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Roman Religion and the Religion of Empire

Some Reflections on Method

Jörg Rüpke

The main focus of the following reflections will be on the conceptualization of the ‘religion of the Roman Empire’.¹ This should in turn provide a new perspective on two other territorial concepts, namely ‘provincial religion’ and ‘local religion’. My aim here is not to present a comprehensive *history* of this concept, since the materials available are inadequate for such a reconstruction. One can however point up certain prejudices and methodological dead-ends, as well as highlight some potentially fruitful new approaches, which I will use to suggest a few perspectives for further research on the subject.

When we speak about ancient religion, we tend typically to place Greek and Roman religion in parallel (or in contrast, in the case of a comparative study). ‘Greek religion’—and nowadays this is a commonplace—includes more than just the religion of Athens. It is a system of religious cults that includes a great number of locally

¹ This paper was delivered at the inaugural conference that prepared the ‘Priority programme 1080’ of the German Science Foundation ‘Römische Reichsreligion und Provinzialreligion: Globalisierungs- und Regionalisierungsprozesse in der antiken Religionsgeschichte’, initiated by Hubert Cancik and co-ordinated by myself. The conference at Bad Homburg, housed and financed by the Werner-Reimers-Stiftung, attempted to formulate and test a number of analytical terms and lines of inquiry. The proceedings were published in Cancik and Rüpke 1997. I am grateful to Richard Gordon for a critical re-reading and have taken advantage of the opportunity to remove some mistakes.

variable elements. Already in his day, Otto Gruppe planned to write a history of Greek religion based on the tribal structure of Greece (an idea obviously influenced by Karl Otfried Müller's mythological studies); a book like Fritz Graf's on the cults of Northern Ionia is certainly an integral part of the study of Greek religion (Graf 1985). Greek religion is the religion of a certain cultural area held together by shared political structures and literary communication. But the arrival of the Hellenistic period complicates matters. Religions developed in the Hellenistic kingdoms which were obviously not identical with the cults of Greek citizens in Alexandria, for example—perhaps indeed had nothing in common with them. Nevertheless, the concept 'Hellenistic religion' does seem to be a kind of meta-system capable of encompassing and influencing this great diversity of cults (Martin 1987). Glen Bowersock has traced the influence of this form of Hellenism up to Islamic times (1990).

Roman religion, on the other hand, is essentially or even exclusively the religion of a single city, the religion of Rome itself. Of course, Rome was not any old city, but the central city of Latium whose language was to become dominant in Italy, and the administrative language and the lingua franca of the western and—up to a point—also of the eastern Mediterranean empire. If we focus on the imperial phase, the *imperium Romanum* was the outcome of an uneven process of political and military expansion that gave rise to a number of very different administrative structures. For the moment, I just need to say that this expansion led to the integration of the large and ancient cultural area of the Mediterranean and its adjacent regions into a political system with Rome as its centre, a system that lasted until the beginning of the fourth century AD.

The basic question for someone concerned with the history of religion must be whether there were any cultural and especially religious institutions that can be understood as parallel to the political construct *imperium Romanum*, and which could by that token be called 'religion of Empire'? The second obvious question would concern the role of the centre and its religion for such a religion of Empire—or would it be more justifiable here too to say that the common denominator was *Hellenism*? Right at the start, however, we can state that, say, 'The North African Cults of Roman Religion' would be a very odd title for a book. A term such as *Romanism*,

denoting the historical effects of the encounter with Roman religion, could only be applied, if at all, to Latin Christianity—and the centre of that was the *city* of Rome.

THE 'RELIGION OF EMPIRE' IN THE LITERATURE OF THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

Johann Adam Hartung (1802–67)

I begin with Hartung's very important work on Roman religion, published in 1836. He emphasized the parallel development of social and religious relations, because 'all corporations were based on the religious community' (Hartung 1836: i. 229). He also (1836: i. 230) observed this political aspect of religion at higher levels of social organization: 'every political conjunction that took place with other states or nations always included the establishment of a religious community or was even caused by it'. The example given by Hartung is the phenomenon of synoecism. For the establishment of the empire, however, such processes were irrelevant. Hartung can show that:

They [the Romans] were interested in extending the dominance of the Roman name and the Roman gods as far as possible without forcing the conquered nations to worship them. [...] In exchange every religion could be freely practised not only in the empire, but also in Rome itself and the conquered nations were allowed to keep their gods in the same way as they were allowed to keep their institutions and constitutions, as long as they did not impede Roman dominance. All foreign religions were categorized as *sacra privata*, *gentilitia* and *municipalia* (private, gentilician, municipal rituals), which affected the state religion to such a low degree that it even cared for their continuation and unaltered practice (Hartung 1836: i. 231).

Hartung has here evidently misunderstood a passage of Festus,² derived from Verrius Flaccus, who was in fact referring to the support

² Festus p.146.9–12 L.: *Municipalia sacra vocantur, quae ab initio habuerunt ante civitatem Romanam acceptam; quae observare eos voluerunt pontifices, et eo more facere, quo adsuessent antiquitus* (Municipalia is the word for cults which the communities had from the beginning, before acquiring Roman citizenship, and which the *pontifices* wanted them to maintain and perform as they had of old).

of the *pontifices* for the continuation of traditional cults in those *municipia* of Italy that had been granted Roman citizenship. At least the term *municipalia sacra*, which is evidently complementary to *sacra publica*, shows that even in Republican times there had been some reflection about the religious duties of Roman citizens not only with regard to familial and individual obligations (*sacra gentilitia*, *sacra privata*), but also to local, non-Roman obligations. As to how far these obligations were to extend beyond the *municipalia sacra*, neither Festus nor Hartung provides any answer. Whenever he mentions the ‘state religion’ thereafter, Hartung (1836: i. 237) is really referring to the religion of the city of Rome, which disintegrated when the city itself fell. Even the extension of Roman citizenship to the whole of the Empire did not change the local restriction of Roman religion: it only allowed complete freedom of religion (Hartung 1836: i. 271).

