality. The very authors had frequently been marginalized ‘intellectuals’, if I may be anachronistic, people on the margins of the Greek world, often outside of the political centres, exiled.<sup>32</sup> The processes are even interrelated. The Romans’ subduing of the larger political units of the Hellenistic world furthered the formulation of a translocal Greek identity; the Greek renaissance in forms like Atticism was a product of a joint Greco-Roman process of value-formation.<sup>33</sup> Greek concepts quickly,

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<sup>27</sup> See in particular FERRARY 1989; after GRUEN 1984 especially GRUEN 1990 and 1992.

<sup>28</sup> See VOGT-SPIRA 1999, 34 with reference to the literature of the 2nd century BC; the competition implied in the concept of *imitatio* only had an effect in the 1st century BC, but also here – the position of VOGT-SPIRA could be intensified by this – as a competition in Latin language for the more complete acquisition of a far-off (!), archaic educational culture.

<sup>29</sup> BREMMER 1987; generally E. SCHMIDT 1909; in summary ERSKINE 2001, 224.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. FORTIN 1980, 244, yet with problematical conclusions.

<sup>31</sup> On history (mythology) and geography cf. RÜPKE 2001b.

<sup>32</sup> Established for historiography by MUTSCHLER 1997, 249.

<sup>33</sup> See MOATTI 1997, 148 f.

though not without problems and resistance,<sup>34</sup> penetrated into Roman discourses.<sup>35</sup> Again I would like to stress that these discourses were discourses among Romans, only as second thoughts they might be used apologetically against representatives of conquered Greek communities.<sup>36</sup>

The process has been described for politics, philosophy and rhetorics in some detail. The writings of Cicero mark a first stopover of the development. He combines the comprehensive representation of Greek schools of thought with a reformulation of the ethics of the Roman aristocracy as could be seen in the books *De officiis*. After Cicero, it is Rome that functions as a centre of philosophical debate in the Roman Empire.

There is nor description of the process focussing on religion. As I have demonstrated, accelerated social change made traditions 'liquid' and precarious. To secure, to fix traditions was the aim of the nobility during the second century BC, not the continuation of the massive innovations of the third and early second centuries. This is visible in the policy of temple building. The import of new gods is clearly curtailed during the second century.

With regard to writing, two lines of action were followed. The first – and dominating<sup>37</sup> – is the development of 'antiquarian literature'. Social and ritual practices of different public areas were collected and systematized in a preliminary manner. Thereby tradition is secured by writing and rationalization.<sup>38</sup> I would like to stress anew that the degree and chronology could vary widely between different areas.<sup>39</sup> Whereas historiography started already by the end of the 3rd century, texts on the calendar or priesthoods were produced infrequently since the middle of the 2nd century, more fully only during the first century BC.

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<sup>34</sup> See JEHNE 1999. That is especially clear for the establishment of rhetoric, which for the time being should be limited to the situation at court (which admittedly reached great importance at the end of the 2nd century BC). Increasing control of access and increasing demand are correlating; new patterns of argumentation do not only support old ones, but also present alternatives (see WALLACE-HADRILL 1988, 231 f.).

<sup>35</sup> Reception and assimilation in this area is shown by GEHRKE 1996 (cf. GEHRKE 1985).

<sup>36</sup> In the discussion about the beginning of the Roman historiography with Greek texts, this is too easily ignored (see e.g. FUHRMANN 1983, 138; RAWSON 1985, 64), cf. RÜPKE 2000, 44 f.

<sup>37</sup> On the significance of philosophy in the Roman upper class cf. JOCELYN 1977.

<sup>38</sup> For the latter MOATTI 1997, 114.

<sup>39</sup> In detail see E. RAWSON 1985; differently FUHRMANN 1983.

