Graeco-Roman Religion in the Roman Empire: Old Assumptions and New Approaches

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ABSTRACT

This article surveys recent trends in research on Graeco-Roman religion, focusing on the first and second centuries CE. In the first half, I assess current views on what I call the old 'master narrative' of Graeco-Roman religious history in this period, that is, the assumption that the decline of traditional Graeco-Roman religion left a void filled on the one hand by the purely political phenomenon of imperial cult and on the other by mystery/oriental religions, which met the emotional needs of the populace. In the second half I discuss two areas of interest that have come to the fore in the wake of the old master narrative's collapse: an approach to interpreting traditional Graeco-Roman religion that some scholars have termed the '*polis*-religion model', and a focus on religious life in the provinces of the Roman empire. As an appendix I include a brief survey of available scholarly resources in this field.

Keywords: Graeco-Roman religion, imperial cult, mystery religion, oriental religion, *polis* religion.

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1. Introduction

For a great deal of the twentieth century, much work on Graeco-Roman religion in the Roman imperial period was informed by a basic narrative about religious developments in the last few centuries BCE and the first few centuries CE. That narrative, put in very crude terms, went something like this: By the first century BCE, traditional Graeco-Roman religion had become moribund and effete. Political and social developments since the time of Alexander the Great had resulted in 'an era of insecurity and anxiety'. 'The shift from nationalism to cosmopolitanism, from the secure isolated city-state to the *oikoumene*, gave people a greater sense of individualism, but at the same time provided many with a feeling of alienation and insecurity.' As a result,

> confidence in the traditional cults and their gods that served as the basis of the political, social, and intellectual life was waning. The general populace no longer placed its hope or faith on the ancient gods, whom they believed could not alleviate their daily encounters with the vicissitudes of Hellenistic life (Tripolitis 2002: 2).

The first Roman emperor, Augustus, made a cynical or, more charitably, quixotic attempt to reverse the decline of traditional religion, but his revival was artificial and of brief duration. Thereafter, significant religious developments within the empire proceeded along two main lines. On the one hand, 'ruler cults were established to replace the traditional city-gods', but 'they were primarily a political phenomenon and did not fulfill the needs of the individual'; worship of the emperor flourished simply because it was fostered by the state. On the other hand,

> the unsettling conditions of the time led people to long and search for *soteria*, salvation, a release from the burdens of finitude, the misery and failure of human life. People everywhere were keenly awake to every new message of hope and eagerly prospecting for a personal savior, someone who would bring salvation, i.e., deliverance or protection from the vicissitudes of this life and the perils of the afterlife (Tripolitis 2002: 2).

This salvation many people found in the mystery cults and in religions imported from the East.

This summary is intentionally crude, and does great disservice to the considerable amount of learned, insightful and subtle work that was done in the earlier twentieth century. Yet, for all that, it is not inaccurate, since in its main lines it did inform much earlier scholarship. As one concrete example,

we may consider the relevant chapter titles of what remains a standard handbook on Roman religion: 'The Decline of Roman Religion', covering the second and first centuries BCE, followed by 'The Augustan Restoration' and then two chapters on the empire: 'The Religion of Loyalty of the Imperial Period', dealing with emperor worship, and 'Impersonal Gods and the Desire for Personal Protection', dealing largely with 'oriental cults' (Latte 1960). Nor has this narrative lost its currency, since it continues to inform at least some recent surveys of religious developments in the Hellenistic and Roman periods; the fact that all the quotations in the preceding paragraph come from the introduction to just such a survey, published less than ten years ago by a highly reputable press, attests to its continued influence. Yet in recent decades every one of the assumptions that underlie it has been exploded, and new models and approaches have been developed instead. The purpose of this article is first to review these critiques and modifications of long-standing assumptions and analytical categories, and then to survey some of the approaches that in recent decades have taken their place. My main focus is work from the last twenty years, but I also note particularly influential publications from the 1970s and 1980s and, as points of reference, some of the chief monuments of earlier scholarship.

By way of preface, it will be useful to begin with a few comments about my somewhat cumbersome title. If I were writing thirty years ago, or indeed if I were someone else writing today, I might more simply and more elegantly entitle my article 'Paganism in the Roman Empire'. But the word 'paganism' is now seen by many scholars as problematic, for two rather different reasons. On the one hand, some object to the fact that the term 'pagan' was in origin a derogatory term devised by Christians and that it continues to be freighted with heavy, and largely negative, conceptual baggage (e.g., Remus 2004). On the other hand, and from my point of view an even greater problem, the word 'paganism' encourages us to see the variegated religious traditions of the Roman world as constituting much more of a unified system than they actually did (Rives 2007: 15-53).

But if 'pagan' and 'paganism' are problematic terms, it is no easy task to find entirely suitable alternatives. Some scholars now use 'polytheist' and 'polytheism' instead, but these terms, while certainly more neutral, introduce difficulties of their own (North 2005: esp. 134-37). For one thing, they put considerable emphasis on what was just one aspect of the varied religious traditions in the Roman world, and moreover an aspect that most contemporaries would not have regarded as particularly worthy

of comment; it is only from a Jewish-Christian-Muslim perspective that the worship of multiple divine beings seems noteworthy. For another, it is likely enough that some 'pagans', had they known the terms, might well have chosen to describe themselves as 'monotheists' rather than 'polytheists'; it is worth keeping in mind that many Greek writers use the singular and plural of *theos* (god) almost interchangeably. An alternative to 'polytheist' is 'Hellenist', which has the advantage of being a term that late adherents of traditional Greek religion, such as the emperor Julian 'the Apostate', applied to themselves (Bowersock 1990: 9-13). Yet not only is this a very late term, but it is obviously problematic when applied to all those regions of the empire in which the Greek tradition was not dominant. My own preference is for expressions like 'traditional Graeco-Roman religion' or 'the religious traditions of the Roman empire'. These have the advantage of highlighting the idea of adherence to ancestral traditions, something that virtually all 'pagans' seem to have professed even if they were in fact introducing radical changes. Yet they are far from perfect solutions: not only are they cumbersome, but they gloss over the cultural complexity of these traditions (I discuss this last issue in more detail below in section 3b, 'Religion in the Roman Provinces'). Since no completely adequate substitute for the term 'pagan' has yet been devised, some scholars have come to advocate its continued use. The debate will no doubt continue, but one point should always be kept in mind: it is only when talking about Jews and/or Christians in the Roman world that there is any real need for a compendious term to refer to all non-Jews and non-Christians.

The other part of my title fortunately requires much less comment. I will be focusing on the first two centuries CE, the period of the early or 'high' Roman empire, with an occasional glance forward to the third and fourth centuries CE and quite a few glances backward to the Hellenistic period and the Roman Republic, that is, the third through first centuries BCE. The last few decades have also seen an explosion of new and innovative work on Greek religion in the archaic and classical periods (eighth through fourth centuries BCE), but that, with rare exceptions, will not figure in this survey. Even within these chronological limits, however, the amount and variety of relevant work is more than can be covered even in a substantial survey. Consequently, what follows is a highly selective and no doubt idiosyncratic overview of what I regard as some of the major trends. By way of compensation, I have included as an appendix a survey of recent research tools that can provide more comprehensive coverage of particular topics.

2. Old Assumptions

a. The Decline of Traditional Religion

As I noted above, the master narrative about religious developments in the Hellenistic and Roman periods was one in which the decline of traditional Graeco-Roman religion created a vacuum that was then filled by other developments, particularly imperial cult and mystery/oriental religions. Although virtually all the versions of this narrative shared certain basic assumptions, the analysis of religious decline took two rather different forms depending on whether the focus of the narrative was the Hellenistic Greek world or late Republican Rome. The former, which we might conveniently label the 'age of anxiety' analysis, attributed the decline of traditional religion to external factors, especially political changes but also intellectual developments. The latter, by contrast, generally attributed the decline to internal factors, in particular the perceived formalism of traditional Roman religion and its increasing manipulation for political purposes. I will thus discuss them separately before considering some of the assumptions that underlay them both.

The phrase 'age of anxiety' originated as the title of a long poem by W.H. Auden, awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1948, that dealt with the individual's search for identity and meaning in the mid twentieth century. It was first applied to the ancient Mediterranean by Dodds, who borrowed it as the title of his study of religious change in the second to fourth centuries CE, a change that he saw rooted in a growing alienation from and hostility towards the material world (Dodds 1965). Implicit in Dodds's appropriation of the phrase was the assumption that people in the period he was considering suffered from the same sorts of ills that are often said to characterize life in the twentieth century: deracination and insecurity, anomie and loss of identity. According to Dodds, it was as a cure for these ills that people sought new forms of religious experience and belief. Dodds was by no means the first scholar to make this assumption, nor indeed the last. Many other scholars, however, located the origin of these ills not in the period on which Dodds focused but several centuries earlier, in the Hellenistic period of the third to first centuries BCE. The following two examples may serve to represent this kind of analysis.

The French scholar Festugière was one of the twentieth century's leading authorities on Greek religion and philosophy in the twentieth century, known particularly for his editions of the Hermetic Corpus and the Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus, as well as a massive and detailed study of late antique mysticism and occultism (1944–54). At the same time as he was

finishing that study, he also published his only significant work in English, a small but wide-ranging book entitled *Personal Religion Among the Greeks* (1954). He begins this book with the premise that

> there is no true religion except that which is personal. True religion is, first of all, closeness to God. Every religious ceremony is but empty make-believe if the faithful who participate in it do not feel that thirst for the Absolute, that anxious desire to enter into personal contact with the mysterious Being who is hidden behind appearances (Festugière 1954: 1).

He then identifies two different forms of personal religion among the ancient Greeks: popular piety, which sought a more intimate relationship with a particular deity, and reflective piety, 'whereby man in the presence of human misery and of the enigma of the will of God desires to leave this world for that of the gods, or seeks to penetrate God's plan' (1954: 37). Although both forms existed already in the classical period, certain intellectual and socio-political changes in the fourth and third centuries BCE, he implies, were crucial for their further development: on the one hand, the influence of Plato, with his stress on the transcendent; on the other, a complex of apparently interrelated socio-political developments arising from the conquests of Alexander the Great.

Of the latter, Festugière highlights three in particular. The first was 'a tendency to prefer the hidden life, the life in retreat'; in his view, 'this love of withdrawal in the great Hellenistic and Imperial Roman cities becomes a current of such strength' that it deserves entire chapter on its own (1954: 39). Secondly, 'because, perhaps, of a certain diffidence toward the old civic gods', there was a tendency to express religious devotion by joining an association centered on the worship of a savior god such as Isis, the Syrian Aphrodite, Cybele, the God of the Jews, Dionysus or Asclepius (1954: 40). Third was an increased 'sense of the instability of human affairs'. Only for this third tendency does he provide an explicit explanation: 'No more tormented period of world history is to be found than the first centuries of the Hellenistic Age. There were countless wars among the successors of Alexander, and countless changes of fortune.' The result was a growing dominance of 'the notion that everything in this world is governed by a cruel and inconstant power, by Tyche or Fortune' and a consequent desire for a savior deity who could rescue one from the uncertainties and difficulties of life (1954: 40-41). This increased sense of the instability of life presumably also promoted the tendencies to withdraw and to join voluntary cult groups, but another major factor, or so he seems to imply, was 'the loss of autonomy in the Greek cities' in the Hellenistic period; he certainly

assumes that this loss of autonomy resulted in the 'undeniable fact' that 'the protecting deities of the Greek cities lost in importance' (1954: 37). For Festugière, then, the changed conditions of life in the Hellenistic period resulted in the decline of traditional public cults and the increased importance of personal religion in its various forms.

A somewhat similar, if more nuanced, account has been proposed more recently by Martin in his synthetic treatment of Hellenistic religion (1987). Like Festugière, Martin sees the fourth and third centuries BCE as a period of crucial change for Graeco-Roman religion, and like Festugière he identifies both intellectual and socio-political factors as the engines of this change. He puts the emphasis, however, on somewhat different factors. As regards socio-political factors, he simply notes that Alexander's empire 'irrevocably altered the sociopolitical world of the Greeks by replacing the local world of the polis, the Hellenic model of the independent, democratic city-state, with an internationalizing vision of the entire world as polis' (Martin 1987: 4). As regards intellectual factors, he ignores Plato and stresses instead a shift in cosmological models, from the 'integrated view of the cosmos' characteristic of classical Greek civilization to the Ptolemaic cosmology, in which 'the terrestrial, sublunar realm was sharply separated from the celestial, superlunar realm by an abyss of cosmic space populated by elemental and demonic powers' (1987: 6-8). 'The effects of Hellenistic cosmological universalism, political internationalism, and widened cultural and intellectual possibilities, together raised new questions of individual existence' (1987: 156). These questions were articulated primarily around changing conceptions of fate and strategies for coping with it. Martin identifies

> three types of discourse and practice that are usually grouped under the singular category of 'religious': piety, mystery, and gnosis. These three types assumed an essentially identical order of things but evaluated this order differently; consequently, they represent three different strategies of existence (1987: 11).

