Writing “Roman Religion” into a History of Religion: A Response to Andrew Durdin

Andrew Durdin has given us a useful foray into late Republican Roman discourses about the gods in Cicero and discourses on Roman cultic institutions in the fragments of Varro in order to engage with what I have called “Premature births of religion in antiquity” in Chapter 3 of Before Religion.1 Examining this material in the context of Roman conquest and incipient imperialism, Durdin finds that these intellectual developments in the Late Republic are “moments of pre-modern theorizing, in which conceptual schemas were developed that seem to border on, or overlap with the modern division of religious versus non” religion (my emphasis). And this leads him to warn against “too strong of a reassertion of the ‘modernity thesis’ for the category of religion…[which] errs by way overstatement, and ultimately serves to isolate and segregate, hindering the important work of comparison and redescription.” Durdin then offers his own diagnosis of scholarship on the history of the concept of religion:

In other words, the problem, as I see it, with modern scholarship concerned with the emergence of the category of religion, is not the search for “religion” prematurely conceived elsewhere. Instead, the problem is the failure, upon having designated “religion” a particular product of the early modern period, to frame a second-order category in which “religion” might sit alongside other attempts by other “religions” to articulate discourse on the superhuman.

This way of framing the problem, to me, contains its own solution. Perhaps I am being overly simplistic, but if what we want is a second-order concept that covers both modern religion and what we choose to see as ancient analogues, we have such a second-order category quite readily

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1 These remarks were prepared for a review symposium of Before Religion (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) held at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion in November 2014.
available. It’s religion. But one of the questions the conclusion of the book leaves open is this: Why exactly should we want a second-order category that binds all these particular things together? Continuity and discontinuity, similarity and difference: These notions are, of course, all relative and all interested. So again, why might we want to class particular Roman phenomena with particular modern phenomena together under the heading of “religion”? Is it the perceived closeness or “overlap” of some Roman discourses with things that are generally agreed to be examples of religion in the modern world? If so, I think it’s worthwhile to ponder why we might be disposed to see such similarities.

Take Varro, for example. Durdin’s summary of discourse on Roman cultic life in the Late Republic draws on Varro’s 16 books on Divine Matters, which Durdin notes were preceded by 25 books on Human Matters, all of which formed a larger work of antiquitates, or archaeologai, to borrow the Greek category. But the Antiquitates did not survive in the manuscript tradition. All we have are fragments, mostly preserved in Augustine’s City of God.

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2 On this point, see Before Religion, 156-158.
3 The narrative of Before Religion stresses difference and gains traction by generalizing both the “ancient” and the “modern” in order to highlight different possible ways for thinking about pre-modern cultures. Nevertheless, as the book notes, “this account is certainly not the only possible one. Different, but not incompatible, narratives could be produced” (Before Religion, 13). On issues of comparison and classification in the study of religion, see Jonathan Z. Smith, Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), esp. 36-53.
4 Worth considering in this regard is the formulation of William Arnal and Russell McCutcheon: Religion “is an artifact of the particular modern and Western detachment of some of its own traditional social institutions from effective institutions claimed by the state. It is only on those occasions when some types of social self-reference and self-organization—the mythology, symbology, and practices of who “we” are—for one reason or another come to be detached from the mechanisms and conceptions of the state, whatever those may be, that the strange, deracinated cultural signifier we moderns call ‘religion’ seems to rear its head. It is precisely for this reason that we do encounter phenomena that look like our notion of ‘religion’ long before the invention of religion as an important modern taxon. At any time or in any place in which for one reason or another the coercive state power is detached from other types of social self-signification, we misrecognize the latter as a thing, ‘religion.’ But such circumstances are, at least before the modern period, transient, and historically and culturally specific. The types of social practices that come to be detached from the state, moreover, vary from one instance to the next” (The Sacred is the Profane: The Political Nature of “Religion” [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], 141).
5 As will become clear, I am less confident than Durdin (in his footnote 13) and the authors he cites about our ability to “get behind” Augustine’s Varro. In addition to the usual concerns about the de- and re-contextualization of “fragmentary authors,” it is also good to recall that Augustine’s concern for Varro’s actual words is open to question. At times, Augustine does stress that he is exegeting the exact words of Varro. In the context of a
Thus our picture of Varro is formed largely through Augustine’s concerns in the *City of God*, in which we are provided with only the barest outline of the 25 books of *Human Affairs*. Augustine gives us much more detailed information about the books of the *Divine Affairs*, but even within those latter sixteen books, Augustine focuses almost *entirely* on the final three books, which concern the different types of gods; he makes only passing references to the contents of the other books *On Divine Affairs* concerning people, places, and times. One of Augustine’s primary tactics in using Varro’s *Antiquitates* is thus to ignore the majority of Varro’s work.

What, then, does Augustine do with the material that he *does* treat? Much of his time is occupied with criticizing and ridiculing the gods that Varro lists in those last three books. What is more interesting is his substantial discomfort with the overall classification system employed by Varro. Augustine singles out things, like theatrical shows, which he thinks do not belong in a bundle of practices and beliefs concerning divinity (*City of God*, 4.1). There are also things that Augustine finds conspicuously *absent* from Varro’s cluster of “divine matters.” Augustine repeatedly complains that Varro does not talk about how proper worship of the gods can help one achieve eternal life (*City of God*, 6.9). The idea of eternal life was not foreign to Varro, but for him it was not something one requested from the gods. All of this is to say that what we learn about Varro from the *Antiquitates* is very much a reflection of the fifth century Christian concerns of Augustine.

And, to complicate matters even further, the material from Varro in the *City of God* also had an interesting afterlife in terms of the formation of religion as a comparative category. The discussion about the nature of the body, Augustine writes, “There is a passage in the treatise of M. Varro entitled *The Race of the Roman People*, which I shall quote in his exact words (*quod eisdem verbis quibus ibi legitur et hic ponam*, *City of God*, 21.8).” Elsewhere, however, Augustine is looser with his citations. When he mentions Varro’s opinion that it is sometimes useful for people to think they are descended from gods, Augustine first writes what Varro “says” (*dicit*), but then he concludes by describing this alleged quotation as a “statement of Varro’s which I have expressed, as best I could, in my own words (*quae Varronis sententia expressa, ut potui, meis verbis*, *City of God*, 3.4). Thus, when Augustine is not so explicit about his citation method, it is difficult to know how accurate he is.
City of God is a text that is frequently cited by writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries involved in various colonial enterprises, exactly the context of the formation of the modern concept of religion. Figures like Bartolomé de Las Casas and the author of the anonymous Relación de las costumbres antiguas de los naturales del Pirú used Augustine’s snippets of Varro as a kind of template for arranging information about new “pagan peoples.” In other words, what we now might call “Roman religion” (in the form of Augustine’s version of Varro’s discourse) could in fact quite easily be seen as playing a role in the formation of the concept of religion, but not in any sort of model employing a neat, linear development. Thus, if aspects of what we find in the fragments of Varro seem to “border on” or “overlap” with modern concepts of religion, at least one reason might be sought in this complicated reception history.

So, to return finally to Durdin, what I understand him as asking for in his concluding remarks is a narrative of the history of religion with greater continuity between the ancient and modern worlds. That was not the book I set out to write, but it is a book I would be interested in reading. I am genuinely curious how such a project would shape up. I would think it would need to in some way acknowledge the kinds of entanglements I have outlined here.