

There was a time when non-Romans knew what Roman religion “was.” For the early Christians it was demons or delusions. For the Enlightenment it demonstrated either the spiritual bankruptcy of all religions, or the spiritual bankruptcy of Christianity. In succeeding eras it was a farrago of primitive magical survivals combined with a “Reichsreligion” of exaggerated jingoism, a religion in which nobody believed. Such certainties no longer exist. “Primitive” and “survivals” are philosophically bogus, “magic” has been redefined in its socio-cultural milieu, “Reichsreligion” has more than jingoism, and the myriad philosophical implications of “belief” render it otiose for heuristic purposes. We have exchanged the certainties of the misconceptions for the uncertainties of no conceptions at all. We have a “Heisenbergian uncertainty” where position and trajectory rebel at simultaneous study. We have a different song — but is it a better song? Although we have rejected the erstwhile certainty of what Roman religion “was” we continue to use the erstwhile philological categories which produced it. Two complementary strategies can help. First, certain traditional philological categories need reconsideration in light of how we “do” philology now, not to junk them but to enable them more accurately to serve their purposes. Second, a refined use of those categories may lead us to select appropriate large-scale conceptualizations, thus enabling logically plausible, evidentially sound conceptions of what Roman religion “was”.

A definition of *religio* has long exercised scholars via etymology and testimonia; since that combination showed *religio* often linked to cult acts, it seemed plausible that Roman religion only constituted those acts. This is logically false since it wrongly equates individual testimonia with ex cathedra, impossible in decentralized polytheism. This is not helpful, since hitherto definitions of religion have said more about investigator than subject. Next and related is the search for cult origins; thus the controversy over the origin of the Lares centers on weighing equally good evidence for either agrarian or ancestral connections. This is not helpful since decentralized polytheism knows not the ex cathedra; one individual could plausibly accept either or both origins of the Lares. In this context the paper will address the issue of Apuleius on the Lemures, a self-contradictory discussion at variance with Varro, Verrius Flaccus, the twaddle of Horatian scholiasts and today’s best views of the *mundus*. Third is the fractioning of “good” testimonia from “antiquarian speculation”. Picumnus and Pilumnus have long been deemed the latter, but an early inscription from Veii contradicts; “antiquarian speculation” becomes, rather, one savant’s view in the pluralistic religious knowledge of polytheism. There looms menacingly a misplaced desire to impose a religion of the book onto a religion of widely scattered information whose originators knew not of all the variants. How to resolve these issues? Reexamining traditional scholarly categories (supra) constitutes one way. Another is judicious application of strategies from history of religions; cognitive dissonance has worked well in Biblical Studies to explain cultic contradictions. Indeed, a cognitive approach has much to offer. Its concern with the kinds of religious knowledge and their implications makes it responsive to the ancient evidence generally. Its concern with religious action makes it responsive to the preponderance of ritual information preserved in Roman evidence. Combining a revisionist view of traditional categories with judiciously chosen cognitive guidelines may well provide the means to a song both different and better.