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Coping with *Pantheon**

CORINNE BONNET

Jörg Rüpke's *Pantheon* is a very impressive, engaging and creative book in the management of the evidence, in the conceptual framework, and in the analysis of local and global phenomena within the development of Roman religion. In fact his perspective encompasses the whole Roman religious dynamics in a long term perspective. And since all the gods of almost every part of the Roman world are potentially citizens of the 'Roman Olympus', the emphasis is put on the 'Global Village' under Roman control. The whole chronological and historical process, with a beginning and an end – from the 9th century BC to the 4th century AD, and even later –, is described and scrutinized through a huge narrative divided into eleven chapters, focused on 'changes in the social location and individual significance of religion' (p. 18). The shaping of the *Pantheon* is thus addressed as a gradual process, which combines space expansion (from a central point, which is Rome) with a deep chronological sequence.

By putting the Mediterranean at the forefront of the shaping of ancient religions, it is possible to write another kind of 'Geschichte der antiken Religionen', namely a story of connectivity, networks, encounters and middle grounds, made of entangled and overlapping narratives and chronologies, a great web of ancient religions in contact¹. Such a perspective leads to a nonlinear history, rather reticular and unpredictable. In fact, I felt a little bit uncomfortable with the general orientation of the book as Jörg Rüpke expresses it in the very first sentence:

'It is the intention of this book to relate a history, the history of an epochal upheaval that, from a world beyond all understanding for most of us, created one quite similar to our own in one particular point: quite succinctly, out of a world in which rituals are practised emerged a world in which one can belong to or even be a member of a religion.'

Jörg Rüpke immediately adds that 'this is no straightforward history' and that 'the changes I shall relate were not inevitable', but his assessment traces some sort of linear progress, from 'a world beyond all understanding for most of us' (...) to 'one quite similar to our own'. But are we

* This text has been initially presented to the round table on Jörg Rüpke's *Pantheon* at Eisenach, on April 4, 2017.

¹ See for example Bonnet 2015. See also Malkin 2011; Demetriou 2012; Pitts and Versluys 2015, all inspired by Horden and Purcell 2000.

sure that late Antiquity, with the emergence of Christianity, with its textual communities and the embeddedness of political and religious authority, is ‘quite similar’ to our own world? And are rituals just practices without belonging? Is it profitable to suggest such an evolution from ‘things’ to be done to ‘things’ to be part of? Jörg Rüpke’s book stimulates our reflexion on this point with the following sentence, which also suggests a clear evolution, and even an epochal transformation:

This book has related a history. A world, in which religion was an activity, became one in which it was possible to have religious knowledge and belong to one of several religions.

This idea is better deployed in the introduction, where Jörg Rüpke writes:

I maintain that the institutionalization of religion characteristic of the Modern Period in many parts of Europe and the Americas, and the confessional and conflict-ridden intensification of the phenomenon in the form of ‘religions’ or ‘confessions’ of which one can be a member, but only one at a time, rests on the particular configurations of religion and power that prevailed in Antiquity, and their legal codification in Late Antiquity. Not only the Islamic expansion, but above all the specifically European developments of the Reformation and the formation of national states, also reinforced the confessional character and institutional consolidation of supraregional religious networks.

Late Antiquity undoubtedly built a new religious world, even if shared traditions – the traditional literary and philosophical *paideia* – continue to irrigate it. By adopting a clear vanishing point which organises the whole perspective, *Pantheon* does not totally avoid the danger of a retrospective reading: from the present to the past, trying to find what is ‘similar to us’ – but who is exactly ‘us’? – and implicitly disqualifying what is different, what is ‘beyond understanding’. If polytheist ritualisms are, under different angles, radically different from monotheist religions, are they necessarily beyond understanding? Do they actually convey a crude problem-solving interaction between people and gods? Is it just a matter of doing something, without knowledge? I am convinced that we can try, or must try to challenge these assessments.

Let us take an example. When two Tyrian brothers offer twin marble cippi to Melqart, calling him *Baal of Tyre* in Phoenician, and *archégetès* in the Greek part of the votive inscription, are they just ‘practicing’ a ritual or do they also display and construct, through the ritual, their belonging to a devotional group, their membership to a social community? The fact

that polytheism implies multiple, cross affiliations does not mean that the significance of rituals is limited to a zero sum game: *do ut des*.

