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Early Christianity in the Framework of Roman Religion: Georg Wissowa¹

Abstract

Georg Wissowa (1859–1931) was one of the leading figures in the history of ancient religion around the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Based on a clear division of labour of *classical* antiquity and the discipline of Classics on the one hand (excluding early Christianity) and the discipline of Theology on the other (including all phenomena that served to construe the origins of Christianity), Wissowa's manual *Religion und Kultus der Römer* mentions Christianity only in passing. Digging into the unpublished papers and the works of his doctoral students, the article is able to reconstruct a more nuanced image of his position beyond confessional priming and polemics.

Keywords: History of Religions, 'Orientalism', 'Paganism', Confessionalisation, Rituals

1 Introduction

Georg Wissowa (1859–1931) was one of the leading figures in German *Altertumswissenschaft* from the 1890s to the early 1920s. This is mostly due to his enormous editorial achievement of starting the second – and completely new – edition of the mid-nineteenth century encyclopaedia by August von Pauly (1796–1845) in the old Stuttgart publishing house of Metzler. Wissowa's contract specified a new edition of the older ten-volume work within the same limits – a limit exceeded already with the first letters of the alphabet and dwarfed at the date of completion in 1980 with sixty-six volumes and another fifteen volumes of supplements. Wissowa started this project as a single-handed enterprise. He was in his early 30s when he signed the contract for the completely new conception of the encyclopaedia. But the contracted space was already used up under his editorship when the entry

1 We are grateful to the organisers of the panel at the EASR Annual Conference 2019 at Helsinki, Annelies Lannoy and Cristiana Facchini, for their invitation and the whole audience for their feedback.

‘Ephoroi’ was reached in volume 5.2 in 1905 as the tenth physical volume or, formally, by the volume numbered 10.2 with the entry ‘Katahochos’ in 1919. This encyclopaedia was rightly a ‘Wissowa’ and not even a ‘Pauly-Wissowa’, as the Anglophone world acknowledges Wissowa’s work. To speak of a ‘New Pauly’ is intellectually robbing Wissowa, even if it acknowledges the modesty of Hubert Cancik, the *spiritus rector*, Manfred Landfester and Helmuth Schneider as the editors of the new enterprise. The appearance of the thirteenth volume of this updated encyclopaedia leading to the letter Z in 2002 coincided with the one-hundredth anniversary of Wissowa’s manual, to which we will come shortly.²

Wissowa, knowing everybody in German-language *Altertumswissenschaft* not only in person, but also as a producer and presenter of research, was for two decades a decisive consultant for the Prussian Ministry of Science, or more precisely: of ‘Kultus’ (*Kultusministerium*), in filling Latinist positions at Prussian universities.

For historians of religion no less important, but more easily accessible than the slowly progressing encyclopaedia, was his manual *Religion und Kultus der Römer* (‘Religion and Cult of the Romans’), a part of the prestigious German series ‘Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft’. Contracted as a volume on mythology, that is, a systematic presentation of the gods as subjects of stories, the much-delayed book that appeared in 1902 was a revolution, a book focusing on practices, full of epigraphic references and eager to include archaeology.³ Building on further research and a number of dissertations commissioned in the years to follow, a second edition augmented by about eighty pages appeared in 1912. Half a century later, the book was meant to be replaced by Kurt Latte’s *Römische Religionsgeschichte* in 1960 (reprinted in 1967). However, this intended replacement was rather poorly received. ‘Un libro dannoso’ argued Angelo Brelich in his review of forty pages in 1961.⁴ In 1971, C.H. Beck published a reprint of Wissowa’s manual, which is still available. More than a century after its publication, the manual now lacks the advances in research that have been made in the meantime as well as the discussion of newly discovered, above all archaeological and epigraphic, sources. However, the book has influenced generations of scholars and is still a frequently reliable guide to literary and even epigraphic evidence for gods and rituals.

2 See, e.g., Cancik and Schneider 1997; Cancik 1998, 7–22: ‘Altertum und Antikerezeption im Spiegel der Geschichte der Realencyklopädie (1839–1993)’.

3 See, e.g., Scheid 1987; Bendlin 2000.

4 Brelich 1961, see for the long prehistory of the book Rüpke 1994.

Its impact would have been much higher, if the English translation, probably furthered by the classicist and historian of Greek religion at St Andrews, Herbert Jennings Rose (1883–1961), had been realised. This, however, was stopped by the outbreak of World War I and its nearly complete disruption of scientific relationships between Germany and the Italo-, Franco- and Anglophone world.

