

# Bryn Mawr Classical Review

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2008.09.36

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**Clifford Ando, *The Matter of the Gods: Religion and the Roman Empire. The Transformation of the Classical Heritage*, 44. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. Pp. xxiv, 239. ISBN 978-0-520-25083-3. \$45.00 / £26.95.**

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Word count: 3057 words

This latest addition to the California series *The Transformation of the Classical Heritage* extends its coverage to an earlier period than usual. Clifford Ando's book examines Roman religion -- although that terminology is necessarily more complicated than it appears -- from the days of the Punic Wars and earlier down to its interactions with Christianity in late antiquity and beyond. Indeed, in his preface Ando explicitly places the origin of the book in the juxtaposition of Augustine and Cicero, in the latter case focusing his approach in particular on the dialogue *De natura deorum*. Ando follows Cicero in inquiring into the nature of the Roman gods, both as expressed in the ideas and attitudes of the ancients themselves, and as they appear in the minds of modern historians.

The primary innovation here lies in the attempt to understand Roman religious behaviour in terms of 'knowledge'--considered as an intellectual category to be set directly alongside the more familiar idea of 'belief'. The consequence is that Ando assigns to the Romans an 'empiricist epistemology' (xvii) in which the boundaries of correct religious behaviour are to some extent established by trial and error: if your rite or your prayer has the desired effect, keep doing it; if not, try something else. This is an attractive approach to the question, and it captures very well the precarious balance maintained in Roman religion between an exaggerated respect for tradition and a remarkable capacity to innovate in a crisis. It passes my usual test, for example, by offering an explanation for what Publius Claudius Pulcher was up to in the famous story relayed by Suetonius (and others) -- in which Pulcher was willing to ignore the ill omen of his sacred chickens refusing to eat. For Suetonius, of course, this was simply arrogance and was accordingly punished by the gods. On the model proposed by Ando, as I understand it, Pulcher was acting quite legitimately: that his augury had failed to produce the desired result could just as easily have meant that the rite was wrong as that Pulcher was

wronging the rite. This 'science' of religion required a respect for the truth -- it was far from 'anything goes' -- but at the same time an acknowledgement that the truth about the gods was known imperfectly. As Ando comments at the end of his preface, it presupposed the possibility of error; and it allowed for the adoption of new ideas and practices.

This approach, then, is explained in the preface and in the free-standing Chapter 1 ('Religion, Law, and Knowledge in Classical Rome'), which includes a few worked examples -- Sulla and the god Amphiaraus, the suppression of the Bacchic cults, and the human sacrifices of 216 BC -- and a sensible discussion of the limits of *religio* as a term to describe Roman encounters and engagements with the god(s). With the interpretative framework having thus been established, the remainder of the book divides into two main parts of three chapters each. Part I ('The Limits of Orthopraxy') explores some of the implications of Ando's approach in a few selected areas, taking in both theory and practice and the fit (or lack of fit) between them. This process begins in Chapter 2 ('Idols and their Critics'), which takes on the problem of the material presence or absence of the gods in their cult statues and in other corporeal objects, although it is more limited and at the same time more wide-ranging than that would suggest. The bulk of the chapter is occupied in tracing the speculative discussions of divine embodiment and representation which took their cue from Plato and Aristotle and which were continued by Apuleius and Augustine in the Roman empire. The main specific example to which this material is applied is the *lapis niger* identified in Republican Rome -- although as Ando recognises, not always securely or straightforwardly -- with the goddess Cybele. His conclusion here must be correct, but is perhaps a little disappointing all the same: that 'Cybele somehow was, and was not coextensive with, that black stone; and in that way, she might also have been, but not been identical with, other black stones' (42). It would be nice to be able to say something more, but the journey here is perhaps more important than the destination.

Chapter 3 ('Interpretatio Romana') promises an equally philosophical excursus, in asking what exactly was happening when Roman names -- and therefore also Roman identities? -- were assigned to new or foreign deities; and Ando does well here to avoid getting bogged down in semantics. His conclusion again is only tentative -- he quotes the notorious legal nicety 'it depends on what the meaning of "is" is' (58) -- but this (brief) chapter nevertheless succeeds in re-emphasising the flexibility not only of Roman religious practices but also of their intellectual underpinnings. When we ask what the Romans thought, or believed, or understood about the gods, we must indeed remember that the idea that the Romans were necessarily consistent is a simplification of our own.

Part I then concludes with Chapter 4 ('Religion and *Ius Publicum*'), in which Ando expresses the intention to explore 'the evolving relationship between religion and law in classical and Christian Rome' (60) as a means of understanding the place of Roman religion as an institution in its own right. Here the starting-point is the Theodosian and Justinianic Codes, and the attitudes on display in those collections are traced back through Ulpian and Cicero before returning to the later empire with Augustine. The contrast drawn at the end of this chapter is a revealing one for Ando's thesis as a whole: for it emerges that whereas traditional Roman convention assumed that political communities had the right to legislate on matters of the gods, in Justinian's Christian code the relationship is reversed. Justinian derived his power to legislate, even in human affairs, from his association with the divine: thus his code was presented to the public as if with the Christian god as its author: *Deo auctore* (92).

