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Jörg Rüpke

# Construing 'religion' by doing historiography: The historicisation of religion in the Roman Republic

## 1 Religion and history

Some practices and beliefs that we usually classify as 'religious' are very old. Regardless of the specific 'theory of religion' one may be referring to – whether it be the belief in the afterlife, the existence of superhuman agents, or non-pragmatic behaviour that forms the definitional kernel of said theory – religion has been identified in some prehistoric images and burial practices of the last 100,000 years and has even been traced back to the age of Australopithecus and his predecessors. As the discovery of Göbleki Tepe has shown, monumental buildings that can hardly be interpreted as anything but ritual sites and thus seem to suggest superhuman agents or an afterlife, have existed since 9000 BCE. The same theories of religion tell us why human beings, defined as a species that exists in a cultural world, came up with or invented religion. Why would a culture create a concept like 'religion'? Inventing such a concept presupposes an interest in making distinctions between a phenomenon like 'religion' and something that is 'non-religious'. Such interest could be of a political nature, as societies wish to distinguish between matters that can be decided by officials whose authority is legitimated by annual elections, and affairs that fall under the influence of those individuals or families who are closer to the gods. Alternatively the aforementioned distinction could be motivated by the economic need to draw a line between those objects that can be subjected to property transfer and those which are *sacer* and thus fall outside the realm of profitable transactions. Moreover, the demarcation of a separate religious realm could be triggered by legal concerns as people attempt to discriminate between those cases that fall under positive law and those that are subject to divine command – abortion in the US or the specific rulings for employees in Churches in Germany are recent examples. Finally the reason behind this division may be a philosophical one arising from human beings' attempts to distinguish what is knowable from that, which is not. In a way all these possible motivations are second-order interests compared to religious practice and beliefs. However, they clearly interact with the latter.

Such observations or speculations are not merely petty historical details. In global politics the concept of 'religion' and of the self-organisation of social

groups in terms of ‘religions’, has proven a highly successful format in efforts to establish oneself as a national or international agent of the ‘non governmental’ type. The proliferation of the Western concept of ‘religion’ (as a parasite construct riding on the back of the notion of national identity that began to flourish from the nineteenth century onwards) and the necessity to construct (or continuously cultivate) interpretive accounts of such religions, has brought along with it the creation of an entirely new discipline, namely the ‘History of Religion’ or *Religionswissenschaft*.

Yet, I am not looking to trace the history of religion as a scientific concept in this article. Instead, I want to return to my initial question: Why would a culture generate a *concept* like ‘religion’? The question is not targeted at the exploration of the term ‘religion’ or *religio* but at the very idea of the religious. In other words I seek to investigate any idea that is at least vaguely comparable to our notion of religion, as it is employed in everyday speech. Turning to ‘religion’ in the Roman Republic and the sources that are available from that time, it becomes apparent that semantics are vitally important if one wishes to outline basic differences between various ideas and terminologies. *Sacer* and *religiosus* are crucial idioms within the context of a hierarchy of property rights (Rüpke 2007, 8). *Feriae*, the Latin word for ‘festival days’ is etymologically related – and we do not know exactly how – to the expressions *fas* and *nefas*, which denote divine property in time (Rüpke 2011, 50f. and 55–8). *Mos maiorum*, tradition (‘the way of the ancestors’), might be corrected by piecemeal actions ascribed to divine interventions – as for instance by *prodigia*, Sibylline oracles –, but is not systematically differentiated from the concept of ‘gods’ will, divine revelation or even from written divine law like the *torah*.

History is not only a mighty instrument of ordering the past for the purposes of academic research but also carries much wider importance. The argument put forth in this chapter is that the historicisation of religion was an important element of the creation of a concept of religion in the late Roman Republic. This claim presupposes a concept of ‘history’ that needs some explanation before I start to analyse the Roman evidence.

