

Politics and Religion in Ancient Rome

What is the place of freedom of worship under a State religion?

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In ancient Rome, the State did not meddle in the private religious lives of its citizens, even though the gods were part of the community and lived among them. The Roman religion accepted diverse forms of worship – provided that they did not seek to impose transcendence. In this essay John Scheid restores to the Roman religion its immanent and physical attributes.

Gods Among Men

Henri-Irénée Marrou wrote that an historian must always know the meaning of the words he uses. Religion and politics are two terms so familiar to us that we might presume they meant the same thing in Rome that they mean to us today. And yet *politikos aner* is not a politician, but a man imbued with a sense of community, of the life of the polis. Applied to public life, the term “political” meant more “politician” than “politics.” In the 19th century, people had a penchant for comparing the ancient Greeks and Romans to the contemporary bourgeois, but that representation has lost currency since then.

The Roman conception of religion was even further removed from ours. This term, which was used by the Romans sometimes to mean scrupulous compliance with rules of ritual and sometimes to mean the link between human beings and the gods, has indeed nothing to do with our conception of religion, which implies revelation, transcendence, the Creation and Creator as well as the individual’s concern for the salvation of his immortal soul. Revelation, holy scriptures and dogma were alien to the Roman religion, and religious services did not include readings of sacred texts or sermons. There was no religious instruction, except in the form of passive attendance at a rite celebrated at home by the head of the family or in the forum by a magistrate. Man was not a god’s creation, and the idea of a creator did not even play any part in the religion. That is why a concept like “religiosity,” so dear to Friedrich Schleiermacher, which was supposed to represent a universal religious attitude, does not pertain to Rome, even if historians in the 19th century and much of the 20th century accepted this viewpoint born of Protestant theology. The Roman gods were created like human beings and, like them, were to be found in this world, but do not appear anywhere as their creators. Relations between gods and humans were also different in the Roman world. Relations which the Romans designated as being religious or determined by *religio* – meaning a sense of a relationship and obligation to the gods – are not about metaphysical life, but solely about physical life. The Greeks, who were like the Romans in worship as well as speculation,

believed one could not know anything about the nature of the gods, about the lives they led in the hereafter, and the ultimate goal of mortals was not to join the gods there. To be sure, there were philosophical circles that sought union and familiarity with the immortals – as did practitioners of magic, though for different ends –, but they were very few and far between. On the whole, the Romans did not ask these questions in the practice of their ancestral religion. Beginning in the 2nd century AD, they would eventually get to know religions that were based on the pursuit of an afterlife, but the period I am discussing precedes these contacts and the spread of these ideas.

To the Roman mind, all beings form communities, whether political or private. And on earth the gods are part of these communities, whatever form the latter may take. To appreciate the gulf between Christian-type religiousness and Roman piety, it will suffice to consider that it was human beings who put the gods in a community, and not the gods who chose that community. A god could reveal himself to mortals and demand that he be heard and welcomed, but he needed the assent of the human community to be admitted into it. The gods' interlocutors in every case were in fact the worldly authorities: executive magistrates (elected for one year at a time), priests, heads of families, annual presidents of associations and clubs etc. The question of the ties between politics and religion can be approached from several different points of view, depending on the entity under consideration: the family, neighborhood, trade association or city-State.

State Indifference to Religions

To gauge the status and sway of religion in public affairs and in government, we should focus on Rome's public life, as this is what we know most about. The State did not meddle in the private religious lives of citizens. The religious authority within the family was vested in the paterfamilias, who served as both celebrant and priest. He officiated over all family religious services, sometimes assisted by his wife or those to whom he delegated this power, e.g. a slave overseeing one of his estates. Neither Roman priests nor magistrates were authorized to interfere with private religious life – as long as it did not disturb law and order. If it did, the ensuing intervention was not for religious reasons, but to uphold law and order. There were sometimes points of contact between priests and families, with regard to sacred properties of burial grounds), for example. If a private person made an offering in his own name in a place of public worship, i.e. belonging to the city-State, that offering was legally private and would not be deemed public property. The community would show due respect for the object offered unless it had need of the place where the offering was deposited, in which case the priests would decide to remove it. The necropolis registers were handled by the pontiffs, even if the latter could not, in their capacity as priests, take part *ex officio* in a burial or funeral service. These services were performed by the fathers or sons of the family. So it is wrong to think that the pontiffs, for example, oversaw the religious practice of citizens the way Christian priests do. The Roman religion was not a universal religion celebrated identically everywhere and for everyone. In Rome each cult was distinctive, and those not under the direct responsibility of the city-State were beyond the priests' control. This is why we talk about the religions of Rome in the plural. There was no Roman religion in the singular.

Like “religion,” “public” is an ambiguous term. In Latin this adjective, *publicus*, means the same thing as the genitive of *populus*, i.e. “of the people.” So whatever is “public” belonged or pertained to the people. And the *Populus*, the People, is what we should call the State. The Roman State is the *Populus*, or better yet the *S(enatus) P(opulus) Q(ue) R(omanus)*, the “Senate and the Roman People,” or the *res publica populi Romani*, “the *res publica* of the

Roman People.” Hence, contrary to common practice since the 19th century, we should avoid positing an opposition between public and private as what takes place “in public” versus what takes place within the privacy of the family. Just as public acts could be carried out in private homes, private actions could be performed in public spaces too. What counts in distinguishing between the two is the involvement of the State, or the People, to put it in Latin terms.

