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Introduction

RELIGION AND POWER IN IMPERIAL ROME

In this book I analyze the related inter-workings of power and religion in the Roman empire by studying the religious involvements and interests of the Roman imperial senate and individual senators in the first two and a half centuries of the empire, from the reign of Augustus to the death of Severus Alexander. Augustus' establishment of a concentration of religious and political power in the same imperial hands offered a new central image of the emperor as prime sacrificer, an unprecedented development in Roman history. Analyzing the dynamics of this new conjunction of politics and religion, this study explores changes that found their way also into the coming of Christianity as Rome's state religion. Religion in Rome once functioned mainly as a *polis* religion and was therefore within the purview of the senatorial elite. I propose that in the empire religion came to play a new and prominent role in the processes of claiming and negotiating power relations between the emperor and the senate; along the way, the notion of power itself underwent a transformation. The position of the emperor was theorized and performed, in part, in religious terms. Similarly, individual senatorial posts gained religious significance, however political they might appear to us. Further, the divine associations of imperial power became part of a complex web connecting socioeconomic elements (such as the notion of Roman social order or the habit of euergetism) to transcendental notions of what makes a good leader, and in ways that approach what would later be considered theological ideals.

The success of this new, individualized association between power and religion, characteristic of imperial rule, can be especially well understood if we consider how senators related their own religious notions and practices to developing imperial practices and ideals. Transformed religious ideas and rituals shaped how senators perceived their own roles and also how they tried to shape that of the emperor. There were, of course, continuities from

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the senatorial religion of the previous, republican period, when the senatorial elite, in priestly colleges, were primarily responsible for maintaining and controlling the priestly authority that was the foremost facet of Roman religion. Nevertheless, senatorial religion in its customary priestly forms grew increasingly ambivalent just as senators forsook their traditionally competitive initiatives in other areas of social, political, and cultural life. What followed was a new configuration of power, including a new kind of religiously inflected discussion about power, which was shaped not only by the emperor, but also by the senatorial elite. And in turn, as religion emerged as an integral part of these new, individualized and power-related contexts, senators found new paths in religion as well, most importantly, through individual and possibly even personal and imaginary engagements with imperial religion – unlike those we have been familiar with in the republic.

RELIGION AND POWER: A NEW APPROACH TO SENATORIAL RELIGION

In the historiography of Roman religion, imperial dominance, gained in part through religion, has been traditionally depicted as leading to a further politicization of senatorial religious life. The modern genealogy of this notion goes back to an argument first made by Mommsen, namely that the royal powers taken by the emperors meant the end of the separation of religious and civil powers.[1] Citing Mommsen, John Scheid argued that the empire brought about the end of the differentiation between *sacrum* and *publicum* with the particular result that religion lost its autonomy among the political realities of the day.[2] The emphasis on the political, so the argument goes, led to a loss of religious content from such traditional senatorial religious roles as priesthoods and the offering of sacrifices. Likewise, imperial control was extended over senatorial religious interests, which paved the way for the subordination of divinatory practices to imperial limitations, as well as for the strong promotion of the new imperial cult.[3] On this interpretation, the most important religious role of the senate as a body under the empire concerned secondary functions dictated by the

[1] Mommsen 1887–8: 11–13. For a summary of the *Wissenschaftsgeschichte* of Roman religion now see Phillips 2007.

[2] Scheid 1984: 279–280, with n. 96.

[3] For the loss of religious content in priesthoods see most prominently Scheid 1984: 278–280; for the imperial control of sacrificial symbolism Gordon 1990c: 201–218, and of divination Rosenberger 1998, with further literature.

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new imperial religion, such as the "constitution" of temples for the imperial cult and the various ritual exercises related to the imperial family.[4] Even Simon Price, who envisions a relatively cooperative model in which religious authority between emperor and senate was shared, significantly limits the role of senatorial religion in his study of the imperial cult; essentially, the senate served as an alternative source for legitimating the introduction of these cults, so as to avoid involving the emperor in sanctioning his own cult.[5]