Part II ('Gods of the Far-Flung Empire') asks a notably different set of questions. Beginning from the observation in Part I that Roman religion was remarkably open to innovation, Ando sets out to explore the ways in which religious ideas and practices developed in the new circumstances of the Roman empire. In the process he explicitly rejects the simple equation of Roman religion with the political life of the city of Rome itself, and the consequent belief that it was by definition ill-suited to its new imperial context. Instead, he argues that Roman religion can indeed be shown to have responded to the challenges of an expanding empire, if not always in any deliberate or systematic fashion. Nor is this intended to suggest that Roman policy-makers were at fault in failing to impose a consistent and coherent religious framework on the empire as a whole. For Ando, such criticism is to miss the point: on his account, the story of Roman religion is one of debate and discussion rather than centralisation and control. Certain assumptions appear to have been widely held, as for example about the nature and role of cult objects such as the *lapis niger* of Cybele, and certain aspects -- here, its corporeality and its presence at Rome -- seem to emerge as the most important. But religion as seen by the Romans themselves was only part of the story: thus Ando usefully reminds us of a point he had raised in Part I -- that Cybele's cult at Pessinus continued to flourish after its cult object was removed to Rome (103). It is not true, for Ando, that a unified empire required or created a unified religion. Instead, he suggests that 'Roman' religion -- like the Roman empire itself -- was to a large extent formed in the encounter between traditional Roman discourse and practices and those of the communities of the wider empire.

The chapters in Part II, then, might be said to concern themselves with the limits of Roman religion. Chapter 5 ('A Religion for the Empire') introduces the general argument and goes on to discuss the (political, legal, hieratic) relationships between the new municipalities and provinces of the empire and the religious conventions that had evolved in Rome and Italy. Ando begins with the spread of the diaspora cults,

including the various mystery cults, throughout the empire, and notes that such a model was to a large extent unavailable to Roman religion in its traditional form. The Roman gods were gods who could be legislated about, and so in some sense they continued to require oversight from Rome even when worshipped in the provinces: they were, Ando argues, placed firmly at some particular site, and had to be persuaded to extend their influence even to the extent of allowing cult statues and temples to be established elsewhere. Nor was this only a matter of form, or of Roman convenience: great play is made here of the Penates of Lavinium, both of their repeated refusal to be rehoused at Rome, and of their (consequent?) interpretation as *praesentissimi* -- gods specifically linked to their own territory. All of this meant that the interaction of religion and empire was a complicated process, 'negotiated ... through religious laws' (110) which governed both the correct attitude to the gods and the proper behaviour of their worshippers.

Ando ends this chapter with a glance at two of the grand exceptions to this model: the imperial cult, and the at least partly Roman religion of Christianity (119). The suggestion is that the immanence of the Christian god -- shared to some extent by certain other gods, such as Isis -- allowed more flexibility in worship and a more rapid spread of that religious community; and that the imperial cult offers a glimpse of this same model in the well-attested *praesentia* of the emperor at his cult sites. The implication is perhaps that it was inevitable that the two gods would compete and, eventually, team up (although Ando does not say so directly); but my sense here is that a significant difference is overlooked. In the light of Ando's discussion it seems to me that the imperial cult is remarkable not for its reach but for the extent to which it constantly referred itself back to a specific place: the emperor himself, though his location might be unknown at any particular moment, was nevertheless known to be *somewhere*. The Christian god was not conceived like this in the New Testament, although something similar can be recognised in the Old -- as when the prophet Daniel is required to wait for assistance while God is detained with the kings of Persia (Daniel 12:10-14). The emperor too was a god who might turn up at any time; but this does not seem to me quite the same thing as a perpetual presence.

The interaction with Christianity continues to be a significant theme in Chapter 6 ('Religion and Imperialism at Rome'), first of all in terms of the attitudes of the ancient religions towards the role of the gods in warfare and conquest. Again this is a political question, and it continues Ando's concerns throughout Part II in particular. The Romans, he argues, did not imagine that they would succeed in their imperial ventures because their gods were superior to others, but (if their success was to be credited to religion at all) because 'they had isolated an appropriate method of consulting the gods, and ... had somehow persuaded the gods to approve their actions more consistently than the gods did those of their opponents' (125). Thus the emphasis is again on the empirical stance taken by the

Romans in their dealings with the gods, and the example here is the process of *evocatio*. The case Ando makes is, in part, that *evocatio* gained an ideological importance among the Roman that far outstripped the actual performance of the ritual in history -- in other words, that it was a convenient concept through which to explain the incorporation of foreign gods into the Roman world. At the same time, he draws out the implications of an ideology in which *evocatio* could play such a part, noting that it must require (as before) a sense of gods as sited in particular places and, to the extent that they could be moved around, the importance of some physical element. We are returned, then, to the contrast between a utopian Christianity and a materialistic Roman religion, and between a limited Roman religion and an unlimited Christianity.