Like all earthly communities, the State, the Roman People’s Republic, had godly partners: Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Mars and so on. The story of how these gods came to Rome varies: the gods may have always been there or they may have been admitted at a recent date. They all had the same mission, however: to take part in the political, i.e. institutional, lives of Roman citizens and help them through the vicissitudes of their lives on earth. The gods’ interlocutors among the community of citizens were mainly the Roman magistrates: consuls, praetors, aediles, later the emperor, too – in a word, those who held executive power. Most of the religious services were celebrated by the annually-elected magistrates, and religious decisions, including those regarding theology, were made by the same magistrates advised by the Senate. Hence the assertion that the sacerdotal function was more widespread in Roman society than in a Christian-type religion. All those entrusted with authority exercised this function to different degrees. The priests were actually specialists in sacred law who also had certain ritual tasks to perform. The pontiffs, for instance, were specialists in religious holidays and ancestral cults, in sacred property and the conduct of priests, and officiated at a number of traditional holidays. They also took part in the consecration rites by which a consul, who actually played the leading role in the ceremony, would transfer a piece of human property to the category of the sacred (*sacrum*) – yet another word that continually gives rise to misunderstandings. Through this act of sacred law, the consecrated object entered into the category of “property which belongs to nobody” (*res nullius*), along with such public facilities as the forum, the basilicas and the public baths. This sacred property was placed at the exclusive disposal of the divinity concerned. So in Rome the sacred was a legal category, and not the earthly manifestation of a transcendental reality.

Citizen Gods

The priests controlled the legality of public consecrations. Furthermore, each sacerdotal collegium had its area of expertise, by dint of which it attended the magistrates’ councils and the Senate: the soothsayers were tasked with consulting the gods, deemed a mandatory precaution before reaching every major public decision; they also held the privilege of controlling the proceedings of the people’s assemblies and assessing any ominous signs they may have discerned, on which grounds they could simply adjourn the assembly as they saw fit. These divinatory actions testified to the involvement of the gods, especially Jupiter, the most political of them all, in public decisionmaking and their assent to whatever decisions were taken. Without this legitimation, which the Romans regarded as favorable auspices, no important public act could be passed. And as it was also a matter of politics in the current sense of the word, it was fair and square to make use of divine assent to impose one’s will. The rites were, in other words, a political weapon. Just as auguring through observation of ritual chickens almost invariably resulted in a favorable omen, the right of *obnuntiatio* (objecting by announcing a contrary augury) could block the decisionmaking process in cases of serious conflict. So each antagonist had a divining weapon at their disposal in the political debate. Like the announcement of an adverse omen, e.g. a thunderclap in calm weather when no lightning had struck, the mechanical side of chicken auguries consisted more of a prayer involving the gods in deciding the matter at hand in the manner desired than in any empirical observation.

It is on this basis that Roman religion has been characterized as political and decadent. However, this depiction is based on a misunderstanding. The Roman religion was indeed worlds away from 19th-century “religiosity,” and some Roman politicians did indeed go too far. But the most infamous abuses occurred in times of acute crisis, of simmering or outright civil war. This game was part and parcel of the very nature of the religious institution. It was a way to involve the gods in the political game. To be pious it was enough to be right, which meant not to meet with a calamity after a decision reached in this manner, for the gods could always manifest their omnipotence to let it be known that the bounds of basic respect had been overstepped. At base, they participated in political life in the same way the Roman people did, that is to say in a generally passive way. History shows that not a single bill proposed in the Roman assembly was ever thrown out: if a consul who was submitting a bill could glean from preliminary deliberations that it would be strongly opposed, he would withdraw it without giving the majority an opportunity to air their views. And when the assembly was voting on a bill or to elect a magistrate, the voting was stopped as soon as the requisite majority of favorable votes (in the so-called *centuriae*) was reached. Within this poll-tax based system, only the social elite voted in an effective manner (each *centuria* had only one vote). As a result, the annually-elected magistrates held near-absolute power over both the citizenry and the gods. This concentration of power is doubtless one of the secrets to the solidity of Roman power, even though it was neither a dictatorship nor a monarchy. This principle also explains why the people would now and then rise up in revolt or secession, and why the gods would have allowed the catastrophic defeats at Cannae and Lake Trasimene during the Second Punic War.

Nevertheless, after these conflicts, concord among the citizens and *pax deorum*, “peace with the gods,” were reestablished. The system itself was not called into question, at least not its religious side. For the gods, which I call “citizen gods” after Tertullian’s *dii municipales*, “fellow citizen gods,” conformed in their relative passivity to the image the Romans had of them. They wished to be honored on earth, with honors affecting every sphere of life and, particularly in the forum, political debates. Concomitantly, the immortals did not wish to terrorize mortals or, more precisely, the Romans would not put up with being terrorized by them. This human hubris may well have been an upshot of Rome’s triumphant imperialism, but the fact remains that the gods had to abide by the social pact of the Roman community: no-one could punish or maltreat a citizen thereof without a trial and conviction. A Roman citizen could not be humiliated by anyone, not even Jupiter. The only thing citizens sometimes agreed to, at the behest of the consuls and the Senate, was to do the rounds of the temples and kneel down before the local titular divinity as a sign of gratitude or supplication, depending on the context.