At that time, Roman religion was not the niche topic it would be in the second half of the twentieth century. It returned to centre-stage only at the end of that century, due to the understanding of religious practices and their role in establishing not only transcendental, but also social and object relationships in areas like politics or economics. Scholars are now also aware that religious practices were of crucial importance for the formation and maintaining of ancient societies, as we do not usually find ethnic boundaries in antiquity.⁵ In the midst of the revolutionising perspectives of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*⁶ on the beginnings of what was called ‘Christianity’ (and conceptualised as markedly different from ancient ‘Judaism’ from the start) and of Franz Cumont’s invention of ‘oriental religions’,⁷ Wissowa was a well-heard and potentially important voice. His papers (and this is to say, his literary estate of manuscripts and usually the letters written to, unfortunately not by,⁸ him) are preserved in the University Library of Halle and await systematic analysis; efforts are now finally made to start digitalising thousands of letters and to analyse his unedited lectures and writings.⁹

2 Life

Georg Otto Wissowa was, like the other doctoral students of the professor for Classical Philology at the University of Breslau, August Reifferscheid (1835–1887), from Silesia. The University of Breslau was a Prussian university that was of above all regional importance. Most of the students were from the area; students of Classics usually became teachers at the gymnasia

5 See Rüpke 2016.

6 See, e.g., Lüdemann and Schröder 1987; Rudolph 1987.

7 Bonnet 2002; Bonnet, Rüpke and Scarpi 2006; Bonnet and Rüpke 2009; see also Lannoy and Bonnet 2018; Lannoy 2020; Praet 2014.

8 Some letters can be found in other archives in Germany. However, they are few and far between.

9 The initiative is by Ute Ecker and Kai Brodersen of the Sächsische Akademie der Wissenschaften and Elisabeth Begemann and Jörg Rüpke at the University of Erfurt in collaboration with the University Library of Halle. Earlier treatments of Wissowa have mostly done without considering these papers, but see Elm 2003; Rüpke 2003.

of the region.¹⁰ The family of Wissowa were locals of Breslau. Georg (born 17 June 1859) visited a gymnasium that was directed by his grandfather August Wissowa.¹¹

Silesia was, by and large, Roman-Catholic and so was Georg Wissowa himself. This was pointed out by Otto Kern in his obituary. For the Wissowa family, however, confessional matters were more complicated. It is important to warn of any too easy confessional interpretation of Wissowa's work, which has frequently been referenced as a Catholic's interest in ritual as opposed to a contemporary Protestant's interests in religious experience and scripture-based belief and piety. Wissowa's father was a Catholic, but his mother was an offspring of a Protestant vicarage. His sisters were thus raised as Protestants.¹² Certainly, Wissowa spent the relevant years of his academic training in institutions that were dominated by Catholics. From 1876 to 1880, he studied Latin and Greek with August Reifferscheid and Martin Hertz, to both of whom he dedicated his doctoral dissertation on the sources of Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, *De Macrobii Saturnaliorum fontibus capita tria* (1880).¹³ His tractate was a *Preisschrift*, i. e., a piece written in the context of a competition for new studies of this lengthy, late antique dialogue with its many important items of historical and religious knowledge of late republican and early imperial Rome, a competition which also instigated others like co-student Hugo Linke to earn their doctoral degrees. In the following year, Wissowa relocated to Munich in order to study archaeology with Heinrich Brunn (1822–1894), whom Wissowa later credited with having taught him the difference between the Greek and the Roman character in religion and art.¹⁴ In 1882, Wissowa achieved his habilitation with a study on Roman Venus statues at Breslau University;¹⁵ to achieve 'habilitation' meant to qualify for a precisely defined competence sought after in a specific department and proven on the basis of an excellent, but rather limited, and often quickly written, work. The faculty would not accept a habilitation

10 For further details and references, see Rüpke 2003. Theodor Mommsen's judgement was particularly negative (see his letters in Wickert 1962, nos. 150, 18 October 1854; 153, 7 November 1854; 170, 12 April 1856; in general Wickert 1980).

11 Foerster 1911, 384–385; see also Kern 1931; Kern 1934 and Unte 1999. August Wissowa himself took the path just outlined, though he submitted his dissertation and habilitation in 1828 at the University of Breslau where he taught in addition to his post at the local gymnasium. At the university, he mostly taught courses on Latin language and literature.

12 Unte 1999, 328.

13 Wissowa 1880. The biography appended (as was usual) to the dissertation is an important source for his early life. – It was for Wissowa to write the obituary: Wissowa 1889.

14 Wissowa 1902, x; cf. already the obituary on Reifferscheid quoted in the previous note.

15 Wissowa 1882. Cf. the elaboration in Wissowa 1898.

without being able to offer the thus created *Privatdozent* the possibility to (at least barely) earn his (never 'her' in those days) living by teaching. Wissowa demonstrated his ability to teach in the field of ancient religion beyond the Romans with his inaugural lecture on tomb decorations and the cult of the dead in Greece.¹⁶ But before starting to teach at Breslau University from 1883 to 1886, Wissowa spent a year in Rome (1882–1883). It was during that period that his Munich teacher in archaeology, Brunn, introduced Wissowa to the ancient historian at Berlin, Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903), whose systematising juridical approach and wide-ranging use of epigraphy shaped Wissowa's approach to Roman religion, and thus the outline of his manual, so much. By dedicating *Religion und Kultus der Römer* to Mommsen, Wissowa clearly acknowledges this. It was *Klassische Altertumswissenschaft*, not anthropological History of Religion or confessional Theology that formed the quickly developing horizons of Wissowa's aspirations.