I want to offer two specific reasons for Hartung’s position on the subject. They are both connected to the character of the Empire as a political structure consisting of many nations and to the historically-charged concept of ‘nation’. My two keywords are ‘diffusion’ and ‘state’. Hartung explicitly argued that processes of diffusion and reception are of no importance for the creation of a supranational religion: ‘The only means by which customs and religions could be passed on was by inheritance, because all nations tried to protect themselves against the adoption of foreign customs as though they were an infectious disease’ (Hartung 1836: i. 238). The genealogy itself has to be reconstructed by analysing language: this is Hartung’s main paradigm, in favour of which he resolutely rejects mythological research (1836: i. 238f.). This also explains his choice of synoecism as an example for the creation of political communities: in a genealogical model, this phenomenon would correspond to marriage. By comparison, all ‘proliferation by means of physical contact or intellectual communication’ is unintentional and uncontrolled (1836: i. 238). So what we have to expect is that the religion of the city of Rome and the religions of the Empire existed side by side without interfering with each other.

Adopting the language of Romantic nationalism, one might say that religion is not the only direct form of expression available to the *Volksgeist* (the national spirit), since the state itself is also a

manifestation of it. According to Hegel, a nation's constitution, its religion, and its art form a coherent whole that transforms the *Geist* (spirit), which is concretely represented by the state, into an 'individual totality': (Hegel 1837/1928: xi. 79) 'The state is the divine will, in the sense that it is mind present on earth, unfolding itself to be the actual shape and organization of a world' (Hegel 1820/2001: § 270).³ Religion, which 'contains absolute truth', (Hegel 1837/1928: xi. 79) is oriented toward the state, because it is the historical form of the divine idea; religion reflects the Absolute that is granted physical form by the state, and makes it apprehensible. In this respect, religion—or at least the 'veritable kind' of religion—has a political function, because it acknowledges and confirms the state.⁴

It would be interesting to investigate the consequences of this concept of the national state in relation to supranational political structures. However the concept of *Reich* (empire) does not seem to have been widely used in this context in nineteenth-century philosophy of the state. Even in Hegel's work, only a footnote in the *Philosophie der Geschichte* (Philosophy of History) takes the Roman Empire seriously as a political structure: it is precisely by being constructed on a supranational level that this state was capable of turning the multiplicity of individuals bound up in their national ethical traditions into subjects. In so doing it created the right of personality.⁵ With regard to religion, this involved agglutination: the Roman state made every attempt to 'assemble all gods and spirits in the pantheon of world domination in order to transform them into an abstract and shared entity' (Hegel 1837/1928: xi. 361f.). Here 'world domination' is the higher level to be attained, whereas the national state aims at a supranational, but nevertheless diverse, political structure.

³ The quotations that follow are also taken from this section.

⁴ Hegel himself also considers other possible developments: 'Religion is the relationship to the Absolute in the form of emotion, of imagination, and of belief. Inside its all-containing core, everything is coincidental or even evanescent.' As a consequence, a fanatical religion can certainly assume an adversarial attitude towards the state, because it no longer accepts the binding character of the state's laws as far as the direct access to the absolute and the resulting alignment are concerned. But in such a case, the religion is no longer of a 'veritable kind', because the criteria that would lead to this valuation are no longer fulfilled.

⁵ Hegel 1837/1928: 11.361f. In Hegel's theory, a 'person' is a subject aware of its subjectivity, a unit of freedom aware of its sheer independence.

Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903)

By the end of the nineteenth century, views concerning the religion of Empire had hardly changed, in spite of the intense interest that the Roman Empire and the complex history of its religion had attracted. A reference to Theodor Mommsen will illustrate this. Although the concept of the religion of Empire is not to be found in his *Römisches Staatsrecht* (1871–75¹; 1887–88³) it does occur in his *Strafrecht* (1899). On the basis of the *crimen laesae Romanae religionis*—an expression found in Tertullian,⁶ but which can hardly be considered a technical term of Roman sacral law—he postulates a ‘religion of Empire’ that extended beyond the geographical bounds of Rome. However, in his opinion, this was by no means a new phenomenon, but rather a wider version of the ‘official religion’ of Rome. That is, Mommsen understood the religious *crimen* as a *crimen laesae maiestatis populi Romani*, ‘which viewed offences against the *dii populi Romani* to be insults to the ruling nation’ (Mommsen 1907: 395; cf. Mommsen 1899: 567f.).

This passage of Mommsen’s work implies a dual model of nationality, according to which the old nationalities were overlaid by an imperial Roman nationality, which was in turn defined by the dominance of the city of Rome:

As the gods of the Roman nation as such were also gods of the Roman Empire and thus had to be granted a position equal or superior to the native gods of any subjected community [in order to express the community’s acceptance of its subjection], the transformation of the Roman national religion into an ‘imperial religion’ does not seem to have been met with general resistance (1899: 571).