Although Martin insists that these various strategies co-existed and overlapped, and so to some extent avoids shaping his synthesis as an explicit narrative of decline, he also clearly implies that they involved a progressively greater degree of alienation from the world and a progressively more radical and personal conception of salvation.

Leaving aside the intellectual developments cited by these two scholars, we may consider current views on the various socio-political factors that they see as responsible for the decline of traditional public cults and the

turn to more personal forms of religious life. First, it hardly needs to be pointed out that Festugière's characterization of the Hellenistic age as the most tormented period of world history is vastly overstated. Warfare was indeed common, even endemic, during Hellenistic times, but much the same could be said about the preceding classical period. Indeed, a case could be made that because so much of this warfare took place between the professional armies of territorial rulers the ordinary citizens of the major cities were more insulated from its direct effects than they had been in earlier times, when the major conflicts took place between individual city-states and their citizen armies. More importantly, assumptions that a loss of local autonomy and an increasing internationalization resulted in the erosion of communal ties and in widespread deracination and alienation are now almost universally rejected. Whatever cities may have lost in terms of political autonomy they seem to have more than made up by their importance for local and communal identity. Even cities subject to the rule of Hellenistic kings still determined their internal and even to some extent their external affairs; people continued to identify themselves above all by their affiliation with their city and to take pride in this identity; the rivalry of civic elites to promote their own city over its rivals fueled the massive programs of public improvements whose remains even now can impress. Moreover, Hellenistic kings and, later, Roman emperors positively encouraged the establishment of Graeco-Roman-type cities in many areas where they had previously not existed. Thus, one recent scholar can assert that the Hellenistic era, far from witnessing any decline, 'was in many respects the most important period in the history of the Greek cities, a period of dramatic growth and development' (Billows 2003: 196). This new assessment of the vitality of civic life in the Hellenistic and Roman periods has had a profound impact on the way people judge the success of traditional public cults.

Turning from the Hellenistic east to the city of Rome, we may consider a different set of narratives about religious decline. As I noted above, these narratives tend to focus around two distinct although interrelated themes, on the one hand the formalism and intrinsic inadequacy of traditional Roman religion, and the other its neglect and abuse by the Roman elite during the last century of the Republic. As a particularly vivid and elegant example we may consider the account in one of the most influential books on Graeco-Roman religion in the twentieth century, Cumont's *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (1911; note especially the 2006 republication of the fourth French edition, which includes a useful introduction setting Cumont's work in its wider intellectual context). Cumont ascribed the success of the 'oriental religions' in the Roman world to the fact that 'those religions gave greater satisfaction first, to the senses and passions,

secondly, to the intelligence, finally, and above all, to the conscience' (1911: 28). With regards to the first, he notes that 'perhaps there never was a religion so cold and prosaic as the Roman. Being subordinated to politics, it sought, above all, to secure the protection of the gods for the state...by the strict execution of appropriate practices' (1911: 28-29); it was thus easy for the 'oriental religions' to satisfy 'the thirst for religious emotion that the austere Roman creed had been unable to quench' (1911: 30). As to the second point, the advance of rationalism first in Greece and then in Rome meant that traditional religion

> lost its vitality and dried up because it lacked the strengthening nourishment of reflection. It became a thing devoid of sense, whose *raison d'être* was no longer understood; it embodied dead ideas and an obsolete conception of the world (1911: 31).

Lastly, the innate conservatism of the Roman religious tradition meant that it could not evolve to meet new standards of morality. As a result,

> indifference spread, the temples were abandoned and threatened to tumble into ruins, the clergy found it difficult to recruit members, the festivities, once so popular, fell into desuetude, and Varro, at the beginning of his *Antiquities*, expressed his fear lest 'the gods might perish, not from the blows of foreign enemies, but from very neglect on the part of the citizens' (1911: 37-38).

'Augustus, prompted by political rather than by religious reasons, attempted to revive the dying religion', but 'this attempted reform failed entirely', because 'making religion an auxiliary to moral policing is not a means of establishing its empire over souls' (1911: 38).

For many scholars, the second of Cumont's three points was the most crucial; it was for many years regarded as axiomatic that the Roman elite, those responsible for the maintenance of traditional religion, ceased to have any real belief in it and as a result consigned it to neglect and cynical political manipulation. Evidence for neglect and manipulation could readily be found, and a standard list of examples gradually took shape: ancient priesthoods left vacant, ceremonies unperformed, temples allowed to decay, priesthoods sought for personal ends, the religious calendar exploited for political gain. It was also easy enough to find statements from contemporary writers that seemed to confirm that they themselves were aware of this religious decline, such as the passage from the first-century-BCE scholar M. Terentius Varro quoted by Cumont. But, as more recent scholars have argued, this evidence has often been cited without proper consideration of its context; at the same time, other evidence that presents a different picture has been dismissed out of hand.

For example, Varro's statement, which is in fact not a direct quotation but a paraphrase of Augustine's (*City of God* 6.2), comes from his learned study of Roman religious antiquities; it has more to do with touting his own research into ancient and obscure traditions than with assessing the health of Roman religion. In contrast, Valerius Maximus, who in the third decade of the first century CE compiled a vast number of historical anecdotes as a resource for orators and students of rhetoric, included a whole range of stories that illustrate the power of the traditional Roman gods and their intervention in human life, stories that he clearly felt would still resonate with contemporary audiences (Mueller 2002). Again, much evidence for the neglect of temples and traditional priesthoods in the late Republic is deduced from the various revivals and refurbishments that took place under Augustus. But it was of course to Augustus's advantage to exaggerate any earlier neglect of religion so that he could gain all the more credit for its restoration. When he boasts that he restored eighty-two temples of the gods in 28 BCE (*Res Gestae Divi Augusti* 20.4), we should probably think not so much of rebuilding half-collapsed structures as of a few minor repairs and a new paint job. On the other hand, there is also ample evidence in Rome during the first century BCE for new institutions and the ongoing adaptation of old ones. Moreover, contemporary accounts of manipulation and charges of sacrilege are now seen more as evidence for the continued vitality of traditional religion than for its irrelevance and decay. As the authors of the current standard account of Roman religion point out, the evidence makes it clear that 'religion remained throughout this period a central concern of the Roman governing class, even if principally as a focus of their conflicts. There was, in other words, a consensus that religion belonged high up on the public agenda' (Beard, North and Price 1998: I, 134; for the ongoing vitality of traditional Roman religion in the late Republic, see in general I, 114-40).

Despite the differences that result from a focus on the Greek east or on the city of Rome, all these various narratives of decline share a number of underlying assumptions that many current scholars would not accept. Although these assumptions are overlapping and interconnected, for the purposes of analysis we may usefully distinguish three of the most significant. One is the assumption that there is by definition a fundamental and clear-cut separation between the religious and political spheres, so that any overlap between the two can ipso facto be regarded as the political manipulation or appropriation of religion. Another is the privileging of the personal dimension over the public dimension, so that the former is taken as the locus of 'real' religion. The third, very closely related, is the emphasis on belief instead of ritual, so that ritual is thought to have 'real' religious meaning only when it is the external expression of an internal belief. In the

1980s a number of scholars began to call attention to and critique these assumptions, with the result that people are now much more cautious about taking them for granted than were the scholars of earlier generations (see in particular Phillips 1986 for a wide-ranging critique of the conceptual categories that informed earlier scholarship). I will consider some particular examples of such critiques in section 3a below, but at this point I want to focus on one of the most problematic results of these assumptions, and that is a marked selectivity in the use of evidence.

It is striking that scholars who want to see a profound change in religion during Hellenistic and Roman times turn again and again to the same authors and texts: Plutarch and Apuleius, Marcus Aurelius and Aelius Aristides, Hermetic treatises and gnostic scriptures. The reason for this is obvious: if 'real' religion centers on matters of personal belief and experience untainted by political considerations, it is only from literary sources that we can learn anything worth knowing about religious life in antiquity; as Dodds points out, 'inscriptions seldom tell us much about the underlying personal experience' (1965: 3). Not only do these assumptions privilege literary texts over documentary sources, but they also define certain types of texts as more significant than others. 'Had Aelius Aristides not written his *Sacred Discourses*, and the Roman speech, he would be a fairly commonplace person of little interest to us', observes Festugière (1954: 85), since his other works are merely 'set speeches of divers sorts: the panegyric of a god or of a city, or a declamation on some literary or ethical commonplace'. In other words, Aristides' records of his intense personal interactions with the healing god Asclepius provide valuable evidence for genuine religion, but his prose hymns in praise of particular deities, of the sort that was regularly delivered at crowded public festivals, do not.

Over the last thirty years or so, however, scholars have considerably expanded the evidentiary basis for the study of religion in the Hellenistic and Roman periods in order to take into account inscriptions, coins, sculpture and architecture. The result has been a radically altered picture of religious life, one that is the polar opposite of the grim account of collapse sketched by people like Cumont. Much of the work on which this new picture is based is not in itself particularly recent. For the study of religion in the Greek east, for example, we can single out the fundamental work of Sokolowski (1955, 1962, 1969; see also Lupu 2005) and above all Robert (e.g., 1937, 1969–90). But it was only in the 1980s that syntheses appeared that pulled together the results of this more detailed work. Worthy of particular mention are the books by MacMullen (1981), Price (1984b, discussed further in the next section), and Lane Fox (1987). All these books reveal a culture in which traditional public cults remained vibrantly alive,

a world filled with processions, festivals, temples and priesthoods. MacMullen, for example, demonstrates the extent to which traditional deities dominate the epigraphic record: in the west, Jupiter, Mercury, Hercules, Silvanus and Mars, with Isis and Cybele only in the lower ranks, and in the east, Zeus, Apollo, Athena, Dionysos and Artemis (MacMullen 1981: 5-7). Lane Fox, in addition to stressing the vitality of public processions and festivals, devotes two vivid chapters to the involvement of the traditional gods in people's day-to-day lives, through dreams and epiphanies on the one hand and oracles on the other (Lane Fox 1987: 102-261). A particularly striking demonstration of the continued importance of traditional religion for civic identity is that of Rogers (1991), a study of one extremely long and involved inscription from the city of Ephesos. The inscription details the provisions of a bequest made to the city in 104 CE that provided funds for an elaborate series of processions and rituals. As Rogers argues, 'through the medium of the foundation we see the demos of Ephesos presenting itself to the world essentially as a sacred community' in which 'individuals were bound together and defined in relation to the institutional roles they played in the great drama of the sacred past of Ephesos, which was performed each year during the celebration of the mysteries of Artemis' (Rogers 1991: 147).

It is important to note that this new picture of the continued vitality of traditional religion does not mean that earlier scholarship has lost all its utility; all the works that I have cited here continue to provide valuable insights. The narratives of decline that informed them were wrong not because the phenomena that these scholars discussed did not exist, but because they were only a part of the story, and a much smaller part than those scholars assumed. As MacMullen points out, if we take the remains of the papyri found in Egypt as a guide to what people there were reading, we must set the very few papyri with texts of the sort so beloved by earlier scholars against the dozens of papyri of Hesiod, Euripides and Callimachus and the literally hundreds of papyri of Homer (MacMullen 1981: 68, with 145 n. 41 and 178 n. 30). The notion that traditional public cults and traditional Graeco-Roman deities were in any sort of decline during the Hellenistic and imperial periods depended on a set of highly dubious assumptions, and could be confirmed only by a very selective and even arbitrary use of evidence. It can now no longer be maintained, at least not without some major qualifications. Not surprisingly, this fundamental shift in the basic narrative of Graeco-Roman religion has had profound implications for the way scholars approach particular topics, and it is to those that I now turn.

b. Imperial Cult

The worship of human rulers as though they were gods was for many years regarded as both symptom and cause of the final decline of traditional Graeco-Roman religion: only in a system that had become completely devoid of real religious meaning, it was assumed, could something like this have been possible. Although a considerable amount of work was done on the topic, much of which retains value as collections of material or analyses of particular developments, the general tendency was to treat imperial cult as a political phenomenon cloaked in religious dress. Over the last thirty years, however, there has been a revolution in the study of imperial cult. Although there is still considerable disagreement on specific points of interpretation, the general tendency now is to take it much more seriously as a religious phenomenon.

A number of scholars have contributed to this shift, but it is safe to say that the most influential has been Price, particularly in his monograph on the Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor (1984b) but also in several other shorter studies (1980, 1984a, 1987). The impact that Price's work has had is due to a number of related factors. First, as I mentioned in the previous section, he calls attention to the underlying assumptions that had justified a dismissive attitude towards ruler cult; such assumptions, he argues, as for example the idea that intense emotions and personal belief are the *sine qua non* of any genuine religion, involved the illegitimate application of Christian standards to other forms of religion to which they are in fact irrelevant (Price 1984b: 7-16). In place of this Christianizing approach, as he describes it, Price draws on anthropological models to develop a very different one, in which the rituals and iconography of ruler cult are analyzed as elements of a cognitive system, a way of understanding and structuring the relationship between the inhabitants of traditional Greek city-states and their rulers. The historical development that called forth this new system was the rise to power, in the wake of Alexander the Great, of territorial rulers who were neither members of the *polis*, as Greek tyrants had been in the past, nor barbarian conquerors, like the Persian kings. Unlike these earlier figures,

> the Hellenistic rulers were both kings and Greek, and some solution had to be found to the problem this posed. There was no legal answer and the cities needed to represent this new power to themselves. The cults of the gods were the one model that was available to them for the representation of a power on whom the city was dependent which was external and yet still Greek (Price 1984b: 29-30; see in general pp. 23-52).