Wissowa was 27 years old when he entered his first professorial position, and he spent the rest of his academic career, remarkably, at Protestant institutions. From 1886 to 1890 he was extraordinary, from 1890 to 1895 ordinary professor at the University of Marburg, where, in 1890, he married Helene Louise Schmidt from Protestant Chemnitz.¹⁷ In 1895, he took up a position at the university of Halle/Saale, which he never left despite the fact that he was offered chairs at several universities over the course of the following years. After two strokes in June 1923, he stepped down and never resumed academic activities and research. He retired in 1924 and died on 11 May 1931 after a period of perpetual decline.

Teaching Classics at a 'Protestant' university was above all a statistical fact, not an institutional constraint. Most of his students were Protestant; it is not until his last academic year that we see him supervising a topic with a confessional slant, a comparison of the rituals of the Arval brethren and Catholic liturgy.¹⁸

3 Christianity in Wissowa

If anything shows how much Wissowa was willing to learn and even to change his opinions, the explosion of the concept of the classical world as materialised in his *Realencyclopaedie* (which was no longer an encyclopaedia of the Classical world with its capital C) is indicative, but it needs to be

¹⁶ 'Gräberschmuck und Totenkult bei den Griechen' (Kern 1934, 7).

¹⁷ Unte 1999, 330.

¹⁸ Metzmacher 1923, published as Metzmacher 1924 in a liturgical yearbook.

subjected to substantial analysis on the basis of his (so far unedited) papers and their now improved accessibility. To reconstruct his views on religion, we have three key corpora/hermeneutical tools at our disposal:

1. Wissowa's published work. Especially important: the differences between the first (1902) and second edition of *Religion und Kultus der Römer* (1912), augmented by 80 pages from a total of 534 to a total of 612 (Wissowa 1902, 1912).

2. For the early Wissowa, the content of his lectures of the 1890s¹⁹ is reflected in a handbook published by his pupil Emil Aust;²⁰ and on other manuscripts based on notes taken by the Ancient Historian David Magie (1877–1960), when he pursued his Ph.D. at Halle University (1904), before returning to Princeton. They are archived at Princeton University.²¹ For the development of some thoughts and a more concentrated, but also somewhat more popular expression, there is furthermore a manuscript from around 1904 for a series of volumes edited by Paul Hinneberg (1862–1934) and published as *Die Kultur der Gegenwart* ('The Culture of the Present'), is useful. Publication of this text was delayed and finally cancelled when World War I broke out, but the manuscript, with a few additions made after 1912, is preserved.²² It is this manuscript that is published in this issue of *Religion in the Roman Empire* for the first time and supplemented by an English translation.

3. Finally, Wissowa's research programme is reflected in the dissertations he had proposed and supervised from 1888 onwards, when he was already working on his manual. He had accepted the task in 1887 when his teacher August Reifferscheid, who was to write a handbook on 'Roman religion', died unexpectedly early, as is pointed out in the printed preface.²³ Roman religion dominates these dissertations, with more than fifty percent of the topics belonging to this thematic field. Christianity, however, is hardly present.

In what follows, we will briefly turn to each of these sources, before discussing, for the bulk of the argument, the unpublished text mentioned in second place.

¹⁹ Potentially also reconstructable based on his later lectures which are also preserved in his papers at the University of Halle. Aust had written his dissertation on republican Roman temples in 1889: Aust 1889.

²⁰ Aust 1899.

²¹ David Magie Papers, 1901–1919, cf. <http://findingaids.princeton.edu/collections/MC093/c021>. Published dissertation: Magie 1905. Magie stuck to epigraphy: Magie 1953.

²² Ms. Wissowa, Yi20, Ia II.

²³ Wissowa 1902, vii. Widely used is the much enlarged second edition: Wissowa 1912 (repr. 1971).

3.1 Religion und Kultus der Römer

The most important context for Wissowa's conception of early Christianity was the handbook series itself. It was based on the differentiation of 'religion' seen as beliefs about the gods, i. e., mythology, and religion seen as 'Kultus-Altertümer', that is ritual practices. Thus Otto Gruppe (1851–1921), teacher of ancient languages at a gymnasium at Berlin from 1876 onwards, himself interested in gods from the Hellenistic East as much as in the history of reception, wrote a volume on Greek mythology (and history of religion) in 1906, after his contemporary Paul Stengel (1851–1929), likewise teacher of ancient languages at a gymnasium at Berlin, had published a second edition of a manual on Greek ritual a few years earlier in 1898.²⁴ In Wissowa's case, this differentiation is reflected in the title: it juxtaposes religion and cult. It is also reflected in the structure, which devotes around 220 pages to discussion of the gods and about 200 pages to ritual, religious times and places and priestly personnel. As Rüpke has shown elsewhere, Wissowa was inspired by the structure of Varro's *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*.²⁵ The ancient model might also have influenced the introductory ninety pages on the 'Entwicklungsgang der römischen Religion', the 'evolution of Roman religion'.