The ‘parting of the ways’ between a distant and odd divine world and a close and similar one does not sufficiently do justice to the complexity of what is at stake in the long term history of religions, of pantheons, of societies all around the Corrupting Sea. However, beyond the general assessment just mentioned, the book shows with great efficacy how collective and individual appropriations of rituals produced many different kinds of agency, identity, communication and expertise. An extremely valuable contribution of *Pantheon* and of the ‘Lived Ancient Religion’ project is to approach and analyze religion as a field of social experimentation.

Many case-studies, finely addressed, show how a pragmatic management of religious matters triggers complex and creative rituals and representations of the divine, subtle strategies of communication and self-construction. The Pantheon, in other words, is never a monumental and fixed building, but the result of choices, contexts, and interactions. Panthea, to quote Jörg Rüpke, ‘reacted to the utmost variety of problematic situations by resorting to a plethora of addressees taken from the long list of deities that came new to the sphere of religious communication’. ‘This was (...) the unsystematic result of individual decisions arrived at in the context of what was known and acceptable at the level of family, region, or intellect, whether to continue one cult or to neglect another. The actors concerned perceived past behaviour and former addressees as traditions to be reinforced by repetition, altered by modifications, or creatively (and on occasion subversively) appropriated.’

A crucial challenge of *Pantheon* and of the LAR project has been, and still remains to find the right balance between individual and collective dynamics, between ‘individual decisions’ and the more or less constraining power of the *nomos* or *mos maiorum*. Far from being left aside, this question represents one of the main contributions to our common reflexion on the very meaning of ‘religion’ and its different historical *Erscheinungsformen*. The question has been largely debated, also by having a look at other cultural contexts – neither Roman nor Greek, and not even ancient – in order to understand what a ‘pantheon’ is, or can be, and how people manage to cope with superhuman powerful beings, one or many, collective or individual, immanent or transcendent. In other words, comparativism is a key resource to address the cultural construction of ‘religions’ and ‘pantheons’, which enables us to resist the temptation of too linear historical writing.

Comparative studies emphasize the fact that coping with the gods is always experimental, approximate, conjectural. The ‘panthea’ – a modern concept ignored by the ancients – are thus always unstable and open, flexible and negotiable. New gods can emerge, new combinations of gods, epithets, rituals, gestures, words and objects can be invented and experimented. The divine world is basically elusive and uncatchable. In Greece and Rome, from Spain to Mesopotamia and Egypt, from Anatolia to Libya, different kinds of agency interact with traditional structures, making creativity communicate with social acceptability. By focusing on social agency, on appropriation and affiliations, from above and from below, Jörg Rüpke’s book gives voice to the incredible diversity of solutions elaborated in the long term history of religions, implying different kinds of entangled expertise and knowledge.

A larger comparative perspective, applied to ancient and modern societies, confirms how diverse are the strategies elaborated to communicate and interact with the divine powers (gods or similar notions), in more or less formalized pantheons. I here refer to a collective book, which was published in July 2017 with the title: *Puissances divines à l’épreuve du comparatisme. Constructions, variations et réseaux relationnels*². It contains twenty-two papers written by anthropologists and classicists, and ranges from the whole Mediterranean area to modern Asia, Africa and America. Let me briefly consider three different ‘panthea’ presented in that book.

In Mesopotamia, a whole set of cuneiform texts provides myriad of gods. Theological speculations give a prominent role and status to cosmic gods who created and organized the universe through a concrete and technical expertise (basket-making, weaving). Every kingdom or ‘city’ is a single unity with its own group of tutelary gods. The Mesopotamian cosmic gods are thus at the same time local and global, and many cosmic gods coexist in the Euphrates and Tigris valley. When, since the middle of the third millennium BCE, geopolitical dynamics gave birth to supraregional entities, and even to universal empires, priests and kings reframe the system. For example, Marduk, initially the god of Babylon, became the king of all the gods and was connected to Enki as one of his sons. In many Mesopotamian cities, Marduk supplanted the local supreme god or integrated him/her in his own kinship. The sources reveal the construction of an imperial pantheon connected to the local divine groups through a kinship code. The long-term perspective, from Sumer to the first millennium empires, shows thus paradoxical evolutions in the religious structures. Neither simplification, nor individualization is the proper key to grasp

² Bonnet et al. (eds.) 2017.

this final reassessment of the divine world in Mesopotamia, and even beyond. Complexification, appropriation, hybridization, legitimacy seems to fit better. We are definitely not dealing with a mere problem-solving religious system, but with a very sophisticated conception of the role of the gods in the human collective (city, kingdom, empire) and individual destiny³.