The second line of action followed is related to philosophical argumentation. Neither the forms nor the contents of Greek philosophy were taken over in a sweeping manner. Obviously Greek philosophy of nature did not supply an adequate description or justification – and hence preservation – of traditional religious practices. The solution thus given was the development of a theory of these practices that gave theoretical status to practice itself. It was Varro who realized this. The theory of practice is the *theologia civilis*. Its theoretical status is ensured by formulating civic theology as an indispensable element of a threefold theology. Varro reorganized different types of theology of the Greek debates and polemics<sup>40</sup> into a structure of three elements. ‘Civic theology’ took up especially ‘popular theology’ and ‘theology of the *nomothetai*’. Thus traditional religious practice was dignified as an independent form of ‘theory’, that is to say, of theory! The contingencies of middle-Italian cultic practices were given the same status as Greek philosophy of nature and poetry.

Varro thus legitimated the clinging to *mos maiorum*, to tradition, within the universalistic framework of Greek philosophy (which is not to be confused with the practices of Greek cities!). Tradition, *mos*, is defined by Varro as “the consensus of those living in the same place, a consensus that produces familiarity by long-standing practice”.<sup>41</sup> This definition, reproduced in Servius, illustrates how Varro did transform Greek universalism. It is permanent consent within a particular communicative community – a community by the way that could be envisaged as a specific social group, the nobility for example – that constitutes what is right, right in a particular place, in a particular history yet universalistic nevertheless, neither ethnically<sup>42</sup> or genetically restricted. Neither particular peoples nor the beginnings have lasting prerogatives. To produce such a consent, now in the city of Rome, might even be helped by Greek philosophy, Varro suggests. The same consent, however, and its traditions form the limits for this philosophy.

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<sup>40</sup> See e.g. Philodem, *Περὶ εὐσεβείας* col. 42; against OBBINK 1996, 491 the reference to a Varronian threefold partition is not tenable.

<sup>41</sup> Serv. *Aen.* 7, 601: *Varro vult morem esse communem consensum omnium simul habitantium, qui inveteratus consuetudinem facit*. On this see MOATTI 1997, 272.

<sup>42</sup> MOATTI (1997, 273) emphasizes this aspect. FERRARY (1995, 68) concludes similar results for Cicero: “Cicero’s city is neither the city of the wise described by Zeno nor the cosmic city of Chrysippus, even if there are occasional references to the latter (...), which serve as a measure of distance and comparison: it is real cities which interest him, above

## 4. CIVIC THEOLOGY IN PRACTICE

Could all these theses about the interests of Varro, about the distortion of religious practices by writing and systematization be proven? After having paid attention almost exclusively to the fragments of the introductory first book of the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*, I should like to offer at least a cursory analysis of those fragments that – following the plausible reconstruction of Agahd as well as Cardauns – form the bulk of the Augustinian quotations.<sup>43</sup> They offer collections of gods that relate to particular areas of human life. What now appears to be mere lists probably had been the organizing structure of a much more detailed account in the Varronian original, including historical details and argumentation.<sup>44</sup> It is important to point out that similar material, although in a more summary form, was already to be found in one of the most ancient antiquarians, Fabius Pictor, who might have written in the middle of the 2nd century BC. He lists, so the quotation runs,

*Fabius Pictor hos deos enumerat quos invocat flamen sacrum Cereale faciens Telluri et Cereri: Vervactorem, Redarotorem, Inporcitorem, Insitorem, Obarotorem, Occatorem, Sarritorem, Subruncinatorem, Messorem, Convectorem, Conditorem, Promitorem.*

the gods that are invoked by the Flamen when he performs the Ceres sacrifice for Tellus and Ceres: the Fieldsweeper, the Againplougher, the Furrowmaker, the Sower, the Overplougher, the Harrower, the Hoer, the Weeder, the Cutter, the Collector, the Storer, the One who takes it out.<sup>45</sup>

It is Varro's intention to offer the *di certi*, the 'certain deities' whose function is known, to his co-citizens by explaining their history – furthermore he tries to find out about the function as precisely as possible in order to make these deities usable for invocations. This already indicates the modifying approach of Varro as does the term *di certi*. The term is

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all Rome." Correspondingly, universalization for him is the universalization of Roman norms and traditions (ibid., 69).

<sup>43</sup> More than forty per cent of the fragments of the sixteen volume works originate in the counting of Cardauns from the fourteenth volume *De dis certis*.