Gods and Citizens: Partners in the Roman Community

There is a fine myth concerning the ideal relations between Romans and their supreme deity, Jupiter. It is set at the beginning of Roman history. Romulus has founded Rome, but the city and its divine partners are still feral and lawless. Romulus’ successor, Numa the wise man, establishes justice between humans and religion to show regard for the gods (N.B. religion gave the gods their due, a relation equivalent to justice). But Jupiter continues to terrorize the Romans. So King Numa, who was the model statesman in the Roman tradition, fair, thoughtful, calm and intrepid, confronts the All-mighty to ask what must be done to appease him. Jupiter, who is in a facetious mood that day, tricks him by demanding a human sacrifice: the execution of a citizen, for no offence and without trial, at the mere behest of a fellow citizen. The king remains undaunted by Jupiter’s bouts of terror and succeeds in

neutralizing the chief god's every demand, transmuting them into harmless rites that are carried out using plants or fish. Jupiter puts an end to the confrontation, expressing his satisfaction with this little man capable of conversing with the gods without being deterred from the basic tenets of the city-State system, and pledges his future patronage. This dialogue and the behavior of the two protagonists represent the justification for the divinatory consultations and the way the Romans treated their gods. This sort of speculative narrative gives us a sense of what, in the eyes of the Romans, was the nature of the bond with the gods as expressed by the word *religio*: a close bond between mortals and immortal partners, though with certain guaranties to safeguard human freedoms. For the whole edifice of the city-State was built on freedom both inside and outside of Rome. Let us not mistake the Roman State and society for a democracy, let alone a model democracy. It was an oligarchic landowners' regime, as were most Greek city-States, which did not keep them from observing certain basic rules, including that of freedom. Their religion was determined by their conception of freedom, which would not allow a fellow citizen to undergo humiliation or subjugation unless he'd been formally indicted and condemned.

What the public cult expressed daily was also manifest in Roman family life and in the administrative life of associations and clubs of all sorts. Everywhere, religion was part and parcel of collective conduct informed by the principles of politics. Through religion, citizens, family members and association members found a place in the order of things, a place that made them earthly partners of the gods and protected them against any intervention by the gods. They were not obliged to submit blindly to a divinity. Moreover, the Roman religions did not require any explicit act of faith, and there was no oversight of any kind, no clergy comparable to that of the Christian religions or Islam. All told, there were only about two hundred priests in Rome, and most of them had a single task, which was to officiate at a single feast. The pontiffs, who were clearly the most important priests, were about twenty in number at the beginning of the Common Era, when the number of Roman citizens exceeded four million! The Roman religions were ritualistic and their only "faith," so to speak, consisted in practicing those rituals, or at least not forswearing or impeding the practice thereof. In fact, it was this sort of forswearing that triggered the anti-Christian pogroms and repression by the authorities in the 2nd century and especially from the 3rd century on.

Religious Practice, Guaranteed Freedom of Conscience

So one could say that Roman religious practice guaranteed freedom of conscience. The Romans could think what they pleased of their gods and religion, though not during religious practice. They discussed it at meetings and in debates, they read books about religion. But that was a cultural activity of no religious import. Problems arose only if they rejected the ancestral religious traditions of the city-State, family, neighborhood etc. Or when they co-opted religious practices in order to exercise control over the minds of the celebrants, as was the case in the scandal of the Bacchanalia, the Dionysian groups that made use of terror and spectacular mises-en-scène to enthrall the minds of the youth. Or when sorcerers claimed they could coerce the gods into helping their patrons and harming their foes.

This conception of the relationship to the gods and personal religious behavior was able to develop under Roman imperialism, which forced the Romans to live side by side with foreign individuals and communities, whether or not they had Roman citizenship, within the same political and social structures. What simplified the religious question was that everyone was supposed to have their divine partners, to honor them in their own way, as well as

participating in tributes to the Roman gods if the individual became a Roman citizen. This was not merely a side effect of Roman imperialism, however, but a fundamental element of the Roman civic tradition. And beyond that, most of the religious systems of the Roman world fit this model, whose origins lay in the thought of the city-State, of the polis, which began in the 8th century B.C. and subsequently spread through the Mediterranean world. As most of the city-States and communities in the Roman world belonged to the same religious universe, this religious coexistence did not pose any problems within the Roman Empire, at least not before the spread of religious communities that rejected this brand of coexistence and were based on a different interpretation of Jewish monotheism. The first Christians did not all take a radical approach, and they lived with other communities just as the Jewish communities had in the big cities of the Roman world – despite the terrible uprisings in Judea. It was only when part of the Roman elite chose to enlist their new god in political conflicts that a development began, which was to change the world.

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