METHODOLOGY IN THE INVESTIGATION OF
ROMAN RELIGION*

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It is fashionable to ask methodological questions in all the sciences, and
especially so in the interpretative, intellectual sciences; for we have learned
that a methodical procedure provides not only a safety net in scientific ex­
amination but in addition can be determinative, indeed predeterminative,
for the results of an investigation. The same holds true for the science of
religion: here, however, there enters a further, very specific set of problems
which derives from the history of this discipline and the peculiar nature of
its sources.

The science of religion, as it is understood today, is a very young
discipline. It got underway as mankind attempted to free itself from the
bonds of the narrowly determined medieval Christian world and started to
look at the phenomenon of religion without any reference to the views held
by Christianity. That this was a very wearisome process can be deduced
inter alia from the fact that the term ‘science of religion’ first emerged in
the year 1869 in Max Müller’s now famous work Chips from a German
Workshop.

Modern research in Roman religion began in almost the way indicated
by a Varro or a Verrius Flaccus, as a speciality of philologists who were not
really equipped to deal with it. Consequently classicists collected diligently
all the available reports about Roman religion, with only one methodolog­
ical endeavour, namely, that of bringing together as comprehensively as
possible all sources that had anything to do with religion, belief, or the
gods, and to do this for the whole period stretching from the most an­
cient (8th to 6th century B.C.) down to the most recent times (about 800
A.D.). The material was systematized without any regard for either con­
text or date of these witnesses, yet with the aim to reconstruct from it the
religion of the Romans. The result was an abstract one, including a system
which tried to replace a millennium of history.

Even a masterpiece of this sort such as G. Wissowa’s Religion und Kultur
der Römer (München 1912) — in my opinion still the very best study of
Roman religion we have today — must fail, because a static system cannot
replace a long history involving so many changes. And, Roman religion
like all religions, especially those not based on revelation with exactly determinable beginnings, such as Christianity, indeed reveals many stadia of development and changes.

Therefore the programme formulated by Max Müller in his Chips (p.3) seemed to supply the solution to all these problems: 'By discovering the real origin of a religion it becomes possible to separate the truly religious elements in the sacred traditions of a nation from the mythological crust by which they are surrounded, and thus to gain a clearer insight into the real faith of that nation'. But which and where are these 'real and truly religious elements' of the Roman religion? Every scholar detected them in a different part of the tradition and accordingly arrived at a different theory about the origin and nature of Roman religion. 5

The reason for this confusion is to be found in the many theories about the rise and development of religion which seemed to lend support to this research that was lacking a methodological concept. This type of support was first found in ethnology which was strongly growing in the 19th century, and which started from the assumption that material collected from the so-called primitive cultures could provide a key to the origin and nature of all religion. Once this key was found one could work out a model which would fit all religions not having the character of a revealed religion — one could proceed from the origin through the first stages of development to the higher religions, and even substitute missing factual material. The milestone of this approach was reached in 1871 in the two volume work of E.B. Tylor on 'primitive culture'. 6

Tylor reconstructed a so-called 'animism' — a body-soul dualism — as the earliest phase of human religious history and maintained that primitive man had, after he had become aware of his soul through the experience of dreams, ecstasy, sickness and death, conceived the whole of nature and the world surrounding him as imbued with a soul. From this a feeling of universal relatedness developed, followed by a veneration of souls and spirits which soon resulted in a form of polydemonism. From this, in turn, a polytheism gradually developed, showing many subdivisions and passing through various degrees until this phase in its last stage had finally to make room for monotheism. Tylor sketched a development from the origins to the highest stage (Christianity) and implicitly demonstrated, as it were, that Christianity was the goal of all the historical development of mankind, a point gladly taken up by Christian theology.

It amounted to little more than a variant of this animistic theory when Andrew Lang in his book The Making of Religion (London 1898) preceded Tylor's animism with a monotheistic preanimism. Father Wilhelm Schmidt then refined this preanimism and expanded it into a theory of a primeval monotheistic first god so that the circle from a primeval monotheism, polydemonism, and polytheism finally closed with monotheism once more. 7
The common characteristic of these theories is that their adherents took certain observations among primitive peoples for the origin of all religions, and in doing so overlooked the fact that in most ancient religions authenticated today, as well as the more recent religions (including Christianity) the most disparate of elements can be observed alongside one another.