Among the Kulung living in the Himalaya in Nepal, the very concept of ‘pantheon’ does not seem appropriate to grasp the organization of the divine world. Moreover, the Kulung do not have dogma, faith, cult-places, statues, priests, religious institutions, sacred books, conceptions on the afterlife. But they do have *ridum*, a term which means ‘genealogy, tradition’, and includes myths, rituals, law, and social order given by the ancestors. The Kulung do know some powerful natural beings, such as the Earth or the Wind, and very few other ‘entities’, like Wrath, Curse, Ancestral Power. They call *pokma* some self-born entities and *cap* or *bhut* spirits or demons, coming from the dead’s soul. But, they do not pray nor worship them; they just feed them and drive them away through specific rituals. These entities are not supposed to manage the cosmos and consequently people are not supposed to take care of them. The myths shared by the Kulung consist mainly of genealogical narratives from the first being to the current population. They are told in specific contexts to answer questions on the origin of some institution or social rule. For what concerns rituals, they exclusively deal with illness and consist in evoking the spirits to cure or prevent illness through divination. The notion of ‘pantheon’ could make sense only in one precise ritual context, when the officiant names all the powers, one after the other, in order to find, through the divinatory procedure, which one is responsible for illness.

In this society, the plurality of divine powers does not imply a global framework where all the entities, and their different aspects (names, functions, epithets, attributes, etc.), are gathered, mobilized, and interrelated through narratives and/or rituals. People do not think about them, nor do they speak about them or make an effort to ‘conceive’ them. They just briefly interact with them when it is necessary. Their existence is probably all the more powerful and efficient so as they are ontologically elusive. Unlike Mesopotamia, where a strong theological discourse has shaped the ‘pantheon’, the Kulung society develops a collective, traditionally founded agency with powerful entities in order to resolve individual and collective problems⁴.

³ Cf. Glassner 2017.

⁴ See Schlemmer 2017.

Finally, in the huge Greek corpus of texts and inscriptions, we find plenty of *theos*, *theoi*, *theion*, conceived and recounted as a family or a society, a family with genealogies, kinships, conflicts, and a society, with functions, roles and status. These two modes of organizing the divine world – both vertically and horizontally – provide a general framework, which is locally, collectively or individually appropriated. Differently from the Kulung case study, the Greek example combines an analytical approach to the divine (exemplified by the lists of gods, for example) with different synthetic representations, which the modern concept of ‘pantheon’ registers. The Twelve Gods, for instance, is a complex of gods, worshipped as such, as a ‘whole’ more than as a sum of twelve individualized gods, in different places. In fact, the gods included in the team vary, both in literary and ritual contexts. It means that the content is less significant than the concept of ‘all the gods’. The concept thus expresses and constructs the human capacity to mobilize, in specific circumstances, all the gods, and not only some of them.

To conclude, my intimate conviction is that considering polytheisms as ‘beyond all understanding for most of us’ – to quote again Jörg Rüpke’s initial sentence of *Pantheon* – is not an impediment nor a burden, but definitely a challenge that we might take up, whereas addressing monotheisms as something ‘quite similar to our own [world]’ may run the risk to underestimate the great plurality of religious positioning until today. *Pantheon* is a remarkable and tough book, full of science, intelligence and creativity, which constantly combines history, archaeology, sociology and anthropology. It is a very stimulating book, sometimes troubling, never annoying. By adopting such a long term perspective and such a broad angle on Roman religion, *Pantheon* reveals a great diversity of *panthea*, answering the challenge of thinking the divine as radically other and inevitably so similar to the human.

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