The redundancy of this argument reveals that Mommsen remained on the level of terminological definition, trying to cope with a new

⁶ *Omnis ista confessio illorum, qua se deos negant esse quaque non alium deum respondent praeter unum cui nos mancipamur satis idonea est ad depellendum crimen laesae maxime Romanae religionis.* (That total admission of theirs—by which they deny that the gods exist and by which they concede that there is no god other than the one to whom we are bound—is perfectly sufficient to refute the charge of causing special harm to the religion of Rome.) Tertullian, *Apology* 24. 1: cf. *Against the nations* 1. 17; *ad Scapulam* 2.

phenomenon by means of old concepts, and without a closer analysis of its actual content. Mommsen neither tells us what functions this 'imperial religion' was supposed to fulfil on the local level, nor what happened to Roman religion after its transformation.

Within the limits of Mommsen's system, his 'religion of the Roman Empire' might just be able to function as the consistent legal basis for the persecution of Christians in the Empire, the lack of which scholars have always pointed out. However, it is obvious that his attempt to create a more general concept is heavily influenced by the massive shift in the understanding of the *imperium Romanum* brought about by use of the term *Reich*, Empire. As a *Reich*—and in this context one must take into account the contemporary history of this concept in connection with the unification of Germany—the Empire is immediately assumed to have had a dense political and administrative structure, similar to a modern state. By analogy, the function of a 'religion of Empire' must be primarily political. This narrowing of the concept has had unfortunate consequences for subsequent work in this area, especially in Germany.

Georg Wissowa (1859–1931)

The obscurities we encountered in Mommsen's work are no longer present in the work of his pupil, Georg Wissowa. His standard work, *Religion und Kultus der Römer* (1912), is strongly influenced by the spirit of Mommsen's legal approach to Roman religion, and he explicitly claims that this is consistent with the Roman view of the matter: 'The crucial point is whether a scholar who attempts to investigate a single aspect of a people, its laws, its language, or its art can manage to understand this aspect with a clear and well founded notion of the character and mindset of these people, and to use the resulting insights to further refine this understanding of them.' (Wissowa 1912: viii, Preface to the 2nd edition.)

Wissowa (1912: 79) saw the consequences of the Empire for Roman religion in terms of the contrast between self and other. The rise of the imperial cult is naturally of the utmost importance in this context, as it transformed the Roman 'state religion' into a

‘court religion’. But there were other processes which still have to be taken into consideration.

The alienation of the Roman gods from their traditional role was increased even more by the proliferation of their cult throughout the whole Roman Empire, which caused them to assimilate the gods of the barbarians and to conceal the worship of foreign deities in the provinces beneath their own names. The government of the Empire definitely allowed the inhabitants of the provinces to maintain their native beliefs and only interfered if these violated the general laws of the Empire; [at this point, Wissowa does not refer to Tertullian, but to human sacrifices by the Druids and in Africa] but Roman officials and soldiers carried the cult of the gods of the Roman state to every part of the Empire and thus stimulated a process of convergence and adjustment between them and native religious beliefs (Wissowa 1912, 85).

Wissowa saw Roman citizens as the primary agents of *interpretatio Romana*, and later elaborated on this idea in a long article (Wissowa 1919).⁷ *Interpretatio Romana* is primarily evidence for a certain Roman mindset that understood gods as ‘functionaries with specific responsibilities and competences’ and all too often asserted identifications on the basis of arbitrary individual characteristics. In his earlier book, however, he stressed the reciprocal effects, the ‘genuine exchange’, that thereby came about (1912: 86). However, these processes are dependent on regional factors and may take a variety of different forms. Wissowa therefore concludes by saying:

There was no ‘religion of Empire’, but rather a transparent film of Roman names that covered an inexhaustible diversity of religious beliefs, only loosely connected to the whole by the worship of Jupiter Optimus Maximus and the imperial cult in all its variety and nuance. The actual religion of the state always remained tied to the area around the city of Rome and could never develop into a religion for the empire as a whole (1912: 87).

The only exception that Wissowa acknowledges, a little further on, is the worship of the sun-god, which was promoted by the emperors in the third century to such an extent that he ‘really became a “god of

⁷ Wissowa’s interest in this topic is also evident from the dissertation of his pupil Franz Richter 1906.

the Empire” in its last centuries’ (1912: 90).⁸ In this context, it is the connection with the state’s religious structures, the ‘state cult’, that is important for Wissowa’s understanding of the religion of Empire. This is not true of the oriental religions: they strove for exclusive dominance at the expense of the other religions:

all worked toward the total destruction of the [...] Roman state religion from within [...] and after the completion of this task would have fought one another to become the religion of Empire, a world religion, if a still mightier opponent had not appeared in the form of Christianity and forced all others to withdraw (1912: 95).

In sum, then, Wissowa virtually fused the concept ‘religion of Empire’ with that of ‘state religion’, thus explicitly emphasizing its political aspect. This narrow focus on religion does not admit a functional analysis of the matter: he takes into account neither the expectations such a religious system had to fulfil, nor the political consequences of its absence. He did not believe in a religion of Empire either in the sense of Mommsen’s sacral law, or in the form of the worship of Roman gods by administrative and military personnel. The only thing left is a process without a proper name, i.e. the highly variable religious encounters between the religious praxis of the city of Rome and the provincial cults, invoked as *interpretatio Romana*, which, according to Wissowa, certainly influenced ‘Roman religion’ but is nowhere analysed in detail. Note that he speaks of provincial and not national worship in this context. The imperial cult and worship of Jupiter are seen as integrating factors, yet their role remains conceptually undefined, though they definitely did not constitute a religion of Empire. At any rate, Wissowa is completely vague about the level at which they worked: was it political; was it religious? He also failed to examine the consequences of the existence of universal (i.e. ‘oriental’) cults and religions, and their dynamic relation to the other relevant institutions.