Historical thinking has widely, though not universally, taken the form of narratives, of organised historiography:

There is no human culture without a constitutive element of common memory. By remembering, interpreting, and representing the past peoples understand their present-day life and develop a future perspective on themselves and their world. ‘History’ in this fundamen-

tal and anthropologically universal sense is a culture's interpretive recollection of the past serving as a means to orient the group in the present. (Rüsen 1996, 8)<sup>1</sup>

Historical narratives generated by a given group seem to be important for many other groups. Others might or might not have a place in these histories. A group's history need not overlap with that of other societies, although it certainly might. The orientation given by such a history for the future might be explicit or implicit. Understandably, religious convictions contribute enormously to their adherents' or cultures' conceptualisation and narrations of the past – a past that is predefined by god(s), often repeats itself, or even represents a period of trials. Such historical narratives are variously furthered by professionals in their historiographic enterprises, embodied through large-scale monuments (Hartmann 2010), memorised through schooling and even physical exercise (Connerton 1989, 72–95) and finally commemorated in public speeches (Bücher 2006, especially 137–40) and rituals.

Similar efforts to interpret or constitute a group as a 'city' or 'people' through one's past could be undertaken by, or for religious communities, thus creating 'confessions' or 'religions' and emphasising differences. It is here that my interest in identifying the historicisation of religion in the late Roman Republic fits in: Such an exploration would be an important element of any process to develop a concept of religion (cf. Metzger, p. 287, in this volume). However, this conceptualisation is not its only benefit.

Through its chronological framework history allows for various stories to relate and speak to one another. It is likely that conflicts and contesting claims have frequently served as triggers for the production of alternate narratives. History, then, does not occur in the singular. Instead it tends to be disputed and endangered. History introduces contingency from the very beginning in order to question the established truths of others. Religion may not seem a very likely candidate for historicisation. Featuring meta-historical claims, gods outside of time and displaying an inherent immunity to change, religion as a social phenomenon possesses strong traditional authority in a Weberian sense. Frequently myths tell stories of a distant past and thereby establish binding norms. These norms continue to be valid, not despite the fact that this past is categorically different from contemporary life, but precisely for this reason. How could one narrate a history for a system of rituals, for a 'cold' sector of culture?<sup>2</sup> A polytheist

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<sup>1</sup> To this definition the element of space must be added (cf. Wescoat, Ousterhout 2012; Tweed 2011; Leach 1988; Rau 2013; and more generally Löw 2001). Basic lines of the following are taken from Rüpke 2014.

<sup>2</sup> For 'cold' and 'hot' societies see Lévi-Strauss 1966, 233f.

religion or an embedded religion that is at home in a specific city would be an unlikely candidate for such a strategy. Instead such an approach appears to be best suited to a monotheistic, prophetic religion with a sound and compelling theology of the history of salvation. What are the reasons for the rise of the history of religion and of historicizing strategies in ‘religion’ – a cultural practice introducing an alternative order and fighting contingency –, when, in scriptural societies, canonisation is frequently used to stabilise narratives, as well as doctrinal solutions, and thus to exclude alternative interpretations from the tradition?<sup>3</sup> It is at this juncture that my second interest in the late republic arises. If there is a historicisation of religion, one has to ask what purpose it serves.

## 2 Religion in late Republican history

Such an interest is new. This statement does not imply that questions regarding history and religion in Roman culture have not been addressed before. Social memory that has been turned into history is available and accessible in written form from the beginning of the third century BCE onwards. We have evidence of honorific funerary inscriptions, increasing in scale with the sarcophagi and *elogiae* to the members of the noble family of the Scipiones in the third and second centuries. The earliest known funerary oration (*laudatio funebris*), which has survived in fragmentary form presumably stems from a speech recorded in writing in 221; it concerns the twice consul and – this information is, however, absent from the textual fragment – *pontifex maximus* L. Caecilius Metellus. By the middle of the third century, the *pontifex maximus* Ti. Coruncanius began to record pontifical *commentarii*. He kept a log of membership protocols, noted down the number of prodigies and chronicled the decisions that were taken. Ascription of agency to actors, and hence the situating of specific priesthoods within a network of ever more formalised and differentiated authorities, seems to have been the dominant function of the *comentarii*. Thus we know that in 275 or 274 L. Postumius Albinus was the priest who held the title *Rex sacrorum*. In this capacity he witnessed the introduction of a new divinatory practice, which demanded that the *haruspices* begin to pay attention to the heart of the sacrificial victim in their scrutiny of entrails (Pliny, *Nat.* 11.186). Evidently, the office of the *Rex sacrorum*, supplemented by Olympiads in the underlying source had been used as a tool for historical organisation and the dating of eras.