Once this system existed, it was almost a matter of course that it be adapted to deal with other novel forms of power, above all, that of Rome.

Another important aspect of Price's work is the subtlety with which he develops his analysis across a wide spectrum of phenomena, devoting separate chapters to architecture, images and sacrifices. In each of these cases he treats the material almost as a language, one that the people of the Hellenistic and imperial periods adapted in order to make new statements about new situations. Thus, for example, 'the uses made of the Hellenistic architectural tradition of temples for the gods illustrates the flexibility and vitality of Greek religious architecture and demonstrates the concern to accommodate the emperor within a Greek framework' (Price 1984b: 134). Similarly, 'imperial images are not merely illustrations of ideology, they partly constitute it. Their iconography articulated different aspects of imperial rule, the civilian, military and divine' (1984b: 205). Although some might object that analyses like this are simply updated ways of treating ruler cult as a political phenomenon, Price disagrees: 'this solution to the problem of power over the city is no less religious a phenomenon than the cults of the traditional gods', since 'these too were conceived in terms of honours and can also be analysed as the representation of power' (1984b: 52).

Much important work has been done on imperial cult in the twenty-five years since Price's book appeared, and some even before. Of contemporary scholars who began publishing before the appearance of Price's book, the most important is Fishwick, whose first article appeared as long ago as 1961. Fishwick has devoted his entire career to the study of the imperial cult in the Latin-speaking provinces of the western empire, particularly the provincial cult, and has brought together the most important results of his researches in a massive multi-volumed monograph (1987–92 and 2002–2005). Other important studies have focused on imperial cult in the eastern empire: Friesen (1993) offers a detailed examination of the provincial cult of the province of Asia, and Burrell (2004) provides a comprehensive account of *neokoroi*, cities with temples that served the imperial cult of a province or regional association. Although both books overlap to some extent with Price's, they differ by concentrating on one particular cult or type of cult and by laying much more emphasis on the diachronic dimension. Another important specialized study is Hänlein-Schäfer (1985), a comprehensive analysis of temples dedicated to the first Roman emperor, Augustus. Gradel (2002) focuses on imperial cult in Rome and Italy, making a strong argument that, contrary to earlier assumptions, imperial cult was fully in accordance with traditional Roman religion. Lastly, the major book by Clauss (1999) offers another synthetic treatment, focused again on the western empire, that includes two thorough surveys of the material, one

chronological and the other thematic. In addition to these major projects, there have also been numerous smaller studies, of which a convenient sampling may be found in Small (1996) and Cancik and Hitzl (2003).

Much of this recent work has been in dialogue with Price, in which some ongoing areas of debate can be identified. One of these is the exact status of the emperor: was he regarded as a god, a mortal or something in between? This had been a major stumbling block for earlier scholars, who tended to take for granted the absolute and transcendent conception of deity characteristic of monotheistic traditions and so could see little other than gross flattery in the idea of treating a mortal as a god. Price brought about a fundamental change in the discussion by dismissing the question of whether or not people 'really' believed that the emperor was a god and focusing instead on the way that Greek cities used the language of traditional divine cult to model the relationship between themselves and the Roman emperor; his specific conclusions, however, have been called into question by more recent scholars. Price argues that the practices of imperial cult involve a number of ambiguities: whereas some treat the emperor as a god, others seem deliberately to distinguish him from the traditional gods. For example, although some sacrifices were offered directly to the emperor himself, more seem to have been offered to the gods on the emperor's behalf. Taken as a whole, 'this range of ritual practices and language expressed a picture of the emperor *between* human and divine' (Price 1984b: 233, emphasis added). Friesen (1993: 146-52) engages in a point-by-point critique of Price's position, and concludes in effect that the ambiguity identified by Price lies in the eye of the beholder; ancient cult practices were not meant to make ontological statements, but to create particular types of relationships in particular contexts. Hence, 'sacrificing to the emperors and sacrificing to the gods on behalf of the emperors were not contradictory actions. They were two complementary aspects of the larger sacrificial system' (Friesen 1993: 150). More recently, Gradel (2002) has developed a similar approach along more comprehensive lines. He argues that questions of divinity in the sort of absolute sense that we often take for granted were in the Graeco-Roman world the province of philosophy, and that cult practices concerned divinity only in a relative sense. Thus, Jupiter was worshipped not so much because he was a god, but because

> his immense power over the well-being of Rome gave him divine status in the Roman 'constitution'. His divine status was thus relative to the body honouring him, and it was 'constructed' by the honours accorded him by this body (Gradel 2002: 28).

It was in precisely the same way, Gradel argues, that the Roman emperors were divine (see in general 2002: 27-32). A broadly similar argument is advanced by Clauss (1996, 1999), although with rather less subtlety. Like other recent scholars, Clauss insists that it is not belief but practice that is the key factor in Graeco-Roman religion; consequently, if we find that people treated the emperor as a god, we must conclude that he was a god (1999: 23). Clauss then devotes the bulk of his book to cataloguing the ways that people did in fact treat the emperor as a god. Although all these scholars reject the ambiguities identified by Price, they all in their different ways build on Price's shift of emphasis from belief to cult practice.

Another key focus of discussion has been the impetus behind imperial cult: whereas earlier scholars tended to see it largely as something imposed from above, by Roman authorities representing the imperial center, Price insisted that it originated with the worshippers, who developed it as a way of meeting their own need to come to terms with the power of Rome. Most recent scholars have accepted Price's approach, and extended it further. Friesen, for example, argues that the growth of a provincial cult reflected the fact that 'social networks were becoming regional, and cultic life needed to reflect this situation'; the driving force in its development 'were the members of the elite who moved from their municipal base into the arena of provincial service' (Friesen 1993: 154 and 167-68). Burrell (2004) provides a particularly detailed and sophisticated analysis of the way that imperial cult served as the locus for complex negotiations over status among local elites and representatives of Roman power. Fishwick, however, makes a forceful case for emphasizing the top-down rather than the bottom-up aspect of imperial cult. In his study of provincial cult in the western empire, he presents a detailed chronological account of the cult's development in which the imperial center developed different forms of the cult suited to different regions, depending on the degree of their acculturation to Rome, and instituted changes to meet the needs of new dynasties. He concludes that 'by and large provincial cult in the West appears as an instrument of imperial policy, a device that could be manipulated in whichever direction the purposes of the central authority might require' (Fishwick 2002–2005: I, 219). Although it must be kept in mind that Fishwick is dealing with the western rather than the eastern empire and with provincial rather than municipal cult, his view of imperial cult as an instrument of centralized policy provides a notable contrast to the general trend.

One of the most significant contributions of recent work on imperial cult has been a new emphasis on non-official forms of the cult. Among earlier scholars, the fact that worship of the emperor was largely limited to official public contexts was seen as proof that the impulses behind it were political

rather than religious. So, for example, Nock argued that the countless dedications to deified rulers

> are all of the nature of homage and not of worship in the full sense, for worship implies the expectation of blessing to be mediated in a supernatural way. The touchstone of piety in antiquity is the votive offering, made in recognition of supposed deliverance in some invisible manner from sickness or other peril. This we do not find directed to rulers living or dead (Nock 1934: 481; cf. 1957: 115).

Quite apart from the problem with Nock's assumptions about what constitutes 'worship in the full sense', he turns out to have been wrong about the evidence: Clauss has now collected a dozen or so votive dedications made by private individuals to emperors or members of the imperial family (1999: 526). This is a tiny number, it is true, but it shows that such personal reactions to the divinity of the emperor were not impossible. More generally, it now appears that the extent to which imperial cult flourished in private contexts had previously been greatly underestimated. For example, literary evidence shows that the emperor was worshipped on the domestic level, with his image placed among the household gods; in light of this, there may be reason to reassess the potential religious significance of the innumerable small images of emperors that have been found in a wide range of media (Gradel 2002: 198-212; Turcan 1996: 55-62). Similarly, epigraphic evidence reveals the existence of numerous private associations of 'worshippers of the emperor' or 'of the emperor's image', many of which seem to have developed from household associations (Gradel 2002: 213-33). In some of these private associations, images of the emperor even seem to have played a role in the celebration of mysteries (Pleket 1965; cf. Clauss 1999: 339-41). In short, private cults of the emperor were 'very common and widespread indeed, in the *domus*, in the streets, in public squares, in Rome itself (perhaps there in particular) as well as outside the capital' (Gradel 2002: 232).

Lastly, we should note an increased concern with terminology. The phrase 'imperial cult', and even more '*the* imperial cult', has come to be seen as problematic, since it implies the existence of a coherent system; what we in fact find is a wide range of practices and images that in very different ways established some association between the emperor and his household on the one hand and the divine sphere on the other (e.g., Beard, North and Price 1998: I, 318; Burrell 2004: 3). Some scholars now prefer other terms, such as 'emperor worship' (Gradel 2002), while others continue to use 'imperial cult' for lack of an equally convenient alternative. But almost all agree that the distinctions between different phenomena should be given due weight, and not obscured by a vague and poorly defined notion of 'imperial cult'.

c. Oriental Religions and Mystery Religions

Although these two terms ought properly to denote distinct phenomena, that is, cults originating in the eastern part of the Roman world as opposed to cults featuring secret initiatory rituals, they have in fact tended to be used almost interchangeably (for discussion, see Sfameni Gasparro 2006). This slippage is not a new tendency, but appears already in the two books that did the most to popularize their use in the study of religion in the Roman empire, Cumont's *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, first published in 1906, and Reitzenstein's *Hellenistic Mystery-Religions*, first published in 1910. Although Cumont focused on the spread of 'oriental religions', he took it as axiomatic that 'all the Oriental religions assumed the form of mysteries' (1911: 205), while Reitzenstein emphasized at the start of his book that by 'Hellenistic' he meant 'religious forms in which Oriental and Greek elements are mingled' (1978: 4). This overlap reflects the fact that the two scholars, for all their differences in emphasis and approach, shared a number of basic assumptions: that in the late Hellenistic and imperial periods a new kind of religion began to spread through the Roman world, one that emphasized personal devotion to a deity and the hope for a blessed afterlife and that derived its distinctive features from its eastern origins. Both likewise saw the spread of this new type of religion as the immediate context for the emergence of Christianity.

The general model assumed by Cumont and Reitzenstein has long been subject to criticism, and two points were established fairly early on. Scholars in the 1930s demonstrated that mysteries of the kind on which it laid such stress were not 'oriental' but Greek in origin and inspiration, the oldest and most famous being those of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis, and that there were in fact no comparable mysteries in the native traditions of eastern cultures (for references, see Burkert 1987: 2 n. 9). In the 1950s, other scholars showed that the figure of a dying and rising god, which Cumont and especially Reitzenstein had regarded as central to the mystery religions, was much more of a modern scholarly construct than a genuine cross-cultural religious pattern (for references, see, e.g., Sfameni Gasparro 1985: xv-xvi; Smith 1990: 89-111, especially 100-101). Despite these criticisms, however, the model long retained enormous influence in the study of Graeco-Roman religion. We may note, for example, the monumental series Études Préliminaires aux Religions Orientales dans l'Empire Romain (EPROER), established in 1961 by Vermaseren, who in some ways positioned himself as Cumont's successor; 113 titles appeared in this series before its renaming in 1990. More importantly, we may note the pervasive presence of 'oriental religions' or 'mystery religions' as standard categories in introductions

to the New Testament world and surveys of Graeco-Roman religion. Indeed, it has been only twenty years since Turcan published what was in effect an updated version of Cumont's classic, a book that in its English translation continues to be a standard text (Turcan 1992).

By the time Turcan's book appeared, however, serious critique of this model was already well underway. Both MacMullen (1981) and Lane Fox (1987), as part of their insistence on the continued vitality of traditional Graeco-Roman religion, made passing attacks on the scholarly obsession with oriental cults. Burkert, a major scholar of Greek religion, chose the subject of 'ancient mystery cults' for a series of lectures that he delivered at Harvard University in 1982. In its published form, this provided a 'comparative phenomenology of ancient mysteries' (Burkert 1987: 4), in which he systematically reviewed the evidence for personal needs, organization and identities, myth and theology, and 'the extraordinary experience' in five cults: those of Demeter at Eleusis, Dionysus, Cybele, Isis and Mithras. It also, perhaps incidentally, constituted a thorough rejection of the earlier paradigm. Last but not least was Smith's historiographical deconstruction of the scholarly program of comparing early Christianity with Graeco-Roman mysteries (1990). As a result of these critiques, scholars of Graeco-Roman religion have in recent years begun to shy away from the use of 'mystery religions' and 'oriental religions' as analytic categories. We may note briefly a few of the main objections.