This study of senatorial religion is much wider in many respects than many of these earlier discussions. By extending the reach of religion into imperial society, I follow but also challenge and partially modify the rightfully influential reading of Beard, North, and Price.[6] These scholars suggest that there was a religious crisis in the late republic, in which the civic embeddedness of religion could not sustain control over an ever-increasing religious variety, which in turn led to a marketplace of less socially embedded religious choices in the imperial era. As they show, the absence of completely distinct categories of religion and politics in the republic, which is especially evident in the fragmentation of religious authority, contributed to later developments in the imperial era. Their study also makes it impossible to question the great variety of religious options available across the empire, suggesting that there must have been some individual freedom in selecting from amongst them. This picture of variety, individual creativity, and fascinating religious multiplicity in the imperial era has deeply influenced this study. Nevertheless, there have been some important criticisms of their conception of Roman religion, based mainly on a *polis* model, which would imply a tradition of religious participation based, to a significant extent, on one's civic position.[7] Moreover, as we shall see, an examination of the religion of Roman senators, an elite invested with power and status, offers an important adjustment to their model of a marketplace of religions. As I argue, the religious understanding of power and the overall imperial emphasis on social hierarchy significantly shaped how senators sought and found their paths among the religious options available in the empire.

[4] Talbert 1984: 386–391 sees the authorization of the imperial cult as the prime religious aspect of the imperial senate.
[5] Price 1984: 66–67.
[6] Beard, North, and Price 1998: I. 42–43, 245–249. Note especially the important suggestions made by Bendlin 2001 (esp. pp. 204–205), including the differentiation of the categories of politics and religion, while allowing for their correspondence.
[7] See Woolf 1997, now to be read with Scheid 1999.

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That social status shaped religious preferences in the imperial era is a major claim of my study. Though it can be difficult to distinguish social, political, and cultural developments from their religious corollaries, it is clear that members of the senate understood power in at least partially transcendental terms.[8] In a certain sense, this difficulty reflects a continuation of some of the embedded characteristics of the religion of the republic: emperors and senators alike carried out public religious rituals on behalf of the whole Roman community. But the recruitment zone of the senate and, increasingly, of emperors, had now expanded to include a largely incongruous empire, and instead of civic homogeneity we tend to find evidence – religious and other – of a highly stratified and varied society. In this context the performance of religious rituals by emperors and senators became part of the larger repertoire that we may refer to as rituals of power, widely understood, marking status in a divinely sanctified social order. And it is unlikely that members of the elite would have fully differentiated between expressions of political and military power, on the one hand, and performances of "civic" religious ritual, on the other.

The first known case of a senator renouncing a position of political power, a magistracy, for its incompatibility with his personal views did not occur until a landmark case datable to the crisis of the mid third century, immediately after the end of the chronological scope of this monograph.[9] That Rogatianus, the senator in question, faced such a choice can be best explained as an outcome of the historical developments addressed by this study. The senator's actions, which included not only the renunciation of his political office, the praetorship, but also the abandonment of his possessions and the adoption of an ascetic lifestyle, offer the first signs of a disruption in an earlier, smoothly aligned imperial system combining political and religious elements. Rogatianus' own explanation, namely that he could not combine his senatorial position with his Neoplatonic studies, is more likely to be classifed as a philosophical rather than a religious incongruity today. Yet, as we shall see, philosophy had already played a role in earlier imperial discourses, shaping, to a significant extent, the understanding of what constituted virtue and also offering a rhetorical

[8] Cf. already Shaw 1985.

[9] Porphyry, *Plot.* 7.32–38. Hadot 1990: 492 read this story as a countercultural stance not uncharacteristic of earlier ancient *philosophers* – but my point is that this is the first case in which somebody renounced a political position he had reached and did so for a reason, which we would today consider a matter of conscience. To the extent that we accept such renouncements in the case of civic obligations today, these are privileged on the basis of a historical trajectory that grew out of an ongoing respect for religious convictions.

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context in which to discuss proper religious behavior. Rogatianus' explanation can therefore be contextualized within a successful earlier synergy between senatorial power and such philosophical discussions – and thus we hear of no earlier senator abandoning his career for philosophical reasons (even if some might have refrained from pursuing a senatorial career completely for philosophical or other reasons). Evidently most senators saw little conflict between questioning traditional religious practices from a philosophical perspective and continuing in their own traditional roles within mainstream religion. As we know from other religious systems, discussions about a religious tradition are often used to claim authority or expertise in them and should not be understood as a generalized attempt to undermine the religion itself. Thanks to the successful integration of philosophical (and theological) concerns with the religious practices of traditional Roman religion among senators, Rogatianus could feel compelled to renounce *an integrated package of power and religion*, in which the *ordo* was highly implicit. This case then indirectly confirms the larger argument, namely that the social category of the senate, their political powers, however restricted, and senatorial religion were closely intertwined in the early empire. The Rogatianus incident, coinciding with the decline of the imperial cult itself, points to the chronological end of this smooth synergy and sets the parameters of this study, which concludes with the crisis of the third century.

