

There is no modern account of ancient religion that does not cover 'ritual' and sacrifice. But 'ritual' is a *modern* category and a product of the intellectual biases current in European academia during the late 19th century; these biases have since influenced the way historians of ancient religion employ the category of 'ritual' or explain the meaning(s) of sacrifice.

Thus, as early as the late 19th century, ritual and sacrificial cult were defined as primary, intellectual exegesis or myth as secondary. Historians and theologians have construed a dichotomy between paganism, as a religion of externalized ritual action, and Judaeo-Christian religion, with the latter being based on internalization and belief. More recently, Roman religion has been characterized as a system of ritual action (an 'orthopraxy'), with sacrifice its most essential component; some scholars have interpreted public sacrifice and other public rituals as symbolic configurations by means of which Romans publicly expressed shared religious and cultural norms or values; others have emphasized ritual's (and sacrifice's) integrative function in the city-state. These scholars have marginalized individual or domestic religious concerns and, more generally, any religious feelings and emotions. True, some scholars have reinvestigated how the realm of literature can provide an exegetical commentary on the sacrificial ritual, how it can authorize, expand upon and hence transform the ritual experience, and how it can even provide cognitive alternatives to ritual action. At best, however, the literary texts provide anecdotal data insufficient to enrich our methodological frames; at worst, literature, though unrepresentative of Roman society at large, has been used to construe a holistic 'Roman' *mentalité*.

But why are current approaches toward ancient ritual and sacrificial practices methodologically flawed? Is it because modern scholarship, relying on categorizations that are of its own making, has lost touch with the ancient accounts as to why a Roman performed her/his sacrificial rituals? Has the modern emphasis on socio-cultural determinism led to an *a priori* marginalization of the non-social (and pre-cultural) dimension of religion, which is neurobiologically constrained as much as it is socio-cultural? My presentation explores these issues while focusing on Roman sacrificial ritual in the domestic and individual realms. I draw upon the so-called 'Cognitive Science of Religion' approach. There, related issues are being investigated which provide an empirical basis for potential cross-cultural comparison: How do people make sense of their own ritual performances? How important is the neurobiological or cognitive/affective aspect of human intuition, and how constraining is the input of texts, myths, intellectual exegesis, or long-held and culturally determined beliefs in the process of ritual performance? How does one judge the efficacy of a given ritual or communicate with the gods through ritual? I argue that the long-held notion of 'Roman ritualism' may be nothing but a modern construal of the 'other', which does not stand up to close historical and cross-cultural scrutiny.