

Religious Pluralism and Diversity in the Ancient World: Herodotus, the Roman Republic and Late Antiquity

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For Ingvild Gilhus and Einar Thomassen

The subject of religious pluralism and diversity is much debated today, but has attracted much less attention in discussions of ancient Greek and Roman religion. In my contribution, I first look at the genealogy of the term ‘religious pluralism’ and differentiate it from diversity as being more normative. Subsequently, I look at Herodotus’ view of Persian religion as an example of religious diversity. I note that this Greek author, himself from a multicultural background, would today be considered a relativist. In his time, though, there was not yet a specific term for religious deviancy, which, as noted, started to emerge in the later fourth century BC (§ 1). I continue by looking at the Roman Republic and the early Principate. From a quantitative analysis, it is clear that the Roman term *religio* becomes more important in the first century BC and also acquires the meaning of a system of religious observances that can be regulated, which is an important step towards its later meaning ‘religion’. At the same time, we note the rise of the concomitant term *superstitio* as the wrong *religio*. Still, the Roman elite tolerated a wide variety of new cults outside civic religion and basically practised diversity (§ 2). After this, I will turn to the demise of religious diversity and pluralism in Late Antiquity, where we start to see religious persecutions for the very first time (§ 3). I conclude with some final considerations on the necessity of dialogue in negotiating religious differences.

Keywords: Religious pluralism, diversity, tolerance, superstition, market place of religions, persecutions, dialogue

Religious pluralism is a fashionable subject. Yet the phrase immediately raises several questions which we have to briefly discuss before we turn to its role throughout antiquity. Two questions are of course obvious: what is religion and what is pluralism? The first question has been lively debated for several decades by scholars of religion,¹ and in recent years that debate has also reached the classical world. In line with much (de-)constructionist

1 For the most recent literature, see Kevin Schilbrack, *What Does the Study of Religion Study?*, *HThR* 111 (2018), 451–458; Jörg Rüpke, *Religion and Its History: A Critical Inquiry*, London – New York: Routledge, 2021.

thinking, two recent books by Brent Nongbri and Carlin Barton & Daniel Boyarin have argued that people throughout antiquity did not have a word for 'religion' nor did they know the concept.² However, despite their erudition and philological subtlety, these scholars do not ask what the consequences for our study of ancient religion would be, if that was true. Should we now stop studying ancient religion because it is a non-existent concept? Of course not. Just as we do not stop studying ancient law or economics which also lack corresponding terms or phrases in antiquity we should not stop studying religion in the ancient world. Though, it is true that we must always be aware of the fact that what religion is in a certain time and context is historically determined. Even in living memory in the West, we can see how people's private lives are being gradually removed from what we call religion. Whilst adultery and same-sex relations were long considered sins in most Christian denominations, this is hardly the case anymore within mainstream churches, as they seem to have abandoned private ethics as a religiously relevant area of life altogether.

Pluralism has other problems. In fact, two prominent British sociologists of religion, Grace Davie and James Beckford, have called it, respectively, 'a tricky term' and a term needing 'special care'.³ It is important for our subject to see that there is a difference between diversity and pluralism. The first term I employ here as a descriptive term for differences between and within religions, whereas the second term has a more normative meaning and concerns 'the frameworks of public policy, law and social practices which recognise, accommodate, regulate and facilitate religious diversity'.⁴ For example, a recent article could be titled: 'Diversity without Pluralism: Religious Landscape in Mainland China', because, as is well known, the Chinese state does not recognise certain religious groups and even actively persecutes

2 Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion*, New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2012; Carlin Barton – Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2016, to be read with the review by Anders Klostergaard Petersen, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2017.06.14 [online], accessed 10. 10. 2023, available at: <https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2017/2017.06.14/>.

3 Grace Davie, Religion in Modern Britain: Changing Sociological Assumptions, *Sociology* 34 (2000) 113–128, at 120; James A. Beckford, Re-thinking Religious Pluralism, in: Giuseppe Giordan – Enzo Pace (eds.), *Religious Pluralism. Framing Religious Diversity in the Contemporary World*, Heidelberg: Springer, 2014, 15–29, at 15.

4 Beckford, *Re-thinking Religious Pluralism*, 15.

or harasses them.⁵ Admittedly, both terms, diversity and pluralism, can be analysed in much more detail but this is enough for our purpose.

However, before turning to antiquity, I want to ask: when did the phrase ‘religious pluralism’ emerge and what does its origins say about the phrase? In English, it seems to have emerged slowly in America in the early 1940s, although at the beginning of the twentieth century it was also used as a variant of polytheism.⁶ According to the distinguished sociologist of religion, Peter Berger (1929–2017),⁷ the term ‘pluralism’ was invented by the German-American philosopher Horace Kallen (1882–1974). But this is evidently not true, as it is already attested in the late eighteenth century,⁸ even if it does not accord with our usage of the phrase. Yet it is correct that Kallen was the first to use the expression ‘cultural pluralism’, of which he was a great champion, and this eventually led the way to the birth of ‘religious pluralism’.⁹ Early instances of the phrase occur in a 1942 book called *Strategy for Democracy*,¹⁰ in a 1944 book by the influential Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) which stated that democracy is ‘in one sense, the fruit of cultural and religious pluralism’,¹¹ and, one year later, in a journal called *Common Ground* (1940–1949), which advocated cultural pluralism in the US.¹² It seems then that the Second World War sharpened the West’s

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- 5 Yongjia Liang, Diversity without Pluralism: Religious Landscape in Mainland China, *Religions* 9.1 (2018) [online], accessed 16. 10. 2023, available at: www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/9/1/22/pdf.
 - 6 Cf. James M. Baldwin, *Genetic Theory of Reality*, New York – London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1915, 139 (‘a religious pluralism or polytheism’).
 - 7 Peter L. Berger, The Good of Religious Pluralism [online], accessed 16. 10. 2023, available at: <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2016/04/the-good-of-religious-pluralism>.
 - 8 W. Pennington, *A Free Inquiry into the Origin, Progress, and Present State of Pluralities*, London: Benjamin White, 1772, 54: ‘They [sc. Cardinals] could see the turpitude of Pluralism, when it prevailed among their inferiors, and speak of it with severity’.
 - 9 Horace Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States*, New York: Boni Liveright, 1924, 43: ‘Cultural growth is founded upon Cultural Pluralism. Cultural Pluralism is possible only in a democratic society whose institutions encourage individuality in groups, in persons, [and] in temperaments’.
 - 10 Cf. Oscar I. Janowsky, Towards a Solution of the Minorities Problem, in: J. Donald Kingsley and David W. Petegorsky (eds.), *Strategy for Democracy*, New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1942, 101–117, at 117: ‘We must recognize that in regions of mixed nationality, liberty and equality can be realized only by the extension of religious pluralism into cultural pluralism’.
 - 11 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944, 120.
 - 12 Bernard Heller, The Comradship of Faiths, *Common Ground* 5 (1945/1), 23–28, at 28.

consciousness of diversity and its need to accept cultural and religious pluralism to bolster democracy.

In titles of books the expression only took off in 1980 after the publication of the British theologian and philosopher John Hick's (1922–2012) famous study: *God Has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism*,¹³ which was surely the fruit of the secularising of British society. Since then, there has been an endless stream of books and articles with 'religious pluralism' in the title, but much less in the study of the ancient world, where we find it exclusively used, as far as I can see, by historians of Roman religion or of religion in the Roman Empire.¹⁴ Making use of these two concepts, religious pluralism and diversity, I will start by looking at Herodotus' view of Persian religion as an example of religious diversity (§ 1). Then I will look at the vocabulary of diversity in the Roman Republic and the early Principate (§ 2). After this, I will turn to the place of diversity and pluralism in Late Antiquity (§ 3), albeit only summarily, followed by some final considerations.

1. From Herodotus to the invention of superstition

Let us start our discussion with Herodotus. There can be no doubt that if there ever was an early Greek destined to be a kind of ethnographic observer, it was Herodotus, as he grew up in a multi-cultural setting. We know from an entry in the *Suda* that his father was called Lyxes. This Carian name was not unknown in Halicarnassus, Herodotus' hometown, and can be found in two

13 John Hick, *God Has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism*, London: Macmillan, 1980.

14 John North, The Development of Religious Pluralism, in: Judith Lieu *et al.* (eds.), *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, London: Routledge, 1992, 174–193; Andreas Bendlin, Looking Beyond the Civic Compromise: Religious Pluralism in Late Republican Rome, in: Edward Bispham – Christopher Smith (eds.), *Religion in Archaic and Republican Rome and Italy*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, 115–135; Sergio Roda, Pluralismo religioso in una società a-religiosa: l'età imperiale romana, in: Paolo Desideri *et al.* (eds.), *Antidoron, Studi in onore di Barbara Scardigli Forster*, Pisa: ETS, 2007, 367–386; Jörg Rüpke, Religiöser Pluralismus und das römische Reich, in: Hubert Cancik – Jörg Rüpke (eds.), *Die Religion des Imperium Romanum. Koine und Konfrontationen*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009, 331–354, reprinted in his *Von Jupiter zu Christus*, Darmstadt: WBG Academic, 2011, 157–175 and Religious Pluralism, in: Alessandro Barchiesi and Walter Scheidel (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 748–766; Erich Gruen, Religious Pluralism in the Roman Empire: Did Judaism Test the Limits of Roman Tolerance?, in: Jonathan J. Price *et al.* (eds.), *Rome: An Empire of Many Nations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 169–185.

local inscriptions as well as in Iasos,¹⁵ but it is less known that the name is also found in Egypt, where the presence of Carian mercenaries is well attested,¹⁶ and even in Babylonian Borsippa where the name turned up in cuneiform inscriptions detailing a group of Karo-Egyptians who lived there.¹⁷ On the other hand, the name of his mother, Dryo, is unique, but seems to be Greek. His cousin was Panyassis,¹⁸ another Carian name. Apparently, Herodotus came from an upper-class family, in which Greek and Carians were well integrated, as also seems to have been the case in Miletus.¹⁹

Consequently, Herodotus will have noticed that the Carians had their own gods, whose names are sometimes attested in Greek literature such as Imbramos, the Carian Hermes,²⁰ and Masaris, the Carian Dionysos,²¹ whilst

15 Michel Clerc, *Inscription d'Halicarnasse*, BCH 6 (1882), 191–193 (lines 6 and 10: ca. 400 BC, Carian names); SEG 43.713 A 28 and D 37 (ca. 425–350 BC). Iasos: SEG 54.1078 (4th cent. BC).

16 See most recently Alexander Herda, *Greek (and Our) Views on the Karians*, in: Alice Mouton *et al.* (eds.), *Luwian Identities. Culture, Language and Religion Between Anatolia and the Aegean*, Leiden: Brill, 2013, 421–506, at 445–446, 464; Anne Fitzpatrick-McKinley, *Preserving the Cult of YHWH in Judean Garrisons: Continuity from Pharaonic to Ptolemaic Times*, in: Joel Baden *et al.* (eds.), *Sibyls, Scriptures and Scrolls*, Leiden: Brill, 2016, 375–408, at 383–396.

17 Egypt: Ignacio-Javier Adiego Lajara, *The Carian Language*, Leiden: Brill, 2007, 379–380. Borsippa: Caroline Waerzeggers, *The Carians of Borsippa*, *Iraq* 68 (2006), 1–22; Herda, *Greek (and our) Views on the Karians*, 424; Laura C. Dees, *Carian Names in Babylonian Records: Some New Analyses*, NABU 2021, 56–58. For other Carians in cuneiform texts, see Kristin Kleber, *Tempel und Palast. Die Beziehungen zwischen dem König und dem Eanna-Tempel im spätbabylonischen Uruk*, Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2008, 164–165 (scribe, 570 BC: with further bibliography).

