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## **Book Review / Compte rendu: Theorizing “Religion” in Antiquity**

Brand, Mattias

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## Theorizing “Religion” in Antiquity

Nickolas P. Roubekas

Sheffield and Bristol: Equinox, 2019. xiv + 443 pp.

This highly self-reflective volume sets out to bridge the chasm between the academic study of religion and the related disciplines of classics and ancient history by explicitly discussing and theorizing modern perspectives on ancient religion, as well as the ancient theorizations itself. Even though not all contributions are equally convincing, there are at least three reasons why this volume stands out from the crowd.

First, the self-reflective attitude starts on the first page. The editor gave Brent Nongbri the opportunity to write the introduction, even though it is immediately clear that they are not on the same page regarding the suitability of the concept of “religion” for antiquity. This leads to a fascinating reflection on the various contributions, which temporarily organizes the contributors into clusters who seem either (1) to be reasonably confident that they know what religion is, or (2) to be interested in subjecting “religion” to various types of criticism. This also reveals that the longstanding debate concerning the definition and origin of our concept of “religion” is a key theme throughout the volume.

Second, all individual chapters are followed by a bibliography, rather than bringing this together at the end of the volume – as has become a regrettable standard in other edited volumes. The inclusion of a brief index at the end, moreover, adds to the practical usefulness of this volume for students.

Third, a concluding chapter—so often absent in similar volumes—provides the reflections of Luther Martin on religion as an object of historiographical study and the possibilities of theorizing ancient religion. He helpfully highlights three central themes in the volume (although different from the ones stressed by Nongbri): (1) the pre-Socratics, (2) the study of ritual, and (3) questions of identity. “The problem with employing modern categories,” he concludes, “is less their modernity per se than their essentialization” (433).

As for an outline of the volume, the first part deals with language and methodology. In the second chapter, Steve Mason addresses the difference between insider religious language and modern conceptualization (helpfully starting with a discussion of patronage in the Roman empire, before discussing the spheres of life comparable to “religion”

in our world). Jason Davies highlights the scholarly debates concerning the (absence of) belief in Roman religion, offering interdisciplinarity and cognitive science as potential ways out of the current impasse. Kevin Schilbrack argues for a critical realist approach to the concept of religion before its modern invention, rejecting the position that its usage for premodern period would be “illegitimately anachronistic” (60). As Nongbri is an important conversation partner in this chapter, it is unsurprising to see that his introduction already offers a first response to this contribution.

The second part consists of three contributions on the Greek world. Donald Wiebe and Emese Mogyoródi discuss the pre-Socratic building blocks that would lead to the conceptualization of religion and, in the words of Wiebe, to the “ultimate emergence and development of a scientific study of religion” (82). Mogyoródi’s chapter seems closer to the ancient sources, arguing that pre-Socratic thinking did not directly result in a denial of the gods. Nickolas Roubekas argues that Herodotus’ theorizing about the origin of the gods cannot be straightforwardly defined as diffusionism.

The third part includes four chapters on Mesopotamia, Egypt and Rome. Alan Lenzi suggests that ancient Mesopotamian scholars developed what might be called an implicit theory of religion in their terminology for ritual speech. Rita Lucarelli stresses that we do not have ancient Egyptian theorizing on magical practices, which means that “magic” can only be discerned (if at all) from an etic perspective. The very recent theoretical reflections found in Frankfurter’s *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, may be read alongside this chapter. Panayotis Pachis carefully reads through Diodorus’s *Library of History* to show how the Greek historian adopts Euhemerus’ ideas regarding Egyptian *theologoumena* and adjusts them for his own religious and political situation. Spencer Cole examines metaphor theory and its application to Roman religion, in particular through the conceptual mappings and images surrounding the assassination of Caesar and the rise to power of Octavian.

The fourth part consists of four contributions regarding Judaism and Christianity. Michael Satlow uses the example of Philo to establish what Jonathan Z. Smith called a “polythetic approach to ancient Judaism.” The three maps on which Satlow plots Judaisms are: a self-identification as “Israel”, engagement with a marked textual tradition, and the ritualization of these traditions. Together these maps facilitate the categorization of a wide range of responses as “Judaism.” Sarah Imhoff challenges all historical narratives of decline that assume that a once homogenous Jewish identity (ethnic? religious? neither? Or both?) *became* diffuse and messy. Rather, Jewishness has always been multifaceted and was demarcated differently throughout antiquity. Nickolas Roubekas’ second contribution argues that Tertullian theorized about space and religion when he wrote against Christians who would visit the Roman spectacles. What was at stake, according to Roubekas, was not their participation per se, but what these places would *do* to religious identity formation. Sarah Rollens argues that the notion of “early Christian communities” is not only at odds with current sociological theorizing, but also carries the legacy of German Protestantism, nationalism, and Romanticism (on the latter two points, she appeals to the work of Stanley Stowers and Robyn Walsh). Also following Stowers, she proposes to speak in terms of a common discourse in which people could participate, or that could be used as repertoire.

The fifth part of the volume brings together a wider array of topics, including gender geography and cognitive studies. Leonardo Ambasciano takes up the latter, arguing that the cognitive science of religion and the evolutionary science of religion can infuse the study of ancient Roman religion, in particular in response to the longstanding rejection of the notion of “belief,” as also treated by Davies. Justin Tse attempts to rescue Eliade from his fall from grace, by stressing how cultural geographers have used his theorizing about ancient religious place-making. This critical return to Eliade is combined with a brief sketch of the longstanding interaction between the study of religion and cultural geography, which he considers “co-constitutive disciplines” (377). James Crossley looks at several politicized versions of the Bible, such as the Enlightenment Bible, the Strange Bible, the Liberal Bible, and the Radical Bible, all of which show how biblical scholars have used the biblical text(s) to create meaning in highly politicized landscapes. Irene Salvo delves into the intersection of gender and ancient religion, reflecting upon the applicability of the concept “gender” and the way it has been used in historical studies. In a brief overview of ancient religion through the lens of women’s studies, cognitive sciences, and feminist history, she argues that what we call gender was important factor regulating and structuring ancient religious practice. Luther Martin’s epilogue, as mentioned above, offers concluding reflections on the most important themes of the volume.

*Theorizing “Religion” in Antiquity* is a formidable accomplishment, bringing together scholars from various disciplines, convincing them to reflect on their usage of concepts like “religion,” and applying a self-critical perspective throughout. One critical remark, here hardly at the right place, is that I hope that “theorizing” ancient religion will come to involve more than the current definition-and-applicability-debate. For now, this volume models the type of conversations we should be having within the study of ancient religion(s)—and beyond. As such, it is highly recommended.

Mattias Brand  
*University of Zürich*

### **The Missing Martyrs: Why Are There So Few Muslim Terrorists**

Charles Kurzman

Oxford: Oxford University Press (second edition), 2019. 252 pp.

In his brilliant and original book, Charles Kurzman skillfully deconstructs the ways in which the media have fueled misconceptions about terrorism in recent decades. While it seems a priori counterintuitive, the question of why there are so few Muslim terrorists is hugely relevant. Given that Islamist revolutionaries have been multiplying around the world since the book’s original release in 2011, this updated version is very welcome and timely. In order to demonstrate how the fear of terrorism is irrational, Kurzman, a sociology professor, relies on a variety of source material (research, surveys, election results, interviews, academic papers and web content), most of which is rarely found in this kind of study. What’s more, the exhaustive examples imply that actual terrorist threat is minimal and that terrorism is rare, with fewer casualties now than in the eighties.