First, in the wake of Saïd (1978), the very word 'oriental' is now regularly viewed as a problematic term that perpetuates western stereotypes about the eastern 'other'. The discomfort that it provokes perhaps explains its disappearance from the English translation of the title of Turcan's book, if not from its content; similarly, Vermaseren's Études Préliminaires aux Religions Orientales dans l'Empire Romain was succeeded by the new series Religions in the Graeco-Roman World (RGRW, which continues the numeration of volumes from the earlier series), although in this case the change in title also reflects a broadening of focus that was already apparent in the latter stages of the original series. But there are more specific objections as well. For one thing, the phrase 'oriental religions' implies some degree of unity among these cults, as though deities from the Anatolian, Syrian, Egyptian, and Persian traditions all shared common traits that distinguished them from traditional Graeco-Roman deities. In fact, as the critics have pointed out, these traditions were quite varied, and to lump them together is not only to assume a western viewpoint but to gloss over significant differences (e.g., MacMullen 1981: 126-27; Burkert 1987: 2-3; Beard, North and Price 1998: I, 246-47). Moreover, although the deities themselves may

have originated in eastern cultures, the forms that their worship took in the Graeco-Roman world tended to be far more Graeco-Roman than eastern; in many cases, apart from some superficial trappings, they do not seem to have differed significantly from other Graeco-Roman cults (Lane Fox 1987: 36; see in more detail Belayche 2000). The term 'mystery religions' has also been criticized, for rather different reasons. As Burkert in particular has stressed, the secret initiatory rites called 'mysteries' were simply 'a special form of worship offered in the larger context of religious practice', and not necessarily the most characteristic or essential form of worship at that. Burkert instead proposes that 'mystery initiations were an optional activity within polytheistic religion, comparable to, say, a pilgrimage to Santiago di Compostela within the Christian system' (1987: 10). To describe cults that included mysteries as 'mystery religions' is to ascribe to the mysteries a centrality that in reality they probably did not possess.

Lastly, there has been considerable criticism of the assumption that these cults laid particular stress on the personal salvation of the worshipper and promises of life after death. Burkert argues that although we have fairly good evidence for a concern with the afterlife in the cults of Demeter and Dionysus, that is not at all true of the so-called 'oriental' cults: 'a redirection of religion towards otherwordly concerns, contrary to what is often assumed, is not to be found with the "Oriental" gods and their mysteries. At best they continue what was already there' (1987: 28; cf. MacMullen 1981: 55). Some scholars have even suggested that the apparent prominence of the features that have been generally thought to characterize the 'oriental' cults—the importance of initiatory rituals and a concern for salvation—is due more to prevailing scholarly assumptions than to their actual prominence in the evidence: 'it is, in fact, the modern assumption (following Cumont) that the "Oriental cults" were the precursors of and rivals to Christianity that has encouraged us to construct them in those terms—on directly Christianizing lines' (Beard, North and Price 1998: I, 247).

These sorts of critiques have become more and more widely accepted: cults that were once seen as a new form of religion, ones that offered a fundamentally different alternative to traditional Graeco-Roman religion, are now often regarded as at most partial variations on the same basic pattern, offering optional extras rather than radical alternatives. (A good idea of current trends can be gathered from the proceedings of two recent conferences: Bonnet, Rüpke and Scarpi 2006 and Bonnet, Ribichini and Steuernagel 2008.) Very recently, however, some scholars have begun to argue that the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater. Alvar, in particular, has made a strong case for the continuing utility of 'oriental

religions' and 'mystery cults' as terms for a distinctive mode of religiosity in the Roman imperial period (2008). Alvar focuses on the cults of Cybele, Isis and Mithras, which he collectively refers to as 'oriental religions'. Although conceding that the phrase is not entirely satisfactory, he mounts a vigorous defense of it. On the one hand, 'oriental' is suitable because these three cults deliberately 'emphasised their own alterity—even if we prefer to call it "pseudo-alterity"' (Alvar 2008: 2). This does not mean that they were essentially eastern rather than Graeco-Roman; rather, 'the oriental cults of the Roman period were in fact a complex bricolage of elements drawn from high cultures notionally "other" than Graeco-Roman, elements in each case irreversibly, even unrecognisably, conditioned by conquest, fragmentation, translation and reception' (2008: 187). On the other hand, they deserve to be described as 'religions' because each supplied full versions of what Alvar identifies as the various sub-systems that comprise the cultural system of 'religion': a system of beliefs about the cosmic, human, and eschatological orders, a system of values and ethics, and a system of ritual practice (2008: 17-23). Moreover, they were all independent enough of the Graeco-Roman mainstream that they 'were not simply absorbed into the larger system but showed themselves capable of quasi-autonomous development' (2008: 5). Although they incorporated many of the standard features of the Graeco-Roman religious tradition, their distinctive feature was 'the promise of salvation, or rather, more precisely, their deities' power to overcome Fate' (2008: 26), a concern that was embodied above all in their mysteries. The popularity of these 'oriental religions' was due not to the failure of traditional religion, but rather to their ability to meet 'new spiritual needs that they themselves encouraged and fostered, and by which they were sustained in return' (2008: 12). In many ways Alvar is obviously revisiting some of the standard themes of earlier scholarship, but he does so after taking into account the critiques that have been made in recent decades. In his view, these categories, when handled critically, retain their fundamental validity: 'The conceptual loss that we incur by pretending... that these cults were just the same as any other religious association...seems to me to outweigh the trivial danger of being mistaken as a proponent of the conceptual follies of yester-year' (2008: 2).

Turning from the general category of 'oriental' or 'mystery' religions to individual cults, we may briefly consider recent work on the three most important: those of Cybele, Isis and Mithras. The cult of the Anatolian mother goddess Cybele has a long and reasonably well-documented history extending from archaic Anatolia through classical Greece and Republican Rome and well into the imperial period, when it became

widespread throughout the empire. Two recent books provide complementary chronological surveys of this history: Borgeaud (2004; originally published in 1996) and Roller (1999). Of the two, Borgeaud is more selective in his approach; he focuses on particular topics and episodes and is concerned in particular with exploring the inconsistencies in the ancient accounts of the goddess and her cult. In the background is a concern to confront and deconstruct 'two scholarly myths that are as tenacious as they are ill-founded' (Borgeaud 2004: xvi): the view of Cybele as an heir of a Neolithic 'Great Goddess' and as a predecessor of the Virgin Mary. Roller, by contrast, is more systematic and comprehensive, devoting more or less equal coverage to the cult in its Phrygian, Greek and Roman phases and dealing fully with the archaeological, epigraphic and literary evidence. But she too is concerned with the preconceptions that helped shape earlier work on this cult, particularly gender (that is, 'modern preconceptions of what a mother goddess ought to be') and race ('namely, the Asiatic origins of the goddess's cult'); indeed, she argues that

> modern cultural attitudes toward issues of gender and race have often become so deeply embedded in the scholarly literature that they impede efforts to evaluate the primary evidence for the ancient deity and place it in the specific context of ancient Mediterranean society (Roller 1999: 9-10).

Taken together, these two books provide a critical as well as up-to-date account of the cult in its chronological dimension. An important complement to them is provided by the earlier book of Sfameni Gasparro (1985), which focuses particularly on the role of communion with the deity and ideas of salvation in the cult.

In the imperial period, the cult of Cybele was generally a public one, with prominent temples and public festivals like those found in traditional Graeco-Roman cults. The extensive epigraphic and iconographic evidence has been gathered in a series of volumes by Vermaseren (1977–89). Although the cult has traditionally been classified as one of the most important mystery cults, the evidence for the celebration of actual mysteries is relatively sparse. The fullest evidence, and certainly the most widely known, relates to the ritual of the taurobolium, a particular type of bull-sacrifice attested in a number of inscriptions from the second to the fourth centuries CE. The fourth-century Christian poet Prudentius provides a lurid description of the ritual, in which the worshipper descends into a pit and is drenched by the blood of a bull that is slaughtered on a grill overhead (*Peristephanon* 10.1011-50). Two systematic studies of the evidence that appeared almost simultaneously in the 1960s both posited an evolution in

this ritual, in which it developed from one that aimed at the well-being of the emperor into a more personal initiation rite that yielded spiritual benefits to the person who underwent it, akin to a Christian baptism (Rutter 1968 and Duthoy 1969). More recent scholars have abandoned this evolutionary scheme, and are much less inclined to think that the ritual was ever primarily seen as a vehicle for spiritual renewal. McLynn, for example, has made a strong case that Prudentius's description, on which so much emphasis has been placed, was intended to serve his own rhetorical needs and is consequently largely unreliable (1996). Borgeaud reaches much the same conclusion (2004: 117-18), and argues that the taurobolium was above all 'an aristocratic ritual whose purpose was to guarantee the health and well-being of the imperial house and city', although he still acknowledges its character as an initiation (2004: 92; cf. 116).

The cult of Isis has, if anything, a longer and even better documented history than that of Cybele, extending from Pharaonic Egypt to the late Roman empire, and perhaps for that very reason a comprehensive historical account of the cult remains to be written. Two syntheses are currently available in English, neither very satisfactory. That of Witt (1971) is learned and covers Egyptian as well as Graeco-Roman sources, but rambling presentation and lack of critical analysis make it almost unusable; that of Solmsen (1979) deals only with the Graeco-Roman world and is largely limited to the depiction of Isis in literary texts. Both books are now also noticeably out of date. In German, by contrast, there is the mammoth contribution of Merkelbach (1995), of which the first part presents a systematic overview of what is known about the myth and cult of Isis and her associates, with the main sources given both in the original and in translation. In the second part, Merkelbach elaborates on his thesis, which he first advanced over thirty years before (1962) and which had been originally proposed by Kerényi (1927), that the ancient novels originated in part from aretalogies, cult narratives that illustrate the powers of a god, and functioned as coded texts closely linked to the Egyptian mysteries (for a brief presentation in English, see Merkelbach 1994). This thesis is controversial to say the least, and has been widely, although not universally, rejected (see, e.g., Beck 1996).

But if we are still awaiting a satisfactory general account of the cult in English, we are now very well off with respect to the primary evidence. The two major literary sources for the cult in the imperial period, Plutarch's philosophical treatise *On Isis and Osiris* and the last book of Apuleius's novel *The Golden Ass*, which describes the hero's initiation into the mysteries of Isis, have both received detailed commentaries by a scholar expert in the Egyptian as well as the Graeco-Roman sources (Griffiths 1970 and 1975).

Totti (1985) collects a wide range of shorter texts from a variety of sources (inscriptions, papyri and literary works), including all the most important; they are presented in the original Greek or Latin without translations or commentary, but with further bibliography. Limited to inscriptions alone, but much more comprehensive within that category, is the recent collection of Bricault (2005), which also provides French translations and further bibliography. In addition, new editions of individual texts continue to appear (most recently, Kockelmann 2008). The data that can be extracted from the primary evidence have also been collected and analyzed: Mora (1990) provides an exhaustive if somewhat daunting analysis of that pertaining to the worshippers of Isis, and Bricault (1996) assembles a list of all the epithets bestowed on Isis together with full references to the texts in which each one occurs. Bricault has also (2001) systematically mapped the geographical spread of the cult. Lastly, we may note that over the last decade there has been a regular triennial conference on Isiac studies, of which the published proceedings provide a good point of entry into current work in this area (Bricault 2000, 2004; Versluys, Bricault and Meyboom 2007).

The last of the three cults that I will discuss here, that of Mithras, has always had a distinctive place in modern research on oriental and mystery religions: Cumont began his career with a massive study of the cult (1896–99), and Vermaseren began his with a comprehensive collection of evidence that replaced Cumont's (1956–60). Since that time there has been a steady stream of new finds, many of them of considerable importance, although there has been no new comprehensive collection. Beck (1984) provides a useful guide to new finds and new work down to about 1980, and Clauss (2000) provides the best and most current introductory survey of the cult; the text itself takes into account work to about 1990, the date of the original German publication, while the supplementary bibliography includes reports on new finds down to the beginning of the present century (see also Turcan 2004). Mention should also be made here of the collected papers of two of the most important scholars working on the cult of Mithras, Gordon (1996) and Beck (2004).