Wissowa evidently thought that the main reason for this thwarted development was the fact that the identity of the Roman gods was constructed historically and topographically: they were bound to

⁸ Wissowa here refers to Usener 1905: ‘Aurelian . . . ensur[ed] the position of *Sol* as the highest god of court and Empire.’

Rome both by locative rules—*intra* or *extra pomerium*—and by temporal ones—by the calendar, which marked the foundation dates of temples. And because the gods were only to a very limited degree personified, they could not develop a trans-local identity.⁹

Other positions

From the point of view of the history of the church, the problem looks quite different. In the context of the confrontation between Christianity and the ‘state’, the latter, in its religious aspect, appears as a relatively homogeneous entity in opposition to the churches, which were progressively (but not exclusively) modelling themselves on the self-same political structures and becoming more centralized (Markschies 1997). The far-reaching religious decisions taken during the reign of Constantine were interpreted in political terms. The matter has seldom been as well phrased as it was by Ernst Troeltsch, who spoke of ‘the creation of a religion of Empire (*Reichsreligion*) to keep the Empire together’.¹⁰ Troeltsch simply presupposed the functional necessity of a ‘religious basis for the creation of the Empire’, concretely identified with the imperial cult. If we disregard the explicit reflection on the Empire as a political entity—which in turn has implications for a ‘catholic church of the Empire’—then the basic assumptions correspond to the concepts of ‘state religion’ and ‘state cult’, identified with the imperial cult. It is obvious that the latter was eminently political, but its direct sacralization of a particular state-form to some extent discredited the concept of a ‘state religion’ as far as Christians were concerned.¹¹ Troeltsch thus hastens

⁹ This becomes evident from the book on Roman religion by Wissowa’s pupil Aust (1899): ‘The cordial acceptance of the foreign gods in Rome was not mirrored by the provincial inhabitants: Roman politics had conquered the world, but the Roman gods remained at home; we only encounter the national cult in places where Roman citizens lived. And how could a religion that failed to appeal to the people in its own native country suddenly be expected to attract the masses in a foreign environment!’ (Aust 1899: 33).

¹⁰ Troeltsch 1925: 89 (emphasis in the original). The phrasing and especially the italicization show that Troeltsch intended to establish a new concept.

¹¹ Cf. Harnack 1924: 306: ‘... the battle against the *deification of humans*... the culmination of which was the radical rejection of the imperial cult, also resulted in

to depreciate Christianity's newly-acquired function, predicated upon its Empire-wide expansion, and hails the reduction of emphasis on the emperor's divine status as an advance.¹² The internal consequences he presents in terms of the 'church of the Empire' (*Reichskirche*) or the 'Catholic church of the Empire' (*Reichskatholische Kirche*). This analytical restriction of the problem of the religion of Empire, which represents Christianity positively as in effect a political religion, really only fits the theories of a very few individuals, in particular the 'theology of Empire' of Eusebius of Caesarea, the 'bishop of Empire' (Cancik 1985).

As a contribution to the formation of a viable historical concept, theological terminology is only of limited use. It can reflect various aspects of a religion co-extensive with the Empire, such as the pre-conditions required for successful expansion (e.g. the Empire as a political unit; Christianity's own 'syncretism')¹³ and its consequences for the internal structure of the church (according to Troeltsch, this already began in the period of the 'Early-Catholic church'), as well as its use of the state's structures and political functions. However, the concentration on early henotheist forms of what was to become

determined protest against the *blending of religion and patriotism*, which refers to the state cult that included the veneration of the state itself, or rather its representation in the form of the emperor. A central intention and success of Christian religion was to draw a sharp line between the worship of god and the veneration of the state and its leaders. '*Christianity uprooted political religion.*'

¹² See the previous note. On the Christian attitude towards the divinization of the emperor, see Schumacher 1995.

¹³ This plays an important part in historical theology, for example in the work of Leo the Great (although he heavily concentrates on the role of Rome itself): *Ut autem inenarrabilis gratiae per totum mundum diffunderetur effectus, Romanum regnum divina providentia praeparavit; cuius ad eos limites incrementa perducta sunt, quibus cunctarum undique gentium vicina et contigua esset universitas. Dispositio namque divinitus operi maxime congruebat, ut multa regna confederarentur imperio, ut cito pervios haberet populos praedicatio generalis, quos unius teneret regimen civitatis.* (In order that the accomplishment of grace beyond description should be disseminated throughout the whole world, divine providence arranged rule by the Romans, whose expansion attained such boundaries that the society of all the peoples from every land should be neighbouring and adjacent. For this arrangement was providentially the best adapted to the purpose that many kingdoms should be joined together in the empire, that the universal proclamation should speedily reach accessible peoples, subject to the rule of a single state.) (Leo, *Sermons* 82 [80]; Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 54. 423). On the subject of syncretism, see Harnack 1924.

Christian monotheism,¹⁴ the alleged isolation of Christianity as well as the construction of a homogeneous ecclesiastical subject (if we disregard heretical splinter-groups) mean that Troeltsch's concept can only be transposed to a limited degree.