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<sup>3</sup> For canonization see Assmann, Assmann 1987; Folkert 1989; Reinhard 2009; exemplary Rajak 2009.

From the late third century BCE onwards, Romans developed a historiography of the rise of their city along the lines of Greek historiography, into which also data on religious practices entered. Evidently, religious data were seen as a factor in secular history. This chapter's interest is however more specific: When and why are the memories and historical dates about what we would denote as religion woven into a history of such religious practices and events, thus establishing an actual concept of 'religion'?

My research is inspired by the work of Hubert Cancik but I am not satisfied by his answers. In a paper published in 1997 Cancik inquired into the historicisation of culture in antiquity and posed the aforementioned question shortly after: 'How can religion, how rituals, how could the divine have a history?' (Cancik 2008, 30). Embedded in his brief analyses of Varro and Tacitus is a reflection on the epistemological basis of such historicisation. Through the analysis of his sources he comes to see religion as an *institutum*, something 'set up' that consists of practices created and traditionalised by humans or even formally regulated and monumentalised in the form of temples (ibid., 28). Yet, I want to argue that this view is in itself not a given fact but rather the consequence of an even more fundamental effort at historicisation by Roman intellectuals. Religious events (like all others) could easily be remembered in a piecemeal fashion. In order to detect 'historicisation' this is not sufficient. A necessary precondition would be a sequencing of events, their temporalisation and an awareness of change. There must be a common subject to the events that are narrated. I will look for the temporalisation of a field that could be termed 'religion'. Some incipient forms of 'historicisation' can be detected in the second century BCE. These will be presented before the analysis concentrates on the first century BCE and Marcus Terentius Varro's *Antiquitates Rerum Diuinarum*, a fully-fledged historicisation of religion which occupies a strategic position in a particular historical context.

### 3 The books of Numa

The historiographic treatment of an incident that occurred in 181 BCE illuminates the changing modes of temporalisation in Roman historiography. In that year it was claimed that the sarcophagus of Numa, the second king of Rome, had been found. The details of the discovery and its plausibility have been the object of many later discussions; interest at the time focused on the books that were recovered. After intensive public scrutiny they were burnt (Livy 40.29). The event was a clear attempt at pseudo-epigraphy (Rosen 1985; Pailler 1988, 623–703; Rüpke 1995, 372, n. 16). The supposedly Pythagorean contents of the books that declared

Numa – against all chronological possibility – a pupil of the famous Greek philosopher Pythagoras, indicate the lack of a unified chronological framework for Roman history at the time. The writings situated an authoritative Roman religious figure within the realm of Greek philosophical thinking. This contextualisation is in itself a statement about the place of Rome in the Mediterranean world after the victories of the Second Punic, and the wars on Greek soil that followed. It is a systematic rather than a historical argument.

However, the views on these now-lost books eventually changed.<sup>4</sup> For the earliest stages we have to rely on a passage in Pliny the Elder:

[...] *libros eius [scil. Numa] repertos P. Cornelio L. f. Cethego, M. Baebio Q. f. Tamphilo coss. – eosque combustos a Q. Petilio praetore, quia philosophiae scripta essent. Hoc idem tradit Piso Censorius primo commentariorum, sed libros septem iuris pontificii totidemque Pythagoricos fuisse, Tuditanus quattuordecim Numa decretorum fuisse.*

([...] his books were found during the time of the consuls P. Cornelius L. f. Cethegus and M. Babius Q. f. Tamphilus and they were burnt by the praetor Q. Petilius because they were books of philosophy. Piso Censorius reports the same in his first commentary but said that there had been seven books of pontifical law and the same number of Pythagorean philosophical works. Tuditanus maintains that there had been fourteen books of decrees of Numa). (Pliny, *Nat.* 13.84–6)

Whereas the only potential contemporary, Cassius Hemina, speaks of Pythagorean, that is Greek philosophy, by the last third of the second century BCE, Calpurnius Piso and Sempronius Tuditanus added or concentrated on an originally Roman element in the small library, raising the number of books from three to two times (namely Greek and Latin books) seven (to grow to two times twelve by the first century BCE). However, Tuditanus adds a clearly historical dimension with the introduction of the ‘decrees of Numa’: We are moving from timeless veracities written down by a famous man to datable change and positivistic law. Nearly a century later, *sacrorum institutorum causae*, ‘reasons (and origins) for the institutionalisation of ritual practices’, had been found, according to Varro (as quoted by Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 7.34). Therefore historical change is in itself a result of circumstances and motifs.