Like Cybele and Isis, the figure of Mithras has a long history in the ancient world. The Persian deity Mithra is attested as early as the fourteenth century BCE, and his worship continued in Persian-influenced parts of the eastern Mediterranean world well into Hellenistic times. But unlike the cults of Cybele and Isis, which can be traced more or less continuously from their origins, there is a radical discontinuity between the evidence for the worship of the old Persian deity in the Hellenistic east and that for the mysteries of Mithras, which appears abruptly in Italy and the western provinces at the end of the first century CE. The relation between the two bodies

of evidence has been much debated. Cumont was convinced that they were closely connected, even if some of the links were no longer apparent, and that the Roman mysteries of Mithras were a direct descendant of the Persian cult, which he thought had been disseminated in the Graeco-Roman world by an Iranian or at least oriental diaspora (see most conveniently Cumont 1903: 1-43). But more recent scholars have pointed out that Cumont's thesis depends more on circular argumentation than on solid evidence (Gordon 1975; cf. Beck 1984: 2063-71), and it now commands little support. They have also demonstrated that Graeco-Roman knowledge of genuine Persian religion was basic at best and fanciful at worst; what circulated as 'Persian wisdom' was largely of Greek origin (Beck 1991; de Jong 1997). So too the mysteries of Mithras themselves are now generally regarded as essentially a Graeco-Roman invention, albeit one that drew inspiration from Persian traditions: Clauss points to the region of Rome and Ostia as their place of origin (2000: 21-22), while Beck has made a tentative case for Commagene, a region on the west bank of the upper Euphrates (1998).

The evidence for Mithras also differs from that for Cybele and Isis in that it is almost entirely restricted to iconographic, archaeological and, to a lesser extent, epigraphic sources. Literary sources are few, and their significance is disputed: Turcan (1975) has argued that references to Mithras in philosophical texts reflect the particular programs of their authors rather than actual cult practice, while Beck has made two passages of the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry (*On the Cave of the Nymphs* 6 and 21-29) central to his interpretation of the cult's imagery (most thoroughly in Beck 2000). But regardless of their views on this issue, all scholars largely rely on the iconographic and archaeological sources in order to reconstruct the myth and doctrines of the cult. As these sources make abundantly clear, the cult had an extremely rich repertory of images, of which the most well-known, and clearly the most important, was that of Mithras in the act of slaying a bull (conventionally called a tauroctony). The interpretation of this imagery, however, is often uncertain. On the one hand, Mithras's slaughter of the bull is generally understood as an act of creation, a sacrifice from which sprang the life of the cosmos (e.g., Clauss 2000: 79-82). On the other hand, the significance of the astronomical imagery that is found in many parts of the cult is much more controversial. Ulansey, in a book that attracted much attention, advanced the argument that the tauroctony is in fact a coded star map, and that the mysteries of Mithras were devised as a response to the discovery of the precession of the equinoxes (1989); his argument has provoked some strong reactions (notably Swerdlow 1991), and few have followed him in placing such emphasis on what must have been a fairly recondite bit of learning. For his part, Beck has argued that a

central element of the cult was a teaching about the soul's descent and reascent through the heavens, a teaching that was propagated more through the cult's imagery and rituals than through any sort of formal doctrine (see most recently 2006). It is thus not only the intrinsic interest of the cult but also the problems with the evidence that have made it so central to discussions of the role of mysteries in the Graeco-Roman world.

One last general point should be made about all these cults: there is a strong trend in recent work to see them not as in any fundamental sense opposed to the social and political status quo of the Roman empire, but rather as movements that if anything supported and reinforced its central values. I have already noted this in connection with the taurobolia performed in the cult of Cybele, and it is true of the others as well. For example, Takács (1995) charts the transformation of Isis and Sarapis into official gods of the Roman state over the course of the first century CE, and then demonstrates how their worship in the Germanic and Danubian provinces was closely bound up with devotion to the emperors. Although we might not be surprised to find these links to mainstream society in the cults of Cybele and Isis, both of which frequently took the form of traditional public cults, we might expect things to be different in that of Mithras, which was celebrated only by small groups in closed settings. Yet here too mainstream norms were upheld. About half of the known dedications to Mithras were made on behalf of the emperor's well-being; moreover, the strictly hierarchical organization of the cult, with its emphasis on discipline and submission to authority, tended to reinforce the same structures and values that were also important outside the cult. As Clauss observes, 'we have here a phenomenon which helped underwrite the stability of the entire Roman social order' (Clauss 2000: 40; see also the fundamental study of Gordon 1972). If many strands of early Judaism and Christianity involved a protest against or rejection of the dominant social and political order, the same cannot be said of the mystery cults.

3. New Approaches

As I argued in the first part of this survey, the old master narrative that for many years informed accounts of Graeco-Roman religion in the Roman empire has in recent decades been largely dismantled, although its influence lingers on in some popularizing works and introductory surveys. The religious phenomena of the imperial period on which that narrative laid such stress, imperial cult and oriental/mystery religions, continue to be an important focus of scholarly attention, but much of it is critical of the assumptions

and interpretations of earlier scholarship, and no longer accords them such dominant roles in the religious life of that time. What, then, is the state of the field in the wake of these changes? As one might expect in an era when all-embracing accounts tend to be viewed as hubristic and even hegemonic, no new master narrative has arisen to take the place of the old one. Rather, recent scholarship has ranged over a wide array of topics and explored a wide range of approaches. I will here briefly mention three, simply as a suggestion of this variety.

First, since the rise of feminist scholarship in the 1970s, there has been much important work done on the role of women in Graeco-Roman religion and, more broadly, the significance of gender. The pioneering work in this area was Pomeroy's *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (1975), the first general treatment of women in the ancient world to incorporate feminist methodologies; although focusing on women rather than religion, it provided the first systematic examination of women's religious roles. Equally pioneering is the work of Kraemer, who first in a sourcebook (1988) and then in a monograph (1992) provides what remain the only comprehensive surveys of women and religion in the ancient world, covering the Graeco-Roman tradition as well as early Judaism and Christianity. The third scholar in this area that I will mention here is Schultz, whose book on women's religious activity in Republican Rome (2006) is important for shifting the framework of inquiry. Earlier research had tended to focus on 'women's deities' and 'women's religions', a strategy that perhaps inadvertently tended to suggest that in the Graeco-Roman world women and men operated in largely distinct religious spheres. Schultz, by contrast, cogently demonstrates that in the Roman tradition women were involved in a wide range of religious activities, both public and private, often worshipping the same deities as men and in the same contexts as men.

A second topic that has attracted considerable interest is the role of what are now often called 'voluntary associations': groups with some religious dimension whose membership depended not on accidents of birth or residency but on deliberate choice. Interest in Graeco-Roman associations in itself is nothing new: a number of major general studies were published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see the references in Harland 2003: 9). What is new is a focus on such associations as a key to understanding religious life in the Graeco-Roman world, particularly the place of Jewish and Christian groups within their larger social context. Again, I will mention here only a very few works. One of the first to promote this as a new research agenda was a collection of papers that emerged from a multi-year seminar on the topic sponsored by the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies (Kloppenborg and Wilson 1996). Coming out of the same

background is the monograph of Harland (2003), which, while focusing on religious associations in Asia Minor, provides a good overview of the topic as a whole; Harland argues that such associations constituted an important means whereby people could claim a place within the larger society, rather than offering a context for competing or alternative identities. Approaching the subject from a different angle, Bendlin (2005) has re-examined the question of the legal standing of such associations, and even the entire notion of 'religious associations'. Two recent collections of essays suggest the range of current work (Belayche and Mimouni 2003; Rüpke 2007e).

A third topic that I will mention here is the place of myth and literature in Graeco-Roman religion. Myth, and the literary texts in which it was embodied, has of course always played a dominant part in interpretations of archaic and classical Greek religion, including those that in recent decades have been most influential (e.g., Burkert 1979, 1983; Detienne and Vernant 1989; Vernant 1991). But that has generally not been the case for the Roman tradition, or even for Greek religion in the Hellenistic and imperial periods. The reason for this neglect is that the literary works of those periods tend to be much more self-consciously literary, written for an elite audience who could appreciate the learning and wit with which they treated myth; most modern scholars have tended to assume that these highly literary reworkings of myth were completely irrelevant to actual religion. That assumption is now being challenged, and more recent scholars have begun to take seriously the religious dimension of these texts; in many cases, these writers provide thoughtful exegesis of religious traditions which, even if not authorized by public priests, is not for that reason to be dismissed. Articles by Beard (1987) and Scheid (1992) constitute some early examples, and the short book of Feeney that appeared a few years later (1998) provides an excellent introduction to the key issues (see also Feeney 2007). Again, some recent collections of papers provide a good sampling of the sort of work that is now being done (Barchiesi, Rüpke and Stephens 2004; Bendlin and Rüpke 2006).

Amidst this variety, any assessment of important current trends is bound to vary strikingly from person to person. That said, I will in the remainder of this article highlight two issues that seem to me particularly significant. One of these is the debate surrounding what has perhaps become the new dominant model for understanding Graeco-Roman religion, a model that can conveniently be described as '*polis* religion'. Since this model has already been subject to a variety of criticisms and qualifications, 'dominance' is perhaps too strong a term; nevertheless, it certainly features largely in current research on Graeco-Roman religion. This will be the subject of the first section below. The second section will survey a subject

that played a surprisingly marginal role in most earlier work on religion in the Roman empire but that in recent decades has moved to center stage: the religious traditions of the various local and regional cultures that made up the empire, and their interactions with the dominant Graeco-Roman tradition of the ruling elite.

a. 'Polis Religion' and its Critics

The term '*polis* religion' was originally devised to describe the religious system of the classical Greek world, and was given widespread currency in a pair of classic articles by Sourvinou-Inwood (2000a and 2000b). Sourvinou-Inwood's basic argument was that the entire Greek religious system was structured around the *polis*, or city-state. On the one hand, the *polis* 'anchored, legitimated, and mediated all religious activity' (2000a: 15); it was 'the institutional authority that structured the universe and the divine world in a religious system, articulated a pantheon with certain particular configurations of divine personalities, and established a system of cults, particular rituals and sanctuaries, and a sacred calendar' (2000a: 19). On the other hand, just as it articulated religion, it 'was itself articulated by it; religion became the *polis*'s central ideology, structuring, and giving meaning to, all the elements that made up the identity of the *polis*, its past, its physical landscape, the relationship between its constituent parts' (2000a: 22). In short, on Sourvinou-Inwood's analysis, the Greek religious system and the Greek socio-political system were not only intermeshed but virtually identical. At the same time as Sourvinou-Inwood was developing her analysis of Greek religion, other scholars were analyzing the Roman tradition in similar or at least closely compatible terms. One of the key figures is North, who in a couple of ground-breaking articles helped reorient the whole approach to Roman religion (1976 and 1979). Along with Beard, herself a major scholar, he also edited an important collection of papers on ancient priesthood (Beard and North 1990) and, with Beard and Price, co-authored what has become the current standard account of the Roman religious tradition (Beard, North and Price 1998). Another key figure is the French scholar Scheid, who has devoted much of his career to studying the most detailed surviving body of evidence for the practice of Roman religion, the inscribed records of the Roman priestly college of the Arval Brothers (Scheid 1990; Scheid, Tassini and Rüpke 1998). In addition to numerous specialized studies, Scheid has also published more general discussions of the Roman religious tradition (2001 and 2005), including a short introduction that is now available in English (2003).

These scholars, and a few others of like mind, have been responsible for working out what I am here, following Woolf (1997), calling the *polis*-religion

model. Before I proceed further, however, a couple of caveats are in order. First, the word '*polis*' properly applies only to Greek city-states and not to the non-Greek cities of the Graeco-Roman world; scholars working on the Roman tradition have generally used similar phrases like 'civic religion'. Yet the latter can be ambiguous for non-specialists, whereas '*polis* religion' is much more specific; it is thus more convenient, even if technically inaccurate when applied to the Graeco-Roman world more generally. Secondly, it would be misleading to suggest that what I am calling the *polis*-religion model is in fact a single coherent model to which all the scholars that I mention here subscribe. It would be more accurate to describe it merely as a set of frequently linked propositions that to some extent constitute the new status quo in work on Roman imperial religion and which these scholars have all in various ways helped to promote. Yet it is obviously simpler to refer to this set of propositions in shorthand as the *polis*-religion model.

With these caveats in mind, we can proceed to a summary sketch of this model. The core of the Graeco-Roman religious tradition is to be found in the public cults of the city, which must be understood as a religious as well as a social community. 'Religion' did not exist as a separate area of human activity, but was embedded in the overarching structure of the city; there were no important religious institutions or offices separate from civic institutions and offices. Each city had its own distinctive set of cults, even if most of these were directed at a shared set of deities, and a city's public cults were what defined the distinctive religious identity of its citizens; there was no religious identity separate from political or civic identity. Control of these public cults was in the hands of the local elite, in their capacity as magistrates, priests and members of the town council; priesthoods were public positions, distinguishable from magistracies only by certain formal features. The town council as a whole oversaw public cults, supporting established shrines and festivals with public funds and decreeing new ones as appropriate. Priests and magistrates presided over rituals and festivals on behalf of the city as a whole; in some ceremonies the populace at large took part, either *en masse* or through the participation of representative groups. Religious activity also took place in 'private' contexts, such as the household or various associations, but these functioned as constituent elements of the city rather than alternative focuses for religious allegiance and identity. The essence of religion lay in ritual rather than belief; hence the exegesis of particular cult acts or ceremonies and speculation about the nature of the divine were not part of public religion, but were left to the private initiative of interested individuals.