While the discussion about the link between monotheism and political empire continued,¹⁵ the concept 'religion of Empire' only played a minor role among scholars dealing with the history of religion. In his *History of Greek Religion*—interestingly enough, the second volume is the sole handbook concerned with the history of the religion of the Roman Empire—Martin Nilsson pointed out the politically-integrative effect of ruler-cults in the Hellenistic kingdoms, as well as the imperial cult. But Nilsson only uses the term 'imperial cult' in his interpretation of a letter by Antiochus III from the year 194/3 BC, which provides evidence for an empire-wide organization of high-priests, ἀρχιερεῖς, of the cult (1961: 168f.).¹⁶ In Roman times he saw no evidence for an empire-wide cult or religion of Empire until Aurelian's cult of Sol Invictus, at a period when there was anyway a strong drift towards monotheism.¹⁷

Nilsson's view (1961: 573) that this 'religion of Empire was an artificial political construct and not an organic popular development' makes clear that his concept cannot be understood in terms of the traditional concept in nineteenth-century Germany. It thus 'remained more of an official state religion than a popular religion' (Nilsson 1961: 708). It is no longer assumed that political function and popular emotional attachment must go together; they are now two completely separate aspects of religion, which do not usually coincide in the case of the Roman Empire. Many scholars believe this to be true, especially in the case of the imperial cult.¹⁸ In the late

¹⁴ Cf. Schneider 1954: 1.4: civic gods turn into gods of the Empire and the world: the ever expanding homogeneous areas form the external side of the monotheistic movement. On local vs. supra-regional identity, see Marksches 1997.

¹⁵ E.g. Peterson 1935; Momigliano 1986; on 'political religion', see Faber 1997.

¹⁶ OGIS no. 224 = Welles 1934: no. 36. Two other letters from the king on the same topic are known: Robert 1949 and 1967.

¹⁷ Nilsson 1961: 573. Latte agrees with this position, when he says that the late third century emperors had defined imperial religion as certain cults that were standardized throughout the whole Empire (1967: 364f.). Together with Aurelian's sun-cult, the 'reform of the imperial cult was intended to maintain the unity of the Empire.'

¹⁸ Dessau (1924: 356) contradicts this, viewing the imperial cult as the solution to a crisis: 'the people had to be enthused. There was a lack of lofty aims...'

seventies, Duncan Fishwick (1978: 1253) could still write: 'Emperor worship must be considered not really worship at all but homage', 'a purely mechanical exercise'—administrative practice, not religion.

Two implicit assumptions collide here. On the one hand, religion is supposed to be able to legitimate the political order, precisely because it can draw upon the non-political. On the other, within the gamut of the religious spectrum as a whole, the imperial cult seems to be so dedicated to legitimating the political that it is no longer 'religious' but purely 'political'. As a consequence, it can no longer fulfil its intended function. For that very reason, many recent publications have attempted to establish that it was the widespread acceptance of the imperial cult that enabled it to perform such a political function.¹⁹ Concentrating on the imperial cult when investigating the religion of Empire is problematic, however, since such a procedure simply continues to highlight the political aspect of such a religion.

The concept of a religion of Empire is problematical for another reason too. Asking questions about the functions of religion in specific local contexts has led to wondering about the status of the higher entity, namely the Empire itself. Could there have been a religion of Empire if no organized 'Empire' in fact existed? If there was only an arbitrary agglomeration of territorial units, with an administration cobbled together according to the circumstances, needs and possibilities of the moment? What if it was only in the third and fourth centuries that the goal of a well-organized political 'Empire' was even approximately achieved?²⁰ By concentrating on the political function of religion, we would be returning to the deliberate silence of the nineteenth century, with the difference that a politico-philosophical problem has now become a historical one, and the entities we are talking about are no longer defined 'nationally' but 'locally'. In view of the complexity of the problems involved

¹⁹ See esp. Price 1984, emphasizing the local functions of the Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor. See also the essays in Small 1996, notably the contribution by Hänlein-Schäfer (1996) on the integration of the imperial cult into the domestic cult.

²⁰ Rives 1995 not only disputes the existence but also the very possibility of a religion of Empire in his study of Carthage. He uses the term 'official religion' that 'narrowly defines religious identity and controls it by means of the central authority' (at p. 310).

in establishing the nature of the *imperium Romanum*, the historian of religion should not simply wait for the political historians to make their minds up, but help solve the problem by rethinking the religious angle.

PROBLEMATIZATION: RELIGION AS COMMUNICATION

In this situation, we cannot simply continue with any ready-made concept of the religion of Empire: there is no *communis opinio* whose contours I might be able to define more precisely. I will therefore try to develop a few of my own ideas, not drawing directly on the earlier discussion that I have summarized, but attempting to systematize and enrich it—on a very abstract level—with a model of my own. The results will require the creation of new terms and concepts.

My starting point is the following question: where are we to look for the religion of Empire? My answer begins with the idea of religious action. I understand religious action—even cult—as communicative action, as symbolic communication. This communication can be described in the following categories:

- Who is communicating with whom? Who are the participants?
- What are they communicating about? What are the contents of the communication?
- How is this communication conducted? What media are involved?

If we look beyond the mere act of communication, we might also ask:

- Who organizes and controls the communication?
- Why does the communication take place? What is its purpose?