It is here, and only here, that Christianity figures, namely in chapter 18, 'The end of Roman religion' at the conclusion of the first part of the manual, devoted to discussion of the individual gods. It is not listed at the end of the second part 'Sacra peregrina', when Wissowa dealt with '60. Sonstige Fremdkulte' (312–317), a place in which anything conceptualised as a new cult might have figured. Chapter 18 built above all on older French works on the 'destruction du paganisme' up to Boissier's work of 1891 and Paul Allard's 1897 publication. The text hardly changed in the 1912 edition, but footnotes are now filled with readings primarily of works written on early Christianity, like Adolf von Harnack's *Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums* ('Mission and Expansion of Christianity', quoted in its 1906 second edition). Franz Cumont is predominantly quoted with his work on Mithras. Wissowa did not engage in a discussion of the latter's theory of regarding Christianity as being prepared by a group of 'religions' wrongly classified as stemming from and being developed in 'the East', the long-living scholarly construct of 'oriental religions'.²⁶

²⁴ Gruppe 1906 (second edition 1921); Stengel 1898 (see his critique of this separation, p. 3). The first edition of 1890 was co-authored by Gustav Oehmichen and had the title of *Die griechischen Sakralaltertümer und das Bühnenwesen der Griechen und Römer*.

²⁵ Rüpke 2003; Rüpke 2005.

²⁶ Bonnet, Rüpke and Scarpi 2006; Bonnet and Rüpke 2009.

Wissowa took his approach from a very different angle. For the centre, Rome, the establishment of the monarchy had transformed the former 'state religion' into a 'court religion'.²⁷ The expansion of the empire did not only lead to a diffusion of ruler cult ('Kaiserkult'); the names of traditional urban gods, also, were used to approach and establish equations between the religion of the centre and the indigenous cults in the provinces, following what Tacitus described as *interpretatio Romana* by Wissowa.²⁸ The breakdown of a differentiation between Roman and foreign as enacted by Caracalla's attribution of citizen status to all free inhabitants of the empire at the beginning of the third century was decisive; Wissowa stresses the religious element of the *Constitutio Antoniniana*.²⁹ As a consequence, all the foreign cults ('Fremdkulte'), that had been carried to Rome as private cults, Oriental ones in particular,³⁰ were now part of the religion of the empire. People were no longer able to understand the 'historical and inner difference and incompatibility of the separate circles of deities and cults'.³¹ Christianity, however, is not described as one of those, but rather their big enemy. Being the 'most intolerant and most exclusive of all religions', not even allowing for the merging of different gods (called 'Theokrasie' here), full victory or destruction were the only alternatives. It was not traditional religion, but the new 'foreign cults' that were the enemies in this last fight.³²

3.2 Dissertations

To follow the third of our suggested lines of thought proposed above, looking at the dissertations he supervised, an interest in Christianity cannot be demonstrated by the topics. This might have been in accordance with what students and colleagues expected. Despite intensive personal contacts and methodological transfers, for instance in establishing stemmata of manuscripts (Lachmann) or comparative mythology, the disciplines of Classical Philology in the Faculty of Arts and the relevant disciplines of the Faculties of Theology were clearly separated. Even the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* at Göttingen looked at Near Eastern traditions rather than the textual and philosophical traditions of the Graeco-Roman world.³³ Disinterest was,

²⁷ Wissowa 1902, 71: 'Hofreligion'.

²⁸ Wissowa 1902, 76 with reference to Tacitus, *Germania*. 43. Further elaborated in Wissowa 1916.

²⁹ Wissowa 1902, 79.

³⁰ Wissowa 1902, 78.

³¹ Wissowa 1902, 82.

³² Wissowa 1902, 85.

³³ Overviews: Colpe 1961; Lüdemann and Schröder 1987; Rudolph 1987.

however, not merely conventional. The personal interests are more apparent when taking into account the development of topics which Wissowa suggested to his doctoral students as subjects for their theses. For the period of and after the second edition of 1912, more and more dissertations display an interest in imperial cult, and above all provincial religion. Studies on *Quellenkritik* for Varro, Verrius Flaccus, Ovid or Suetonius are replaced by dissertations on epigraphical sources. The very last dissertation supervised by Wissowa before his two strokes in mid-1923 dealt with local cults at Tibur and Praeneste, asking for Latin and Italian contexts of urban Roman religion.³⁴ There is only one exception, which we will come to at the end.