The synergy of power and religion through the earlier imperial era complicates any easy application of modern distinctions between these two concepts. Thus, I have – admittedly and purposefully – cast a wide net in my interpretation of what might be included in this study of senatorial religion; modern conceptualizations about the separation of religion and politics simply do not suffice. The breadth of the approach seeks to emulate that of Peter Brown, whose studies of late antiquity have connected previously separate areas into a complex understanding of ancient society and its religion.[10] Yet, even within the study of the earlier period, the empire has sometimes been seen, to use Keith Hopkins' phrase, as a "world full of gods."[11] Moreover, recent work on late antique and medieval religion has taught us to appreciate the wide sway of religion in shaping social practices and norms. It thus seems reasonable to consider a similarly wide array of practices and notions when studying what imperial senators might have understood in transcendental terms. In analyzing what might be included within the category of religion in this specific period

[10] Várhelyi 2008. [11] Hopkins 1999.

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of the empire, my approach sides with what can best be categorized as "culturalist" studies within the academic study of religion.[12] Nevertheless, any study of religion in the early empire inevitably faces a particular difficulty, namely the apparent connectivity of imperial "paganism" to contemporaneous early Christianity, which relies on claims about the divine that readers today are culturally trained to recognize as properly "religious."[13] In light of this added difficulty, in order to identify the connections of a non-Christian, senatorial religion to power, my approach looks at evidence for religion contextually rather than causally. This contextual orientation aims at sorting out how and what the senatorial elite saw as religious (and at times, irreligious) in their lives within the varied sociocultural landscape of the early Roman empire.[14]

Defining religion in cross-culturally acceptable terms is difficult, yet necessary. For the purposes of this study, the approach proposed by Bruce Lincoln and Willi Braun has proven to be especially helpful. These scholars emphasize (a) the ordinary nature of religion – it is just one unique variety of otherwise ordinary discourses and practices – that is nevertheless (b) characterized by a special reference to matters transcendent (i.e., beyond the limited spaces of the world) and eternal (i.e., beyond the limits of time).[15] Lincoln and Braun propose a further important characteristic: (c) religion requires a disposition on the part of its participants towards addressing their concerns with an authority equally transcendent and eternal. Authority is itself a focus of increasingly contested debates in the period of the early empire, whether within the larger elite, between the emperor and his satellites, on the one hand, and senators on the other, or, in various constellations, also among miracle-workers of various sorts, diviners, and diverse subsets of Jews and Christians. Yet caution is necessary: the emphasis on authority, rather than on the personal nature of the religious investment, may lead to a misleading impression that Roman senators had no "beliefs." As this study will show, the bifurcation of an authority-based Roman religion and a belief-based early Christianity is problematic. We must therefore ask how religious authority is claimed and used in religious ideas and practices as evidenced by senators themselves.

[12] Compare the different distinction between emic and etic in modern studies in Headland, Pike, and Harris 1990; and its best depiction in Pike 1967.
[13] See the judicious comments of Weckman 2006 on how such comparisons force us to be aware of our own predilections.
[14] On concerns with regard to "fuzzy boundaries of religion," or even relativism see Braun 2000: 10: "one's person's 'sacred' is someone else's 'profane.'"
[15] Braun 2000: 10 (modifying Lincoln 1996: 225) with some further minor modifications.

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In posing these questions, my approach also builds on, although it does not necessarily agree with, social scientific work in the past decades that has tried to reclaim a sense of the "religious" in the Roman world. One of the main avenues towards this goal has been through challenging the Marxist viewpoint that religion is essentially a balm for the less fortunate. Prominent among the studies that launched a new phase in contemporary discussions about social power and its relation to religion is the 1972 work of Rodney Stark, *The Economics of Piety: Religious Commitment and Social Class*, a piece which, interestingly, opens with a citation from a Roman epic poet of the imperial period, Silius Italicus:[16]

> Tanta adeo, cum res trepidae, reverentia divum
> nascitur; at rarae fumant felicibus arae.
>
> (Silius Italicus, *Punica* 7.88–89)

> Such great reverence for the gods is born at times
> of trouble; yet altars rarely smolder in prosperous times.