This then provides the theme for the concluding Chapter 7 ('The Palladium and the Pentateuch'), although Ando first distances himself from any idea that either Christianity or traditional Roman religion can be considered in isolation from the other. This view would now be generally accepted, I think, at least among scholars of later Roman religion, and so too would Ando's desire to approach religious change in terms of the transformation or redefinition of 'the holy' -- a category which need not be identified with any specific religious or doctrinal allegiance. Indeed, many of the previous volumes in this same California series have approached late antiquity in similar terms; Ando seeks to build on this work by examining the broad epistemological assumptions shared across Christian and pagan 'theology', and in so doing offers new angles on a number of old questions. Regarding the famous debate over the Altar of Victory in the Roman Senate House, for example, he is able to call on his earlier arguments concerning the importance of divine presence to make the discussion more than a matter of antiquarianism or political factionalism; and similar concerns about the real presence of the gods are shown to re-emerge in the legendary translation of the Palladium from Rome to Constantinople. Indeed, the requirement to establish the new eastern capital as an equal to Rome and an appropriate centre for the empire required pagans and Christians to follow remarkably similar ideological paths. For both, it seems, the New Rome had to be provided not only with the important human institutions but also with a divine legacy: and Constantine's collection of classical artworks and Christian relics was therefore not purely a matter of aesthetic appreciation or naïve superstition, but bespeaks a real sense of how Romans -- including those Romans who were now Christians -- understood the relationship between their own world and the world of the divine.

Throughout these chapters Ando covers a wide range of authors and topics, and my summaries have inevitably done less than full justice to the wealth of material and ideas on display. Nevertheless, I cannot help but confess to a sense that the chapters in Part I hang together only precariously, and it is evident that they have been assembled together from articles and chapters published elsewhere. Their contents serve a

more convincing and coherent argument throughout Part II, but even there it is often difficult to grasp the precise issues at stake at every stage. Similarly, for all of the genuine insights that Ando is able to derive from it, the frequently repeated contrast between Christianity and traditional Roman religion never quite comes into focus. It is an interesting claim that Roman religion was based on empirical knowledge of gods who appeared in the world; and that Christians, by contrast, believed in a god whose presence they could only infer. Phrased in such bald terms, however, the distinction risks seeming rather simplistic -- and although it is true that Ando would rightly caution against reducing such a complex issue to the space of a single sentence, there are occasions on which he seems to fall himself into a similar trap.

Thus once or twice the treatment of ancient Christianity can seem a little cavalier: for instance, even looking at the matter 'from a Roman perspective', it seems suspiciously neat to distinguish Romans who could 'know' the rules of their religion from Christians who could 'merely believe' (17). Christians claimed knowledge as well as belief, and on an empirical basis at that: for the truth had been revealed to them in historical time, and had been recorded by eye-witnesses in the scriptures. The significant difference, at least as Augustine eventually came to define it, was that for Christians there would be no more revelations: their knowledge was sufficient and complete, and any further inquiry might be useful but was ultimately unnecessary speculation. The traditional Roman gods, however, could not be pinned down quite so easily: in their case the truth might turn out to be something previously unsuspected, and as long as there was a chance that they would keep talking, their adherents had to keep listening. It was these pagan traditionalists, after all, who saw a clear significance in the Sack of Rome in 410 -- that is, they blamed the Christians -- and it was Augustine who had to fight a rearguard action to convince wavering Christians that these terrifying events were all part of the plan. The weakness of Roman religion lay perhaps in its lack of a central core; but there was a weakness too in Christianity's insistence that every question had already been answered.

But this is to risk doing an injustice by simplifying both a complex issue and a capacious and intelligent scholarly work. Indeed, it is the great merit of Ando's book that he mostly avoids grand conclusions and extravagant rhetoric, and instead sets himself to address some familiar questions from unfamiliar angles, and with a punctilious attention to detail. If the book as a whole is sometimes a little disjointed, therefore, it is never less than stimulating. It spreads its net widely, and anyone interested in any aspect of Roman religion -- and certainly in Roman intellectual history -- should have plenty to learn, or to argue with. The style only emphasises the point: Ando is chatty while remaining theoretically sophisticated; he identifies the important questions but is not afraid to admit the lack of a definitive answer. The sense is that readers are being permitted to eavesdrop on the author thinking aloud. The

impressive result is therefore not a (Varronian) collocation or even a (Justinianic) codification; instead, and fittingly, given its origins in the encounter between those two most eloquent Romans, it is far more a (Ciceronian) dialogue or (Augustinian) soliloquy.

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