This model has proved to be a very fruitful one for advancing our understanding of the Graeco-Roman religious tradition. As is no doubt obvious, it

has played an important role in critiquing the assumptions that underlay the master narrative of Graeco-Roman religion in the Roman imperial period that I discussed above in section 2a, 'The Decline of Traditional Religion'. So, for example, in an explicit rejection of the assumption that 'real' religion is by definition located in the realm of personal experience rather than that of public action, scholars have placed great emphasis on the communal nature of *polis* religion. For example: 'the religion of Republican Rome was essentially a public religion. In contrast to the modern Western stress on private manifestations of religious commitment, religious observance in Rome consisted primarily in public or communal rituals' (Beard and Crawford 1985: 30). Nor was this perceived by people at the time in negative terms, as something for which they had to seek compensation elsewhere, as earlier scholars seemed to assume.

> It has sometimes been claimed that [private and family cults] offered the Romans a kind of personal satisfaction entirely lacking in public religion. There is no justification for that view. Although proof is impossible, we firmly believe that the vast majority of such cults essentially represented the state cult on a smaller scale—practised within the smaller social unit of the family (Beard and Crawford 1985: 35-36).

Implicit in this relocation of religion from the private to the public realm is a similar rejection of the assumption that there is a clear and natural distinction between the religious and political spheres. On the contrary, within a *polis*-religion system like that of Rome it was perfectly natural for public priests to be in effect 'merely a sub-group of the Roman political elite, who acted as expert advisers on religious matters and carried out or supervised particular rituals and sacrifices'.

> This was no accident, no failure on the part of the Romans to differentiate adequately between different specific functions. It was the natural corollary of a religious system that was embedded in the political—or a political system embedded in the religious (Beard and Crawford 1985: 30).

In such a context, political activity and religious activity were inevitably interwoven, and to some extent simply different aspects of the same phenomenon. It is thus reductive and naïve to disregard the political implications of religious activities or interpret them as evidence of abuse.

> Ordinary inhabitants of the Roman empire *expected* that political power had a religious dimension. The opposite was also true: religious cults might quite properly have a political dimension. If we seek to distinguish between cults that were (really) political and those that had a (genuine) spiritual dimension we are doing little more than engaging illicitly in Christian

> polemic against an alien religious system (Beard, North and Price 1998: I, 359; emphasis original).

This principle is clearly fundamental to the re-evaluation of imperial cult that has taken place over the last few decades and that I have already discussed above in section 2b. But it has also allowed for other analyses. Gordon, for example, has explored the implications of what he terms the 'civic compromise', that is, 'the failure within traditional Graeco-Roman cult to differentiate sharply between magistracy and priesthood'; he argues that 'this refusal is not just a curious "fact" about the Roman system but a central mode of domination' (Gordon 1990: 202). In the Graeco-Roman world, any public honor brought with it the expectation that the person so honored would in return bestow material benefits on the community that had honored him. This exchange of public benefactions for public honor, conventionally known in classical scholarship as 'euergetism' (see especially Veyne 1990), was in effect a means of perpetuating the dominance of the economic elite; as Gordon puts it, 'the concealed "bottom line" means that: giving + gratitude/honour = power for the élite' (1990: 224 n. 68). Because public priesthoods were an important type of public honor, religion was necessarily bound up with euergetism. Consequently, 'insofar as there is an overall development discernible in the complex history of civic priesthood in the Principate, its rationale surely lies in this fusion of the religious system with the socio-political system, a fusion which served to veil from the central and local élites the true character of their domination' (Gordon 1990: 231).

The *polis*-religion model also rejects the assumption that belief must be prior to ritual, and that ritual can have genuine religious significance only when it is the external expression of an internal belief. Scheid, in particular, has made a very strong case that Roman religious ritual was not empty or meaningless simply because it did not proceed from any authorized and explicitly articulated system of belief. On his analysis, rituals contained their own implicit meanings, insofar as 'ritual gestures were organised in sequences that formed, as it were, propositions or implicit statements' (Scheid 2003: 32). But 'there was no authority to prescribe the sense of the statement that it might be transmitting; so, since none was obligatory, one was as good as any other'. Apart from the demand for 'respect to be shown for the gods', the only real limit was that 'imposed by the traditional order of actions and attitudes, which immediately conveyed a literal meaning: sacrifice, for example, proclaimed the existence of the gods as partners of men in that they agreed to share a meal with them' (Scheid 2003: 35). Yet these rituals, with their implicit meanings,

provided the basis for a spirituality every bit as real as that grounded in elaborate statements of belief.

> The rules [of ritual procedure] were not merely observed. They possessed their own life that gradually resulted in a learned casuistry. This spirituality of the rule was tied to the letter of ritual obligations... In this religious system, the role of humanity did not reside in the spiritual contemplation of the mystery of God; it consisted in respecting and commenting on the rites, and in that process contemplating the nature of the bond that mortals maintain with the gods (Scheid 2005: 279).

In addition to countering the assumptions that shaped earlier accounts of Graeco-Roman religious history, the *polis*-religion model has also been used to construct an account of religious change that is very different from that found in the old master narrative. Some scholars have proposed that we can best understand this change by seeing as its defining feature the decline and collapse of *polis* religion as the dominant form of religious organization: the centrality of public cults progressively gave way to a plurality of religious options, and as a result religious identity became increasingly separable from civic/political identity. North, for example, has suggested that we can identify a very early stage of this development in the Roman persecution of the Bacchic cult in 186 BCE. This cult, which took the form of private groups of worshippers to which individuals were admitted by an initiation ceremony, functioned as an organization 'solely devoted to religion' and entirely separate from the organization of the city. It thus provided people with a religious choice, something that did not exist within the context of traditional *polis* religion, and 'with the possibility of such choice, the relationship between religion and society already began a process of change' (North 1979: 96). In a later article North develops this argument further, with particular reference to Jewish groups in the Graeco-Roman world, and proposes an analysis of religious change in the Hellenistic and imperial periods as a 'development from religion as embedded in the city-state to religion as a choice of differentiated groups offering different qualities of religious doctrine, different experiences, insights, or just different myths and stories' (1992: 178).

I have advanced this thesis in my own work as well. In my study of religious life in Roman Carthage in the first three centuries CE, I argue that 'virtually the only model for religious identity that existed in the Roman world was a civic model, one which linked the individual to a particular city' (Rives 1995: 5); Roman authorities, however, in extending Roman citizenship and promoting a more culturally and politically unified empire,

unwittingly 'created a radically new political context in which the civic model of religion was increasingly out of place' (1995: 9). It was the increasing divergence between the cultural and political realities of the empire and the traditional organization of *polis* religion that provided the context within which a plurality of religious options could develop. Similarly, in a later article I propose that we might best interpret the decree mandating universal sacrifice issued by the emperor Decius in the mid-third century CE as in effect a response to the new realities of the empire: 'by insisting that every inhabitant of the Roman Empire had a specific and immediate religious obligation to the imperial government', the decree 'defined at least one aspect of what we may reasonably call "the religion of the Roman Empire"' (Rives 1999: 152).

Although most scholars would probably agree that the *polis*-religion model has done much to advance our understanding of Graeco-Roman religion, it has also been subject to various criticisms. I will here survey a representative sampling, in order to give some sense of their variety. (Note also Kindt forthcoming 2009, a thoughtful appraisal of the model as used in the study of classical Greek religion, which addresses many of the same issues raised here.) In one of the earliest and most comprehensive critiques, Woolf (1997), while acknowledging the successes of the *polis*-religion model, also points out that it inevitably marginalizes all forms of religious activities that cannot easily be seen as part of the *polis* system and is thereby incapable of explaining the totality of religious life in the ancient world. As examples, he lists four specific shortcomings. 'First, *polis* religion offers little explanation of the complexity of ancient religion: put bluntly, the profusion of gods, cults and priesthoods seems redundant if the needs of the city are seen as paramount.' 'Second, the emphasis on public rituals leaves little room for some aspects of religion that seem to have been very important to some ancients, myth for example, or even some prominent deities, for example Silvanus or the Matres, who never received public cult' (Woolf 1997: 76). Third, the *polis*-religion model does little to explain how change actually came about:

> many public 'innovations' seem in fact to be responses to changes in what might be termed the religious *koine* of the Mediterranean world. If the origins of religious innovation most often came from the world of 'private religion', any perspective that marginalises non-public cult is bound to be handicapped in accounting for change (Woolf 1997: 76).

Lastly, 'treating private cult as secondary makes it difficult to account for the continued popularity of paganism in a period when public cults

withered away and were abolished' (Woolf 1997: 76). Woolf does not suggest that scholars abandon the *polis*-religion model, but rather that they do more to supplement it by taking into account other 'ordering principles' (1997: 77) such as myth, landscape and independent ritual traditions; these 'give some sense of how others outside the *polis* elites might have experienced ancient religion, and of what went on in that crucial gap between the prescribed and the proscribed cults of the ancient city' (1997: 83).

Other scholars have similarly criticized the *polis*-religion model for downplaying the complexity of religious life even within a city, particularly within such a large and diverse city as Rome. Rüpke (1999) points out that the system of public cults to which the *polis*-religion model gives such priority is by no means the whole picture, and that these cults must in fact have been of more importance to the elites than to the rank-and-file inhabitants of a city: rather than dominating religious life, they were instead for many people simply one element among many. Rüpke adopts the metaphor of 'a marketplace of religions' as a way of describing the situation more fully. Bendlin (2000) develops a similar approach in greater detail, stressing that individuals in their day-to-day religious lives frequently acted on their own personal motivations and that many temples and shrines would have derived a significant part of their income from individual clients. He thus argues that 'we must abandon the traditional dualism of civic religion and private cult, of *sacra publica* and *sacra privata*, and the subsequent subordination of the one to the other' (Bendlin 2000: 131); he proposes as an alternative model a 'decentralised system of cultic and possibly financial as well as administrative responsibilities' that 'created a "market" of small religio-economic entities semi-detached from, rather than conceptually embedded in, the civic system' (2000: 134).

While Woolf, Rüpke and Bendlin offer general critiques of the *polis*-religion model, other scholars have focused on some of the particular propositions that comprise it. In an important monograph, Dignas (2002) re-examines the assumption that in the Graeco-Roman world the religious system and the socio-political system were indistinguishable. She does this through a detailed examination of the financing of some of the great temples in Hellenistic and Roman Asia Minor. Although the usual assumption has been that the finances of a cult were simply subsumed within the more general finances of the city, she identifies a number of situations in which the priorities of these temples and the priests who oversaw them came into conflict with the interests of the city as a whole. As a result, priests and temple personnel appealed to external authorities such as Hellenistic kings or Roman governors to enforce their rights and privileges against what

they saw as the encroachment of the city. Thus, instead of a unified *polis* religion, she posits a triangular relationship between cult, *polis* and ruler. Dignas's critique of the *polis*-religion model has its limitations. As one reviewer pointed out, 'all D. has managed to demonstrate is that groups within a city, groups whose interests include economic ones, do not always get subsumed into the *polis*' (Kindt 2004: 275). Nevertheless, by calling attention to those cases where the interests of cult and city diverge, Dignas raises important questions about the extent to which we can regard the two as forming a seamless whole.

King has taken on another key element of the *polis*-religion model, the proposition that it is illegitimate or at least misleading to talk about Graeco-Roman religion in terms of 'belief' (see also Bendlin 2000: 119-23). According to King, 'the arguments that have been employed against the use of the word "belief" are not self-consistent, and the calls to banish the term from Roman studies seem premature, for the term "belief" is appropriate and useful for describing some aspects of the Roman religious experience, particularly in regard to Roman prayer' (King 2003: 276-77). King's argument is in essence that objections to the term 'belief' rest on conflation of the word's basic meaning and the particular way that it is used in Christianity; the rejection of the term as 'Christianizing' is consequently unjustified.

> The question of the presence or absence of beliefs should not be confused with the question of how beliefs can be organized. It is within their mutually incompatible frameworks for the organization of beliefs that fundamental distinctions between the nature of Roman Paganism and Christianity can be seen (King 2003: 277).

If we define 'belief' broadly as 'a conviction that an individual (or group of individuals) holds independently of the need for empirical support' (2003: 278), then its usefulness in talking about Graeco-Roman religion becomes apparent; for example, 'any prayer whose stated goal requires divine power to initiate some action would, as prerequisites, require underlying beliefs in the existence, powers, and responsiveness of the deity' (2003: 282). But whereas Christianity modulates belief in the particular forms of dogma and orthodoxy, Graeco-Roman religion was simply 'an aggregate of an overlapping set of beliefs', no one of which was absolutely required or served as the necessary structuring principle of the others. He concludes his analysis by identifying three mechanisms that 'prevented or mitigated conflicts between the holders of different beliefs': polymorphism (that is, the idea that gods possessed 'more than one form or aspect'), 'the ortho-prax emphasis of the priests, and *pietas*, the Roman concept of reciprocal obligation' (2003: 292).