<sup>44</sup> See Elm 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Fabius Pictor, *Iuris Pontificis Libri* 16 = fr. 6 Seckel/Kübler = Serv. *Georg.* 1,21.

coined by Varro.<sup>46</sup> It demonstrates that Varro is not a mere collector and implies by pointing to functional classification and determining a reductionistic approach.<sup>47</sup>

I cannot offer the texts but in a very comprehensive and selective manner. For the process of procreation from the start to caring for the newborn Varro names the following gods: *Ianus* clears the way for the semen, *Deus Consevius* takes care of the insemination, *Saturnus* of the semen itself. *Liber* frees the man of the semen during the coitus, *Libera* does the same for the woman who is credited by Varro for contributing semen, too. *Fluvonia* feeds the child in the uterus. If the sequence in Augustine is correct, *Dea Mena*, who presides over menstruation, would redirect the monthly bleeding to the growth of the fetus.<sup>48</sup> *Alemona* cares for the intrauterine bringing up. *Vitumnus* furthers the vital, *Seninus* the sensual powers of the fetus. Three deities of fate take care of the right time of birth, namely during the ninth or tenth month, their names are *Parca*, and, as you could presume, *Nona* and *Decima*. In the shape of *Diespater* Iuppiter brings the child to daylight, *Lucina* brings it to the light. The etymological relationship could hardly be missed even in a translation. During childbirth there is cult of *Lucina* and *Diana*. The following week a table with offerings to *Iuno* is set up. At the end of the week, probably on the *dies lustricus*,<sup>49</sup> one has to invoke the *Fata scribunda*, deities of fate who write down the names and the like.

We have not finished with giving birth yet. If the well-argued, though far from certain, sequence of Cardaun's edition can be trusted, we return to the situation of birth.<sup>50</sup> A woman delivering for the first time will do so by candlelight, perhaps due to prolonged labour. Hence *Candelifera* is important. Two *Carmentes*, *Postverta* and *Prorsa*, care for the head up or head down position of the child to be born and with afterwards – as *Carmentes* – prophesy to the newborn. We do not know what *Fortuna* did directly afterwards. *Ops* showers the newborn laid down on the earth with presents. The *deus Vaticanus* does not care for Catholic baptizing but for the first utterances of the child: *va, va*. There are deities for the next stage

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<sup>46</sup> WISSOWA 1921.

<sup>47</sup> Y. LEHMANN 1983, 156.

<sup>48</sup> See the commentary of CARDAUNS 1976, 193 *ad locum*.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>50</sup> For factual details KÖVES-ZULAUF 1990.

of speaking, perhaps active only later: *Aius*, *Farinus* and *Lacutius*. A god *Fabulinus* is explicitly mentioned for the first correct speech.<sup>51</sup> *Dea Levana* helps the father to 'levy' the child from the earth, thereby declaring his fatherhood. The role of *Albana* is not known. Maybe – but that is my speculation – she whitens the father's face when he opens a nappy the first time.

Three deities protect the mother: *Intercidona*, *Pilumnus* and *Deverra* speaking names as far as the symbolic activities of three men are concerned who, pace Varro, act as guardians against *Silvanus*. *Cunina*, then, protects the cradle. *Diva Rumina* adduces the breast; *diva Potina* and *diva Educa* care for drinking and eating.<sup>52</sup> The list is continued by deities that care for the children's standing, their leaving and returning, mental health and so forth. *Numeria* teaches how to count.<sup>53</sup>

This is not the only sequence in Varro. The group of the nuptial deities, *di nuptiales* or *coniugales*<sup>54</sup> that I am not going to describe in detail care for anything from the gifts the bridegroom has to present up to details of sexual intercourse, position and defloration. Augustine's sarcasm revels in the names but drops in details.

What is common to the lists?<sup>55</sup> They are organized around riskful human action. There might be rituals at some points but they seem to lack for many instances. The theological precedes any ritual details by far. Far from just documenting changing practices, antiquarian literature changes them itself. Whatever would have been the prayer of the *Flamen*, it is reduced to lists of deities in *Fabius Pictor*. These lists do not offer a unified theory of action, they abstain from abstraction as much as possible. Yet they attest to a reflection that dissects complex actions and processes into minimal parts, it atomizes.<sup>56</sup> I would not deny the possibility of self-amused playing around.<sup>57</sup> Basically, however, the author tries to concentrate on riskful situations, situations that offer alternative courses of action or events.

