

RELIGION, POWER AND SOCIETY IN REPUBLICAN ROME

RÜPKE (J.) *Religion in Republican Rome. Rationalization and Ritual Change*. Pp. vi + 321. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. Cased, £45.50, US\$69.95. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4394-9.

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In this exciting work, R. puts forward the thesis that the development of religion at Rome during the Republican period should be understood in terms of progressive rationalisation and systematisation, which are essentially understood as a function of political developments during this time period. It brings together R.'s views on separate, yet related topics concerning, amongst other things, festivals, drama, epic, the calendar, legal documents, antiquarianism and philosophy, in especially the late Republic. Most of the fourteen chapters are based on contributions that have appeared previously, some of these having made a firm impact on the academic discourse already. Nevertheless, the present book as a whole has strong added value, one may say precisely because of its systematisation and rationalisation of R.'s previous views into a cogent and strongly chronologically and contextually embedded argument.

This argument is based on the idea that Max Weber's notion of rationalisation provides a useful tool to describe religious and cultural change in mid and late Republican Rome, especially in the period from c. 300 to 40 B.C. Adopting a substantivist, or relational definition of religion (p. 13), R. argues that the process of rationalisation he envisages can be tracked down in the ordering and systematisation of religious concepts, practices and instruments. Starting in the late-fourth century B.C., processes contingent to political competition would have led to the regulation of aspects of religion and ritual in public, but in turn this 'subjection to discursive control' (p. 1) would have set in motion a new process, in which the rules and principles abstracted from practice were then made the object of a specialised discourse and institutionalisation, eventually producing Roman religion 'as we know it' from the imperial period.

After a general introduction and a chapter on the archaic and early republican background, R. traces this process of change in various realms and wide-ranging case studies. Throughout the chapters, and as part of the central methodology of the book, there is a particular emphasis on the relationship of the development of new media (such as the spread of writing and theatrical performances) and modes of interaction, i.e. on 'arenas of communication', and the formation of public audiences or 'public spaces' in these processes. For instance, changes in the visibility and extent of ritual processions, as well as their progressively restricted character, are explained from this perspective. The calendar and the constitution-like charter of the *lex Ursonensis* are amongst other cases highlighted as examples of successful rationalisation.

The emphasis on the process of communication, combined with an admirable breadth of types of evidence, is one of the key strengths of this work. Such an angle allows integration and comparison with other aspects of the Roman Republic, such as power and cultural processes, as is demonstrated especially in the last chapters. Chapter 14, 'Greek Rationality and Roman Traditions in the Late Republic', ties the previous arguments together by putting forward, in a schematic and almost systemic way, the interrelationship between (new conceptions of) power, cultural change, and knowledge production and diffusion. The process of ritualisation, or the 'formalizing and stereotyping of certain activities in public space' (p. 212), should, according to R., indeed be seen as a control

mechanism linked to the particular power structure of Rome, comparable to sumptuary measures; as part of the attempt by Roman authorities (such as the Senate) to gain, or remain in, control. R. goes so far as to declare that, from the late-fourth century B.C. onwards, 'religion became the decisive medium for public control of aristocratic competition' (p. 213). Although admirably clear in his statement, it should also be admitted that such a vision may be partly conditioned – in this condensed book of barely more than 200 pages covering such a vast topic – by the choice of case studies and type of evidence. For instance, the 'ritual' of the subtitle of the book, for R., refers principally to large, spectacular processions and festivals, analysis of which is likely to produce different results than other types of ritual further down the hierarchy and/or in other contexts. Analysis of religious practices or notions that behave differently and were not so easily 'subjected to systematization' or other top-down measures may therefore enrich this picture in the future and provide further texture.

Another key strength of the book is its meticulous and programmatic chronological contextualisation. This is a most welcome and salutary approach to evidence that has so often been conflated and abstracted, resulting in static, composite images or indeed chimaeras. The chronological range spans the period between, roughly, the end of the Latin War in 338 B.C. or, rather, that of the first Punic War in 241 B.C., on the one hand, and c. 40 B.C. on the other, although in practice the lion's share of the book focuses on the late Republic. This choice is equally well explained as defensible, given the focus on changing modes of communication in relation to power dynamics and cultural processes, which clearly undergo profound changes in precisely this time period. The proliferation of documentary evidence at the end of the time span under consideration is in itself one of the main tenets of R.'s argument.

Yet, an almost natural consequence is that this time period at times tends to be represented as a somewhat closed formative stage, in which especially the beginnings – archaic and early republican Rome – and to a lesser extent the end of imperial Roman religion 'as we know it', stand out as relatively static points of departure and arrival. For instance, if 'religion acquired a political importance it had not had at the start' (p. 50) over time, this arguably does not really do justice to the complex situation in the archaic and early republican periods, for which the documentary situation is very different. Qualification of the changing *forms* of the relationship between religion and politics, in which different modes of communication and its transformative power play key roles, as R. otherwise rightly underlines, seems a more nuanced way to approach the perceived contrast.

When so much is offered, also in terms of the breadth of analysis, it may seem ungrateful to ask for more. Yet, the choice for favouring different types of evidence for different time periods may, even if partially explainable by the importance of literacy as a process profoundly altering society, sometimes skew the general image. It thus risks drawing R.'s developmental model in a teleological direction, or at least complicates comparative assessment.

For instance, the reliance on literary evidence from and for the late Republic contrasts somewhat with analysis of the earliest period, for which relatively more material evidence is brought to the fore. In light of the centrality of precisely communication spaces in R.'s analysis on the one hand, and competition and its regulation on the other, approaches centred on architecture and spatial analysis of the places of actual religious and ritual performance could be of value also for this time period. Cult sites, 'arenas of communication' in the literal sense, undergo profound changes in the late Republican period, and the momentous processes of abandonment and centralisation, as well as new forms of architectural monumentalisation, may form an interesting material counterpart to be fruitfully compared with R.'s arguments based on the literary evidence.

The work is intriguing and stimulating because of its sharp argumentative structure, breadth of analysis and focus on communication processes, and represents a vital contribution to the discussion on Roman religion, and the Roman Republic in general. In the end, it may not be so much the first ‘serious history of republican religion’ it purports to be (p. 4) but an, indeed exceedingly serious, specific argument for a way to understand its development within Roman Republican society – which is even more impressive.

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