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<sup>4</sup> See more general Rosenberger 2003 for the changing views on the contents of the sarcophagus.

## 4 Ennius and the *fasti*

A crucial case of new historical writing is nearly as old as the Pseudo-Numa. In 189 Marcus Fulvius Nobilior was consul along with one Manlius Vulso and assumed military command of the Aetolian front (Livy, 37.50; 38.1–11). Traditional records maintain that the most important event of this campaign was the siege and capture of the city of Ambracia, which is located north of the Gulf of Actium. In fact it was the booty from this city in particular that the victor displayed in the triumphal procession that took place upon his return to Rome in 187 (Livy, 39.5.14f.). Fulvius not only brought the treasures home, he actually put a roof over their head. He transformed a temple of Hercules into a 'museum' in the true, modern sense of the term: It became a *Museion*, a sanctuary of the Muses, and the first of its kind in Rome (Pape 1975; Östenberg 2009). Fulvius also undertook the expansion of an existing temple of Hercules, probably that of Hercules Custos, after reconciling with Aemilius, his former antagonist and fellow censor in 179 BCE. He added a hall with columns and then installed the statues of the nine muses that he had taken from Ambracia. Hercules became *Hercules Musarum*, 'Hercules of the Muses'. The institutionalisation of the new name and this new tutelary role of Hercules signified powerful protection of cultural production, a sphere of activity of increasing importance to the self-image of the Roman elite. A *terminus post quem* for the foundation of the temple is the beginning of Fulvius' censorship in 179; its completion and dedication would have occurred in the subsequent years.<sup>5</sup>

In addition *Fulvius* installed a calendar known as *fasti* in the *aedes Herculis Musarum* in the form of a wall painting (Rüpke 2012, 93–5). He also added a meeting place for poets in the interior and furnished it with many statues and Greek paintings. The few quotations from this calendar indicate that the inscribed dedication might have stated the following:

The consul and censor M. Fulvius Nobilior set up this calendar after the Aeolian War: Romulus had named ten months, the first in honor of his father and foremother; after having divided the people into older and younger to ensure that one group should defend the state by advice, the other by arms, he named the third and fourth in honour of both; the rest was named by numbers. Numa named the two that were added for Ianus and the Gods of the Netherworld. A thirteenth month was intercalated according to a law by the consul Acilius in the year 562.

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<sup>5</sup> See Rüpke 2012, 88–90, and the critical evaluation of the dating by Feeney 2007, 143, n. 24.

This is not a faithful reconstruction, but a rather basic hypothesis that could help explain all the quotations of, and references to Fulvius' calendar (Rüpke 2012, 95; id. 2006, also for the following). The calendar as a cultural product is thereby given a history. However, we have to ask ourselves whether this is already a history of religion. It is likely that at the time no encompassing concept of religion existed that would have formed the basis for an answer to this query. The creator of the painting added another element, a list of the annual consuls and occasional censors. It has been hypothesised that this list covered all such officials from the Gallic Sack of Rome onwards, as this event was construed as the second (or even third) birth of Rome. The artistic ensemble was clearly an attempt at 'systematic' history. It tried to summarise and unify the most important eponymous agents, that is those employed in dating, in a coherent list that had been extracted and reworked from historic narratives.