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<sup>51</sup> Concerning the last, of whom the mention is guaranteed for Varro, but not for the *Antiquitates*, see CARDAUNS 1976, 204.

<sup>52</sup> The presented succession in fr. 90-114.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, fr. 137.

<sup>54</sup> Fr. 144-156.

<sup>55</sup> For a systematical classification of the following findings see RÜPKE 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Aug. *Civ.* 4, 16 p. 165, 24 f.: ... *cum deos singulis singulis rebus et paene singulis motibus adtribuerunt* ...

<sup>57</sup> The at least selective parallel tradition for Varro yet allows to estimate this factor to

Responsibility is credited to the gods, not to the humans.<sup>58</sup> The gods partly have things to do: Diespiter, for example, who brings the day.<sup>59</sup> Yet it is important to pay close attention to the wording, even if the text might be distorted by its quotation. The relation of deity and its realm seems to be an own area of reflection. *Praeesse*, to preside, is the most frequent term.<sup>60</sup> Alternatively to it nouns are used that seem to be part of Varro's vocabulary: There are *officia* and *munera*, jobs and duties of the gods.<sup>61</sup> The introduction of book 1 attests further phrases: power, ability, magisterial force – *potestas*.<sup>62</sup> From another text, Censorinus' treatise on the birthday still another phrase could be added: Ironically miniaturizing he speaks of *administrates*, 'to do a bit of administration'.<sup>63</sup>

The relationship of a deity to its area is formulated on the model of public rule – the only form of public administration known to the Roman republic. If that is true, it is legitimate to point to the parallels: The activities ascribed to that host of deities parallel the Roman concept of public power. The power of a magistrate is not positively defined as a set of specific competences but by basically unlimited power that is restricted in practice by collegiality, short periods of office holding and instances to appeal to. Likewise the gods: Their plurality restricts their area temporally as collegially; in a number of cases possible concurrences remain without a solution by ranking: *Nona* and *Decima*, *Postverta* and *Prorsa* offer examples of such collegiality.<sup>64</sup>

The consequences of the approach could be demonstrated with another example, here in the fragment 111 of Cardauns, which is quoted

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a less degree. 'That he really fabricated names (...) is hardly provable' (CARDAUNS 1976, 240). Both WISSOWA's fundamental criticism on the value of the names (1904a) and WALTER F. OTTO's attempts to recover them as gentilician names (1909), need to be rejected in principle (not in every detail).

<sup>58</sup> Differently RADKE 1970, 44.

<sup>59</sup> Varro *Ant. rer. div.* 99 Cardauns.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, *passim*: Cf. Serv. *auct. Aen.* 2, 141 (= Varro fr. 1 Agahd): ... *quia et pontifices dicunt singulis actibus proprios deos praeesse*.

<sup>61</sup> Varro *Ant. rer. div.* 88 as well as (*officia*) Aug. *Civ.* 6, 9 p. 262, 29 and Serv. *Georg.* 1, 21.

<sup>62</sup> Varro *Ant. rer. div.* 3 Cardauns: ...*quam quisque deus vim et facultatem ac potestatem cuiusque rei habeat*.

<sup>63</sup> Cens. 3, 4: *dei complures hominum vitam pro sua quisque portione adminiculantes...*

<sup>64</sup> See GLADIGOW 1990, 246 f. for Greek alternatives in dealing with problems of competition.

by Augustine in his *Civitas dei*<sup>65</sup> and obviously formed part of Book 14 “About those deities whose functions could be ascertained”, *De dis certis*:

*Mulieri fetae post partum tres deos custodies (commemorat) adhiberi, ne Silvanus deus per noctem ingerediatur et vexet, eorumque custodum significandorum causa tres homines noctu circumire limina domus et primo limen secure ferire, postea pilo, tertio deverrere scopis, ut his datis culturae signis deus Silvanus prohibeatur intrare, quod neque arbores caeduntur ac putantur sine ferro, neque far conficitur sine pilo, neque fruges coacervantur sine scopis; ab his autem tribus rebus tres nuncupatos deos, Intercidonam a securis intercisione, Pilumnium a pilo, Deverram ab scopis, quibus diis custodibus contra vim dei Silvani fetae conservaretur.*