3.3 Unpublished manuscripts

The clearest instance of Wissowa's view on Christianity is to be found in the manuscript on 'Religion der Römer'³⁵ – we should note that Wissowa had here established 'religion' as the term encompassing what he had allowed to be called 'Religion und Kultus' in the contract of 1887. In what follows, we will present the unpublished German text as well as a translation.

Basically, his historiographic view is shaped by a scheme of degeneration, which started already in the third century BCE, outlined in the chapter on 'Hellenisation':

Aber das religiöse Empfinden der Griechen und der Römer ist in seiner Eigenart so verschieden, dass weder eine organische Verschmelzung möglich war, noch der Römer sich einfach die griechische Denkweise aneignen konnte; die Hellenisierung hat den alten Glauben zerstört, ohne etwas lebensfähiges Neues an seine Stelle setzen zu können.

But the religious feeling of the Greeks and the Romans still differed to such a degree that it was impossible to become one, nor could the Roman simply adopt the Greek way of thinking; Hellenisation destroyed the old faith without having something new to offer in its stead that could thrive.

This line of argumentation can also be found in the chapter on the 'Reforms of Augustus', where Wissowa describes the attempts of Augustus to favour specific gods:

aber so sehr auch die höfische Dichtung diese Götter und ihre Bedeutung für Kaiser und Reich verherrlichen mochte, dem religiösen Empfinden der Masse standen sie zu fern, neue Göttervorstellungen lassen sich dem Volke nicht aufzotroyieren, sondern nur aus wenn auch zeitweilig verlegenen, so doch noch triebfähigen Wurzeln hervorlocken. Das sah Augustus ein und handelte danach, als er nach dem Tode des Lepidus den Ober-

³⁴ Meusel 1923.

³⁵ Ms. Wissowa, Yi 20, Ia 11, 'Die Religion der Römer', 1904, 56 Ms. pp. (published in this issue).

pontificat übernahm und damit ein für allemal die Würde eines höchsten Vorstandes der Landeskirche mit der Person des Kaisers verknüpfte: ...

but however much court poetry attempted to glorify these gods and underline their significance for emperor and empire, they were too far removed from the religious sensibilities of the masses, new religious ideas cannot just be foisted upon the people, but can only be carefully nourished from the deep, yet vital roots of religious feelings. This Augustus realised and acted upon it when, upon the death of Lepidus, he took over the office of the supreme pontiff and thus linked the dignity of highest office of the church to the person of the emperor once and for all.

In keeping with the period, the text is full of biological metaphors, in particular the rich power of procreation. It is interesting to note that the point of comparison for the position of Augustus is taken from contemporary Protestant churches, which fits very well with the liberal Protestant background of Paul Hinneberg's editorial enterprise that aimed at a broader understanding of cultural and historical roots beyond the lines traditionally invoked. For the development of religion in the imperial period, the chapter 'Romanisation of national religions in the provinces' is important testimony to Wissowa's view beyond the centre.

Der Römer hat aber auch eine merkwürdige Art, die Götter fremder Völker nicht nur seinem Verständnisse näher zu bringen, sondern geradezu den seinigen zu assimilieren: ausgehend von der Anschauung, dass im Grunde allerorten immer wieder dieselben Götter, die auch die des römischen Staates sind, wenn auch unter fremden Namen und abweichenden Anbetungsformen, verehrt würden, fand er überall im fremden Lande, an mehr oder minder überzeugenden Übereinstimmungen des Wesens erkennbar, die eigenen Götter wieder ...

But the Roman also has a strange way in which to assimilate the gods of foreign peoples to their own understanding: departing from the view that the same gods who were worshipped in Rome were essentially worshipped everywhere, even if differing in name and in cultic custom, the Romans found in any foreign land, to a greater or lesser degree of plausibility, the same gods.

But he also acknowledges the limits of assimilation, namely in the chapter on 'Oriental cults in Rome':

Ganz anders dagegen stellt sich das Verhältnis der Religionen Ägyptens, Vorderasiens, Syriens, Persiens, überhaupt des ganzen Ostens zu Rom dar. Grundverschieden in der Gesamtanschauung und für den Kreis ihrer Anhänger durchweg mehr oder weniger bestimmt mit dem Anspruche der Ausschliesslichkeit auftretend, liessen diese Götter eine Romanisierung nur in der alleräusserlichsten Weise zu: ...

Dagegen besaßen diese Religionen ihrerseits Eigenschaften, die ihnen einen starken und nachhaltigen Einfluss auf die Bewohner der Westhälfte des Reiches sicherten: die Formen ihres Gottesdienstes mussten in ihrer wilden Ausgelassenheit und schwülen Sinnlichkeit einen fremdartigen Reiz ausüben, und der Inhalt ihrer Lehren bot vielfach gerade dasjenige, was der römischen Religion zu allen Zeiten abgegangen ist, Anre-

gung der Phantasie und Befriedigung der unbestimmten Sehnsucht des menschlichen Herzens nach geheimnisvollen Offenbarungen und über die Grenzen der Sterblichkeit hinausführende Verheissungen.

