

How should we conceptualize the presence of ‘Roman religion’ – the religion of the city of Rome – in the Roman Empire? This paper will engage with recent approaches, starting from current discussions of how the material culture of the city of Rome was diffused across the Empire, and of how provincial cultures developed in response to Roman imperialism. This paper will argue that it was the diffusion of a Roman concept of “religion“ rather than the diffusion of particular religious symbols, deities and cults that proved to be the decisive factor in the history of religion in the imperial period. Research has concentrated on the ‘civic’ character of ancient religion: the local character of ‘civic religion’ has been stressed since Georg Wissowa, and the lack of a Roman „Reichsreligion“ – the necessary corollary of empire – has been deplored. There have been frequent attempts at identifying that missing ‘Reichsreligion’: the imperial cult or Christianity have been nominated. The so-called ‘mystery cults’ were seen as likely candidates, based on their potential to fulfill personal needs rather than merely political functions. Others have argued for or against the respective merits of polytheism and monotheism. But the problem of a conceptual ‘exportability’ of Roman religion has been addressed only recently. Following this recent approach, I will modify its argument, shifting the emphasis towards the notion of ‘religion’ more generally.

Firstly, the analysis of documents like the charters of Urso (a Roman *colonia*) or Irni (a *municipium*), both in Spain, reveals an interesting mixture of very general regulations about religion, combined with a nearly complete lack of norms concerning the deities or festivals; likewise the choice of priesthoods and of the town’s sacred architecture is barely regulated. My paper will place these findings in the context of provincial religion: for analyses of religious cultures throughout the Empire have shown that, apart from the cult of the emperors, cults spread more often within the periphery than from the centre. Much the same holds true even for the imperial cult: although it could rely on a certain amount of communication between the centre Rome and the periphery, its specific shape was nevertheless often determined by local needs and traditions.

Secondly, religion in the provinces (especially in the Latin West) changed dramatically under Roman rule: a new set of religious media (epigraphy, writing, amphitheatres, monumentalized sanctuaries) not only altered the physical environment but also changed the visibility and the range of those cultural practices that we call ‘religion’ – both private and civic, local and universal, entertaining and serious, both functional within the public organization of towns and independent from their civic contexts. This change is not a direct consequence of the import of ‘Roman’ cults and deities; rather, ‘religion’ in the provinces is a result of the diffusion of a Roman concept of ‘religion’ and must be analyzed with a view to its dependence on the Empire’s formation and communication structures.