The combination of these elements proves the historicizing significance of the third element (and at the same time important innovation) that formed part of Fulvius' mural calendar: The calendar recorded *dies natales templorum*, the foundation days of urban temples. In the half-century that ensued after the end of the war against Hannibal, temples financed from war booty shot up like mushrooms in Rome. They were dedications to the gods that had granted the Romans victory in individual battles and hence commemorated military success. After they had seen, heard, and smelled the victories in lavish processions and games, Romans could now view history in much more tangible terms in those very temples. While up to that point the purpose of the public calendar had been to document the political and juridical year, it now functioned additionally as an embodiment of history. Previously calendars had merely included those religious dates that served (or, unexpectedly, did not affect) said purpose, festivals like the *Vestalia* or *Neptunalia* (dedicated to Vesta and Neptune respectively) that rendered days forbidden for some political and juridical business. Temple foundations rank highly on the list of those historical events that were most precisely retained in Rome's collective memory (Rüpke 2006a). However, temples were likewise monuments dedicated to a god. A temple was owned by a deity and usually housed his or her statue. As such it was the most concrete sign of the deity's presence and a testimony to its relationship with the Roman people. A deity might publicly enter the city as a statue, but frequently temples were built first. Within the possibility of a polytheistic system open to additions and multiplications of divine figures, it is the production of statue and temple that brings the god into social life – regardless of his earlier ontology.

Our analysis of the introduction of the temple-foundation days into the *fasti*, and the way they were combined with the magistrate lists, has shown that there was a historical perspective to the integration of alien elements into this calen-

dar. The timeless character of the dedication days distributed across the year was thus transferred and attributed to the historical phenomenon of successive temple foundations. As a result the religious reading of these events, as embodying the history of divine epiphanies and cult diversifications, obtained a political dimension. In the history of ideas, this kind of inversion is referred to as euhemerism. Interestingly it was Ennius, a protégé of Fulvius and a contemporary intellectual, poet and historian, who introduced this type of thinking to Rome.

Ennius' narrative *Euhemerus* is not merely eponymous for the Latin tradition. In this treatise, which was probably written before the *Annales* were begun in the latter half of the 180 s BCE (see Ennius/Skutsch [ed.] 1985, 3–6), he concerned himself directly with the origins of temples and – in this order – annual festivals. In his work Ennius followed a Greek model and the fragments that survive contain no explicit history of the origins of the *dies natales templorum* in the city of Rome. It is therefore difficult to arrive today at an appropriate assessment of his Ennius' view of these days. Nonetheless, the elements of critique that do survive can appear downright radical to modern eyes. It may, however, not even have occurred to Ennius and his readers that an explanation of the genesis of the gods and the origin of the cult dedicated to them necessarily implied atheism and denial, or even scepticism. Nor did he seem to think that such exploration and documentation implied a call for action in the real world. In fact this would certainly have been the last thing the temple's patron needed. Even to readers in the ancient world (e. g. Cicero, *nat.*, 1.119; cf. Winiarczyk 1990), a philosophical treatise such as *Euhemerus* constituted less an attack on religion than the application of historical instinct to religion, despite its critical implications. It was a powerful instrument of ordering in a quickly changing world.

The incipient use of historicisation must have been already apparent in aetiological myths. Yet, these aetiologies tend to remain anecdotal as historical examples in political rhetoric (stressed by Jehne 2002, 71, to be characteristic for the first century BCE). Ennius' *Annales* replaced anecdotal forms of family memory (whether in the form of inscriptions or of funerary speeches) with a coherent and sequential history. This is what the Fulvian *fasti* did as well, although the means used in this case were not narratives but instead the chronographic form of the calendar.

## 5 Varronian History and systematics<sup>6</sup>

With Varro's sixteen books of *Antiquitates rerum diuinarum*, 'Antiquities of divine things', the systematisation of religion reaches its climax at the end of the republic. The work was dedicated to Julius Caesar in 46 BCE. In this opus religious historicizing goes well beyond aetiological stories. The existence of two chronologically ordered passages has been acknowledged since Agahd's edition of the first and the last books.<sup>7</sup> Fragments 35 to 39 of the first book of Varro's *Antiquitates rerum diuinarum* list the introductions of deities and cults into the city of Rome by the earliest kings (fr. 35f. Cardauns = fr. 39a Agahd). These fragments form the first sequence. The second chronological sequence occurs in book 15. Fragments 214 to 221 (according to the reconstruction of Burkhard Cardauns 1976) add further cults and thus enlarge the chronological realm, so that it comes to encompass Hercules' visit to Rome. The historical data roughly conforms to the narratives found in the general historiographic literature of the time. In his listing of sacred places in *On Latin Language*, Varro himself refers to the introduction of Sabine deities by Titus Tatius and attributes his data to the 'annals' (*Ling.* 5.74). The impulse to record such information and to organise historical reflection around it is clearly akin to the aforementioned efforts at combining lists of consuls and temple foundations in the *fasti* of the temple of Hercules Musarum. By chronologically relating objects and actors, causation and responsibility is suggested. The manner in which Varro frames the account of Roman religion through these sequences, places Varro in the realm of historiographic genres. The loss of knowledge about the gods is above all (as is stressed in fr. 2a) the loss of memory.