Participants

The first question can be answered clearly: in the case of ancient religion, religion is a local, even private, action. The participants, male or female, communicate with each other; through texts, clothing,

and choreography, religious roles strengthen or modify social roles. The local aspect is also dominant in the case of the imperial cult and the cult of the Capitoline triad (Mitchell 1993: 1. 102–17, esp. 113–17), but is also a feature of ritual action in more strongly centralized religions like Judaism and Christianity.²¹ A ritual act can be perpetuated by means of an inscription and thereby overcome the temporal limitations of the actual performance. Spatial limitations can be overcome by reporting specific ritual actions, but this is only possible in a few special cases, e.g. exceptional oaths for the emperor or the daily reports of the performance of regular cult-acts in military units.²² Only in these cases are local rituals conceptualized as translocal communication.

The exclusively local reach of ritual communication can of course be compromised by the presence of foreign guests in the *θεωρία*, the festive legation. However, senior Roman administrators evidently did not usually perform such duties, so this level can offer no answers in the search for regular symbolic communication on the level of the Empire. Rituals related to the emperor's *adventus* (arrival) were also exceptional. Personal representation is the inverse: representatives of various cities in a region perform a cult together at a central location. Historically, a grid of regional networks seems to have developed during the imperial period, of which we have only fragmentary evidence. We do not know whether such networks were territorially extensive or whether they were limited to the individual provinces. Nor do we know whether they were co-ordinated at some higher level (though this is likely). Such regional structures were almost certainly not identical everywhere.²³ The major characteristic of this form of cult was not supra-regional uniformity but competition between individual cities in a given regional category, i.e. local pride and local engagement.²⁴ The obvious conclusion must be that the

²¹ Cf. Mellor 1992. Green 1992 has demonstrated the local character of religion in a diachronic perspective by using the example of Harran (Carrhae) in Syria.

²² See for example Fink 1971: nos. 49; 50; 52 frg.b (taking *excubatio ad signa* as part of the symbolic system 'religion').

²³ This is the starting point of Marquardt 1888, with large amounts of useful material.

²⁴ For cities' efforts to obtain the title of *neokoros*, see Friesen 1993; Collas-Heddeland 1995; the importance of local prestige as a motivating factor is also demonstrated

primary political functions of local—i.e. practically all—rituals were tied to the local context. Such a point of view hardly leaves room for a religion of Empire. If it did exist, it had local character.

But such a model of communication must not lead us to a dead end. The generally small scale of pre-modern societies did condition the character of larger units, but did not as a rule prevent the creation of larger territorial structures. It is very important here to take account of the frequency of short-term and long-term movement. Besides the 'classical' long-distance merchants, we also have to consider military personnel as functional elites in military and administrative positions, economic migrants and itinerant professionals, such as artist-craftsmen and orators, as well as tourists. Precisely because they could not rely on well-developed supra-regional communicative networks, we need to ask how quickly these groups were able to participate in local religious communication. Were there forms of religious communication in the Empire that were similar or even identical to each other? The answer to this question depends on the content and media of religious discourse, to which I now turn.

Content

Whenever we speak of symbolic communication, we imply that the contents of this communication are expressed in communicative media. This is especially true in view of the type of source-materials at our disposal, i.e. mostly votive inscriptions that concentrate on the divine addressees and the donors. I want nevertheless to try to keep content and medium analytically separate. The occasion for the performance of the ritual or consecration may be entirely private, or local or supra-regional considerations might play a part. An example of the latter is provided by the dedications to *Victoriae* in Africa (Smadja 1986). It is not surprising to find much evidence for worship of a goddess of victory near the borders of the Empire and at strategically-important locations; but dedications to *Victoria*

by the example of Hispellum in the time of Constantine (Bowersock 1983: 177 = 1994: 333, on *ILS* no. 705).

Parthica or Armeniaca in the same area indicate that the donors saw their own situation in the context of the Empire as a whole (Smajda 1986: 509; 514).

A comparable awareness of a link between local action and the Empire as a whole, represented by the emperor, is suggested by the stereotyped dedications *pro salute imperatoris*, which can be combined with a great variety of addressees and concerns. This 'content' can be found throughout the Roman Empire, and can thus be considered as religion of Empire in a double sense.

Dates and festivals that were celebrated all over the Empire, above all those of the *domus Augusta* (Augustan house), also offered identical content. These are especially important in the military calendar, as we can see from the *feriale Duranum* (Fink 1971: 422–9 no.117, c. AD 223–7). But in the civil sphere too, as we can see from the Flavian municipal laws, such days are defined as days on which no court business can be done *propter venerationem domus Augustae*.²⁵ They are also very important as occasions for local public and private rituals (Herz 1975). In a world with a multitude of local calendars, the value of shared and correctly correlated festival dates is not to be underestimated, since they could confirm long-standing personal temporal grids and likewise affirm the supra-local importance of this aspect of religious communication.

Identical content does not necessarily have to be presented in identical form. This is clear from Tertullian's discussion about Christian prayer for the *imperator* (not for the *imperium*).²⁶ This prayer to God allows the Christian to maintain his (precarious) identity as *civis Romanus* and goes some way to accommodate the efforts from the Severan period to create a (civil-)religious basis for the Empire.²⁷ But

²⁵ '... because of the acts of veneration towards the Augustan house.' *Lex Flavia municipalis* <c.LXXXII> = *Lex Irnitana*. X B 29, 44f., 49 (González 1986: 180); see Rüpke 1995: 540–46.

²⁶ For the emperor, not for the Empire: see 1 Timothy 2. 2; Tertullian, *Apology* 30. 1: *Nos enim pro salute imperatorum Deum invocamus aeternum, Deum verum...* (For we, in the interest of our emperors' safety, invoke the eternal God, the true God...).