18 Cf. Jan N. Bremmer, *Becoming a Man in Ancient Greece and Rome*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021, 212–213 (cousin, not mother's brother).

19 Alexander Herda – Eckart Sauter, *Karierinnen und Karer in Milet: Zu einem spätclassischen Schlüsselchen mit karischem Graffito aus Milet*, *Arch. Anz.* 2009/2, 51–112; Herda, *Greek (and Our) Views on the Karians*, 434–441; Serafina Nicolosi, *I costumi carii delle donne di Mileto tra realtà storica, propaganda e leggenda*, *Athenaeum* 103 (2015), 374–389; Naomi Carless Unwin, *Multilingualism in Karia and the Social Dynamics of Linguistic Assimilation*, in: Olivier Henry – Koray Konuk (eds.), *KARIA ARKHAIA. La Carie, des origines à la période pré-hékatomnide*, Paris: Institut Français d'Études Anatoliennes – Georges Dumézil, 2019, 43–60, at 51–54.

20 Herodianus, *De prosodia catholica*, 3,1, p. 171 Lentz: Ἰμβραμος. οὕτως Ἑρμῆν λέγουσιν οἱ Κάρεις; Steph. Byz. s.v. Ἰμβρος (= τ 57 Billerbeck): Ἑρμοῦ, ὃν Ἰμβραμον λέγουσιν οἱ Κάρεις.

21 Herodianus, *De prosodia catholica*, 3,1, p. 99 and 171 Lentz: Μάσαρις ὁ Διόνυσος παρὰ Καρσίν; Steph. Byz. s.v. Μάσταυρα (= μ 92 Billerbeck): παρὰ Καρσίν ὁ Διόνυσος. Both gods have to be added to Robert Parker, *Greek Gods Abroad*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2017, 192.

a few others are known from inscriptions.²² As the Persians controlled Caria in Herodotus' time, he probably became aware of both Carian and Persian rituals and religious ideas. This 'multi-cultural' background makes it all the more interesting to investigate what draws his attention when he observes other religions. Naturally, I cannot go into detail, but it will be enough for my purposes to take a brief look at Herodotus' description of Persian religion in his first book (1.131–140):²³

Regarding the Persians, I know that they have the following customs: to make and set up statues, temples and altars is not their accepted practice, but those who do such things they think foolish, because, as it seems to me, they have never believed the gods to be anthropomorphic, like the Greeks.²⁴

It is rather surprising that Herodotus begins his survey of Persian customs with religion. It seems that this aspect of the Persians struck him as being the most different from Greek culture,²⁵ but it also says something of the place of religion in Greek ideas about their own identity.²⁶ We are also immediately confronted with a negative approach: the Persians are not like us, but at the same time, as Walter Burkert (1931–2015) attractively suggested in a famous article, Herodotus criticises his own contemporaries for their anthropomorphism.²⁷ In fact, Herodotus appears to stress this point by his

22 Parker, *Greek Gods Abroad*, 192.

23 See Rosalind Thomas, Herodotus' Persian Ethnography, in: Robert Rollinger *et al.* (eds.), *Herodot und das Persische Weltreich*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011, 237–254 for subtle observations on the place of this section in the whole of Herodotus' *Histories*.

24 Hdt. 1.131.1, interestingly quoted by Celsus in his polemics against the Christians, cf. Orig. *CC* 7.62. Note that Herodotus observes the same absence of statues, temples and altars among the Scythians: 4.59. For the passage, see also Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge, *Le polythéisme grec à l'épreuve d'Hérodote*, Paris: Collège de France, 2020, 68–70.

25 As is noted by Thomas, Herodotus' Persian Ethnography, 241.

26 María Cruz Cardete del Olmo, La religión como criterio de identidad en la Grecia clásica, *Gerión* 35 (2017), 17–38.

27 Walter Burkert, Herodot als Historiker fremder Religionen, in: Giuseppe Nenci – Olivier Reverdin (eds.), *Hérodote et les peuples non grecs. Neuf exposés suivis de discussions*, Vandoeuvres-Genève: Fondation-Hardt, 1990, 1–32, reprinted in his *Kleine Schriften* VII, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007, 140–160, at 153–154, accepted by Scott Scullion, Herodotus and Greek Religion, in: Carolyn Dewald – John Marincola (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 201–203; Thomas, Herodotus' Persian Ethnography, 242–243; for Herodotus' scepticism about the anthropomorphism of the gods see, especially, Robert L. Fowler, Gods in Early Greek Historiography, in: Jan N. Bremmer – Andrew Erskine (eds.), *The Gods of Ancient Greece*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, 318–334. For Burkert and

use of the rare word *ἀνθρωποφυέας*, which is found here for the first time in Greek literature and may well derive from contemporary discussions.²⁸ It is quite probable that Herodotus had an axe to grind at this point, as the Persians actually had altars,²⁹ some temples,³⁰ and did think of their gods in human form.³¹

It is no wonder, then, that Herodotus proceeds with adducing proofs for his statement, such as his claim that the Persians worship Zeus by calling the vault of heaven Zeus. The idea is not the same as, but comes close to, contemporary Greek progressive ideas in Xenophanes (A 30 DK) and Euripides (F 941 with Kannicht *ad loc.*), as Burkert notes. However, it looks suspiciously like another idea from Herodotus himself, as there is no evidence that the Persians ever called the sky Auramazda.³² Moreover, as he also says, the Persians sacrificed to the natural elements (sun and moon, earth and fire, water and winds), that is, not to gods in human form. Although these elements are represented in the Iranian pantheon by individual divinities, if Herodotus knew this, he did not mention it in order to strengthen his argument regarding the absence of anthropomorphic gods. In any case, the fact that these very same divine elements are also grouped together in a *Yasna* (1.16),

Herodotus, see Maurizio Giangiulio, *Vergleichbares festhalten*. Walter Burkert e Erodoto, *Technai* 7 (2016), 77–89.

- 28 It also occurs in Aeschylus F *89 Radt (Diod. Sic. 4.59.3), but it will hardly have been in Aeschylus' text.
- 29 Pierre Briant, *Histoire de l'empire Perse*, Paris: Fayard, 1996, 261–262; Daniel T. Potts, Foundation Houses, Fire Altars and the *frataraka*: interpreting the iconography of some post-Achaemenid Persian coins, *Iranica Antiqua* 42 (2007), 271–300.
- 30 Cf. Wouter Henkelman, Practice of Worship in the Achaemenid Heartland, in: Bruno Jacobs – Robert Rollinger (eds.), *A Companion to the Achaemenid Persian Empire*, 2 vols, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2021, 2.1243–1270, at 1247–1249.
- 31 Albert F de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, Leiden: Brill, 1997, 95. For the literary and iconographical evidence, see Bruno Jacobs, Kultbilder und Gottesvorstellungen bei den Persern: zu Herodot, *Historiae* 1.131 und Clemens Alexandrinus, *Protrepticus* 5.65.3, in: Tomris Bakır *et al.* (eds.), *Achaemenid Anatolia* Leiden: Peeters, 2001, 83–90 and, especially, Michael Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images: The Iconography of Deities in the Pre-Islamic Iranian World*, Leiden: Brill, 2014. This has escaped Gian Franco Chiai, Wie man von fremden Göttern erzählt: Herodot und der allmächtige Gott der anderen Religionen, in: Klaus Geus *et al.* (eds.), *Herodots Wege des Erzählens. Logos und Topos in den Historien*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013, 55–82, who follows Herodotus.
- 32 Burkert, *Kleine Schriften* VII, 153; De Jong, *Traditions*, 96–98. For Auramazda, see Wouter F. Henkelman, The Heartland Pantheon, in: Jacobs – Rollinger, *Companion*, 2.1221–1242 at 1224–1227.

the liturgy of the daily ritual,³³ seems to point to oral information. Perhaps Herodotus' source were the Magi, but unlike Egyptian priests, Herodotus never claims to have spoken with anyone of them. Did he avoid mentioning this source because in contemporary Greek literature the Magi often had a bad name as charlatans?³⁴

Somewhat oddly, this section is concluded by a statement about the later arrival of Aphrodite. Yet the information supplied about her name among the Assyrians and Arabs also suggests an indirect source, because it is hard to see why Herodotus would investigate her name among those peoples. The fact that Mithras is given as the name of this Aphrodite, that is, the Persian Anahita,³⁵ does not point to a native informer, as he would not have made such a mistake, but to an intermediate source, presumably Greek, if it is not a corruption of the text.³⁶

Continuing with the sacrificial ritual,³⁷ Herodotus again first notes the absence of the normal elements of Greek sacrifice: from altars and fire to flutes, wreaths and barley grain. He then turns to the actual sacrifice where he comments that the Persians have to pray for 'all the Persians and, in

33 De Jong, *Traditions*, 102f.

34 Cf. Jan N. Bremmer, The Birth of the Term "Magic", *ZPE* 126 (1999) 1–12, updated in my *Greek Religion and Culture, the Bible and the Ancient Near East*, Leiden: Brill, 2008, 235–47, 347–52; Bernd-Christian Otto, *Magie. Rezeptions- und diskursgeschichtliche Analysen von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit*, Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter, 2011, 43–218; Fritz Graf, Greece, in: David Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, Leiden: Brill, 2019, 115–38, at 116–123.

35 Cf. Mariana Rici, The Cult of the Iranian Goddess Anāhitā in Anatolia before and after Alexander, *Živa antika* 52 (2002), 201–14; Peter Hermann, Magier in Hypaipa, *Hyperboreus* 8 (2002), 364–69, reprinted in his *Kleinasien im Spiegel epigraphischer Zeugnisse*, Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter, 2016, 231–235; Christopher Tuplin, Heartland and Periphery: Reflections on the Interaction Between Power and Religion in the Achaemenid Empire, in: Reinhard Achenbach (ed.), *Persische Reichspolitik und lokale Heiligtümer*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019, 23–43, at 37–40.

36 For Mithras, see Richard Gordon, Mithras, in: *RAC* 24 (2012), 964–1009. Corruption: Gauthier Liberman, *JHS* 135 (2016), 195 (review of N. G. Wilson's edition of Herodotus).

37 See now also Bruno Jacobs, Ein Totenopfer für ein Mitglied der persischen Elite in Phrygien am Hellespont. Zu einem achämenidenzeitlichen Relief aus Daskyleion, in: Kristin Kleber et al. (eds.), *Grenzüberschreitungen. Studien zur Kulturgeschichte des Alten Orients. Festschrift für Hans Neumann*, Münster: Zaphon, 2018, 313–325; Alberto Cantera, The Offering to Satisfy the *ratu* (*mīazda ratufri*): the Dual System of the Animal Sacrifice in Zoroastrian Rituals, in: Alberto Cantera et al. (eds.), *The Reward of the Righteous. Festschrift in Honour of Almut Hintze*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2022, 39–95.

particular, the king' to be well.³⁸ Ab de Jong has recently stressed the active role of the Achaemenid kings in Persian religion, as the Avesta does not mention kings or kingship. This prayer is another, excellent illustration of this development, as praying for the king was, surely, ordered from above, not a pious thought from below.³⁹

After further details on the cutting up and arrangement of the sacrificial victim, Herodotus observes that:

a Magus who stands close by chants a theogony, which is the kind of song, they say, they chant. For it is against their customs to perform sacrifices without a Magus. After a short while the sacrificer takes away the meat and does with it as he pleases.⁴⁰

Herodotus must have been struck by the fact that a Magus always had to be present at Persian sacrifices because Greeks could sacrifice without any priest being present at all.⁴¹ It is also striking that Herodotus stresses that the song they sing is an *ἐπαιοιδή*, that is, a kind of magical song, an incantation.⁴² Why would he stress this and what kind of theogony did the Magus sing? Now, the latter question is easy to answer: there was none because the Persians did not have theogonies. This is well known among experts in Persian religion, who

38 Hdt. 1.132.2: ὁ δὲ τοῖσι πᾶσι Πέρσησι κατεύχεται εὖ γίνεσθαι καὶ τῷ βασιλεί. Both A.D. Godley (Loeb) and Aubrey de Sélincourt (Penguin) translate “the king and all the Persians’, but this does not take into account that the king receives special attention here through the word order; Henry R. Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus*, Cleveland: Press of Western Reserve University for the American Philological Association, 1966, 185 (‘all the Persians, including the king’) is also less precise.