This observation is crucial since, according to Varro, religion is chronologically and logically secondary to the foundation of society. Religious institutions constitute historic data, even if contingency does not rob them of their obligatory character for all those people who lived posterior to the founders' decisions (fr. 12). Political history and art history mark major stages in the history of religion. The introduction of divine images is one such step, chronologically related to the construction of the large Capitoline temples. Jupiter and Summanus were originally deities of equal power – another example of Varronian reasoning. One was responsible for lightning at daytime, the other at night. Due to the construction of the Capitoline temple, an utterly contingent factor, Summanus fell into

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<sup>6</sup> The following paragraphs on Varro summarise the findings published in Rüpke 2014.

<sup>7</sup> See Varro/Agahd (ed.) 1898. This edition has been replaced by Varro/Cardauns (ed.) 1976.

near oblivion (fr. 42). To an extent unknown to us, Varro might have noticed the foundation of temples down to his own time (e. g. fr. 43 f.).

The assumption formulated above that conflicting claims trigger the telling of historical narratives most intensively, be it to criticise counter-claims or to fortify one's own, could now be turned into a heuristic device. Why did Varro write his history in addition to, or rather as a framework for, his systematic, antiquarian handbook and his philosophical interpretations of religion? Religion had not yet been established as a clearly differentiated concept; historicisation itself acts as a means of establishing such a concept. Thus, we cannot expect specific ritual or theological controversies to be the driving force behind histories of religion. Which ends could historicisation serve?

The painting in the temple of Hercules Musarum might be seen as a tool to establish the history of the Roman calendar, Roman temples, and Roman consuls as a subject worthy of literary elaboration. Against the backdrop of Greek literature this would clearly imply the 'We' of Latin-speaking Romans. The focus is an urban one. Varro, in contrast, took a universalistic stance. This is not only true for the philosophical foundation of his arguments. In fact an astonishing number of fragments does not necessarily imply an urban Roman context.

Varro wrote during a time when Roman citizenship was extended to most of Italy. Certainly, his focus was as wide as that. He did not only acknowledge the introduction of Italian deities to Rome by the early kings, but also investigated numerous local, mid-level Italian deities that were to be belittled (and preserved) more than two centuries later by Tertullian as *deos decuriones cuiusque municipii*, 'town council deities' (fr. 33b = Tert., *apol.* 24.8; see Rüpke 2011a, 187 f.). Despite Tertullian's derision, Varro should have been as serious here as he had been in naming Nona and Decima as goddesses of timely birth (fr. 98; see Rüpke 2005).

Varro did not distance himself from Rome. Varro's *theologia civilis*, his 'theory of practice' (Rüpke 2005a, 118 and 124), dignified traditional Roman religious practices within the framework of universalistic Greek philosophy. Clifford Ando has shown this approach to parallel the juridical notion of *ius civile*, the set of norms that belongs to a specific people (Ando 2010, 78). Consequently, the plurality of local regulations has to be understood within a wider framework. There is a clear difference between philosophy and history, and it is epistemological. In his last book, dedicated to 'special and selected deities', Varro dealt with those gods who were defined by Roman places of worship and represented by statues but also had to admit the limits of his own interpretations:

I will write in this book about the public deities of the Roman people, to whom they have dedicated temples and whom they have marked out by many images, but, as Xenophanes

from Colophon wrote, I say what I believe, not what I claim. A human can only surmise these things, only a god knows them for sure. (Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 7.17, p. 295.22 introducing fr. 228)

As indicated in fr. 12 of his work, the history of an old people had more binding authority. Nevertheless, history's authority did not imply intellectual consent. The very special, yet binding, history of the urban territory and its people told of the poor decisions made by the old Romans – and perhaps even by Varro's contemporaries. As his reference to Egyptian cults and his comments on the 'levelling of temples' (fr. 46a) demonstrate, Varro referred to the conflicts of his time. Narrating these events in such a manner allowed for distancing. Varro supported Roman religious tradition despite the crucial historical mistakes made by its agents, at the time of the foundation of the city as in later periods, for instance when images were introduced.