²⁷ See Kehrer 1997: 25–33. In this context I should also refer to the religious aspect of Caracalla's extension of citizen status in the *constitutio Antoniniana* (*P. Giess.* 40 = Riccobono 1941: 445–9, no. 88). [cf. now Beard, North and Price 1998: i. 241]

such a prayer does not extend the religious communication beyond the confines of Christianity.

Media

I would define the ‘media’ of symbolic communication primarily as rituals, but also sacral architecture and the documentation of religious acts by means of inscriptions. In order to be able to establish whether or not there was a religious *koine*, allowing even outsiders to identify and practise local religion, it is important to analyse the extent to which certain forms managed to establish themselves. The role of such a *koine* in creating a specific identity could be read in terms of a contrast with the surrounding barbarian areas, insofar as such a contrast was perceptible. However, I doubt whether we can identify, for example in the extension of animal sacrifice, a religious content on this level which was valid throughout the whole Empire. Nevertheless, it is important to determine the extension of such media and their emblematic significance, meaning how in their specific local context they refer to the central system of values (Shils 1975: 3–13). The issue of a religious *koine* is absolutely central, above all for the definition of local and regional (provincial) religious systems, including their local particularities. The practice of making vows, including the requirement that they be documented by means of an inscription, the organization of cults as mysteries, the spread of specific patterns of priestly organization, the triumph of astrology, the definition of magical practice, and the exclusion of maleficent forms—all these combine supra-regional patterns with regional variation.²⁸

In my opinion, we should include the gods addressed in the rituals (and the votive inscriptions) in the category ‘media’. The very fact that they determine the specific religious action turns it into a medium of real symbolic communication. These gods are

²⁸ H. G. Kippenberg (1997: 157–9) has noted the differences between the western and eastern (or Roman and Greek) Empires regarding the acceptance of secret cults; on votive religion, see van Straten 1981; on magic, Graf 1996; in general, Rüpke 2009a.

also, in a polytheistic context, part of the local pantheon. Yet this pantheon is only up to a point defined by the temples and religious facilities on the ground; the individual's freedom to address gods not (yet) present in the area was, or might be, virtually unlimited.²⁹

Despite the great importance of traditional pre-Roman local deities, especially for those outside the local elites, we must not overlook the fact that the media of symbolic communication were often gods with Roman or even, in the west, Greek names.³⁰ The agents of this *interpretatio Romana* were thus not only Roman citizens but also natives who were not comfortable using indigenous names, at least in written and politically significant contexts³¹—though one can usually make out a local god behind the name taken from the central culture. In the name of realism we can of course play down the importance of these names, but a nominalist position is still tenable: new gods, marked as such by their names, are being introduced into local contexts. The fact that these names are to be found throughout the Empire, however, does not necessarily indicate the existence of Empire-wide cults. Such names were usually more or less learned constructions based on (older) texts and not on directly-communicated ritual tradition.³² We can observe a high degree of formal stability, especially in the case of mystery cults, which were typically highly organized. This allowed them to become standing options in local cult-structures, and suggests long-term membership³³ as well as the possibility of migrants renewing their membership of the cult at their new location.

²⁹ For Rives 1995 this lack of control was a central reason for the failure of the civic model in the cities of the Empire. But because his model is the official religion of Republican Rome, he assumes a close monitoring of the pantheon which can never have existed in fact.

³⁰ Février 1976: 310 offers Pluto at Carthage as an example.

³¹ See the observations by Derks 1992 on the differences in the treatment of local female gods and male gods being connected to *civitates* and *pagi* in Germania Inferior.

³² See Scheid 1995: 106–09 on the deities of the temple area of the Altbachtal at Trier.

³³ On the problems of the concept of membership in relation to 'mystery-religions', see Burkert 1987: 21f.; 33ff., who links the mysteries closely to 'votive religion'.

Controlling communication

At this point we should also address the meta-question of how this communication was controlled and organized. The first point to make is that Roman religious policy was usually concerned with Rome alone, regardless of whether it was a matter of the location of temples or the eviction of undesirable religious groups. Such issues, e.g. the extension of the *pontifices'* authority over the recognition of prodigies (MacBain 1982 [now challenged by Rosenberger 2005: 87]) into Italy, or the dedication of votives outside Rome which had been made inside it (Tacitus, *Annals* 3. 71. 1f. (*aedes Fortunae Equestris* in Antium, AD 22)), were mostly motivated by immediate political circumstances, and were thus one-off decisions rather than a systematic enforcement of a fixed sacral law. The rather lax treatment of sacral *ius soli* points in the same direction, meaning the classification of property in the provinces used for religious purposes as *pro sacro* even though it was not consecrated *ex auctoritate populi Romani* (Gaius, *Institutes* 2. 7). Local temples were almost never built on initiative from higher levels. On the other hand, the requests for approval prior to the erection of large cult-complexes or festival games connected with the imperial cult show that approval from the centre was indeed sought, and that the centre considered granting it as a form of control over the symbolic inventory (Rüpke 1996). Once again, despite its polymorphism, we find the imperial cult to be a privileged site of supra-regional communication.

Supra-regional control was not however limited to the senate or the emperor and his cult. Synods or *concilia* might also exert 'media control' in other religions, and bring together Egyptian priests or Christian bishops; the intermediaries between Jewish communities and the patriarch were called *ἀπόστολοι* (Krauss 1905). Such structures might be congruent with the Empire, or with its administrative sub-units, but they might also extend beyond them. Even if they lack direct functional links to the political structure of the Empire, such connections are interesting for what they suggest about the development of regional and supra-regional systems, at any rate in so far as their centres coincided with the political centre, or the number of centres within a given area increased. After all, the Isiac, Jewish, and

Christian communities of Rome acquired disproportionate weight within their several organizations even though the historical and ideological centres of these cults were elsewhere.³⁴ In such cases, we can say that the political functions of the religion of Empire were being fulfilled quite unintentionally.

