

Ancient Rome should be any religious historian's dream, or nightmare. The city was – by the 1st century CE – home to roughly one million city-dwellers. Only continuous migration, from the Italian countryside and from all over the Mediterranean, sustained Rome's grandeur; migration intensified the structural problems of life in the pre-modern metropolis and its hinterland. As a corollary, Rome also welcomed all the gods that the various ethnicities and *civitates* across her Empire worshipped. The boundaries of the religious system were unsystematically (if at all) policed; in the context of the city's demographic expansion and its differentiation, claims about religious identities were challenged by competing religious discourses, their meanings construed and contested.

How should one explain such confusing plurality? A new consensus has been reached with respect to how religion in the civic sphere might be interpreted. But this 'civic model' cannot provide a blueprint for the totality of religious practices and discourses in the city of Rome: the model marginalizes religious behavior that, for the large majority of city-dwellers, was conditioned by the demographic, ecological and economic realities rather than by the political life of Rome. But no systematic attempt has yet been made to adjust our explanatory models.

This paper will outline a new approach. Firstly, historians tend to link religious plurality to the crisis of institutionalized religion in the city-state. My alternative approach draws on the metaphor of the 'religious economy', which explains religious pluralism as the relation between religious supply and changes in religious behavior. Polytheistic Rome provides a test-case for this model of religious pluralism: multiple religious alternatives and unsystematically policed boundaries generate competition among non-exclusive cults, temples, shrines and other providers of religious goods; they allow individuals to make mutually compatible choices, or rather the best possible 'rational choices', with regard to their respective religious needs. This model does not anachronistically abandon the historical gap between the modern beholder and ancient Rome; rather, the 'rational choice' approach is a far more satisfactory solution than the explanation of Roman religious behavior in terms of 'inconsistencies'.

Secondly, the paper will propose that our assumptions about the supposed 'alienness' of religious behavior at Rome are misguided. Once we accept that the refusal to apply categories like 'belief' or 'emotion' to the Roman evidence is not sustainable, recent approaches in the cognitive science of religion, researching how mental processes (rather than a shadowy concept of 'culture') condition individual ritual behavior, can illuminate ancient ritual behavior such as the examples of ritual practices presented in this paper.