Therefore it is a random assumption in terms of which one form of religion can be declared as very old, indeed original, while another can be explained as a late development. In this assumption the fact is also overlooked that the oldest evidence available is in no way to be regarded as the beginning of human and religious history, and therefore cannot be offered as a proof for any question of origins. 8

Unfortunately many investigations into the history of religion by classical philologists were influenced by these theories and are therefore flawed from the outset. This applies to Mannhardt and Usener, Eitrem and Wagenvoort as well as to Deubner, Nilsson, Bayet, Rose and Pfiffig.9 The underlying theory is seldom, if ever, explicitly mentioned in the works of these scholars, but the skilful reader can easily tell when results depend on the contribution of such theories rather than on the evidence as such.

Alongside this line of research which depended heavily on ethnology, some other factors, especially in recent times, have had a persistent influence on the study of religion in general and that of Roman and Greek religion in particular. The most persistent influences derive from the fields of psychology10 and sociology.11

The old psychologism in the style of Ludwig Feuerbach has long been abandoned, and yet there are attempts once more towards a new and fanatical psychologism. This is evidenced in the elaboration on the theories of Sigmund Freud (notably in the school of C.G. Jung), particularly in the area of the interpretation of symbol and myth by Walter F. Otto,12 the founder of the Frankfurt school (F. Altheim; C. Koch) or by Karl Kerényi and the ‘Eranos’ circle.13 The most important characteristic of this line of research is the explanation of religious manifestations as expressions reflecting psychic dispositions of the conscious as well as the unconscious in man. And since in these theories archetypical behaviour is presupposed in the manifestations of religion, it was believed equally possible to explain and interpret historical phenomena of religion in terms of such human psychological dispositions. Both the arbitrary scope of interpretation was allowed in this method as well as the variety of uncertainty in its results are demonstrated by the many mutually contradicting interpretations within this tradition.

The situation is similar when sociological theory is applied as the real key to the investigation of religion. Although with Durkheim, Huber and Mauss sociology had distanced itself from its positivistic beginnings,14 it
then began, not by drawing parallels between certain phenomena of religion and their historical-sociological determinants, but rather by attempting to force sociological models onto the historical data of religion. The most notable example of this is the work of George Dumézil, who thought that he had found a framework in his theory of the ‘tripartite ideology’ of Indo-European peoples which, he believed, covered all of the religio-historical tradition of historic as well as prehistoric societies. It must be conceded that Dumézil truly discovered a historically identifiable stratum (in the fields of sociology and religion) among the Indo-European peoples, the existence of which at a certain time and within a certain social structure cannot be denied. Nevertheless, to apply this particular historical structure, as he does, as the key to all the Indo-European peoples, regardless of the most varied epochs and cultural stages they reveal, overshoots by far the possibilities of such an approach and does violence to the statements of the larger variety and the larger part of religio-historical sources, which in this way are subjected to an ideological interpretation.

As a proof of the influence of such theories on the investigation of Roman religion I refer to the various interpretations of the Roman god Mars and the variety of functions associated with him. The variety of interpretations does not depend — to emphasize this point once more — on facts of a varied nature (on the contrary, all scholars work from the same sources) but rather on the interpretation given to both these facts and the evidence in accordance with the various theories adopted by the science of religion. Thus Dumézil does not see a god of the agrarian and rural realm in the god Mars, whom he associates with the area of military leadership in his tripartite ideology, but simply the god of war, ever since the earliest times down to the late times of Roman history. On the other hand, scholars influenced by animistic theories see in Mars a god originally bound up in the cycle of the seasons, a god of annual cycles and fertility whose vegetative-magic meaning became narrowed down to the aspect of the war god in the course of polytheistic Roman religion. Thus, in the above mentioned views the interpretation of the Mars religion is made to conform exactly with that development which we previously characterized as the basic model in the animistic theory. The representatives of this interpretation — they include scholars such as the early Mannhardt and Fowler down to contemporaries such as Deubner, Eitrem and Wagenvoort — explain the evidence of the Mars religion associated with the agrarian realm as the oldest prehistoric substratum which at that stage could not yet have been completely overshadowed by the later Mars (then regarded solely as god of war) and his religion. In contrast to this, Dumézil understood the agrarian sources as evidence for the martial function of the god Mars in the agrarian and farming area.