Function

This leads us on to the second meta-question, concerning conscious intentions and actual functions. The issue is whether a religion of Empire needed to have a positive relationship to the *imperium*, whether it had to reinforce the political system. If one works from local 'state religion' to religion of Empire, a connection of this kind can be taken for granted, but not if one starts from 'local religion', i.e. the totality of all local religious practices. After all, one cult that spread everywhere, namely Christianity, was certainly at odds with the Empire.

CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES

What are the implications of this model for the selection of an appropriate set of terms for investigating the extent to which the religion of Rome, and other centres, was present on the periphery of the Roman Empire (and conversely, the extent to which the periphery was present in the centre) and for writing a history of religion in the Empire that acknowledges the influence of such regionally differentiated perceptions? Our starting point was the concept of the religion of Empire. The concept itself is heuristically important, because it addresses the religious aspect of the formation of the Roman Empire. The attempt to see it in terms of a supra-regional correlate of the 'state religion' of the city of Rome (the 'civic model') has not proved very satisfactory, since such an account can really only

³⁴ See Markschies 1997 on the development of regional religious structures in contrast to Roman political geography.

be applied to integrative features of institutions controlled from the centre (above all the army and certain parts of the administration), which largely prescribed both the participants and the contents of such communication. A functional approach, however, might produce significant insights into the process of the formation of the Empire, into the conceptualization of territorial domination and its practical implementation. At any rate, religion does not necessarily have to play second fiddle to political developments, but might itself be an area for experiment and a medium for the creation of new structures.

The analysis of local situations has shown that the concept of a religion of Empire is problematical in that context. Here I would like to argue in favour of Gladigow's purely territorial, inclusive concept of 'regional religion', i.e. 'urban religion', meaning religion of the city and not 'state religion'. Such a concept of the local history of religion does not exclude inner differences, even serious ones, but allows us to study all the cults/religions in a given area together and in relation to the local community. This does not imply that the local society must be seen as an absolute value: the role of supra-local but non-divine reference-points in local religion and in different social groups remains an important empirical question.

By concentrating solely on the religious aspect of the Empire and the history of local religion, however, we neglect essential parts of the picture. The religion of Empire in this sense and regional religion are not binary concepts. If we limited ourselves to these two themes, we would neglect the spread of religions diffused from the centre and from elsewhere, processes that differed markedly from region to region; likewise the shared features in the regional reception of central influence. This is where Wissowa's call (1912: 87) for a *Geographia sacra imperii Romani* (sacred geography of the Roman Empire) comes in, which he saw as a prerequisite for a history of the religion of the Empire. The fact that the media employed, although they are at least to some extent identical, differ in their range means that such a project involves investigating the periodization, the functions and the limits of a Mediterranean-European 'religious *koine*', whose centre was surely not exclusively at Rome.

A further aspect of the research-project is the definition of the units to be examined. If we are to form meaningful categories on the

basis of the various local enquiries, we would need to establish common features in the reactions to and modifications of the processes of diffusion from the various centres. I would therefore propose using, at least provisionally, the concept of 'provincial religion'. This is not intended to substitute the framework of Roman administrative structures for research into the formation of cultural areas, as is the case with the 'archaeology of the Roman provinces', even though provinces (but also *κοινά*, provincial assemblies, whose territorial extent could be different) might occasionally be units in the required sense, i.e. centres of specific cults. On the contrary, the term is intended to link a geographical, regional perspective with a supra-regional system of reference, namely the Roman Empire. If we define the field in territorial terms, we can investigate not only status-specific religious systems, such as the religion of the army and cult acts by Roman officials, but also the expansion of single elements, as well as entire organizations, of external cults and regionally unrestricted religions, as well as locally-defined religious systems. The issues of what 'Roman religion' and its territorial limits are will then have to be the subject of a new debate.

AFTERWORD

The term 'religion of Empire' has proved heuristically fruitful throughout the research programme of the same name. It turned out, however, that the functional analysis suggested at the end of my contribution produced only very limited results. Intentional relationship with the centre on a religious level was restricted to very few phenomena, among which emperor worship was dominant. Yet even the cult of the emperors was not organized on a geographical scale or at a speed which would suggest that it was intended to serve as a 'religion of Empire', even if in fact it may actually have fulfilled that function. Positively, two developments stand out. First, we can register a plurifocal diffusion of religious symbols, practices, and standards, the development of a 'global' communication about religion, and hence the development of a religious *koiné*, a kind of institutional isomorphism. This development modified religion both in the

centre as well as on the periphery, and caused archaisms as well as regional developments of new 'provincial religions'. Second, within the vast expanse of, and the intensive exchange within, the Roman Empire, the notion and shape of 'religion' itself changed. Religion grew in importance, defining ethics and behaviour, forming social bonds, and legitimizing power on a new scale. For both aspects many of the reflections reproduced above proved helpful. Terminologically, however, the notion of 'religion of empire' as a comparative category had to be stripped of some of its functional implications and has to be replaced by the historical notion of a new understanding and type of religion shaped in, and by the Roman Empire (see Rüpke 2007; 2009a and b).

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