Lastly, Nongbri (2008) has very recently re-evaluated the advantages and disadvantages of the concept of 'embeddedness', as it appears, for example, in the following quotation:

> When we look, therefore, at the way in which religion and society intersected, we do not find special institutions and activities, set aside from everyday life and designed to pursue religious objectives; but rather a situation in which religion and its associated rituals were *embedded* in all institutions and activities (Beard, North and Price 1998: I, 43; emphasis added).

Nongbri acknowledges the utility of this term in highlighting 'how ancient cultures differ from a modern, post-Enlightenment world that typically posits sharp divides between religion and politics or religion and economics' (2008: 441-42). He criticizes it, however, for in effect allowing the scholars who employ it 'to have their cake and eat it, too': 'to say that religion is "embedded" in the social structures of a given culture is to admit that the evidence of that culture is not particularly well-suited to the analytical category of religion, while at the same time to assert that religion is still somehow intrinsic to the culture' (2008: 452). Nongbri does not necessarily propose banishing the word 'religion' altogether from accounts of the Graeco-Roman world, since 'there is nothing inherently wrong with using religion as a redescriptive way of arranging the data for our own comparative purposes, *as long as we strive to make it clear that the resulting arrangement is our own*' (2008: 455; emphasis original). At the same time, he stresses that 'we need to find better ways of making our descriptive accounts, better ways of talking about how humans and gods interacted in antiquity' (2008: 456).

I hope that it is clear from this brief discussion that the various methodological propositions that I have brought together under the rubric of 'the *polis*-religion model' have done much to advance the analysis of Graeco-Roman religion in the Roman empire; at the same time, they do not constitute a new master narrative nor even a master key to understanding the subject. Their ultimate value may in fact lie in stimulating further debate and encouraging more precise and better-grounded approaches.

b. Religion in the Roman Provinces

Although one might reasonably assume that the indigenous traditions of the various peoples who made up the empire, and the way that these developed under Roman rule, would long have been a central focus of research on religion in the Graeco-Roman world, that is not in fact the case. There were many reasons for this fact, three of which I will note here. The first simply has to do with sources. Because surviving literary texts provide very

little information about religion in the Roman provinces, its study depends almost entirely on epigraphic and archaeological remains. Consequently, it is only with the systematic collection and publication of inscriptions and with the development of increasingly sophisticated archaeological methods that detailed research on this topic has become possible. Yet these are necessary rather than sufficient conditions, since the systematic publication of inscriptions had begun already in the nineteenth century, and enabled those scholars who were interested in religion in the Roman provinces to study it in some detail; a particularly notable result was Toutain's massive survey of cults in the western provinces of the empire, of which the third volume was devoted to 'indigenous national and local cults' (1907–1920). Yet the fact that Toutain's work long remained exceptional suggests that the more significant reasons for the general lack of interest had to do with the way that the research agendas of the day were defined.

On the one hand, there was the widespread acceptance of the master narrative about the religious history of the Graeco-Roman world that I discussed in the first part of this article. That narrative, with its emphasis on the decline of traditional religion and the spread of imperial cult and mystery religions, simply had no place for the transformation of local and regional traditions. The 'oriental religions' may seem an obvious exception to this general lack of interest, but they are in fact the exception that proves the rule. For a scholar like Cumont, regional traditions were significant precisely to the degree that they became deracinated. For example, in contrasting the religious traditions of the western and eastern parts of the empire, he notes the widespread dedications to the Celtic goddess Epona made by soldiers from the area of her original worship. 'And yet', he continues, 'it does not appear that she ever received the homage of many strangers; it does not appear, above all, that druidism ever assumed the shape of "mysteries of Epona" in which Greeks and Romans would have asked to be initiated' (Cumont 1911: 25). For Cumont, consequently, the worship of Epona lacked any real significance for religious history. On the other hand, those scholars who did have an interest in indigenous national and local cults tended to be concerned with reconstructing the 'pure', pre-Roman form of these traditions, rather than investigating the way that they developed under Roman rule. From this point of view, the value of the abundant evidence from the Roman period lay not in what it could reveal about the religion of the period in which it was produced, but in the light that it might shed on an earlier situation.

In recent decades, however, this situation has changed dramatically. In part this shift is due to the collapse of the old master narrative, which has

opened up space for new approaches and focuses. In part it reflects a more general shift in the field of ancient history as a whole, away from the political and intellectual history of the elite, to a focus on social history and an interest in a much broader spectrum of the population. But for whatever reason, there has been an explosion of work on religion in particular provinces and regions of the Roman empire. Leaving aside a large number of smaller studies, these include monographs on Sicily (Kunz 2006), North Africa (Brouquier-Reddé 1992; Rives 1995; Saint-Amans 2004; Cadotte 2007), Gaul (Derks 1998; Van Andringa 2002), Britain (Henig 1984), the German provinces (Spickermann 2003, 2008), Judaea/Palaestina (Belayche 2001), Palmyra (Kaizer 2002), and Egypt (Frankfurter 1998), as well as several collections of papers (Dondin-Payre and Raepsaet-Charlier 2006; Häussler and King 2007; Hekster, Schmidt-Hofner and Witschel 2009). A major focus of activity has been a wide-ranging and multi-year project in Germany, organized by Cancik and Rüpke, on 'Roman Imperial Religion and Provincial Religion: Processes of Globalization and Regionalization in Ancient Religious History', the overall goal of which is 'the analysis of the formation of cultural zones of various scales and degrees of interaction within the Roman empire' (Rüpke 2007a: 1); the project has in fact resulted in a new series, Religion in der Römischen Provinzen (RRP), to which several of the volumes cited above belong. Among the myriad other publications resulting from this project I would note in particular a volume that provides an overview of each associated project, together with full bibliography (Rüpke 2007d), and two collections of papers that focus on broad methodological issues (Cancik and Rüpke 1997, 2009).

It is obvious enough that all this recent work makes it possible to get a detailed sense of religious life in a much wider range of cultural areas within the Roman empire than ever before. But it has also brought with it a whole new set of methodological issues. Many of these center on the long-standing question of how we can best understand the interactions between Graeco-Roman and local cultures. For a long time, the dominant model was that of 'Romanization': the subject populations gradually adopted the material, social and intellectual culture of the Graeco-Roman elite, and in doing so became civilized. We should note two particular features of the original model, as it was developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: first, it accepted unquestioningly the superiority of Graeco-Roman culture over that of the populations incorporated into the empire, and so regarded Romanization as an entirely positive development (see, e.g., Woolf 1998: 4-7); secondly, it tended to treat Roman culture as an unproblematic unity, and to postulate a simple dichotomy between 'Roman' and 'native'. If the

original model of Romanization reflected its origins in the heyday of European colonialism, the wave of colonial emancipation that began after World War II not surprisingly brought a shift in thinking. The first development was a tendency to highlight native resistance to Roman cultural imperialism. This approach not only stressed obvious continuities in local cultures, but also made a case that even the adoption of particular Roman traits could serve to mask the maintenance of native traditions; for example, an ostensibly 'Roman' cult could in fact become deliberately 'indigenized' as a form of cultural resistance (e.g., Bénabou 1976). Other scholars, however, quickly pointed out that this notion of 'resistance' was simply the mirror opposite of 'Romanization'. Particularly in the wake of post-colonial theory (e.g., Saïd 1978; Bhabha 1994), scholars have explored a range of more flexible models for the interaction of Graeco-Roman and local cultures, proposing alternative terms such as 'culture change', 'acculturation', 'hybridization' or 'globalization'; some advocate abandoning the term 'Romanization' altogether, although its utility has so far seemed to outweigh all the problems associated with it (e.g., Woolf 1998: 7-16; see further Mattingly 1997; Hingley 2005; Schörner 2005).

The significance of these general debates for the study of religion in the Roman provinces is obvious. At the same time, there are other debates that focus more particularly on religious organization and religious change, such as those around the *polis*-religion model discussed in the previous section, with which they intersect. As a result, there is currently a rather bewildering array of approaches and models for understanding religious life in the Roman provinces. Rather than attempting any sort of systematic analysis, I will here offer a more or less random sampling of recent work. First, closely linked to his critique of the *polis*-religion model discussed in the previous section (Bendlin 2000) is Bendlin's proposal to replace 'Romanization' with 'the model of an "additive extension of an open system", where choices are made on the principle of extending, rather than replacing, a cultural system' (Bendlin 1997: 53). Bendlin stresses the 'decentralization of provincial societies', the fact that the administration of the empire depended on 'the mutual interests shared between Roman and provincial élites' and was thus 'inclined to support the autonomy of local power groups' (1997: 42). These local power groups looked to the dominant culture of the empire for models, yet reproduced them in idiosyncratic ways that served their own immediate ends. The similarity of religious developments throughout the empire was thus not the result of some monolithic Romanization, but simply reflected the fact that all local elites tended to have similar interests and concerns.

> Hence, the religious cultures of the Roman empire can be described as open, yet integrated systems where the individual agents optimize religious configurations through the addition of new options such as ruler cult and the extended Graeco-Roman pantheon, or through re-interpretation of native deities along Graeco-Roman lines. Because the interests and emulative habits of local élites were roughly similar, the optimization of the respective local religious system in that period followed similar patterns and restraints (1997: 57).

Ando, although taking a very different approach to the subject than Bendlin, reaches conclusions that are not incompatible. Ando focuses not on the worship of deities associated with Rome or on religious practices that in some way reflected Roman models, but instead on the traditional Roman conception of cult, as that was embodied in the specifics of cult practice and sacral law (2007; 2008: 95-148). His central argument is that 'a religious system that conceived the spread of cults as occurring through the transfer of specific cult objects from one place to another was in fact ill equipped to conceive the imposition of a single cult and endless reproduction of its apparatus throughout the empire' (Ando 2008: 97). Two topics receive particular attention. First, he investigates the extent to which, and the precise ways in which, the religious structures of Rome were replicated in the charters of Roman colonies and municipalities (which included established indigenous settlements recast as Roman communities as well as new foundations). Secondly, he highlights the Roman tendency to associate deities with particular places or particular objects, so that the worship of those deities was necessarily first and foremost local. His conclusion is not so much that 'specifically Roman cults and ritual actions did not spread under the empire', but rather that 'the cults and rituals of the empire made sense only within a specific geographic, political, and historical context, and they aimed to attract and cement the support of the divine in the maintenance of the conditions, institutions, and personalities of the here and now' (Ando 2007: 444-45). In short, the religion of the Roman empire was inevitably local rather than imperial.

In my own recent book I too have tried to provide a general framework for exploring the variety of religion in the Roman empire, 'the commonalities and differences in religious life as it existed through the Roman world' (Rives 2007: 6). Given that this book is directed primarily at a non-specialist, even undergraduate, audience, most of the categories I employ are more pragmatic than methodologically sophisticated: personal experience of the divine; the role of religion in the construction of communities at the levels of the household, association, and city; the various mechanisms that served to promote some degree of religious integration throughout the

empire. I also, however, propose one approach that may be worth exploring further, that of investigating religion in the Roman empire in terms of the interlocking dynamics of particularization and generalization, which I see as features shared by virtually all the traditions within the empire (the Jewish tradition being perhaps the prime exception). By particularization I mean a recurring tendency 'to identity gods very closely with specific locales and to give them distinguishing epithets that linked them to particular temples, cities, tribes, or topographical features'; by generalization I mean the equally common tendency to associate these local gods with each other by the use of shared names, iconography and cult practices, and thus to acknowledge that 'the gods that one group worshipped in one place were "the same" as the gods another group worshipped in another' (Rives 2007: 86). An intensification of structures at the supra-local level, such as those fostered by the Roman empire, served to accelerate the tendency towards generalization, which nevertheless always remained balanced by that towards particularization.

Although the studies that I have mentioned so far all deal with religion in the Roman empire in general, some of the most stimulating work in this area deals with particular regions or cultural traditions. I will again mention just three examples. Frankfurter (1998) surveys religious life in Egypt during the middle and late Roman empire, focusing on traditional Egyptian practice and belief in villages and small towns. Although the book is rich in specific detail and interpretations of particular phenomena, two major themes run throughout. The first is an emphasis on religion 'as a local, collective endeavor to negotiate fertility, safety, health, misfortune, identity, and collective solidarity' (Frankfurter 1998: 6); that is, as a local phenomenon dealing with the basic concerns of day-to-day life. On Frankfurter's analysis, however, this local phenomenon is by no means isolated from large-scale developments; using the anthropological model of a 'little tradition' in dialogue with a 'great tradition', he investigates the way that local and regional religious authorities utilized the idioms of traditional Egyptian priestly tradition, of Hellenization and lastly of Christianity as a way to respond to local needs and thus maintain their own positions. The second and obviously related theme is that of continuity and transformation, which Frankfurter sees as processes that are inevitably interlinked: 'a culture's resistance to conversion or religious decline often amounts to a complex process of embracing new idioms and ideologies in order to reinterpret them, to indigenize them' (1998: 6). Thus a radical shift in a 'great tradition', for example the move from traditional Egyptian religion to Christianity, can be accompanied by robust continuity in the 'little tradition', the ways that local populations repeatedly turn to tried and true structures of religious power.