In view of the disparity between the background theories it is evident
that unanimity will be impossible, and consequently no solution to the question of the Roman Mars religion can be expected. Therefore we must admit that hardly any progress is to be expected in research along these lines in the field of Roman religion in general. Thus even at present, the major schools of research of the past remain irreconcilably opposed to one another: proponents of the theory of Dumézil will not allow themselves to be convinced by objections of a different kind. The same holds true for the converts of the Frankfurt school and the 'Eranos' circle, or for those of the Vienna school, or the representatives of animism. In view of this one might perhaps be misled to believe that all problems could be solved immediately provided one rejects these doubtful theories. But even so, some questions would still call for attention. Methodology, so badly needed in all scholarship, would still be the unsolved question.

So let the question be put in a different way. Why did scholars investigating religion seek support from the previously mentioned theories? The historical source material for Roman religion is extremely incomplete. In terms of both period and place it is widely dispersed, and therefore very difficult to interpret in and of itself. It thus comes as no surprise that the students of religion sought help and found it — or so they thought — in theories which furnished generally valid models of development or models resting on psychological or sociological constants. Such theories supplied, after all, ready-made connections and interpretations.

One such assumption has been that religion, on account of the holiness of its object, is a phenomenon which remains constant in all its manifestations throughout the centuries, if not millennia. Therefore one is inclined to look at gods, sacrifices and prayers with all their religious content as being invariables independent of time or place, invariables from which is reconstructed what has been called the origin or the nature of a religion — for example the nature of Roman religion (Latte, Altheim, Koch, Bayet, Dumézil etc.). This assumption has also been the justification for simply integrating both the oldest and most recent sources indiscriminately in the belief that it is possible to draw valid conclusions about an underlying religio-historic content from a cross-section of all the sources. When this procedure does not yield the proper result, the inconsistency is explained as something peripheral or else as the result of the influences of foreign peoples and cultures.

It should be apparent from this criticism that the first and basic demand is to analyse the testimonies about Roman religion in the same way as is being done in the case of all other historical texts and documents: they, too, are strictly timebound witnesses.

A series of separate religio-historic investigations has already demonstrated that not only gods and the content of beliefs attached to them but even religious institutions are subject to change. This, by the way, is a fact
that was already known to the ancients: in Varro for example, gods and religious institutions are mentioned which were still known to antiquarians from old sources, but which, in the first century B.C., were already obsolete or had slipped from human memory. That sociological structures do depend on contemporary historical conditions, and that transformations in them do take place, both these facts have been sufficiently demonstrated in sociology. Thus, all that remains to be exploited in this connection is what one might call the psychology of religion in the broader sense of the term. Thus the remaining question is: ‘Are there invariant conditions in the disposition of mankind which cause it always to act or react in the same way despite a change in the times?’ Or, phrased differently: ‘What are the true constants in this complex structure called “religion”, and what aspects, on the other hand are subject to historical change?’

In 1946 Karl Meuli, in a long essay on Greek sacrificial customs, demonstrated that during the ritual slaughter of animals by the hunters and shepherds of the paleolithic period the same actions are to be found as in that of the otherwise dissimilar Greek sacrificial system. This situation over an immense period of time and in spite of all changes in cultural and sociological preconditions had structurally remained the same. From this Meuli rightly concluded that this is where we meet with a constant element, in the area of ritual behaviour. Elsewhere this element has been sought for in vain. This area of ritual and ritual behaviour can be expanded to include the realm of animals, where we likewise meet with rigidly defined patterns of behaviour, which are retained, even though they have shed their concrete function. Evidently this serves as a conventional expression of a community which has, however abandoned the corresponding behaviour. From such a communicative function of ritual behaviour are derived two main characteristics, namely the constant repetition of the same form and a certain theatrical exaggeration: the patterns, indeed, do not transmit differentiated, concrete information, but basically only one piece of information. This piece of information, however, is considered so important that it is protected against any possible misunderstanding and misuse even by a superabundance of redundancies. What is conveyed is of less importance than the fact that it is performed: Ritual creates and affirms contact and community.