However, the relationship of the Egyptian religion, the Near Eastern, Syrian, Persian, yea, all the Eastern religions to Rome is quite different. A basic differences lies in the world view and the all-encompassing claim among their adherents that their, and only their, god would provide salvation, a claim which would not allow for Romanisation, or so only in the most superficial of ways: [...]

These religions had certain traits which would guarantee them a strong and lasting influence on the inhabitants of the western half of the Empire: the forms of their worship, their wild exuberance and sultry sensuality exerted an exotic charm, while their dogmas offered that which Roman religion had always lacked, an inspiration to the mind and a quieting of the heart in mysterious revelations that made promises beyond the limits of mortality.

The text considers the attractiveness of these cults to the simple folk in contrast to the educated elite that was enticed rather by intellectual content and moral reflection as shown by persons such as Seneca or Marcus Aurelius. Wissowa uses the term 'Orient' just as a geographical summary. The stress is on difference, and difference is spelled out in a number of qualities, exclusivism (as developed in his account of Christianity in *Religion und Kultus*) first among them. The ritual is qualified negatively ('schwüle Sinnlichkeit') and only here is the foreign character ('fremdartig', exotic) stressed. The teachings are again qualified as different and even addressing something that is lacking in Roman religion, a personal, mystic or spiritual element – terms, however, that Wissowa did not use. Wissowa diagnosed an attempt to concentrate the monotheistic and syncretistic tendencies in a new cult of a sun god. It was in that venue that Aurelian made 'den letzten Einigungsversuch des antiken Polytheismus', the 'last attempt to unify ancient polytheism'.

Judaism and Christianity, clearly differentiated in his view now – Judaism is not mentioned in the treatment in *Religion und Kultus* –, are seen as exceptions, as is formulated in the chapter on 'The position of the Roman state towards Judaism and Christianity'. Against the background just quoted, they share the exclusivism, but not the exoticism. Both are evidently not just another 'cult', another set of *sacra peregrina*, as are treated in the published manual.

Vor zwei Religionen hat die sonst gegenüber fremdem Glauben so allseitig bewiesene Toleranz der Römer Halt gemacht, vor dem Judentume und vor dem Christentume; mit gutem Recht, denn beide vertraten den alle Schranken der Nationalität niederwerfenden Monotheismus in der Weise, dass sie neben ihrem Gotte keine andere göttliche Gewalt anerkannten und die Existenz der römischen Staatsgötter rundweg ableugneten.

The much-evident tolerance of the Romans towards foreign faiths stopped short of two religions, Judaism and Christendom; with good cause, as both advertised a monotheism that broke all boundaries of national faiths in such a way that they not only did not recognise other divine powers beside their god but denied the very existence of the Roman gods of state.

Tolerance thus proved fatal, as Wissowa states in the chapter headed 'Acknowledgment of Christianity':

... so musste doch schon diese Gleichstellung bei der absoluten Unvereinbarkeit der christlichen Grundanschauung mit dem Polytheismus notwendig und unbedingt zur Vernichtung des letzteren führen, und die persönliche Begünstigung des Christentums durch die Kaiser seit Konstantin hat diesen Prozess zwar beschleunigt, aber keineswegs allein entschieden.

... this according of (legal) equality meant that with the absolute incongruity of Christianity and polytheism, the latter would of necessity be overcome, and the personal favouring of Christianity by the emperors since Constantine may have accelerated the process, but was by no means the only decisive factor.

Wissowa uses dramatising language, speaking of the *furchtbare Macht*, the 'awesome' or 'dreadful power' of Christianity. He describes the historical development as a 'fight', but not an open-ended one, as the chapter 'Last fights' demonstrates:

In die beiden Jahrzehnte, die zwischen Gratian und Theodosius liegen, fällt der eigentliche Todeskampf des römischen Heidentums. Zwei Bollwerke besaß der alte Glaube noch, von denen aus er seine Verteidigung bis zum letzten Atemzuge führen konnte: den Adel der Reichshauptstadt und die Landbevölkerung der westlichen Provinzen. ... Zäher in seinem Festhalten am Alten erwies sich das Landvolk, bei dem die orientalischen Kulte nicht in demselben Masse wie in den Städten ihre zersetzende Wirkung geübt hatten und dessen ganze Tätigkeit und Lebensweise alltäglich an die Abhängigkeit von höheren Mächten gemahnte, so dass es einen Abfall von den bisher bewährten Göttern nicht nur als einen Bruch mit der historischen Vergangenheit, sondern als ein bedrohliches Rütteln an den Grundlagen der gesamten eigenen Existenz empfand ...