The facticity of contingent history – a history that could have taken other directions and could have produced alternative outcomes – gave rise to institutions that could not only be compared to those of other social groups, but were also connected to each other through the transfer of Penates and the spread of Bacchic cult images. In the very beginning I pointed to the manner in which history can be used to consolidate group cohesion and create boundaries. Varro did not use the histories of religions in order to mark boundaries. He appears to have been interested in the potential inherent in shared history to bridge intercultural gaps, rather than in its capacity to tie people together. I have proposed to term this approach a focused universalism (Rüpke 2014, drawing on Yarrow 2010 and Van Nuffelen 2010). Examined through this lens Varro's three types of theology did not aim at deepening dividing lines, but rather aspired to bring divergent developments together in a meaningful way. Roman poetry frequently featured embarrassing stories about the gods, which had high entertainment value and could be performed in the theatre, while still serving the civic cult (fr. 11). In turn, philosophy not only produced physical interpretations of religion that should be confined to smaller elite circles, but equally offered something to civic theology (*ibid.*). Poetry, as well as philosophy are universal phenomena and hence they shared reservoirs for the many local civic variants of religion (see fr. 9).

The Varronian approach can be situated within a wider context. Surely, a lot of Roman historiographical writing was partisan history used to advance the claims of particular families to official posts and noble ancestors. Yet, there was a strong current in Roman historiography that aimed to create a history common to all Roman families, regardless of their geographical location in Italy or their social position. Annalistic history presented a new opportunity to write history in a non-hierarchical fashion. Through the documentation of Roman history

over the years with its ever-changing protagonists and by projecting a long line of military victories into the calendar via the use of founding dates, differences in individual or gentilician contributions were levelled out. In the second century BCE Cato the Elder attempted to narrate history without naming individuals and also tried to include Italy and Italian prehistory into his narratives. Roman society at the time was still facing the challenge of integrating peninsular Italy, as was gruesomely demonstrated by the civil war that commenced at the beginning of the first century BCE. In the following period waves of massive expansion, Pompeii's push into the East and Julius Caesar's subjugation of Gaul, demonstrated the necessity for an even wider, universalistic stance with regard to local claims in order to secure the stability of an empire. Like his contemporaries Diodorus Siculus or Pompeius Trogus, who were themselves writers of universal histories, Varro aimed to composing a unified historical account. Given the contemporaneous production of historiography, this was a polemical attitude of the sort postulated above. History is never written in the singular but instead organises memories in an alternative manner.

It is for precisely this purpose that Varro defined *religio* not as a tradition, but as an institution (*institutum*), something that has been 'set up' by humans. According to Varro, the differentiation of the divine into endless lists of names has been contingent, or in other words historical. Contingency acts as a distancing method: one can reflect on historical decisions or even criticise them. Yet, it is important to remember that in a contingent world, decisions are necessary even if they turn out to have negative implications, like the expulsion of Egyptian cults. Before the age of historicism all decisions of this kind would have been considered binding, as long as they were taken by people invested with proper, legitimate authority. This notion of inevitability was held up despite the fact that decisions may have been viewed critically.

This insight forms the basis for how Varro proceeded as a systematizing thinker. Within the aforementioned historical framework he created a recipe book for religion. In his *De natura deorum*, written in the year following the publication of Varro's work, Cicero accepted Varro's concept of religion as the contingent human reaction to a conviction that the divine existed. What is more, in Cicero's formulation it is only this latter transcendent truth that forms the legitimate object of philosophical inquiry, whereas religious practice, that is, the contingent reaction of humans to that truth, merely requires a form of control (Rüpke 2010, 750).