“Three days after birth giving three custodian deities were called for the woman, in order to prevent the deity Silvanus to enter by night and to torment her. In order to indicate these three custodians, by night three men surround the house and, first, beat the threshold with an axe, secondly with a pestle, and thirdly sweep them with twigs. These indications of care should keep the deity Silvanus from entering, because neither could trees be cutted down and shrubbed without iron nor could flour be prepared without a pestle nor could crop be collected without twigs. From these three things the gods take their names: Intercidona from the cutting of the axe, Pilumnus from the pestle, Deverra from the twigs. By these custodian deities the woman in childbed is preserved against the violence of the god Silvanus.”

This text is read as a description of a domestic ritual, which even might have been in danger to be lost if Varro had not preserved it. But this interpretation ignores the literary context. The reaction to the described change of traditions and the rationality pressure namely went on. While Cicero concentrated on translating Greek philosophy into Latin language and making it socially acceptable, Varro went further on in justifying the traditional practices by developing a theory of the practice that gave theoretical status to this practice and therefore a higher dignity. The seemingly ethnographically documented ritual in its explicit rationality, its restriction to etymologically relevant details and the precise functional definition of gods offer a striking example. It should not be read as performance instructions.<sup>66</sup>

To sum up: It is a seemingly innocent religious context that displays reflections about power. In the activity of the antiquarian, civic theology

<sup>65</sup> Aug. *Civ.* 6, 9, p. 263, 26 ff.

<sup>66</sup> See Cic. *Acad. post.* 1, 9: *Nam nos in nostra urbe peregrinantis errantisque tamquam hospites tui libri quasi domum reduxerunt, ut possemus aliquando qui et ubi essemus agnoscere:*

does not remain a mere formality but gains a particular profile. A profile, however, that is specifically Roman in contents, not philosophical.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In looking for the theologian, Varro and his *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* proffered the antiquarian. That is entirely conforming to the reception in antiquity and later on. The Varronian model of the *tria genera theologiae* did not have any lasting impact.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, Varro was read and quoted widely. For medieval and modern times that is due to Varro's most diligent adversary, Augustine, whose *Civitas dei* was more present than most other non-biblical texts. We know of more than two hundred manuscripts before 1500 and several early printings. Yet, Augustine of course used Varro because the latter was famous for his richness in information. It is Varro who forms the fundamental source of information for all the antiquarians of the empire. It is his image of late republican religion that even today informs our image to a large extent.

And yet, we could not call him a theologian. Varro did not produce a philosophical reflection on Roman material, did not provide the Greek philosophy of Roman religion that is so conspicuously absent from Cicero. Of course, there is Cicero with his complete transference of Greek philosophy into Latin, a transfer though that turns out to be stringed quite thoroughly by roman upperclass outlook. But Varro stands for an alternative that offers another form of systematization of social and religious practices, antiquarian literature, even dignified by Varro as theoretical, a theological enterprise. This antiquarianism is an answer to accelerated social change, too, and it is an even more successful and more widespread than pure Greek philosophy. It is exactly by combining both of the two approaches that Varro demonstrates the applicability and at the same time the limits of the application of a universal rationality on traditional urban religion.<sup>68</sup>

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... tu sacrorum iura, tu sacerdotum, tu domesticam, tu bellicam disciplinam ... tu omnium divinarum humanarumque rerum nomina, genera, officia, causas aperuisti ...

<sup>67</sup> That is aimed at LIEBERG's assumption (1982) that the (pre-)Varronian threefold scheme was common (found in Y. LEHMAN 1997, 193-225).

<sup>68</sup> I should like to thank SABINE ZUBARIK, Erfurt, for help with the English text, SANDER GOLDBERG, ROBERT GURVAL and CLIFFORD ANDO, all Los Angeles, and MARCOS RUVITUSO, Mar del Plata, as well as CECILIA AMES, Córdoba, for critical remarks on an earlier version of the paper.

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