Stark read this passage as marking a *social* difference between those "in trouble," on the one hand, and those prospering, on the other, exactly the kind of Marxist opposition that he intended to reject. As classicists would see it, however, the words of Silius are less indicative of the social distribution of power than of a *qualitative* or *temporal* distinction between more and less fortunate people or periods.[17] Still, Stark's larger argument – that the religious differences between people of higher and lower social status are a matter of *kind* rather than of *degree* – is an important predecessor for this project. His main thesis, which builds on Marxist class distinctions but includes the Weberian insight that the workings of religion are not based solely on material conditions, claims that the upper (and middle) classes take special interest in those aspects of religion that confirm the legitimacy of their claim to status.[18] Weber's response to Marx confirms the role of ideas in conjunction with material interests in shaping most human action, and Stark and his collaborators have combined these insights in ways that

[16] Stark 1972: 483, 495.

[17] *Felicibus* would more naturally refer back to *res*, "prosperous times," but could also imply *hominibus*, "prosperous men," as an agent of *fumant*, so Spaltenstein 1986: 449, ad loc. For a similar notion, he quotes Liv. 5.51.8, where the Romans return to religious worship in the wake of the Gallic threat. Even more relevant is the contemporary literary parallel, the same hexameter ending, *felicibus arae*, that occurs in Stat. *Theb*. 12.496 with reference to "prosperous men" in a similar context with regard to the sanctuary of Clementia: *semper habet trepidos, semper locus horret egenis | coetibus, ignotae tantum felicibus arae*. ("The place always has fearful people, always bristles with crowds of the destitute, the altars are unknown only to lucky *men*.")

[18] Pyle and Davidson 1998: 498.

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establish the importance of social status in shaping religious preferences.[19] On this social-historical view, elites prefer involvement in the status-granting aspects of religion, such as religious knowledge, public ritual, and institutional participation, which can be positively associated with control and status in religious organizations. Such groups, however, are less likely to seek religious compensation when they fail to achieve worldly rewards, such as wealth or political success. In consequence, the particular religious choices of the elite do not make them any less religious, as they will desire transcendental rewards in any case. They will simply be religious in a different way.

Roman senators were certainly interested in the status-granting features of religion, although the changing conditions from republic to empire significantly complicate the story. While my findings corroborate Stark's thesis, at least to some degree, the religion of the Roman elite should not be too quickly correlated with a search for this-worldly social and political power. Any simple equation of the religious aspects of power with imperial ideology should be avoided and is especially inappropriate for studying the senatorial elite, whose stances on imperial power were often ambivalent. In fact, the classical Marxist notion of ideology as a superstructure that imposes a (possibly false) perception on reality can obfuscate rather than clarify Roman senatorial religion. Historical realities and symbolic notions about them (that were Weber's prime concern) should be seen as interwoven within a complex and dynamic interaction.

A dynamic study of elite religion in social life can be difficult to achieve: we are limited both by the forms and distributions of our evidence and also by a tendency – understandably common among the epigraphers and prosopographers who deal with large amounts of ancient material first-hand – to identify static, normative trends in the almost overwhelmingly rich data. Much of our evidence for religious practices and discourses that we can associate with senators is attested on inscriptions, rather than in literary and material forms, and thus most new findings about Roman elite religion have come from the associated fields of epigraphy and prosopography. This book has itself grown out of the primarily empirical project of establishing a prosopographical database, tracing evidence for the religion of senators in the first two and a half centuries of the Roman empire through the literary, epigraphical, and material evidence. Though this work is not

[19] For a succinct summary of the Weberian response to Marx, albeit without a discussion of the problems see Sadri 1992: 37–43. The most significant summary of Stark's position to date is his work with Finke, in Stark and Finke 2000.