## 6 Religion in the History of Religion

The late republican reflections point to a specific problem in our use of the concept of ‘religion’, and in particular of its plural form ‘religions’. Historians of religions have a large body of sources at their disposal, which are imbued by narratives that were produced to serve the very purpose of creating boundaries. Therefore ‘religions’, as units of religious practice and beliefs, appear to be clearly distinct from one another. The task of ‘emic’ historiography is pursued with much ingenuity and energy by religious innovators. This enthusiasm may be exemplified by Chinese or Japanese Buddhists arguing for the continuity of their reforms by aligning themselves with one of the existing seven schools or by Christian jurists’ attempts to legitimise claims to power and land through appeals to the donation of Constantine. Similarly, Muslim chronographers’ and biographers’ efforts to prove the reliability of the chain of tradition (*hadith*) also represent an exercise in ‘emic’ historiography. All of these intellectuals produce accounts with a thick veneer of plausibility. Thus, historians of religion, who are supposed to produce ‘etic’ accounts and strive to apply a methodology of understanding (*Verstehen*) to their scholarly objects, often uncritically adopt emic constructs and ignore the subjective and interpretive nature of these frameworks. Even in cases where authors and the primary audience do not belong to the same religious group (which is often the case and needs not be regarded as the norm), there exists no clear dividing line between ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ contents of historiographic writing. ‘Etic’ reconstructions of history largely depend on ‘emic’ narratives.

As a consequence, scholars often took the identities and interpretations generated by religious groups for granted. They treated these analyses as legitimate and valid models for the study of the history of religion. Thus, we continue to hear and read about ‘the church of the martyrs’ or of the ‘victory’ of Buddhism in its dealing with local Japanese cults in classical Japanese historiography (see Bowring 2008 for Japan). We are told about the ‘Hellenisation of Christianity’ and even about Christianity, Judaism, and paganism (in the late antique Mediterranean context, for example) as if these were all separate, stable and unified entities that may or may not have influenced and interacted with each other in various ways. The concept of the ‘church of the martyrs’, which construes survivors as legitimate successors to those that were killed, is often put forward by professional religious historiographers.<sup>8</sup> Likewise Christian historiographers’ depiction of the ‘Hellenisation of Christianity’ is based on the extrapolation of false dichot-

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<sup>8</sup> Most famously the fourth-century church historian Eusebius (cf. Grafton, Williams 2006).

omies and portrayals of Christianity as a separate and new entity on the world stage. These sharply defined identities exist in contradiction to the ambiguity and ambivalences that have always permeated the field of religion. However, the production of boundaries by historiographers and group leaders must not be allowed to completely obscure the existence and historical significance of the vast array of shared practices of daily life. In areas of the world where multiple (or indistinct) religious identities were the norm, many functions and forms of religious practice and beliefs arose in a shared space that lay beyond the boundaries invoked by distinct groups.

The very concept of the plural 'religions' is itself one important and problematic consequence of the historical approach sketched above. The units of description might be self-evident from an emic point of view. The internal discourse of a group, which is frequently adopted by political commentators and journalists who share an interest in clear-cut boundaries, as well as in the exclusion of heretics and the inclusion of wavering allies, treats religious categories as obvious phenomena. Similarly the term 'religion' has frequently been essentialised in the historiography of religion, and hence been justified on the basis of normative claims. The uncritical usage of 'a' religion and the plural 'religions' has even led to fundamental criticism of the paradigm of 'history of religion' as such (cf. Uehlinger 2006).

As I stressed in the beginning, the concept of 'religion', as well as the self-organisation of social groups as 'religions' has proven highly successful. For scholars of religious history, the influence of emic and etic religious histories on international relations, as well as on contemporary local conflicts, brings along with it the urgent challenge of renewing and revising the manner in which historiography of religion is approached. The direct and inextricable link between religious identity and the historiography of religion (familiar from a tradition of 'national history') in, what we might term 'confessional historiography', can be counteracted through the development of alternative and more complex histories of religion. While, evidently, every group is entitled to construe itself as the legitimate keeper of its tradition, it should be the task of scientific 'History of Religion' to highlight the manner in which emic histories have selected and excluded particular events and people. Reflecting on the biases and concealments of traditional narratives and the historiography of religions, as well as on the history of its analytical and descriptive terms is vital for any 'History of Religion' in the twenty-first century. The variety of Roman attempts to write such histories of religion, strengthening local political identity or building bridges in an incipient imperial situations, encourages us to take a harder look at the biases and options implied in our 'sources'. There are alternatives to confessional historiography.

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