In the two decades that lie between Gratian and Theodosius, we see the final struggle and death of Roman paganism. Two bastions the old faith still had from which it would lead its final charge: the nobility of the imperial capital and the rural population of the western provinces. [...] The peasantry, however, proved to be harder to pry away from their ancient rituals, as among them the Oriental cults had not corroded ancient custom as it had in the cities, while all of their works and their very way of life was known to be in the hands of higher powers, so that to turn away from the gods would not only have meant a break with the historical past, but a dangerous charge laid to the foundation of their very existence.

Wissowa's text was intended for a whole book series featuring volumes of several long treatments. The series' name was 'Die Kultur der Gegenwart', 'The Culture of the Present'. Thus, evidently, the authors were asked to

also pay attention to the history of reception, something not to be found in *Religion und Kultus*. Wissowa briefly touches upon poetry and the arts, highlights the importance of the Renaissance, in order to conclude in this chapter on ‘Perspectives’ with particular reference to a German readership:

Inhaltlich hat die römische Religion im Glauben und Aberglauben des deutschen Volkes kaum irgendwo deutlich nachweisbare Spuren hinterlassen. Für den grössten Teil unseres Landes war die Berührung mit den Römern doch eine zu wenig nachhaltige und eindringliche, als dass sie auf die einheimischen Göttervorstellungen und gottesdienstlichen Formen einen tieferen Einfluss hätte ausüben können, und gerade in diesen von der römischen Kultur nur flüchtig gestreiften Landesteilen im Norden und Osten hat auch die Reformation am kräftigsten mit allen alten Erinnerungen aufgeräumt. Anders stand es in den Landschaften an den Ufern des Rheins und der Donau. Es ist kein Zufall, dass diejenigen deutschen Landstriche, in denen noch heute zur Abwehr von Dürre und Hagelschlag die Procession mit dem heiligen Blute die Felder umzieht wie zur Römerzeit die Umzüge der Ambarvalia und Robigalia und der Bauer in der Herdecke vor dem Bilder der Mutter Gottes und seiner Schutzheiligen sein Lämpchen ebenso ansteckt wie einst der Römer vor der Penatennische, eben diejenigen sind, in denen im Altertume das keltische-germanische Volkstum am tiefsten von der römischen Kultur durchdrungen worden ist. Wer darum im Tone der Anklage von dem “Heidentume in der katholischen Kirche” reden will, dem mag das unbenommen bleiben; wer nach geschichtlicher Erfassung der Vorgänge strebt, wird es vorziehen, sich der leisen Spuren zu freuen, die ihn im Wandel der Völker und Zeiten bleibende und stets sich erneuernde Züge erkennen lassen.

In terms of content, Roman religion has left no traces in the beliefs and superstitions of the German people. The greater part of our lands had little or no contact, and no intensive contact, with the Romans so that they had hardly any influence upon the indigenous notions of godhead and forms of cult, and in these very lands barely touched by Roman culture to the North and the East, the Reformation most thoroughly scourged what was remembered of the ancient days. The situation was different in the lands bordering the Rhine and the Danube. It is no coincidence that in those German regions in which the procession of Corpus Christi still circumambulates the fields to ward off drought and hailstorms, as was done in Roman times with the processions of Ambarvalia and Robigalia, and the farmer lights his lamp at the hearth before the image of the Mother of God and his patron saint, just as the Roman once did to sacrifice to his *di penates*, are the very ones in which in ancient times the Celtic-Germanic peoples had been in closest contact with Roman culture. Whosoever will thus speak of the “paganism of the Catholic Church” may do so; but whosoever looks for historical understanding will prefer to rejoice in the quiet traces that show the perpetual and ever-renewing constants throughout time and change.

Evidently, the author is referring to confessional perspectives in an ongoing discourse. Defining points of this discourse as seen by Wissowa can be identified with the help of the last addition to the bibliography of chapter 18 of the manual in its second edition:³⁶

³⁶ Wissowa 1912, 102.

Das Fortleben einzelner Züge heidnischer Anschauung im Christentum verlangt eine minder tendenziöse Betrachtung, als sie ihm in den an wertvollem Materiale reichen Werken von Th. Trede, *Das Heidentum in der römischen Kirche*, 4 Bde., Gotha 1890–1891; *Der Wunderglaube im Heidentum und in der alten Kirche*, Gotha 1901, und bei W. Soltau ... zuteil geworden ist.

The continuity of specific traces of pagan beliefs within Christendom deserves a less tendentious survey than it finds in Th. Trede, *Das Heidentum in der römischen Kirche* [Paganism in the Roman Church], 4 Bde., Gotha 1890–1891; *Der Wunderglaube im Heidentum und in der alten Kirche* [Belief in miracles in paganism and the early Church], Gotha 1901, and in W. Soltau ..., rich though these writings are in material.