In this domain, the question is both difficult and disputed concerning the degree to which ritual behaviour in humans is innate or acquired. There is also the question as to the ritual patterns of behaviour in the animal realm. Since research here has just commenced, any statement at this stage would be premature, and similarly the interpretation of such behavioural patterns would be out of place.

In the scientific study of religion this means that ritual behaviour as such, because of its function of constituting a sense of community and of
maintaining a community over a long period of time, is regarded as the perennial element which has previously been sought in vain in other areas. The importance and significance of such rituals do not lie in what they express but rather in their performance as such. After all, fixed patterns of behaviour similar to those detected in the animal realm are to be observed even where they have lost their original meaning. The best known example of this type is that of the behaviour of domesticated animals which have retained the very rituals of their own kind still living in the wild, despite the fact that in the new and different surroundings both the necessity and the motive are lacking.

The same phenomenon is observed in the realm of mankind, this time with a difference which is all important for the question of methodology in the scientific study of religion. Human beings also do retain the primeval ritual patterns of behaviour, as Meuli has shown for the Greek system of sacrifice, and as I could argue for Roman religion in the light of several test studies. And yet, with every change in the external situation they seek and continuously give new interpretations to such a received ritual by virtue of the peculiarly human ability to think and speak. So it happens that in the course of time we notice different interpretations of religious practices which themselves are observed unchanged. Such interpretations have been found to correspond with the changed historical and human situation.

There is a second point. Ritual as communication is already a kind of language. Nevertheless, since humans by virtue of their speech already possess an efficient system of communication, the object-bound language of speech is added to the language of action in ritual. Therefore ritual and speech have gone together since the appearance of language, which, of course, leads to the problem of what the exact relationship between language and action really is. It would lead us too far here to discuss this multifaceted problem in all its details; so I will limit myself to one undisputed fact, namely that human capacity for speech and thinking always stand in a certain relationship to historical influences, in as much as in every speech process, in every expression, a piece of history is captured, which means that here, in contrast to the realm of ritual, an historical variable rather than a constant element must be assumed.

From all the above, the following can be stated in summary regarding the methodology applied in the study of religion:

1. In the area of religion, the scientific study of religion must differentiate between constants and variables.

2. Constants are ritualised patterns of behaviour which observation shows to be unchanged in their basic structure over exceptionally long periods of time. ‘Basic structure’, though it allows for differences in peripheral areas,
never allows such differences to touch the heart of the ritual. If it would, its function as ritual would be nullified.

3. Yet, statements about ritual and ritual acts are not constants but variables in view of the fact that they are historically conditioned. This applies not only to descriptions of ritual acts but also to statements about them (interpretations of rituals, accounts of myths and mythological representations), more especially to statements about gods and the belief in them. Being expressions of humans — themselves always products of their own time — the significance of such sources is limited to their own period.

4. The result of this is that the researcher of the history of religions may interpret religious and historical sources, which indeed correspond to historically conditioned speech situations, only and primarily as statements relating to the period in which they arose. In addition the idea of time should be taken very strictly and exclusively. No Latin source can claim authority for the whole of Roman history. No, it applies to those years only to which it belongs. Since, however, such sources include both the temporal expression and the constants of the ritual behaviour which is described, we must be careful to analyse and distinguish between the various strata of the sources. All historical sources concerned with religion have to be examined in this way in order to determine both the time-bound and universal elements. It is evident, I believe, that we cannot go any further than the source itself permits. When in distinguishing the layers we finally reach the oldest concrete layer of interpretation, we must then realise that we have also reached the end of what can be said about the religious understanding of a people or a society. What lies beyond, is mere ritual action which as such escapes the immediate interpretation of religious investigation. Our efforts cannot go beyond the interpretations of the earliest contemporaries of such ritual.