39 Albert de Jong, Religion at the Achaemenid Court, in: Bruno Jacobs – Robert Rollinger (eds.), *Der Achämenidenhof / The Achaemenid Court*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010, 533–558 and *The Religion of the Achaemenid Rulers*, in: Jacobs – Rollinger, *Companion*, 2.1199–1209. Another example is the reform of the Avestan calendar by Cambyses, cf. Antonio Panaino, Liturgies and Calendars in the Politico-Religious History of Pre-Achaemenian and Achaemenian Iran, in: Wouter F. M. Henkelman – C. Redard (eds.), *Persian Religion in the Achaemenid Period / La religion perse à l'époque achéménide*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2017, 69–95.

40 Hdt. 1.131.3: Μάγος ἀνὴρ παρεστῶς ἐπαιεῖδι θεογονίην, οἴην δὴ ἐκεῖνοι λέγουσι εἶναι τὴν ἐπαιοιδήν· ἄνευ γὰρ δὴ Μάγου οὐ σφι νόμος ἐστὶ θυσίας ποιέεσθαι. ἐπισχῶν δὲ δλίγον χρόνον ἀποφέρεται ὁ θύσας τὰ κρέα καὶ χράται ὅ τι μιν λόγος αἰρέε. The new OCT edition of Herodotus by Nigel Wilson prints a somewhat different text – ...ἐπαιεῖδι οἶα δὴ θεογονίην... – but that does not affect the contents here. I am grateful to Bob Fowler for a discussion of that text (email 9-9-2018).

41 Fritz Graf, *Nordionische Kulte*, Rome: Schweizerisches Institut in Rom, 1985, 40.

42 Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, Cambridge, MA – London: Harvard University Press, 1997, 28–29 (with older bibliography); Martin L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 327.

usually tell us that Herodotus meant a liturgical hymn,⁴³ though he knows perfectly well what a theogony is (cf. 2.53.2). The first question is more difficult to answer. I would start by pointing out that the Greeks knew that the Magi customarily whispered their Avestan and other ritual texts in a very low voice: Prudentius' *Zoroastros susurros* (*Apoth.* 494).⁴⁴ This whispering must have made the activities of Magi look like 'magical' rites in the eyes of the ancients, since murmuring was closely associated with magic by both Greeks and Romans.⁴⁵ Now in the first columns of the Derveni Papyrus we do find the expression 'the incantation of the Magi',⁴⁶ and it is an attractive suggestion that this ἐπαιδιή is the Orphic *Theogony*.⁴⁷ If this is right, as it seems to be, Herodotus probably interpreted the murmuring of the Magus at the Persian sacrifice with what he had heard of Magi, or people claiming to be Magi, operating in Athens. As with the lack of anthropomorphism, he interpreted what he saw with what he knew from his own experience.⁴⁸

43 Cf. Geo Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965, 126; De Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 118, 363; David Asheri et al., *A Commentary on Herodotus Books I-IV*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 168 (by Asheri).

44 As is frequently attested, cf. Joseph Bidez – Franz Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés*, 2 vols, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1938, 2. 112–113, 245, 285–86; Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans*, 249–50; Jonas C. Greenfield, "r τ yn mgws," in: Sidney Hoenig – Leon Stitskin (eds.), *Joshua Finkel Festschrift*, New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1974, 63–69; De Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 363.

45 Admittedly, our first Greek examples are only Hellenistic, but they are so widespread and persistent, that it seems hyper-critical not to assume the same for classical times, cf. Theocr. 2.11, 62; Orpheus, *Lith.* 320; Lucian, *Nec.* 7; Ach. Tat. 2.7.5 (τῶ τῆς ἐπωδῆς ψιθυρίσματι); Apul. *Met.* 1.1.1, 1.3.1, 2.1.3; Heliod. 6.14.4; Eduard Schrader, *Corpus Iuris Civilis* I, Tübingen: Georg Reimer, 1832, 764 (many passages); Luca Soverini, ΨΙΘΥΡΟΣ: Hermes, Afrodite e il sussurro nella Grecia antica, in: Salvatore Alessandri (ed.), *Ιστορίη: Studi offerti a Giuseppe Nenci*, Galatina: Congedo, 1994, 183–210; Emmanuelle Vallette-Cagnac, *La lecture à Rome*, Paris: Belin 1997, 42–47; Pieter W. van der Horst, *Hellenism-Judaism-Christianity*, Leuven: Peeters, 1998, 300–302; Danielle K. van Mal-Maeder, *Apuleius Madaurensis, Metamorphoses: Livre II*, Groningen: Brill, 2001, 60; Loretta Moscardi, *Magica Musa: La magia dei poeti latini: Figure e funzioni*. Bologna: Pàtron, 2005, 165–174 ("Murmur" nella terminologia magica', 19761); Mario Andreassi, Implicazioni magiche in Meleagro AP 5.152, ZPE 176 (2011) 69–81 at 74–75; Catherine Schneider, [Quintilien], *Le tombeau ensorcelé*, Cassino: Università di Cassino, 2013, 171f.

46 *Derveni Papyrus*, col. VI Kouremenos = § 17, ed. Mirjam E. Kotwick, *Der Papyrus von Derveni*, Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter, 2017: ἐπ[αιδιή δ]ῆ τ(ῶν) μάγων.

47 Kotwick, *Der Papyrus von Derveni*, 140–41; Jan N. Bremmer, *The First Columns of the Derveni Papyrus and Polis Religion*, *Eirene* 55 (2019) 199–213, at 205f.

48 John Gould, *Myth, Ritual Memory, and Exchange*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 358–377 ('Herodotus and Religion') has some good observations on Herodotus' description and persuasively argues against Burkert, Herodot als Historiker, 21 that the

Subsequently, Herodotus mentions that the lepers were banished from the city, as in Leviticus (13.46), and highlights their profound reverence for rivers, without, however, saying that the Persians actually worshipped rivers like gods, as the Greeks did.⁴⁹ Yet he regularly notes the Persian veneration of water and rivers, which is indeed well attested in both Persian and Graeco-Roman sources.⁵⁰ Most interestingly, excavations have even uncovered a Zoroastrian temple of the Oxus at Takht-i-Sangin in Bactria (nowadays Tajikistan), where several inscriptions bear witness that Greek settlers also worshipped the river god.⁵¹ In fact, Anahita, who originated as a river goddess, was still connected with water in Roman times.⁵²

Herodotus emphasises that all this is first-hand knowledge but, as he says, he cannot speak authoritatively about the ritual of exposure because it is not mentioned in public. This seems to contradict the fact that the Magi, according to Herodotus, do speak quite openly about it. Does this perhaps suggest that a Magus was an informer, directly or indirectly? In any case, Herodotus gives a brief but accurate description of this age-old Zoroastrian funeral ritual which now seems to be also archeologically attested but which probably became widespread only in the Sasanian period.⁵³

description is based on personal observation, not a reconstruction from hearsay (370 note 15).

- 49 For the Greek worship of rivers, see Jan N. Bremmer, *Rivers and River Gods in Ancient Greek Religion and Culture*, in: Tanja S. Scheer (ed.), *Nature – Myth – Religion in Ancient Greece*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2019, 89–112.
- 50 Hdt. 1.189, 5.52.5, 7.35.1; Str. 15.3.14, 16; Arnob. 6.11; *Anth. Pal.* 7.162; Henkelman, *Practice of Worship*, 1249–1251; add West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 275; Anca Dan, *Grecs et Perses sur les Détroits: Le démon enchaîné et la démesure du Grand Roi*, *Ancient West & East* 14 (2015), 191–235.
- 51 Filippo Canali De Rossi, *Iscrizioni dello estremo oriente greco*, Bonn: Rudolf Habelt, 2004, 311–312; SEG 58.1686, cf. Marina Veksina, *Zur Datierung der neuen Weihinschrift aus dem Oxos-Tempel*, *ZPE* 181 (2012), 108–113; Kazim Abdullaev, *Images d'un dieu-fleuve en Asie Centrale: L'Oxus*, *CRAI* 157 (2013), 173–192; John Boardman, *A Personification of the Oxos River?*, in: Pedro Bádenas de la Peña et al. (eds.), *Per speculum in aenigmate: miradas sobre la antigüedad: homenaje a Ricardo Olmos*, Madrid: Asociación Cultural Hispano-Helénica, 2014, 53–55; Robert Parker, *“For Potamos, a vow”: River Cults in Graeco-Roman Anatolia*, in: María-Paz de Hoz et al. (eds.), *Between Tarhuntas and Zeus Polieus: Cultural Crossroads in the Temples and Cults of Graeco-Roman Anatolia*, Leuven: Peeters, 2016, 1–13, at 10f.
- 52 Cf. *TAM* 5.1, 64: τὴν Ἀναεΐτιν τὴν ἀπὸ τοῦ ἱεροῦ ὕδατος (I owe this inscription to Robert Parker).
- 53 De Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 432–444; Dietrich Huff, *Archaeological Evidence of Zoroastrian Funerary Practices*, in: Michael Stausberg (ed.), *Zoroastrian Rituals in Context*,

Herodotus ends the section on Persian religion with a comparison between the Magi and Egyptian priests: ‘the Magi distinguish themselves considerably from the other people and, especially, from the priests in Egypt’ (1.140.2) in that they kill all kinds of living creatures, especially ants, snakes and birds, the *khrafstra*, unlike the Egyptian priests who did not kill any living creature except for sacrifice. At this point, Herodotus’ information is correct, and this Zoroastrian attitude to animals can still be observed today.⁵⁴ Although Herodotus does not explicitly reflect upon Greek priests, his detailed attention to the Magi and to Egyptian priests, here and elsewhere in his work, suggests that their positions must have struck him as something extraordinary.

It is time to conclude this section. If we now remind ourselves of the definition of pluralism, where does Herodotus stand? Evidently, he is not in the position to regulate, accommodate or facilitate religious diversity. But he certainly recognises religious diversity. It is typical of Burkert that he looked at Herodotus’ description of the sacrifice from a Greek perspective and somewhat neglected other aspects of Persian religion, such as funerary practices or the role of the Magi,⁵⁵ but we should also note that this is the first, fairly detailed description of a Persian sacrifice that we have.⁵⁶ Herodotus was not a modern anthropologist, but often a very good observer. Moreover, he is remarkably neutral and only rarely comments negatively on

Leiden: Brill, 2004, 593–630; St John Simpson – Theya Molleson, Old Bones Overturned. New Evidence for Funerary Practices from the Sasanian Empire, in: Alexandra Fletcher *et al.* (eds.), *Regarding the Dead: Human Remains in the British Museum*, London: The British Museum, 2014, 77–90; Michele Minardi, The Zoroastrian Funerary Building of Angka Malaya, *Topoi* 21 (2017), 11–49. Herodotus’ report that the Persians cover the dead bodies with wax before burial has not been confirmed by literature or archaeology and, therefore, seems doubtful.

