ACTA CLASSICA LX (2017) ISSN 0065-1141

MacRae, D. 2016. *Legible Religion: Books, Gods, and Rituals in Roman Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Pp. 272. ISBN 9780674088719. US$49.95.

The book under review makes an important contribution to scholarship on Roman religion by studying the history of religious writing in Rome from the late Republic to early Christian apologists. The topic here is essential for our understanding of Roman religion as a historical phenomenon, as it touches very closely upon some of the most important (and controversial) questions of modern historiography, namely the relationship between social realities and the written sources at our disposal to study them.

The book is structured in three parts. The first part, 'Writing Roman Religion' (pp.13-78) comprises three chapters and focuses on the Republican period and the emergence of religious literature at Rome, which the author calls 'civic theology'. In Chapter 1, 'Gods and Humans in Rome and its Empire' (pp.13-27), MacRae positions himself within the debate on civic religion at Rome with a clear position: 'Roman religion' was the creation of writers of civic theology, and it is thus a discourse for the élite by the élite. This is further explored by the following two chapters. Chapter 2, 'Writing Roman Religion' (pp.28-52), analyses Roman writings about religion in the late Republican period across genres, including philosophical treaties and books on pontifical law. MacRae thus examines the innovative way in which the Romans responded to Hellenistic cultural influences. Chapter 3, 'Letters of the Republic' (pp.53-78), focuses on the audience of religious literature. It is argued that members of the varied groups that can be called the Roman élite used religious literature to interact with one another. Examples from texts outside the genres directly engaging with civic theology, like Cicero's *De domo sua*, show that it was widely assumed that most of Roman élite would be familiar with these treatises.

Chapter 4, 'Rabbis and Romans' (pp.79-100), which comprises the second part of the book, entitled 'Comparison', attempts a comparative study of Roman writings on religion and the Mishnah, a rabbinic compilation concerning Jewish worship. The author finds much in common between the ways this early rabbinic text and Roman civic theologians construct an authoritative discourse on religion. The main difference with Roman writers is that the Mishnah later assumed the status of scripture, whereas this never happened with Roman civic theology. Part 3, 'Reading Roman Religion', consists of the last two chapters, and examines the Imperial period. Chapter 5 'Emperor as Reader' (pp. 101-22), focuses on civic theology and the emperors. MacRae argues that civic theology continued to play an important role in the relationship between the élites and the emperors and that, in spite of the scarcity of the evidence, these texts kept being read. Chapter 6 'Paper Pagans' (pp.123-40), focuses on the way in which Tertullian and Augustine read civic theology, and especially Varro. Whereas Tertullian uses Varro as a source of authority on Roman religion that serves as a point of contrast with Christianity, Augustine uses him more as a rhetorical opponent. It is Augustine who first introduces the radical distinction between literature (Varro and the likes) and scripture (the Bible). The conclusion persuasively proposes to go beyond the categories of scripture and literature when considering the relationship between religion and writing.

This monograph is particularly important for its re-consideration of Roman writings on religion as a broad phenomenon that transcends literary genres. I particularly admired how MacRae deals with fragmentary texts. This concerns both works such as Varro's *Divine Antiquities*, for which we have a considerable number of fragments, and works of Valerius Soranus, Nigidius Figulus, and L. Cincius, which are much more difficult to have a clear idea of. MacRae shows remarkable caution on what can and – most importantly – cannot be said about fragments, with careful consideration of how the quoting authorities use them. This is reflected by the well-argued, and strongly connected Chapters 2 and 6, and exemplified in particular by the comparison between the ways in which Tertullian and Augustine engage with Varro.

I was less persuaded by two aspects of the argument of the book. Firstly, Roman religion is considered an invention of civic theology because Roman élite writers deliberately included or excluded certain elements from their discourse. Although there is little doubt that every text by nature is constructed, I found this position quite radically formulated. More consideration could have been given to the fact that texts interact with existing political and social concepts, and that these concepts are not only constructed by texts, but express meanings and experiences related to the social and political contexts within which they were created. Using the same argument one could say that, for example, Cato invented Roman agriculture. Although Cato's treaty on agriculture is similarly a complex and constructed text, which shows a sophisticated self-fashioning and

literary chiselling,[1] Cato was interacting with and restating concepts related to well-established social and political contexts.

Secondly, it seemed to me that the structure of the monograph relies excessively on Augustinian categories. The book starts and ends with Augustine's demarcation between scripture and literature in reference to the books of Numa and Varro. MacRae constructs the problem that his monograph confronts – the relationship between religious writing, scripture and literature – in Augustinian thought, and it is only in the conclusions that these categories are historicised. This is the other side of the coin of one of the best aspects of this book, namely the careful consideration of the way in which Christian writers use Varro in different ways. The adoption of such an Augustinian perspective, however, also entails the danger of circularity. The author shows perfect awareness of this risk and he is capable of averting the problem with his persuasive conclusions. The analysis, however, remains constructed around Augustinian categories, and I wonder to what extent 'scripture' is useful in enhancing our comprehension of Roman writing on religion. This is particularly visible in the comparative Chapter 4. MacRae masterfully shows how the Mishnah and Roman religious writings are similar, and that they are likely to reflect comparable social needs. The chapter, however, struggles to show how, and why, these texts are different, and resorts to falling back on the same Augustinian categories (i.e. the Mishnah is different because it has the capacity of becoming scripture).

These observations are not meant to take anything away from what is clearly an important book. The notes and bibliography show great erudition and an up to date bibliography, and the book was well proof-read and produced – I could not find any mistake, and there is a comprehensive bibliography. In terms of presentation, it is regretful that the Press decided to publish the text with endnotes rather than footnotes, as this makes following MacRae's arguments and rich referencing much more difficult. This monograph will represent without a doubt the reference for future discussions on how the Romans wrote about religion.

Daniele Miano,
University of Sheffield.

[1] On which see, e.g., Reary, B. 2005. 'Agriculture, Writing, and Cato's Aristocratic Self-Fashioning', *Classical Antiquity* 24: 331-61.