Theodor Trede lived from 1833 to 1900 (his last work is posthumously edited) and was a pastor of the German Protestant community at Naples. Basically, his confessionally biased argument was that the fight between Paganism and Christianity, which lasted for two hundred years, was lost by Christianity. Its result was an external Christianisation only. Deep down, it was a victory of the pagan spirit, as he formulates in his statement on the spirituality of paganism ('religiöse Geistesrichtung des Heidentums') in the opening chapter of his treatment of 1889.³⁷ Confessional polemic comes to the fore time and again, for instance, when he compares Lucian to the pope: 'Lucian, the Satirist of the second century AD, describes the Syrian Goddess on her throne as a *Regina*, saying at the end of his description: "Every year a new high priest is elected, who has a purple garment and a golden threefold crown (*tiara*)."' If Lucian were alive today, he would write thus: "The high priest of SS. Maria, regina dell' Universo, lives at Rome, is elected for a lifetime, and bears a golden Tiara, as once the high priest of the Syrian queen of heaven did."³⁸ He formulates even more poignantly in his later and posthumously published work on the belief in miracles in the 'ancient Church'. The last of the six concluding theses on ancient miracles was formulated as follows: '6. If the tiny plant of true Christianity within that suffocating climate of pagan addiction to miracles and dishonest delusion of miracles of the period did not die completely, that very fact can be termed the only and real miracle of the time.'³⁹

³⁷ Trede 1889–91, vol. I.3.

³⁸ Trede 1889–91, vol. I.3, 371.

³⁹ Trede 1901, 264.

4 Conclusion

Wissowa, a Catholic teaching at a Protestant university, was not interested in introducing the field of inter-confessional strife and polemics into the study of ancient, and in particular Roman, religion. The expansion of the empire was analysed with regard to its religious consequences, attention was paid to differences in the Western and Eastern parts of the Roman Empire. But with his growing interest in practices outside the geographical centre, and thus a widening vision of the historical context of urban developments, he did not shrink from observing and describing processes of reception and translocation. This becomes evident in a very late dissertation supervised by him and defended a few days before his first stroke on 16 May 1923. Gerhard Metzmacher defended his treatise *De sacris fratrum Arvalium ecclesiae christianae veteris caerimoniarum comparatione illustrandis observationes selectae*, ‘Selected observations on rituals of the Arval brethren that can be elucidated by comparison with the old Christian church’. As the author stated,⁴⁰ the work was inspired by Wissowa’s work on the Arval acts, the enormous complex of inscriptions displayed in the sanctuary of Dea Dia on the outskirts of Rome.⁴¹ Wissowa himself had published an article on the acts in 1917.⁴² Metzmacher’s work was hardly the outcome of a surfacing Catholic trait in Wissowa. Academically, the author, born in 1900, was influenced by Thomas Achelis (1850–1909), the founder and first editor of the first German journal for the History of Religion, the *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* (from 1898 onwards), trying to bring together different disciplines under such a heading. Metzmacher was a student of Carl Clemen (1865–1940) in Bonn, a theologian who was part of the movement of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* and from 1920 onwards editor of the ‘*Fontes historiae religionum*’, a source collection for the history of different religions (for instance ‘Roman religion’).⁴³ However, his interest in religion and ritual, as stated in his dissertation, had been stimulated by Ludwig Deubner (1877–1946), teaching at Freiburg/Breisgau at the time, even if the topic of the dissertation was suggested by Wissowa. Furthermore, Metzmacher himself was a Protestant.

We thus find that Jesus was no, and even Christianity was never an important, topic in Wissowa’s work on Roman religion. As pointed out above, in Germany around 1900, one needed to have special motifs to look for

⁴⁰ Metzmacher 1924, I.

⁴¹ See now the edition Scheid 1998.

⁴² Wissowa 1917.

⁴³ On the ARW in the period, see Dürkop 2013. On the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* above, n. 33 and Ittel 1956; see also Auffarth 2013.

closer connections. Hermann Usener (1834–1905), advanced in years, and the young Eduard Norden (1868–1941), looking for the roots of strangeness in classical (and less classical) texts, had these.⁴⁴ In all other cases, exceptionalism would do: Judaism and Christianity – always clearly distinguished – were simply so different that they could succeed ‘paganism’, but not be part of the field. This position was no longer tenable for close observers in the 1920s, after folklore studies as much as the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* had had their say, but for all others it was easy to keep to older solutions. In this field, Catholic or Protestant backgrounds, as we have seen for the figure of Trede, might polemically sharpen the analysis. However, such differentiations were not necessary. Undoubtedly, religious positions were important in the research on religion of the period – beyond as much as in Germany. But they did not explain everything. On the basis of the material analysed here, for Georg Wissowa confessional factors were not important.

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⁴⁴ On Usener see Arrighetti 1983; Baumgarten 2006; Bremmer 1990; Dieterich 1905; Kany 2004; Mette 1979; Michela Sassi 1983; Momigliano 1983; Schlesier 1995; Schmid 1969.

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