54 De Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 338–342 (with older bibliography); Richard Foltz, Zoroastrian Attitudes toward Animals, *Society and Animals* 18 (2010), 367–378.

55 This is well argued and illustrated by Andreas Schwab, *Fremde Religion in Herodots “Historien”. Religiöse Mehrdimensionalität bei Persern und Ägyptern*, Stuttgart: Steiner, 2020. For the Magi, see most recently Antonio Panaino, Erodoto, i Magi e la storia religiosa iranica, in: Robert Rollinger *et al.* (eds.), *Herodot und das Persische Weltreich*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011, 343–370; Kai Trampedach, Die Priester der Despoten. Herodots persische *Magoi*, in: Hilmar Klinkott – Norbert Kramer (eds.), *Zwischen Assur und Athen. Altorientalisches in den Historien Herodots*, Stuttgart: Steiner, 2017, 197–218; Tuplin, Heartland and Periphery, 40–42; Henkelman, Practice of Worship, 2.1244–1247.

56 Cf. Mateusz Kłagisz, Indo-Iranian Animal Offerings in the Light of the *Essai sur la Nature et la fonction du Sacrifice* by Hubert and Mauss, *Aram* 29 (2017), 15–33.

other cultures, with some exceptions such as the killing of animals by the Magi where he observes that this custom is as it had originated and should remain like it, or where he states that he does not admire the Scythians in most respects (4.46.2).

In general, Herodotus was what we would call today a relativist, someone who does not consider one culture better than another and implies that he did not consider one religion to be better than another.⁵⁷ This does not mean of course that he would have changed his Greek ideas for Persian or Egyptian ones, but in the modern world he would perhaps have been a pluralist. He can even let Xerxes speak of Greeks ‘sacrificing in their own manner’ (7.54), thus suggesting that the Persians were conscious of the difference in sacrificing, just as he was himself. And indeed, the Persians were conscious of the gods of other peoples and mostly respected them,⁵⁸ but they were not pluralists. We can see from the Persepolis Fortification Tablets that the Persepolis administration did not fund the cults of subject peoples resident in Fars, but only the Iranian and Elamite divinities.⁵⁹ And when the Persians felt it necessary, they did not refrain from destroying temples of foreign divinities.⁶⁰

57 John Gould, *Herodotus*, London: St. Martin’s Press, 1989, 95; Tim Rood, Herodotus and Foreign Lands, in: Dewald – Marincola, *Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, 290–305.

58 Amélie Kuhrt, The Problem of Achaemenid “Religious Policy”, in: Brigitte Gronenberg et al. (eds.), *Die Welt der Götterbilder*, Berlin – New York: De Gruyter, 2007, 117–142; Tuplin, Heartland and Periphery, 28.

59 Amélie Kurth, Can We Understand how the Persians Perceived “Other” Gods / “the Gods of Others”?, *Arch. f. Religionsgesch.* 15 (2014), 149–165 at 151; note that the Tablets have not been considered at this point by Angus M. Bowie, *Herodotus, Histories VIII*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 143; see also Anne Fitzpatrick-McKinley, Continuity between Assyrian and Persian Policies toward the Cults of Their Subjects, in: Diana Edelman et al. (eds.), *Religion in the Achaemenid Persian Empire*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016, 137–171.

60 *OGIS* 54 (temple belongings from Egypt carried away by Persians); Pierluigi Tozzi, Per la storia della politica religiosa degli Achemenidi: Distruzioni persiane de templi greci agli inizi del V secolo, *Rivista Storica Italiana* 89 (1977), 18–32; Gauthier Tolini, Les sanctuaires de Babylonie à l’époque achéménide. Entre légitimation, soumission et révoltes, *Topoi* 19 (2014), 123–180, at 167–169; Eduard Rung, The Burning of Greek Temples by the Persians and Greek War Propaganda, in: Krzysztof Ulanowski (ed.), *The Religious Aspects of War in the Ancient Near East, Greece and Rome*, Leiden: Brill, 2016, 166–179; Tuplin, Heartland and Periphery, 25–30; in general, Robartus J. van der Spek, Cyrus the Greatw, Exiles, and Foreign Gods: A Comparison of Assyrian and Persian Policies on Subject Nations, in: Michael Kozuh et al. (eds.), *Extraction and Control: Studies in Honor of Matthew W. Stolper*, Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2014, 233–264.

Nevertheless, on the whole the Persians were fairly tolerant. Herodotus, then, lived in a world that was not pluralistic but still practised diversity.

There remains one last point in this section. In Herodotus' time there was not yet a fixed term to denote deviant religious behaviour, although the terminology of magic as such behaviour was on the rise. One could of course transgress religious norms, commit *ἀσέβεια*, but there was not a negative term like superstition with which the West long disqualified many behaviours and ideas of its colonial subjects or peasants in its own countries. Such a term, however, originated in Greece in the second half of the fourth century when in his *Characters* Theophrastus wrote his sketch of the *Δεισιδαίμων*, usually translated as 'The Superstitious Man', that is, the man who 'if a weasel runs across his path he will not proceed on his journey until someone else has covered the ground or he has thrown three stones over his head ... If a mouse nibbles through a bag of barley he goes to the expounder of sacred law and asks what he should do; and if the answer is that he should give it to the tanner to sew up he disregards the advice and performs an apotropaic sacrifice ... If ever he observes a man wreathed with garlic <eating> the offerings at the crossroads, he goes away and washes from head to toe, then calls for priestesses and tells them to purify him with a squill or a puppy.' (*Char.* 16, tr. Diggle). Evidently, this concerns someone who takes certain aspects of his religion all too seriously.

The term *δεισιδαίμων* had started in a neutral key to denote a person of conventional piety, but with Theophrastus it began to become less favourable, if not wholly depreciatory.⁶¹ The reason for this development is not really clear, but his contemporary Menander also wrote a comedy called *Δεισιδαίμων*, which must have made fun of the same type of behaviour, as one of the fragments mentions a man who sees an omen in the snapping of his right shoe strap. Menander even says that those who take omens from birds, seers presumably, call such people 'effeminate'.⁶² More or less contemporaneously, the Attic historian Philochoros (FGrH 328 F 135b) explained

61 See the references in James Diggle, *Theophrastus, Characters*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 349, but add Samson Eitrem, *Zur Deisidämonie, Symbolae Osloenses* 31 (1955), 155–169.

62 Menander F 106 Kassel-Austin (shoe strap), F 109 = Photius o 243 Theod.: ἄλλοι Μένανδρος τὸν γυναικῶδη καὶ κατὰ θεὸν καὶ βάρηλον and o 245: ἄλλοι τοῦτ'· τοὺς δεισιδαίμονας ἐκάλουν οἰωνίζομενοι. Μένανδρος Δεισιδαίμωνι. Menander and Philochoros have not been taken into account by Dale Martin, *Inventing Superstition*, Cambridge MA – London: Harvard University Press, 2004.

the cowardly attitude of Nicias at Syracuse regarding a lunar eclipse from ‘inexperience or δεισιδαιμονία’. In other words, we suddenly see towards the end of the fourth century a development which looked unfavourably at all too religious behaviour – a development that probably was caused by the philosophical critique of traditional religious ideas and practices.

Robert Parker has rightly noted the contempt in which purifiers and seers were held at that time, but it is clear that their clients were looked down upon as well. More importantly, Parker also observes that this is the first time that a word emerged to stigmatise those with religious practices that were deemed foolish or even impious.⁶³ It was a word that could now create diversity between us, the enlightened, and them, the superstitious ones. It is the same development we will observe in Rome to which we now turn. However, whilst Herodotus looked at another religion, we will now look at a differentiation within Roman religion.

2. Diversity in the Roman Republic

It is well known that we owe our term ‘religion’ to Roman *religio*, but it is less familiar how and why. Let us therefore take a quick look at its meaning and usage in the Republic until the imperial cult changed the character of the religion of Rome and its subject cities and peoples. *Religio* is the most important Roman term to denote the right religious practices and feelings. Yet, for a better understanding of Roman attitudes towards religion in the later Republic we should not only analyse the meanings of *religio* but also take into account its deviant, excessive form, *superstitio*, and, moreover, look at actual Roman practices. It is only in this way that we can gain a better insight into the Roman way of dealing with religious diversity.

The first aspect I would like to note is that the words *religio* and *religiosus* clearly became more popular in the first century BC in comparison with the previous century. Whereas Plautus (c. 254–184), who has a considerable oeuvre, uses these terms only twice, Ennius (c. 239–c. 169) only once, Terence (195/185–159?), with a smaller oeuvre, 4 times and Accius (c. 170–c. 90) two times, Lucretius (c. 99–c. 55) uses them 14 times,⁶⁴ Livy (64/59 BC–AD 12/17) about 170 times and Cicero (106–43) even more than 500 times. The latter

⁶³ R. Parker, *Miasma*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983, 206.

⁶⁴ Cf. Jean Salem, *Comment traduire „religio“ chez Lucrèce?*, *Les Etudes Classiques* 62 (1994), 3–26.

two have, of course, a considerable oeuvre, but still, the difference seems clear. This increase in popularity can hardly be separated from the growing interest in the rationalisation and textualisation of religion in the first century BC among the upper class.⁶⁵ But what does *religio* exactly mean?

In fact, both its etymology and meaning are still debated. The recent etymological dictionary by de Vaan calls the connection with *ligare* uncertain,⁶⁶ but he does not discuss the more persuasive connection with *relegere*, which some scholars nowadays prefer with Émile Benveniste (1902–1976).⁶⁷ With regards to its meaning, recent investigations have made real progress.⁶⁸ It is clear that in the early stages *religio* already had several meanings. It could mean ‘scruples, inhibition, anxiety’ as in Plautus (*Curc.* 350) and Terence (*Ter. An.* 722–30 and 939–41, *Heaut.* 727), and ‘religious scruples’, as in Plautus (*Asin.* 782; *Merc.* 881) and Accius (fr. 136–37, 421 Warmington = 281–82, 531 Dangel), but also ‘cult’, as in Ennius (fr. 11 Goldberg/Manuwald = Euhemerus *FGrH/BNJ* 63 F 23). In Cicero, our most important source of

65 For this process, see Jörg Rüpke, *Religion in Republican Rome: rationalization and ritual change*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012; Duncan MacRae, *Legible Religion*, Cambridge MA – London: Harvard University Press, 2016.