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primarily aimed at furthering the detailed analysis of individual senators, my project builds upon and advances the meticulous studies first undertaken by Sir Ronald Syme and continued today by Werner Eck and John Scheid, among others.[20] But to the extent that the prosopographical study of the evidence has shaped many of the insights offered in this field, it is now time to take a critical look at the often implicit assumptions about the roles individual senators played in Roman society and particularly in Roman religion.

"Prosopography" in and of itself is simply the methodology of tracing names through a variety of evidence – and it is striking how this same method has been put to radically diverse uses in the historical studies of different periods. To take the most influential approach outside ancient history, microhistorians of early modern Europe apply the methodology to the study of how the material conditions of everyday life were experienced, especially by those outside the center of power, persons usually relegated to the margins of traditional historiography.[21] A central critical point of these microhistorians is that the large-scale generalizations of historical scholarship have often distorted the reality of human life, which, on their view, is not spent in the macrostructures primarily studied in political history, but in the world of the individual. This rationale led Carlo Ginzburg to focus on Menocchio (a sixteenth-century miller who was burnt to death by the Inquisition) and Giovanni Levi to concentrate on Giovan Battista Chiesa (a seventeenth-century parish priest and exorcist-cum-healer), with both scholars selecting neither the typical nor the exceptional representatives of their times – but exactly the so-called "exceptional typical."[22] The stories of these individuals are *exceptional* in that they do not conform to established social norms, but they may also be understood as *typical* – that is, their experiences reveal certain characteristic aspects of contemporary society that are nevertheless absent from the norm. Insofar as the phrase "exceptional typical" seems to be an oxymoron, its use by microhistorians is suggestive of a double bind facing those interested in both normative macro- and potentially insubordinate micro-phenomena – a point that relates well to my own emphasis upon the dynamic potential of historical interpretations.[23]

While I clearly do not intend to analyze the non-elite here, it is significant to understand how these microhistorical practices in the field of modern

[20] Eck 1989, Scheid 1990a. [21] Iggers 1997: 101–102.
[22] Ginzburg 1976, Levi 1988; the term "exceptional typical" goes back to Edoardo Grendi, cf. Peltonen 2001: 348 n. 5.
[23] Peltonen 2001: 359.

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European history challenge our practices within Roman prosopography. With their focus upon "historically significant" people, the first Roman historians to put prosopographical evidence to use, Matthias Gelzer and Friedrich Münzer, had a relatively uncritical approach to the ways that the web woven by the prosopographically identifiable family relations, intermarriage, or collegiality in office may have shaped individual behavior.[24] Whether the prosopographical focus was too narrow was a concern to Syme himself, which may have led him to forge a strong link between his prosopographical work on familial and office-based connections among the elite and the macrostructures of Roman history.[25] The main criticism from the 1970s onwards against "Syme Incorporated," as Thomas Carney jokingly referred to Roman prosopographers, has been aimed at this view of history as "made by the elites."[26] Along similar lines, Keith Hopkins coined the phrase "the Everest fallacy" to describe the "tendency to illustrate a category by an example which is exceptional," because to his mind such illustrations are misleading in that they suggest, for instance, that the famous orator and politician M. Tullius Cicero was "a 'typical' new man" – which would be tantamount to suggesting that Mount Everest is "a 'typical' mountain."[27] His suggested solution is to compare prosopographical data with sociological and demographic models, so as to check for potential distortions in the surviving material. In the past few decades we have seen plentiful results from such modeling, even if they are still primarily focused on establishing the same normative patterns for which Roman prosopographers have been searching.

In this volume, however, the exclusive focus on identifying static normative trends even within the elite studies of the Roman world is challenged. To apply the lessons of microhistory, we need to reconsider the degree to which normative trends can shape the individual, the Greek *prosopon* from which our common prosopographical method takes its name. A less static model of social interactions may allow us to read a variety of human discourses and actions that do not fully conform to social norms, while not excluding the possibility that some of these very same individuals followed established *mores* throughout most of their lives. Such a dynamic conceptualization of historical processes is especially useful for understanding the senatorial elite, who sometimes challenged imperial social norms even as they played a central role in the production of these same norms. We are

[24] Gelzer 1912, Münzer 1920; to be read with the critical remarks of Meier 1966.
[25] See, especially, the concern expressed in Syme 1968: 145.
[26] Carney 1973. [27] Hopkins and Burton 1983: 41.

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