As an example and clarification of what I have said I choose the Roman 'suovitaurilia' sacrifices. In all handbooks one reads that this sacrifice of a boar, ram, and steer was a lustral sacrifice to Mars, the wild god of the outside. I will now briefly discuss the significance that this sacrifice had in the cult of the Romans and in the understanding of this god, an understanding which varied as the centuries went by. I will be using the methodological axioms I have just explained. I hope that it will also be apparent that earlier interpreters were mistaken or imprecise and that they drew a false picture of the history of this sacrifice as they did of the history of the god Mars.

The 'suovitaurilia' sacrifices were considered a lustral sacrifice by the Romans, and even the most important form of lustral and piacular sacrifice, since they were performed at the most important state occasions,
for example at the ‘lus .um’ and ‘devotio’. In addition to this, and for a variety of occasions, there were other lustral and piacular sacrifices such as the ‘agnus sacer’, ‘agnus pinguis’ or ‘agna opima’ for the Lares, for Ceres or for Bacchus respectively.

From this we may now conclude:

1. The Roman lustral and piacular sacrifices were not offered to a certain ‘lustral’ god, but rather were they from time to time offered to the god in whose sphere of influence ‘lustratio’ and ‘piaculum’ were required. Mars then could not have been the lustral god of the Romans.

2. The ‘suovitaurilia’ is not the only possible form of Roman lustral sacrifice, merely the highest and most important one; and,

3. such an important sacrifice presupposes a god considered especially significant.

Important conclusions are justified in the light of these distinctions: the first has to do with the Roman belief in gods — in our case the god Mars. In the time of the Republic he was the recipient of the largest state ‘suovitaurilia’. It follows that he was an important state god and no lustral god. Later on, beginning with the testimonies of Augustan times, the ‘suovitaurilia’ was offered also to a variety of gods: to Augustus, to Jupiter–Juno–Minerva, to Euphrates (in Syria), in the cult of the fratres Arvalis to Dea Dia, to Mithras in a Mithraeum in Rome (about 200 A.D.), in Moesia to Jupiter Dolichenus and to Dea Roma respectively, and to Sol Invictus in Rome (about 300 A.D.). From this it is evident that the great state lustral sacrifice of the ‘suovitaurilia’ in the earlier times was indeed offered to the god Mars, but then in later times, due to the decline of the power of the god Mars in the state cult and religious life, it came to be offered to the gods of greater importance at every particular stage. The belief in the priority of the gods was obviously changing, but the ritual and meaning of the ‘suovitaurilia’ sacrifice remained unchanged.

It is remarkable that in contrast to other great state sacrifices of the late Republic and of imperial times, at which 50, 100, even 300 animals were slaughtered, the ‘suovitaurilia’ was content with the sacrifice of only three animals. From this one may perhaps conclude that the ‘suovitaurilia’ sacrifice originated at a very early time when the earliest domesticated farm animals, namely swine, sheep and cattle — as the symbolic gift of one’s entire possessions — would be a or even the most precious sacrifice. What the conceptions were attaching to the sacrifice for this god in this early period (whether that of propitiation, or purification, or whether it was merely a primitival sacrifice), is a question which cannot be answered.

Another conclusion can be drawn from the name ‘suovitaurilia’, a conclusion that contradicts the commentaries of Cato and Varro who speak of the
slaughter of a boar, a ram and a steer. Rather, the name was derived from 'sus', 'ovis', and 'taurus' constructed with the suffix '-ilia'. That means, swine and sheep could be male or female animals; the steer, however, had to be a male animal at the time the word was coined. The name of the sacrifice, which is very old, therefore contradicts the interpretation given by Cato and Varro who themselves belong only to the second and first centuries B.C. This proves that in the course of time a change was noticed, the date of which cannot be exactly determined now. Yet, according to Cato and Varro, the sacrifice since then was offered to male gods. Thus the evident freedom that had existed earlier and which had been expressed in the collective nouns 'sus' and 'ovis', had been abandoned.