66 Michiel de Vaan, *Latin Etymological Dictionary*, Leiden: Brill, 2008, 341.

67 Émile Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, 2 vols, Paris: Minuit, 1969, 2.265–279, followed by Godo Lieberg, *Considerazioni sull’etmologia e sul significato di religio*, *RFIC* 102 (1974) 34–57; Roberth Muth, *Vom Wesen römischer “religio”*, in: *ANRW* II.16.1 (1978), 290–354, at 342–352; Giovanni Casadio, *Religio versus Religion*, in: Jitse Dijkstra et al. (eds.), *Myths, Martyrs, and Modernity: Studies in the History of Religions in Honour of Jan N. Bremmer*, Leiden: Brill, 2010, 301–326, at 306. The etymology was probably debated at an early stage, as the connection with *relegere* seems presupposed by TrRF Adesp. F 164 Sauer (= Gellius 4.9.1): *religentem esse <ted> oportet religiosus ne f<u>as* and Cicero, ND 2.72 (*sunt dicti religiosi ex relegendo*), whereas the one with *religare* seems alluded to in Nigidius Figulus, fr. 4 Swoboda (= Gellius 4.9.2): *Quocirca ‘religiosus’ is appellabatur, qui nimia et superstitiosa religione sese alligaverat, eaque res vitio assignabatur* and in Lucr. 1.932 *religionum animum nodis exsoluere pergo*; one with *relinquere* is advocated by Servius Sulpicius (fr. 3, ed. Franz P. Bremer, *Iurisprudentiae Antehadrianae*, 2 vols, Leipzig: Teubner, 1898–1901, 1.241 = fr. 14, ed. PE. Huschke, *Iurisprudentiae anteiustinianae reliquiae*, 2 vols, Leipzig: Vieweg – Teubner, 1908–19116 = Macrobius 3.3.8): *religionem esse dictam tradidit quae propter sanctitatem aliquam remota ac seposita a nobis sit, quasi a relinquenda dicta*. For the early enthusiasm for etymology as a tool to explain religion, cf. Robert Schröter, *Die varronische Etymologie*, in: *Entretiens sur l’Antiquité Classique* 9 (1963), 79–116; Macrae, *Legible Religion*, 38–40.

68 The most detailed analysis of Republican usage, with the fullest bibliography, is now Barton – Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 15–52, although they worryingly group together really early passages with those in Livy; but see also Lieberg, *Considerazioni sull’etmologia*’.

the first century BC,⁶⁹ we find the earlier meanings of *religio*, but he adds a connection of *religio* with *metus*, ‘fear’, like Lucretius.⁷⁰ However, Cicero’s more influential idea of *religio* was that it was a system of religious observances that can be regulated and so he speaks about a *constitutio religionum* (*Leg.* 2.10.23) and *leges de religione* (*Leg.* 2.7.17). It is this usage that will be taken up by the Christians in the later Empire and, eventually, will lead to our modern term ‘religion’.⁷¹

From an early stage, however, religious observances could also be seen as something negative, as in the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (c. 80 BC) *religio* occurs among a number of negative qualities, such as flattery, fear of death and the passion for power.⁷² This idea of *religio* as a negative quality also found its expression in another couple of Roman terms: *superstitio* and *superstitiosus*, usually translated with ‘superstition/ous’. For example, consider the praise of a deceased wife for her *stud[ium religionis] sine superstitione*, ‘pursuit of *religio* (here clearly positive) without *superstitio*’.⁷³ It is noteworthy that *superstitiosus* already occurs in Plautus and Ennius, whereas *superstitio* does not appear before Cicero’s orations against Verres of 70 BC. Therefore, it does not seem immediately likely that the noun was already coined in the

69 For Cicero, see also Lucio Troiani, *La religione e Cicerone*, *Riv. Stor. Ital.* 96 (1984), 920–952; Arina Bragova, *Cicero on the Gods and Roman Religious Practices*, *Studia Antiqua et Archaeologica* 23 (2013), 303–313; María E. Cairo, *Religio* como elemento central de la identidad romana en *De divinatione* de Cicerón, *Quaderni Urbinati di cultura classica* 143 (2016), 75–96; Claudia Santi, *Religionum sanctitates. A proposito di Cicerone*, *De natura deorum* II 5, *Kosmos e Chaos* 16 (2015), 1–15 (<http://www.chaosekosmos.it/>, accessed 17. 11. 2019); John P.F. Wynne, *Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion: on the nature of the gods and on divination*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

70 Cicero, *De inventione* 2.22.66: *Religionem eam, quae in metu et caerimonia deorum sit, appellat*; Lucr. 1.62–79, 5.71–75.

71 Cf. Casadio, *Religio* versus Religion’ (with earlier bibliography); see also Manuel de Souza, *Une inversion de la norme religieuse à la fin de la République*, in: Bernadette Cabouret – Marie-Odile Laforge (eds.), *La norme religieuse dans l’Antiquité*, Paris: Le Bocard, 2011, 25–36. For the semantic development of ‘religion’ from antiquity to the modern age, see Ernst Feil, *Religio*, 4 vols, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986–20122, supplemented and corrected for the late Middle Ages and Reformation by Niels Reeh, *Inter-religious Conflict, Translation, and the Usage of the Early Modern Notion of “Religion”*, *Journal of Religion in Europe* 13 (2020), 45–69.

72 *Rhet Her.* 2.21.24: *‘Quid amor?’ inquiet quispiam, ‘quid ambitio? quid religio? quid metus mortis? quid imperii cupiditas? quid denique alia permulta?’*.

73 *CIL* 6.1527 a.30–31: *stu[di]i religionis] / sine superstitione*. For the date, ca. 18–2 BC, see Nicholas Horsfall, *Some Problems in the “Laudatio Turiae”*, *BICS* 30 (1983), 85–98, at 93f.

first half of the second century BC, as suggested by Richard Gordon.⁷⁴ On the contrary, it is more probable that, in thinking about the proper usage of *religio*, Cicero or a contemporary coined the noun *superstitio* as its useful antithesis. Whatever the case may be, it is an odd but intriguing fact that neither the etymology nor the semantic development of *superstitiosus* has yet been satisfactorily explained.⁷⁵

We move onto safer ground with numbers. Whereas we find *superstitio/osus* 3 times in Plautus, twice in Ennius, and once in Pacuvius (c. 220–c. 130 BC), the adjective and noun occur 50 times in Cicero but only 2 times in Vergil (70–19 BC) and 8 times in Livy (c. 59 BC–c. 19 AD). Once again, Cicero has the biggest number of references by far: he was clearly interested in problems of religion.

So what does this ‘superstition’ entail? Here we can follow Richard Gordon in his detailed discussion. He shows that *superstitio* can mean several things, none positive. It often denotes excessive religious apprehensions or fears, but it can also characterise the religion of others, such as the Egyptian worship of cats and dogs, or the religion of the Jews. In a way, it represents the flip side of the *religio* of the Roman elite, and especially that of the noble families represented in the Senate. The practitioners of that elite religion represented, in their vision, the qualities of courage, moderation and steadiness, whereas the ‘superstitious’ masses displayed the mentality of (old) women,⁷⁶ just as we have seen with Menander (above). It was the maintenance of the right civic religion that would also guarantee the position of the elite. Elite representatives like Cicero may well have felt that if people would start to question the traditional worship of the gods, the next step would be to question the fragile hegemony of the elite itself.⁷⁷ That is why it was of cardinal impor-

74 Richard Gordon, *Superstitio*, Superstition and Religious Repression in the Late Roman Republic and Principate (100 BCE–300 CE), in: Steve A. Smith – Alan Knight (eds.), *The Religion of Fools? Superstition Past and Present* (*Past & Present*, Suppl. 3), Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2008, 72–94, at 81.

75 But see Laurens F. Janssen, Die Bedeutungsentwicklung von *superstitio/superstes*, *Mnemosyne* IV 28 (1975/2), 135–188, at 172 (*superstitio* a back formation of the adjective); see also Denise Grodzynski, *Superstitio*, *Revue des Études Anciennes* 76 (1974), 36–60; Michele R. Salzman, *Superstitio* in the Codex Theodosianus and the Persecution of Pagans, *Vigiliae Christianae* 41 (1987), 172–188; Jörg Rüpke, *Religious Deviance in the Roman World: superstition or individuality?*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

76 Women: Livy 39.15.9 and 16.1. Old women: Cicero, *ND* 2.70 with Pease *ad loc.* (many references).

77 Cf. Cicero, *De legibus* 2.7.15–16, *ND* 1.42.118, *De divinatione* 2.12.28.

tance to maintain the traditional rituals, whatever one's personal beliefs.⁷⁸ *Superstitio*, then, served to characterise the 'Other' and to keep the imagined community of their own elite group together.

Although *superstitio* created diversity between the inferior 'them' and the superior 'us', was it just rhetoric or did this idea have practical effects? In other words, how did the elite Romans treat new cults within and religious communities outside Rome: respectfully, with tolerance, repression or in some other way? Regarding their own community, we know that the Roman elite treated the Bacchus worshippers severely in the aftermath of the famous Bacchanalia scandal of 186 BC.⁷⁹ But that was a rather unique event and, apart from the expulsion of the Jews and worshippers of Isis in AD 19 under Tiberius and those of Jews and astrologers under Claudius,⁸⁰ the Roman authorities displayed a remarkable tolerance of all kinds of cults. In other words, the elite gave room for diversity in its own city, but what about the other communities and to what extent did this diversity approach pluralism?

At first sight, the situation seems clear when we look at Cicero's brief but telling remark about the status of the religio of other communities. In his concluding argument in the trial against Flaccus (59 BC), he says: 'every community has its own religious observances, Laelius, we ours'.⁸¹ This sounds

78 Thus, persuasively, Peter Brunt, *Philosophy and Religion in the Late Republic*, in: Miriam Griffin – Jonathan Barnes (eds.), *Philosophia Togata*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, 174–198, at 180f.

79 The authoritative study is Jean-Marie Paillier, *Bacchanalia. La repression de 186 av. J.-C. à Rome et en Italie: vestiges, images, tradition*, Rome: École française de Rome, 1988; more recently, Hildegard Cancik-Lindemaier, *Von Atheismus bis Zensur: römische Lektüren in kulturwissenschaftlicher Absicht*, Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2006, 33–49; Pilar Pavón Torrejón, *Y ellas fueron el origen de este mal...* (Liv. 39.15.9): mulieres contra mores en las Bacanales de Livio, *Habis* 39 (2008), 79–95; Julietta Steinhauer, *Dionysian Associations and the Bacchanalian Affair*, in: Fiachra Mac Góráin (ed.), *Dionysus and Rome: Religion and Literature*, Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter, 2020, 133–155.

80 Jews: the evidence has been endlessly discussed; see, most recently, Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem*, London: Allen Lane, 2007, 386–389; Birgit van der Lans, *The Politics of Exclusion. Expulsions of Jews and Others from Rome*, in: Michael Labahn – Outi Lehtipuu (eds.), *People under Power. Early Jewish and Christian Responses to the Roman Empire*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015, 33–77, at 67–71; Heidi Wendt, *Judaica Romana: a rereading of evidence for Judean expulsions from Rome*, *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 6 (2015), 97–126. Isis and astrologers: Bruno Rochette, *Tibère, les cultes étrangers et les astrologues* (Suétone, *Vie de Tibère*, 36), *Les Études Classiques* 69 (2001), 189–194; Pauline Ripat, *Expelling Misconceptions: Astrologers at Rome*, *Class. Philol.* 106 (2011), 115–154.

81 Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 28.69: *Sua cuique civitati religio, Laeli, est, nostra nobis.*

as a fine relativistic observation, many of us might agree with, but the context shows that this is not quite what Cicero means when addressing Laelius, the prosecutor in the trial. He continues, namely, with:

Even when Jerusalem was still standing and the Jews at peace with us, the observances of their religious practices (*sacra*) were incompatible with the majesty of this Empire, the dignity of our name and the institutions of our ancestors. And now that the Jewish nation has shown by armed rebellion what are its feelings for our rule, they are even more so; it has shown how dear it was to the immortal gods by being conquered, farmed out to the tax-collectors and enslaved.⁸²

In other words, yes, other communities may and should have their own religious observances, but ours are superior, witness our victories, whereas those of others could even be incompatible with Roman religious observances.