Focusing on a very different part of the empire, Derks (1998) studies the transformation of religious traditions in northwestern Gaul. Derks's book is important not least because it offers a model investigation of religious organization and religious change based almost entirely on archaeological and, to a lesser extent, epigraphic evidence, which it treats with great methodological sophistication (see the very useful review of Woolf 2000, which examines the book within the larger context of current scholarship). Like other recent scholars, Derks rejects a simple dichotomy of Romanization and resistance; rather, 'it is much rather a question of selection, of redefinition of the adopted ideas and goods within their own cultural context and of the creation of new cultural forms, incorporating elements of both cultures, which did not previously exist in either culture' (Derks 1998: 241). That said, Derks stresses the tendency of local groups 'to keep their own cultural identity as much as possible...by introducing elements from Roman culture in the widest sense (myths, architecture, ritual practices) into their own way of life and thinking, without having to discard the essence of their own traditions' (1998: 245). One of the most interesting results of his study, however, is its detailed demonstration that this process did not operate in the same way in all regions but was shaped by local ecological and economic conditions; consequently, it could result in the articulation of new group identities. Having identified a pattern in which groups in the northern part of his study area assimilated their local gods to Hercules and those in the southern part preferred Mars, he concludes that

> the differences between the old tribal communities diminished within each of the two sections of the study area (instead of the former plurality of different gods they now all worshipped either Mars or Hercules), but those between the two halves increased. In the cult of their principal gods a new boundary was symbolically defined which was also to be of great significance in the late-Roman and early-medieval periods (1998: 245).

Another important book with a focus on Gaul is that of Van Andringa (2002), although it differs from Derks's in a number of ways. Van Andringa's geographical scope is much wider than Derks's, and his approach is that of a historian rather than that of an archaeologist. The most important difference, however, is one of emphasis. Van Andringa argues the religious transformation of Gaul was in effect a function of its socio-political transformation, in which the tribal organization of the pre-Roman period was replaced by a system of city-states on the Graeco-Roman model. 'The change that Rome presented—a new way of living together—led to the emergence of new forms of the divine.' Yet the Gallo-Roman city-states were not independent political

units like those of classical Greece, but were established from the start as parts of a territorial empire. Hence, 'the indissoluble bond established between the city and the central power is essential in every aspect of local religion. The gods were indispensible for protecting the community, just as they were for defining the bond between the city, Rome and the emperor' (Van Andringa 2002: 11). It would be inaccurate to describe the results of this development as a kind of syncretism, since there was no 'fusion or mixing of religious practices or divine beings'. 'On the contrary, religion allows one to retranscribe in an extremely precise way, at a given moment of its existence, the state of a society' (Van Andringa 2002: 289). A more recent contribution (Van Andringa 2007) offers a convenient summary of his approach that in addition extends its scope to the Roman empire as a whole. 'As the imperial government rested on an amalgam of autonomous cities, the starting point is the creation of religious constructs defined by each city in relation to its specific history and the political dialogues it had established with Rome.' At the same time,

> the spread of divine powers of universal character...and the call on the city gods to safeguard the emperor and the empire contributed to the appearance of a common religious language. A common religious language and a variety of pantheons specific to each community—this is how one can define religion in the Roman empire beginning in the second century AD (Van Andringa 2007: 84).

Although there is considerable variety in this recent work on religion in the Roman provinces, as I hope this brief review suggests, much of it involves similar principles: a concern with the particular, a stress on local conditions, and a sensitivity to the complexity of cultural interactions. Perhaps above all, there is an emphasis on the agency of local populations within the empire, who are no longer seen as merely the passive recipients or even the opponents of Graeco-Roman culture, but as the active shapers of their own religious and cultural identity. Since the study of religion in the Roman provinces is in many ways still in its early stages, I think we can expect further interesting developments in the years to come.

4. Conclusion

In this review I have tried to provide an overview of what I regard as some of the main trends in research on Graeco-Roman religion in the Roman empire over the last two or three decades. Perhaps the most important development has been the erosion of what I have described as the old 'master narrative' of Graeco-Roman religious history, the argument that

the decline of traditional Graeco-Roman religion in the Hellenistic east and in Republican Rome left a void that in the imperial period was filled, on the one hand, by the purely political phenomenon of imperial cult and, on the other, by mystery/oriental religions, which catered to the actual religious needs of the populace. To some extent, criticism of the assumptions that underpinned this master narrative developed in tandem with a new model for understanding Graeco-Roman religion, which I have here called the *polis*-religion model. According to this model, what in modern western culture is identified as 'religion' had no existence in the Graeco-Roman world as a distinct area of human activity, but was instead embedded in the general structures of the ancient city; there was no religious identity separate from political or civic identity, and the essence of religion lay in ritual rather than belief. Although the *polis*-religion model has itself been subject to some substantial critiques, many of these have aimed not so much to refute it entirely as to refine it or to incorporate it within a wider and more flexible model. But even those who have criticized it generally concede that it has played a crucial role in stimulating new research.

Indeed, the erosion of the old master narrative and the development of the *polis*-religion model have in my view been largely responsible for the truly exponential increase in the amount and range of work on Graeco-Roman religion that has taken place over the last two decades, work that includes both the radical re-evaluation of traditional areas of interest and the development of new fields of study. Work on well-established topics such as imperial cult and the 'oriental' or 'mystery' religions has continued apace. But this recent work differs from earlier scholarship in taking for granted the ongoing importance of traditional deities and the continued vitality of a city's public cults; as a result, questions about the nature and extent of the religious change that these phenomena represent have had to be reframed. It also tends to be more self-aware in its use of analytic categories, to the point that some scholars reject traditional terms like 'imperial cult' or 'oriental religions' altogether. Among the wide range of new topics that are now being explored, religion in the Roman provinces constitutes a particularly important and wide-ranging field of study, since it shifts the focus away from the traditions of the imperial elite to the lived experience of religion among the vast and varied population of the Roman empire. It should also in time make a crucial contribution to the better understanding of early Judaism and early Christianity in their historical context. The amount and variety of work on Graeco-Roman religion in the Roman empire in fact makes it difficult to keep track of

current research; in the appendix I provide a brief guide to various other points of departure.

Appendix: Further Resources

Although I have deliberately excluded work on archaic and classical Greek religion from my coverage, it is impossible to have a full understanding of religion in the imperial period without some knowledge of the earlier Greek tradition that played such a large role in shaping later developments. The standard handbook is that of Burkert (1985), although it is in some respects starting to be a bit out of date. There are also several good recent surveys and introductions that tend to complement each other in terms of approach and strengths: Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel (1992) provide a good introduction to the influential French school of work on Greek religion; Bremmer (1994) concentrates on scholarly developments since the original publication of Burkert's handbook; Price (1999) takes a very broad approach, including the later reactions to the Greek tradition by Romans, Jews and Christians; Mikalson (2005) contributes a systematic overview intended especially for beginning students. A very different sort of work but also a useful entry point into current approaches is Cole (2004), an exploration of the particular topics of gender and spatial organization. Lastly, Buxton (2000) gathers a selection of important recent articles, and Ogden (2007) provides an up-to-date and highly stimulating guide to the current state of the field.

On the Roman side, we are fortunate to have introductory surveys by three of the most influential scholars of the last thirty years, all now available in English. The briefest is that of North (2000), which explores some of the main issues in the interpretation of Roman religion. Scheid's book (2003) is probably the most accessible to an absolute beginner, and provides a brief but systematic survey of the main structures of the Roman civic tradition. The longest and most detailed of the three is Rüpke's (2007b), which fully engages with both primary and secondary material and pays particular attention to questions of methodology; Rüpke is particularly interested in exploring religion as a set of communicative signs. Also worth noting is the short but stimulating discussion of Potter (1999). My own book (Rives 2007) is also an introduction, but to a rather different subject: not the religious tradition of the city of Rome but religious life in the empire as a whole. Another type of introduction is represented by edited collections of previously published papers, which are an efficient

way to get a handle of the range of scholarly orientations and concerns (Ando 2003; North and Price forthcoming).

For Roman religion there has been no recent comprehensive handbook comparable to that of Burkert (1985) for Greek religion; the standard reference work remains that of Wissowa (1912), now badly out of date but still enormously useful on points of detail; for particular Roman festivals, Scullard (1981) provides a rather more convenient source of detailed information. The closest thing to a more recent handbook, although it explicitly disclaims that role, is the major study of Beard, North and Price (1998). The first volume presents a chronological analysis of Roman religion from its archaic origins down to the Christian empire, focusing on the city of Rome but also bringing in Italy and the provinces; the second volume is the most useful and wide-ranging sourcebook now available. Although BNP (as the work is often known) is undoubtedly the touchstone for all current work on Roman religion, certainly in the English-speaking world, it has not lacked criticism, as I have already suggested; for two contrasting critiques, see Linderski (2000) and Bendlin (2001). A very different work is the recent Blackwell *Companion to Roman Religion* (Rüpke 2007c). Its overall organization is thematic rather than chronological, although chapters 3–9 provide an excellent chronological survey, and advances an implicit argument (found more explicitly in Rüpke 2007b) that the focus of research should not be the products of Roman religious discourse, such as gods, priests and festivals, but rather its processes. Hence the book offers groups of chapters on 'media', 'symbols and practices', and 'actors and actions'. It will undoubtedly prove an important starting point for further research.

A range of major reference works also provide a valuable point of entry into current work on religion in the Roman empire. The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (*OCD*: Hornblower and Spawforth 2003) and the *Cambridge Dictionary of Classical Civilization* (*CDCC*: Shipley *et al*. 2006), both one-volume general reference works, are invaluable sources of quick overviews and basic information. On a much larger scale is *Der Neue Pauly* (Cancik and Schneider 1996–2003), which is now available in an English translation as *Brill's New Pauly* (Cancik and Schneider 2002–2009). Two other multi-volume reference works are also currently in the works (Gagarin 2010; Bagnall *et al*. forthcoming). Lastly, there is the massive series *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (*ANRW*: Temporini and Haase 1972–), which is organized as a handbook rather than an encyclopedia, divided into major topics such as 'political history', 'law' and 'language and literature', and with contributions in German, English, French and Italian. The

volumes devoted to *Heidentum*, pagan religion (II, 16-18, each with multiple parts), are a valuable resource because of their breadth of coverage; they include often lengthy articles on all major deities and all the regions of the empire. For some topics *ANRW* thus provides the only convenient starting point (the contents can be accessed online at www.bu.edu/ict/anrw/pub/index.html). Yet it must be used with caution, since the contributions vary dramatically: a few are important and original pieces of scholarship, many are useful surveys, some are idiosyncratic or even unreliable.

Of reference works that focus on religion, Johnston (2004) is a stimulating one-volume resource. Covering the range of ancient Mediterranean religious traditions from the Bronze Age through early Christianity and arranged both thematically and geographically, it facilitates comparative research as well as providing a quick and convenient survey of a wide range of topics. On a much larger scale are two multi-volume works, which like *ANRW* have contributions in English, German, French and Italian, that are rapidly proving to be indispensible resources. The *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (*LIMC*) provides a comprehensive survey of deities portrayed in the art of the Greek and Roman worlds. Each volume consists of two parts, one of text and one of plates: the former includes for each deity an overview of his/her main characteristics and historical development, a classified catalogue of extant depictions, and a concluding essay on the chief types of representations and their significance; the latter includes a generous selection of images to illustrate the catalogue. Despite the title, the series is not confined to the deities prominent in Graeco-Roman myth but also covers many provincial and local gods. Intended as a companion to *LIMC*, the *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquarum* (*ThesCRA*) provides a systematic survey, again amply illustrated, of the elements of ancient religious practice: the first three volumes cover the 'dynamic elements' of cult, such as divination, prayer, gestures of veneration, oaths, and consecration; the last two volumes cover cult places and cult personnel. Each entry is divided into sections on the Greek, Etruscan and Roman traditions.

Lastly, several journals provide up-to-date guides to current work on ancient religion. For Greek religion, the most important is *Kernos: Revue internationale et pluridisciplinaire de religion grecque ancienne*, which began publication in 1988 (further information online at www.kernos.ulg.ac.be). In addition to general articles, it also publishes regular surveys of recent epigraphic and archaeological finds as well as bibliographies of current research. For ancient religion more generally, *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, which began publication in 1999, is a major resource. Although its range is broad, one of its major focuses is religion in the Roman empire. Each annual issue has one or two main themes, as well as periodic surveys

of recent research; several extensive surveys of work on Roman religion have appeared (Bendlin and Rüpke 2000, 2003; Bendlin and Haase 2007). But for the simplest and in some respects the most effective way to get a good overview of current work, one should consult the journal *Greece & Rome*, which in its annual survey of research in classical studies includes a very helpful section on religion, written in recent years by Gordon (e.g., Gordon 2007, 2008).

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