This external adaptation which in itself did not touch the essential nature of the sacrifice, was, as we know, the second step, one which had been preceded by an earlier accommodation of this sacrifice to the cult of Mars. The word 'suovitaurilia' itself shows that at the time of the coining of this word one animal of the tripartite complex was especially emphasized, namely the steer, beside which the swine and the sheep evidently occupied a lesser position. From this it is obvious that the great primal ritual of a swine-sheep-cattle sacrifice in pre-Republican times had been externally modified for the first time as it entered the circle of the god Mars, in as much as cattle were replaced by steer. In later times, again, in another adaptation to the Republican Mars cult of the Roman state, the ritual was changed to a boar-ram-steer sacrifice. A confirmation of this is found in a similar line of development in the way the ancient swine-sheep-cattle sacrifice in the cult of the fratres Arvales also took another direction: there an 'agna opima' stood at the centre of the cultic practice for the goddess Dea Dia, while swine and cow (cow, not steer as with Mars) were offered only as a kind of piacular presacrifice. If the sacrificial animals must be of the male gender in the sphere of the Mars cult, it must be understood that in the realm of Dea Dia they were female animals, and while the state cult could only be satisfied by the greatness of the expensive steer, the lamb was the central gift in the less pretentious rural sphere of the Arvalian cult. Thus the old 'suovitaurilia' sacrifices in the region of Rome and Italy developed outwards in two directions without changing their nature:

1. in the state cult of Rome, under the spell of the Mars religion, to a boar-ram-steer sacrifice, and

2. in the rural ritual of the Arvales to a swine-cow-sheep sacrifice. In both cases, however, it was believed to be the most efficacious form of 'lustratio' and 'piaculum'.

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In the state religion of the imperial epoch the god Mars who had lost his meaning had to make room for the new chief gods: Jupiter Dolichenus, Sol Invictus, Roma and Mithras. Thus, whereas this evidence shows that the understanding of the gods was subject to vast changes, the ritual actions retained a constant nature. The constants in this connection are the threefold animal sacrifice (swine, sheep, cattle), the variables are the external accommodation of this sacrifice to certain kinds of belief, external aspects in which change is clearly noticeable. Equally subject to change, however, is the conception of the gods, e.g. the belief in the power of certain gods.

Let me summarize: We proceeded from the question of methodology and its relevance for the science of religion, and then came to the conclusion — on the basis of the history of scholarship in this area — that the lack of source material or testimonia in this area of study prompted hypothetical reconstructions based on certain religio-historic models developed by other disciplines. The lack of testimonia also led scholars to assume certain invariables. A critique of these constants yielded the result that only ritual actions may be understood to be invariable while all other elements of religion are variable; that is to say, they are subject to all those changes that mankind undergoes in the course of its history. Therefore in all sources the varying historical components must be distinguished by the use of stratigraphical analysis, familiar to both philological and historical criticism, so as to enable one to recognize which observations belong to which particular epochs. For this work the philologist needs the help of historiography, linguistics, and archaeology; all the other disciplines — sociology, psychology, phenomenology, and theology — will accompany this
effort, but in an auxiliary, rather than in a prescriptive role. Although we cannot hope to succeed in answering the old question as to the nature and origin of religion as such in this way, we can at least outline a valid picture of the understanding of the gods and the beliefs they enjoyed for individual periods. Such research which, I have to admit, pursues a modest goal when compared with the grand structures of speculative religious theory, is only in its infancy.

NOTES

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2. It is not the intention of this paper to give a full survey of all tendencies — only some main trends are referred to in order to point out the problem and to explain the necessity of a strictly historical starting point which will also furnish all other beginnings in this field (even the structuralists: a good example is H.S. Versnel, ‘Apollo and Mars one hundred years after Roscher’, Visible Religion 4/5 [1985/86] 134 sqq.). For a more complete documentation see U. Bianchi, Problemi di storia delle religioni, Rome 1964; U.W. Scholz, Studien zum altitalischen und altromischen Marskult und Marsmythos, Heidelberg 1970, 81 sqq.; R. Muth, Einführung in die griechische und römische Religion, Darmstadt 1988, 1 sqq.

3. This is shown and discussed by means of an example by U. Scholz, ‘Zur Erforschung der römischen Opfer (Beispiel: die Lupercalia)’, in: Le sacrifice dans l’antiquité, Entretiens Fondation Hardt 27, Genf 1981, 289 sqq.


16. Cf. my 'Studien' (note 2) p.9 sqq. for exact references.


22. For details and documentation see U.W. Scholz, ‘suovitaurilia and solitaurilia’, *Philol.* 117 (1973) 3 sqq.
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