Yet the idea expressed by Cicero must have been widely shared by the Roman elite, which in general allowed other communities their own religious practices, without interfering.⁸³ Italy itself was no longer a problem, as all inhabitants had received citizenship rights after the Social War (91–88 BC), but they could still continue their traditional religious practices (*sacra*), nay, they were even exhorted to do so by the Roman *pontifices*.⁸⁴ Regarding other communities or peoples, we can profit from a wide-ranging study of Cliff Ando, who has shown that it was Roman policy to urge their subjects that religious practices in the future should continue those of the past; and indeed, the ritual of *evocatio* is no longer attested after 75 BC.⁸⁵ He also notes that the names – indeed, any identification – of the god or gods to

82 Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 28.69, tr. C. Macdonald (Loeb), slightly adapted. For the passage, see the valedictory lecture of Philippe Borgeaud (2011) in his *Exercices d'histoire des religions*, Leiden: Brill, 2016, 172–189 (À chacun son religion). For the situation of the *Pro Flacco*, see Miriam Ben Zeev, The Myth of Cicero's Anti-Judaism, in: Gorge Hasselhoff – Meret Strothmann (eds.), *“Religio licita?” Rom und die Juden*, Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter, 2016, 105–134.

83 The exception to this rule are the prohibitions of human sacrifice in Gaul and North Africa, but these need not concern us here.

84 Festus 146L: *Municipalia sacra uocantur, quae ab initio habuerunt ante ciuitatem Romanam acceptam; quae obseruare eos uoluerunt pontifices, et eo more facere, quo aduissent antiquitus.*

85 This is insufficiently taken into account by John S. Kloppenborg, *Evocatio Deorum* and the Date of Mark, *J. Bibl. Lit.* 124 (2005), 419–450 (with detailed bibliography); Giorgio Ferri, Una testimonianza epigrafica dell'*evocatio*? Su un'iscrizione di *Isaura Vetus*, in: Simona Antolini et al. (eds.), *Giornata di studi in onore di Lidio Gasperini*, Rome: Tored, 2010, 183–194.

whose honour the local rites in question were directed are absent from the available texts. Apparently, the Roman elite had hardly any real interest in the religions of others, but just wanted to make sure of the maintenance of the social order by letting their subject communities continue with their customary practices.⁸⁶ In this respect, they went pretty far in their tolerance, as their treatment of the Judeans shows: these were allowed not to appear in court on Sabbaths and were free from military service because of their dietary laws.⁸⁷

It is time to conclude this section. We can see that in the first century BC the Roman elite increasingly started to reflect about religion and its uses. In the course of this process, it probably also coined a new term, *superstitio*, which denoted the wrong *religio*. Yet they did not translate this rhetoric into action and tolerated a wide variety of new cults outside civic religion. They also allowed their subject cities and peoples to have their own religions and religious practices, sometimes even in a surprisingly generous manner, as in the case of the Judeans. Diversity, then, was no problem for the Roman elite, but it did not go as far as giving new cults the same possibilities as the traditional ones. However tolerant they were, there was a limit. Compared to the Persian Empire, though, the Republic was perhaps somewhat more advanced from a modern perspective, as it tolerated foreign religions and even incorporated some foreign cults in its capital, such as that of the Mater Magna, albeit with several restrictions. Their practices were borne out of indifference rather than pluralism. Yet the effects were not that different in practice from the situation in many modern Western states.

86 Clifford Ando, *The Rites of Others*, in: Jonathan Edmondson – Alison Keith (eds.), *Roman Literary Cultures: Domestic Politics, Revolutionary Poetics, Civic Spectacles*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016, 254–277; note also Rudolf Haensch, *Die hohen Vertreter Roms und die lokalen Kulte. Das Beispiel der kleinasiatischen und griechischsprachigen nordafrikanischen Provinzen*, in: Rubina Raja (ed.), *Contextualising the Sacred in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2017, 63–72.

87 See Benedikt Eckhardt, *Rom und die Juden – ein Kategorienfehler? Zur römischen Sicht auf die Iudaei in später Republik und frühem Prinzipat*, in: Hasselhoff – Strothmann, *Religio licita?*, 13–53 (also with good observations pertaining to our subject). The Roman evidence for Jewish soldiers has been shown to be non-existent, cf. Walter Ameling, *Epigraphische Kleinigkeiten IV*, *ZPE* 210 (2019), 185–193, at 187f.

3. From the Early Empire to Late Antiquity

So far, then, we have seen the development of a discourse of differentiation between acceptable and non-acceptable religious behaviour within the Roman Republic. Yet this discourse did not develop into physical violence by the elite against those it considered to be *superstitiosi*. But how did the diversity tolerated by the Republic develop during the later Principate and Late Antiquity until the emperor Theodosius started to prohibit public pagan rituals in the 390s? Obviously, such a time span allows only a few observations, but the main outline can be sketched with a few examples.

With the arrival of the Principate, Roman religion gradually started to change and that change also had an impact on the subject cities. The disappearing of borders and the safeguarding of land routes and sea lanes created a large Mediterranean network which facilitated the moving of cults and the emergence of new religions.⁸⁸ This new situation has sometimes been characterised as a market place of religions. This metaphor was coined by the already mentioned Peter Berger in 1969 who, when writing about the religious changes in last century stated that ‘As a result, the religious tradition, which previously could be authoritatively imposed, now has to be “marketed”. It must be “sold” to a clientele that is no longer constrained to “buy”’.⁸⁹ In America, Berger’s idea has been adopted primarily by rational choice theorists, such as Rodney Stark (1934–2022) and Roger Finke,⁹⁰ but his ideas have also been followed by historians of the ancient world.⁹¹ And

88 For stimulating studies of this development, see Walter Scheidel, *The Shape of the Roman World: Modelling Imperial Connectivity*, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 27 (2014), 7–32; Greg Woolf, *Empires, Diasporas and the Emergence of Religions*, in: James Carleton Paget – Judith Lieu (eds.), *Christianity in the Second Century. Themes and Developments*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 25–38; Jörg Rüpke, *Pantheon*, Princeton – Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018, 211–363.

89 Peter Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*, London: Faber and Faber, 1969, 137.

90 See, especially, Rodney Stark – Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press, 2000.

91 North, *The Development of Religious Pluralism*; Walter Ameling, “Market-Place” und Gewalt: Die Juden in Alexandrien 38 n.Chr., *Würzb. Jahrb. NF* 27 (2003), 71–123; Roger Beck, *The Religious Market of the Roman Empire: Rodney Stark and Christianity’s pagan competition*, in: Leif Vaage (ed.), *Religious Rivalries in the Early Roman Empire and the Rise of Christianity*, Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006, 233–252; Christoph Auffarth, *Religio migrans. Die “Orientalischen Religionen” im Kontext antiker Religion. Ein theoretisches Modell*, in: Corinne Bonnet et al. (eds.), *Religioni in Contatto nel mondo antico. Modalità di diffusione e processi di interferenza*, Rome: Fabrizio Serra

indeed, there can be little doubt that the first centuries opened up the religious market of the Roman Empire, and the opportunities thus created were eagerly taken up by people I like to call religious entrepreneurs. We know several of them quite well, such as the apostle Paul or Lucian's Peregrinus and Alexander of Abonoteichos.⁹²

It is especially the inspiring Lived Ancient Religion équipe of Jörg Rüpke in Erfurt, which has explored the possibilities of individuals to make their own religious choices and to even create their own cults and religion.⁹³ It is indeed important to have an eye for the agency of the individual in the religious world. Yet we should also not lose sight of the established elites with their civic cults and religions. During this period, people would see in their cities the temples of their local gods and the celebration of their festivals, with the upper classes worshipping, sacrificing and supervising. In the course of time, though, people would also witness the rise of a new cult, that of the emperor and his family.⁹⁴ Now in the context of the idea of a 'free market' of religions, it is important to stress, I suggest, that the imperial cult in general became more attractive for local elites than their own traditional cults, as the prestige of the emperor gave status and, occasionally, privileges. Consequently, as the ruler cult increased in importance, the religious market became skewed in its advantage, at least as regards the investments and attention of the local elites. Yes, there was a market place, but some cults were more equal than others.

At the same time, we can witness another major change: the emergence of Christianity, which was no longer a cult, like the one of Isis, or an ethnic

Editore 2008, 333–363 and Reichsreligion und Weltreligion, in: Cancik – Rüpke (eds.), *Die Religion des Imperium Romanum. Koine und Konfrontationen*, 37–54.

92 Cf. Jan N. Bremmer, Lucian on Peregrinus and Alexander of Abonoteichos: a sceptical view of two religious entrepreneurs, in: Richard L. Gordon *et al.* (eds.), *Beyond Priesthood: Religious Entrepreneurs and Innovators in the Roman Empire*, Berlin – Boston, De Gruyter, 2017, 47–76.

93 Jörg Rüpke (ed.), *The Individual in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; Gordon, *Beyond Priesthood*; Janico Albrecht *et al.*, Religion in the Making: The Lived Ancient Religion approach, *Religion* 48 (2018), 1–26.

94 For nuanced, recent discussions, see Walter Ameling, Der kleinasiatische Kaiserkult und die Öffentlichkeit, in: Martin Ebner – Elisabeth Esch-Wermeling (eds.), *Kaiserkult, Wirtschaft und spectacula*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011, 15–54; Stefan Pfeiffer, Das Opfer für das Heil des Kaisers und die Frage nach der Praxis von Kaiserkult und Kaiserverehrung in Kleinasien, in: Thomas Schmeller *et al.* (eds.), *Die Offenbarung des Johannes. Kommunikation im Konflikt*, Freiburg: Herder, 2013, 9–31.

religion, like that of the Judeans, but a religion cutting across peoples and classes. At first, the Roman elite resorted to the same vocabulary against these religious deviants as they had employed since the first century BC. That is why Pliny, Tacitus and Suetonius all use the term *superstitio* in connection with the Christians,⁹⁵ but before long we start to see a different qualification.

Let us fast forward to Scili, a small town in North Africa, nowadays Tunisia. On July 17, AD 180, the proconsul Saturninus interrogated a group of Christians and told them: ‘if you return to your senses, you can obtain the pardon of our lord the emperor’.⁹⁶ It is noteworthy here that in this oldest Latin martyr Act, even the oldest Latin Christian text, the Roman governor does not use the term *superstitio*, but apparently thought that the Christians lacked a *bona mens*. In fact, this is a recurring pagan accusation in the martyrs’ Acts, where we frequently find the vocabulary of *dementia*, *furor*, *μανία* and *ἀπόνοια*, but here attested for the very first time.⁹⁷ Yet the idea is clearly older, as in Livy’s account of the Bacchanalia scandal the consul opposes the *furor* of the *superstitiosi* (Bacchus followers) to the *bona mens* of the Assembly,⁹⁸ and Pliny (10.96.4) already speaks of the *amentia* of the Christians. The idea of the *bona mens* is still invoked by Galerius in his famous

95 Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96.8; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44.4; Suetonius, Nero 16.2; Laurens F. Janssen, *Superstitio and the Persecution of the Christians*, *Vigiliae Christianae* 33 (1979), 131–159; Dieter Lührmann, *Superstitio: die Beurteilung des frühen Christentums durch die Römer*, *Theol. Zs.* 42 (1986), 193–213; Asher Ovadiah – Sonia Mucznik, *Deisidaimonia, Superstitio and Religio: Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Early Christian Concepts*, *Liber Annuus* 64 (2014), 417–440.

