

Review

JACOB L. MACKEY, *BELIEF AND CULT: RETHINKING ROMAN RELIGION*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 2022. Pp. xxi + 468, illus. ISBN 9780691165080 (hbk): £35.00; 9780691233147 (eBook).

Nine hundred words are insufficient for reviewing a problematic and frustrating book. After several works ‘rethinking Greek religion’ with cognitive tools (e.g. J. Kindt, *Rethinking Greek Religion* (2012) and J. Larson, *Understanding Greek Religion: A Cognitive Approach* (2016)), it was time for the understanding of Roman religion to be refreshed as well. This is the project of this heavy (c. 400 pages of text) book, arduous to read for its technical language while still clearly written. Mackey wants to grant to belief (‘a mental state’ that is ‘Intentional’) its due place alongside the long-dominant ritualistic perspective exemplified for him by John North, among others. The project is not that innovative, given studies from recent decades with similar questions yet a different methodology (e.g. A. Bendlin, ‘Rituals or Beliefs? “Religion” and the Religious Life of Rome’, *SCI* 20 (2001); J. Scheid, *Quand faire c’est croire* (2005); or the LIII Entretiens of the Fondation Hardt, *Rites et croyances* (2007)). It is confusing in its framing more than in its object. M. applies the theory of cognitive science of religion (CSR) to ‘Roman religion’, in fact to ‘any religion’ (98). Why not? But this is not ‘Rethinking Roman religion’. ‘This is a theoretical book. If Roman religion interests you, but theory does not, this book may not be for you’ (xv). A puzzling start indeed, because, for historians, theoretical tools are the conceptual frame for helping to enlighten evidence; they are not a matter of ‘liking’ (22), except if *this is* the main target of the book, as here. M. ‘reformulates a discourse’ (e.g. 65; a clear ‘rewording’, 107) on already known aspects of Roman religion with the unfamiliar (so much for ‘to be clear’), technical (jargonising?) language of CSR theory (thus the need for a glossary, 395–8, to which should be added ‘doxastic’, ‘Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device’/HADD and ToM).

M. investigates the cognitive processes at work in well-known public rituals (360: ‘to illustrate some features of cognition-about-practice’). His declared subject is ‘the *religio* of Cicero’s city-state’ (xvii), thus public religion (see also remarks on *societas* and *communitas*, 139ff and 194ff, and chosen examples like sacrifice, 360ff); yet the first case study (ch. 6) is the Epicurean philosophy of religion (see 210; for M.’s ‘approach’, 293), a speculative system which cannot stand for public religion. To be honest, the ‘method’ dresses some phenomena of Roman religion in CSR’s garments, but this brings nothing new to our understanding of it — e.g. long pages on (*in*)*auguratio* (ch. 9) ignoring basic bibliography (like Y. Berthelet, *Gouverner avec les dieux. Autorité, auspices et pouvoir* (2015), or F. Van Haepelen, *Le collège pontifical* (2002)). The first half of the book (c. 200 pages) is a summary of psychological and cognitive theories (J.R. Searle, P. Boyer, D. Sperber, J.L. Barrett, and so on). It is rather long (with many repetitions and summaries, sometimes *verbatim*, e.g. xv and 22, 47 and 52). The exposé of CSR theory and its theorising perspective is made tedious by pompous expressions to say common things (‘intellectual perceptions’ for ‘intuitions’, ‘mental episodes’ for ‘emotions’, ‘psychological modes’ for ‘attitudes’, and so on) and neologisms (like ‘doxastic’) whose necessity is questionable. It looks naïve to imagine that one needs such a ‘cognitive armada’ (with two ‘systems of cognition’) for demonstrating truisms (see also 158, 173): of course Romans *believed that* (59, 77, *et al.*) their gods existed, and this is indeed the core of ritualism, insofar as religious rituals consist in communicating with superior powers (see 36ff) and ritual changes the world socio-religiously, normatively (363), but not ontologically (e.g. an inaugurated place remains accessible under certain conditions). The question is not that of a ‘dichotomy’ between ‘action’/‘practices’ (rites) and ‘belief’ (their meaning); the point is that ritual efficacy (e.g. the creation of a priest; warning: the *declaratio* of a priest is a *sanctio*, 186) *does not need* the meaning and the belief, whatever they are, though they certainly exist.

The first part prepares the second, devoted to five case studies on well-known Latin texts and topics (e.g. 92–5 on *prodigia* as ‘epiphanic warnings’). In these c. 200 pages, the historical material is manipulated to suit the theory (cf. Lactantius and the two ‘systems of cognition’, 89ff) more than the theory helps to illuminate facts of Roman religion. Besides some pertinent pages (on *pietas*, 119 and 126ff), this theorising goal comes with some misunderstanding of the documents: 328 on ‘agrarian’ Mars, an outdated theory after G. Dumézil’s demonstration because

M. does not identify a *circumambulatio* ritual; 187ff the use of *aedes* for *templum*; 201 *sancta* is not 'sacred' but 'acknowledged by a public action'; 307 *mactus hos ferto* in Cato's prayer is disregarded though it is the sentence that sets the contract with Jupiter (warning: 309, contrary to the myth, there is no 'god's psychology' in rituals). Some texts are read with insufficiently critical gaze (see the *Philippics* of Cicero on Antony, or Ovid and a rhetorical device, 137–8). Ch. 7 on children, an original topic that might have been innovative, offers pages on the psychology of the infant (3 years old); yet in terms of historical approach, conclusions go no further than a line of John Scheid quoted (245 n. 6) (likewise for prayer, ch. 8, ignoring the *Commentarii fratrum arvalium/ CFA*, J. Scheid (2005)). This psychological discourse cites little evidence, all from domestic religion (e.g. 266–7), none from public religion (no historical reliefs of sacrifices with *camilli*, for instance). It is the task of scholars to 'rethink' scientific dossiers, but for Roman religion the job still has to be done.

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