96 *Passio Scilitanorum* 1: *Potestis indulgentiam domni nostril imperatoris promereri, si ad bonam mentem redeatis*. For Saturninus, see *Prosopographia Imperii Romani* 2 V 633; Anthony R. Birley, *Persecutors and Martyrs in Tertullian’s Africa*, in: Dido F. Clark *et al.* (eds.), *The Later Roman Empire Today*, London: Institute of Archaeology, 1993, 37–68, at 38. For the *Passio*, see Jan N. Bremmer, *Imitation of Christ in the Passion of the Scilitan Martyrs?*, in: Anja Bettenworth – Marco Formisano – Dietrich Boschung (eds.), *For Example: Martyrdom and Imitation in Early Christian Texts and Art*, Munich: Brill, 2020, 143–169; Vincent Hunink, *Acta Martyrum Scillitanorum. A Literary Commentary*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2021.

97 Cf. *Pass. Scilitanorum* 8: *Nolite huius dementiae esse participes*; *Pass. Cypriani* 4.1: *nec te (Cyprianus) secta felicissimorum temporum suorum obdurati furoris ad caerimonias populi Romani colendas bonamque mentem(!) habendam tanto tempore potuerunt (viz. the emperors) revocare*; *Pass. Marcelli* 1: *Quo furore usus es ut proceres sacramentum et talia loquereris*; *Mart. Agapae* 3.7 (cf. also 4.2 and 5.1); *Mart. Pionii* 10.20.2, 3; *Mart. Irenaei* 3.4; *Mart. Eupli* 2.3; *Pass. Abitinensium martyrurum* 10.6; *Mart. Phileae* 29.

98 Livy 39.16.5: *optare igitur unusquisque vestrum debet, ut bona mens suis omnibus fuerit. si quem libido, si furor in illum gurgitem abripiet...*

311 tolerance edict of Serdica, albeit for the very last time.⁹⁹ Evidently, we find here a widely shared idea of the Roman ruling class regarding those they considered to be religious deviants.

However, Speratus, the leader of the Christians, answered that they had never done anything wrong and always held the emperor in honour. At which Saturninus replied: ‘we are too observing our religious duties (*religiosi*), and our religion (*religio*) is honest and straightforward (*simplex*)’.¹⁰⁰ To illustrate this *religio*, he mentions the swearing of the oath by the genius of the emperor and the offering of prayers for the emperor’s health. In other words, he did not ask the Christians to deny their faith, but, simply, to comply with the Roman rituals. Their refusal to do so, was eventually the reason of their execution. But the Christians did not mind. ‘Today we will be martyrs in heaven’,¹⁰¹ one of them exclaimed, before being led to their execution.

Obviously, the report is a summary of what was said during the trial, just as trials are summarised in modern newspapers or television news shows. But there is no reason to question the words of the governor. It is one of the few moments where we can catch a glimpse of the personal ideas of a member of the Roman upper class and it is revealing. Saturninus represents himself as a traditional worshipper of an honest religion. It seems important to note that he was not alone in this as a representative of the ruling class. Pliny and Hilarianus, the governor who condemned Perpetua and her group to death, were not that different.¹⁰² Most of the members of the senatorial class were more or less traditional, rather than conservative, in their religious beliefs and actions.¹⁰³ Tellingly, Saturninus gives as the main reason for his judgment that

99 Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 34: ... *ut etiam Christiani, qui parentum suorum reliquerant sectam, ad bonas mentes redirent*, cf. Vessalina Vachkova – Dimitar Dimitrov (eds.), *Serdica Edict (311 AD): concepts and realizations of the idea of religious toleration*, Sofia: Tangra TanNakRa, 2014.

100 *Pass. Scilitanorum* 3: *et nos religiosi sumus et simplex est religio nostra*, cf. Jan den Boeft – Jan N. Bremmer, *Notiunculae martyrologicae, Vigiliae Christianae* 35 (1981), 43–56, at 43–45 for the proper translation and interpretation of these words.

101 *Pass. Scilitanorum* 15: *Hodie martyres in caelis sumus*.

102 See James Rives, *The Piety of a Persecutor*, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4 (1996), 1–25 and Walter Ameling, *Pliny: the Piety of a Persecutor*, in: Dijkstra, *Myths, Martyrs, and Modernity*, 271–299.

103 See the authoritative study of Werner Eck, *Religion und Religiosität in der soziopolitischen Führungsschicht der Hohen Kaiserzeit*, in: *id.* (ed.), *Religion und Gesellschaft in der römischen Kaiserzeit*, Cologne – Vienna: Böhlau, 1989, 15–51; Alexander Weiss, *Soziale Elite und Christentum. Studien zu ordo-Angehörigen unter den frühen Christen*, Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter, 2015, 188–208.

the Christians lived in the Christian manner and had refused to return to the Roman customs.¹⁰⁴ The upper class would retain its ways until Constantine, and that explains partially why we hardly find a single Christian senator until his rule.¹⁰⁵ Another factor must have been the risk carried by conversion. Indeed, it is rarely observed that one of the most important consequences of Constantine's rule was the fact that senators now could show themselves to be Christians without fear for repercussions, which indeed a number of them soon did.¹⁰⁶

The appearance in Latin of the Greek word *martyr* points to another aspect of this trial: the arrest and execution of people for their religious conviction.¹⁰⁷ In fact, Saturninus was the first Roman governor to execute followers of Christ in Africa,¹⁰⁸ but that did not mean that he really wanted to do so. He had offered them a month to think things over, but this had been flatly refused by the Christians in their, as Geoffrey de Ste. Croix (1910–2000) phrased it, pigheadedness, *obstinatio*, and that is why they were condemned to death.¹⁰⁹ It is important to note that the polytheist Romans actually introduced this habit of executing for religious reasons, as some scholars, the famous German Egyptologist Jan Assman in particular, have argued that religious violence is typical of monotheism.¹¹⁰ This point of view, though,

104 *Pass. Scilitanorum* 14: *ceteros ritu christiano se vivere confessos, quoniam oblata sibi facultate ad Romanorum morem redeundi obstinanter perseveraverunt, gladio animadverti placet.*

105 For the altercation in the *Passio Scilitanorum*, see also Clifford Ando, Religious Affiliation and Political Belonging from Cicero to Theodosius, *Acta Classica* 64 (2021), 9–28, which is relevant for this section as a whole.

106 As conclusively shown by Timothy D. Barnes, Statistics and the Conversion of the Roman Aristocracy, *J. Rom. Stud.* 85 (1995), 135–147; see also Michele R. Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy*, Cambridge, MA – London: Harvard University Press, 2008; Rüpke, *Pantheon*, 375.

107 For the first occurrence of the term *martyr*, see Jan N. Bremmer, The *Apocalypse of Peter* as the First Christian Martyr Text: Its Date, Provenance and Relationship with 2 *Peter*, in: Jörg Frey et al. (eds.), *Second Peter in New Perspective: Radboud Prestige Lectures by Jörg Frey*, Leiden: Brill, 2019, 75–98.

108 Tertullian, *Scap.* 3.4: *Vigellius Saturninus, qui primus hic gladium in nos egit, lumina amisit*

109 *Pass. Scilitanorum* 14: *obstinanter perseveraverunt*, to be added to the references in: Geoffrey E. M. de Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, & Orthodoxy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 146.

110 Cf. Jan Assmann, *Die Mosaïsche Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus*, Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2003, trans. The Mosaic Distinction or The Price of Monotheism, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009; *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008 and *From Akhenaten to*

overlooks the fact that east of the Euphrates we also have well documented examples of persecuting polytheists, as we can observe even today, looking at Myanmar, India and Sri Lanka.¹¹¹ But why did the Roman authorities proceed to executions and drop their century old tolerance?

Strangely, the answer is not clear, as we cannot identify a specific imperial edict or measure that did condemn the Christians, although it is hard to imagine that there had never been any.¹¹² Yet less than half a century after Nero's attack on the Christians for supposed arson, we find them being condemned for the name 'Christian' in the famous correspondence of Pliny with the Emperor Trajan (10.96.2), but also in the more or less contemporaneous Christian treatises *1 Peter* (4.15) and Hermas' *Shepherd* (*Vis.* 3.2.1, *Sim.* 9.28.3–4).¹¹³ Moreover, around AD 200, give or take some decades, we find persecutions mentioned by Irenaeus in Gaul (*Against heresies* 4.33.9), Tertullian in Carthage,¹¹⁴ and Clement of Alexandria,¹¹⁵ that is, widespread in the Empire. The geographical and chronological spread surely supports the idea of regular, albeit more local persecutions. Admittedly, these authors may have exaggerated the sufferings, but with no basis in reality their rhetoric would not have worked. It is therefore hard to accept recent attempts to deny the reality of these reports or of trying to minimise their effects.¹¹⁶

Moses: Ancient Egypt and Religious Change, Cairo – New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2014.

111 Jan N. Bremmer, *Religious Violence and its Roots: A View from Antiquity*, *Asdiwal* 6 (2011) 71–79, updated in: Wendy Mayer – Chris de Wet (eds.), *Reconceiving Religious Conflict: New Views from the Formative Centuries of Christianity*, London – New York: Routledge, 2018, 30–42; see also René Bloch, *Ancient Jewish Diaspora. Essays on Hellenism*, Leiden: Brill, 2023, 293–313 ('Polytheism and Monotheism in Antiquity: On Jan Assmann's Critique of Monotheism'),

112 Theo Mayer-Maly, *Der rechtsgeschichtliche Gehalt der "Christenbriefe" von Plinius und Trajan*, *Studia et Documenta Historiae et Iuris* 22 (1956), 311–328.

113 Date of 1 Peter: David G. Horrell, *Becoming Christian. Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, 164–210; Otto Zwierlein, *Petrus in Rom*, Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter, 2010, 308–315. Date Hermas: Andrew Gregory, *Disturbing Trajectories: 1 Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas and the Development of Early Roman Christianity*, in: Peter Oakes (ed.), *Rome in the Bible and the Early Church*, Carlisle: Cumbria, 2002, 142–166.

114 Henricus Hoppenbrouwers, *Recherches sur la terminologie du martyre de Tertullien à Lactance*, Nijmegen: Dekker & Van de Vegt, 1961, 5–7.

115 Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 2.125.2; Paed. 2.73.3; *Strom.* 4.28.4–5 and 78.1–2, 6.1.4 and 167.4, 7.1.1.

116 Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, New York: HarperCollins, 2013; Brent Shaw, *The Myth of the Neronian Persecution*, *J. Roman Stud.* 105 (2015), 73–100, to be read with Birgit van der Lans – Jan N. Bremmer, *Tacitus and the Persecution of the Christians: An*

Just as somebody nowadays visiting a Christmas market in Berlin, crossing a bridge in London or sitting at a terrace in Paris may wonder about the possibility of a terrorist attack, so many a Christian must have wondered about his or her safe being, the more so, as we know from the modern witchcraft persecutions of around 1500 that persecutions were often used to settle personal and local scores.¹¹⁷

This situation of incidental persecutions changed dramatically in AD 249, when the emperor Decius issued an edict obliging everybody to sacrifice to the gods, and his example would be followed by Valerian and Diocletian until Constantine.¹¹⁸ We now see the Roman state using all its power to enforce a certain kind of religious uniformity: no tolerance of diversity, no pluralism here! Yet we still find a remarkable reticence of the Roman state to execute. Less than a decade later, the emperors Valerian and Gallienus issued a similar edict. As with Decius, the Christians are not mentioned as the prime target, but the emperors must have known from his experience what the outcome would be. But even so, there is no idea that all Christians needed to be executed. Take the example of Bishop Cyprian of Carthage: [The judge] read the decision from a tablet: 'It is decided that Thascius Cyprian should die by the sword'; Cyprian the bishop said: 'Thanks be to god'. After his sentence the community of brothers said: 'Let us be beheaded with him'. One would have thought this an excellent chance for the government to get rid of the other

Invention of Tradition?, *Eirene* 53 (2017), 299–331, John G. Cook, Chrestiani, Christiani, **Χριστιανοί**: a Second Century Anachronism?, *Vigiliae Christianae* 74 (2020) 237–264 and Mischa Meier, *Die nderonische Christenverfolgung und ihre Kontexte*, Heidelberg: Winter, 2022; Éric Rebillard, Popular Hatred Against Christians: The Case of North Africa in the Second and Third Centuries, *Arch. f. Religionsgesch.* 16 (2015), 283–310.

117 See, for example, James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997; James Corke-Webster, *By Whom Were Early Christians Persecuted?*, *Past & Present* 261 (2023), 3–46.

118 See, most recently, AnneMarie Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008, 157–174; Katrin Pietzner, Die Christen, in: Klaus-Peter Johnhe (ed.), *Die Zeit der Soldatenkaiser*, 2 vols, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008, 2.973–1007, at 994–999; Allen Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 117–249; Rosa Mentxaka, *El edicto de Decio y su aplicación en Cartago con base en la correspondencia de Cipriano*, Santiago de Compostela: Andavira Editora, 2014; Paul Schubert, On the Form and Content of the Certificates of Pagan Sacrifice, *J. Roman Stud.* 106 (2016), 172–198. Add to the corpus of Decian *libelli*: W. Graham Claytor, A Decian *Libellus* at Luther College (Iowa), *Tyche* 30 (2015), 13–18; P. Mich. Inv. 4462g; W. Graham Claytor, SB I 4455. The Decian *Libellus* from Philadelphia, *Tyche* 35 (2020), 225–227.

Christians too, but nobody was arrested, let alone executed – only Cyprian.¹¹⁹ Apparently, the main aim were the clerics, not the average Christian.¹²⁰

Things got worse with Diocletian. His persecution is well known and need not be treated here. Our sources unanimously suggest that many Christians were executed, especially in the East, often in a much crueler manner than before: in Alexandria alone 642 martyrs and their bishop Peter; according to a recently published new Ethiopic text.¹²¹ It is this murderous policy which in the end had an unexpected and, surely, unintended result, viz. that in the first decade after those persecutions we no longer hear of religious coercion. In fact, in the beginning of his rule Constantine repeatedly stressed the need for tolerance of all religions.¹²² This new attitude becomes visible in the so-called edict of Milan of AD 313, in which Constantine and Licinius state that in order to ensure reverence for the Divinity ‘we might grant both to Christians and to all people freedom to follow whatever religion each one wished’.¹²³ This was of course still within a religious framework – atheists were unthinkable – but it is the most explicit declaration of religious freedom we have from antiquity. From this freedom – let that be clear – the Christians profited most, but apparently also another group. After AD 324, Constantine issued a law that

119 *Acta Cypriani* 4–5, cf. Christopher J. Fuhrmann, How to Kill a Bishop: Organs of Christian Persecution in the Third Century, in: Rudolf Haensch (ed.), *Recht haben und Recht bekommen im Imperium Romanum*, Warsaw: Fundacja im. Rafała Taubenschlaga, 2016, 241–261.

120 For the Valerianic persecution, see most recently, Toni Glas, *Valerian. Kaisertum und Reformansätze in der Krisenphase des Römischen Reiches*, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2014, 241–318; Sophie Röder, *Kaiserliches Handeln im 3. Jahrhundert als situatives Gestalten*, Berlin – Boston: Peter Lang, 2019, 139–211.

121 Alessandro Bausi – Alberto Camplani, The History of the Episcopate of Alexandria (HEpA): Editio minor of the fragments preserved in the Aksumite Collection and in the Codex Veronensis LX (58), *Adamantius* 22 (2016 [2017]), 249–302, at 275 (= HEpA § 23). For another, well-known case, see Jan N. Bremmer, Roman Judge vs. Christian Bishop: The Trial of Phileas during the Great Persecution, in: Harry O. Maier – Katharina Waldner (eds.), *Desiring Martyrs: Locating Martyrs in Space and Time*, Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter, 2021, 81–118.

122 Cf. Harold A. Drake, Lessons from Diocletian’s Persecution, in: Vincent Twomey – Mark Humphries (eds.), *The Great Persecution*, Dublin – Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2009, 49–60.

123 Lactantius, *De mortibus* 48.2: *ut daremus et Christianis et omnibus liberam potestatem sequendi religionem, quam quisque voluisset*; see also Eusebius, *HE* 10.5.2; David Dainese – Viola Gheller (eds.), *Beyond Intolerance: The Milan Meeting of AD 313 and the Evolution of Imperial Religious Policy from the Age of the Tetrarchs to Julian the Apostate*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2018.

the Christians should make their churches higher, wider and longer.¹²⁴ Unlike the pagans, of whom we hardly know any new temples during his rule,¹²⁵ the Jews must have been inspired as well by this law, as the numerous excavations of recent decades have shown that the fourth century was the time in which they erected many new synagogues, some very impressive, such as the Sardis one,¹²⁶ and, not unlikely, in competition with the Christians.

Yet, this happy moment in time would only be short-lived. A good decade after the tolerance edict, Constantine already issued a law that prohibited the setting up of pagan statues, to practise divination or even to sacrifice at all. Rather strikingly, he now speaks of the ‘polytheist madness’, thus turning the tables in the vocabulary used,¹²⁷ just as Christians already had started to label paganism as *superstitio*.¹²⁸ For all we know, Constantine’s law had hardly any effect, although he did loot some pagan temples,¹²⁹ but it set a trend which gradually accelerated and became really effective at the end of the century with the reign of Theodosius. At that time, paganism became forbidden, synagogues turned into churches, deviant Christian groups and the post-Christian Manichees were persecuted. As always, locally situations may have been very different, and we should be careful not to generalise, but the ideology is clear: no more diversity, no more pluralism, just one emperor, one empire and one church.

124 Eusebius, *VC* 2.

125 For the much-discussed case of Hispellum, see Noel Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, 114–130; Gwyneth McIntyre, *Imperial Cult*, Leiden: Brill, 2019, 52–56. For the difficult interpretation of CTh 15.1.3, see Raphael Brendel, *Kaiser Julians Gesetzgebungswerk und Reichsverwaltung*, Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2017, 271–276.

126 Cf. Leonard V. Rutgers, The Synagogue as Foe in Early Christian Literature, in: Zeev Weiss et al. (eds.), *“Follow the Wise”: Studies in Jewish History and Culture in Honor of Lee I. Levine*, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010, 449–468, at 449–452; Andrew R. Seager, *The Synagogue at Sardis*, Cambridge, MA – London: Harvard University Press, 2024.

127 Eusebius, *VC* 2.45.1: τῆς πολυθέου μανίας; similarly, Eusebius, *De laude Constantini* 8.9. For the many debates about the precise contents of Constantine’s law, see, most recently, Frank M. Ausbüttel, Constantins Maßnahmen gegen die Heiden, *Gymnasium* 124 (2017), 561–589.

128 Majastina Kahlos, *Religio and superstitio: Retortions and Phases of a Binary Opposition in Late Antiquity*, *Athenaeum* 95 (2007), 389–408.

129 Cf. Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, Cambridge, MA – London: Harvard University Press, 1982, 245–248.

Final considerations

What can we conclude from this survey? It is not that easy to draw a conclusion, as we can hardly avoid looking at antiquity with the eyes of today. What we can say in any case is that in long stretches of antiquity diversity was the situation of the day. Polytheism is by its nature more flexible in incorporating new cults, even though there always were limits. We only need to think of the execution of Socrates or the near-execution of the courtesan Phryne in fourth century BC Athens for the introduction of a new cult, who was only saved by her beautiful body,¹³⁰ or the bloody suppression of the Roman Bacchus cult (above, § 2). Yet polytheism is not inherently more tolerant by nature than monotheism, as the invention of religious persecution by the Romans and, the contemporaneous Zoroastrians has shown.¹³¹ Religious violence depends on many circumstances and is not the inherent result of religion as such;¹³² on the contrary, ideologies, such as imperialism, communism, Nazism and fascism, have made many more victims than any religious persecution before them, as the twentieth century has amply demonstrated.

A second point I would like to make is that not all persecution is the same. The Norwegian scholar Johan Galtung has made the useful distinction between physical, structural and cultural violence'.¹³³ In antiquity, most of the time people lived in societies where there was certainly 'structural violence' from a religious point of view, perhaps also 'cultural violence' but hardly 'physical violence'. Diversity was the norm but it never rose to the level of pluralism as defined at the beginning of my contribution. But is that

130 Most recently, Helen Morales, *Fantatising Phryne: The Psychology and Ethics of Ekphrasis*, *Cambridge Classical Journal* 57 (2011), 71–104; Jan N. Bremmer, *Religion and the Limits of Individualisation in Ancient Athens: Andocides, Socrates and the Fair-breasted Phryne*, in: Martin Fuchs *et al.* (eds.), *Religious Individualisation: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter, 2019, 1009–1032.

131 For Zoroastrian inspiration of the Roman persecutions, see the interesting suggestions of Paul McKechnie, *Roman Law and the Laws of the Medes and Persians: Decius' and Valerian's Persecutions of Christianity*, in: id. (ed.), *Thinking Like a Lawyer*, Leiden: Brill, 2002, 253–269.

132 Richard Payne, *A State of Mixture. Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2015, 23–58 frames the problem by stating that Zoroastrianism is not inherently intolerant. Such a statement essentialises a religion and wrongly formulates the problem. Much better: Jitse H. F. Dijkstra – Christian Raschle (eds.), *Religious Violence in the Ancient World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

133 Johan Galtung, *Cultural Violence*, *Journal of Peace Research* 27 (1990), 291–305.

ideal really possible? Can we really live in a society where, say, female USA Supreme Court judges would appear in burkas, Christian bakers refuse to bake wedding cakes for gay people,¹³⁴ or cows are everywhere sacrosanct. We obviously cannot. These simple examples show that religious pluralism is an ideal, which never can be realised to the full extent in a plural society, because the various religions, ideologies and worldviews may have opposing, sometimes incompatible ideas. In antiquity, intellectuals, such as the Christian Tertullian or the pagans Libanius and Themistius, sometimes started to reflect on religious freedom or tolerance, but, understandably if unfortunately, always from the underdog position.¹³⁵ Today we live in a culture, where diversity is the rule, as everywhere religious and secular people have to live together. Pluralism is perhaps impossible, but it is the ideal we should always keep before us. But that requires a willingness to listen and to talk. Dialogue is the only way forward.¹³⁶

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¹³⁴ See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-court-baker-idUSKCN1J01WU>, accessed 16. 10. 2023.

¹³⁵ Cf. Hubert Cancik, *Europa - Antike - Humanismus*, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011, 144–173; Mar Marcos, Persecution, Apology and the Reflection on Religious Freedom and Religious Coercion in Early Christianity, *Zs. f. Religionswissenschaft* 20 (2012), 35–69; Peter Van Nuffelen, *Penser la tolérance durant l'Antiquité tardive*, Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2018, 39–91; Evangelos Chrysos, *Libertas religionis* in Late Antiquity: A Critical Overview, in: Dominic Moreau – Raúl Gonzalez Salinero (eds.), «*Academica Libertas*»: *Essais en l'honneur du professeur Javier Arce*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2020, 337–344.

¹³⁶ For comments and information, I am most grateful to audiences in Charlottesville, Washington DC, Liverpool, Brussels (2018), Bergen, Odense (2021) and Prague (2022) as well as to Raphael Brendel, Laura Feldt, Bob Fowler, Michael Stausberg and Christopher Tuplin. This text has been proofread by Caleb Harris, to whom thanks are due.