

Introduction

Do Religions Die? Theorizing Death and Demise of Greek and Roman Religions

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The early decades of the twenty-first century witnessed a spate of publications designed to remind readers that the fabled ‘triumph of Christianity’ had come at a cost for other religious groups. Alan Cameron’s *The Last Pagans of Rome* joined James J. O’Donnell’s *Pagans: The End of Traditional Religion and the Rise of Christianity*, Edward J. Watt’s *The Final Pagan Generation*, and other, similarly illustrious works.¹ Historians of Late Antiquity had, of course, long grappled with the discourse, so prominent in patristic writings of the fourth and later centuries, of Christianity’s ascent and the concomitant, forcible descent of other aspects of the Roman Empire’s diverse religious landscape. These publications nevertheless turned the paradigm outlined in the preceding sentence on its head, centering not Christianity triumphant but rather the demise of a religious tradition that had, in all its pluriformity, sustained centuries of private and public practice across the Mediterranean and beyond.

Against this backdrop unfolded a conversation that has, for the past half-decade, productively preoccupied the Greco-Roman Religions Section of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), and to which the current issue is only the most recent contribution. Originally conceived as a single panel session at the

1 Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199747276.001.0001; James J. O’Donnell, *Pagans: The End of Traditional Religion and the Rise of Christianity* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2013); Edward J. Watts, *The Final Pagan Generation: Rome’s Unexpected Path to Christianity*, *Transformations of the Classical Heritage* 53 (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020), emphasis mine. An initial response, aimed chiefly at Cameron’s volume but with relevance to later examples as well, appeared in the form of Rita Lizzi Testa, ed., *The Strange Death of Pagan Rome: Reflections on a Historiographical Controversy*, *Giornale Italiano di Filologia: Bibliotheca* 16 (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2013), <http://www.brepolsonline.net/action/showBook?doi=10.1484/M.GIFBIB-EB.5.112187>.

2018 SBL Annual Meeting in Boston, “Twilights of Greek and Roman Religions” proved generative for both the unit and its interlocutors. An additional session at the 2019 meeting in San Diego (“Further on the Twilights of Greek and Roman Religions”) resulted in the 2020 publication of a themed issue of the *Journal of Early Christian History*.² That its contributors have agreed to re-visit the topic both in the issue at hand and in a third and thus far final session at the 2021 Annual Meeting in San Antonio, however, is the result of a fortuitous coincidence – or, rather, of the traction that conversations about religions’ endings have gained in the realm of religious studies more broadly.

During the very years in which the Greco-Roman Religions Section had begun aforementioned conversations, the Centre for Advanced Study at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters in Oslo had spearheaded a project on ‘The Demise of Religions.’ Led by James Lewis and Michael Stausberg, the project sought to ‘provide a comparative analysis of the why and how of the decline of religions,’ in order to ‘develop an overarching analysis, typology, vocabulary, and theory of the demise of religion.’³ Two resulting publications, including an eponymous volume and a themed issue of *Numen*, brought the project’s findings to the attention of the broader public.⁴ Their provocative theoretical insights, including particularly Jan N. Bremmer’s essay, “How Do We Explain the Quiet Demise of Graeco-Roman Religion?,” also provided an impetus for further engagement and reconsideration for the scholars who had previously explored these topics under the auspices of the SBL. The 2021 Annual Meeting showcased the fruits of their labors in a panel titled ‘Do Religions Die? Theorizing Death and Demise of Greek and Roman Religions.’ More proximately, they appear in print in the issue at hand. While each carries forward a thread originally developed in the context of their authors’ prior contributions, the essays are both intelligible and intellectually stimulating in their own right. The remainder of this preface is accordingly dedicated to a concise introduction of the articles in question and to identifying a selection of the central *topoi* around which the authors have organized their reflections.

2 *Journal of Early Christian History* 20, no. 2 (2020), <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rech20/10/2?nav=toCList>.

3 <https://cas.oslo.no/research-groups/the-demise-of-religions-article2082-827.html>

4 Michael Stausberg, Stuart A. Wright, and Carole M. Cusack, eds., *The Demise of Religion: How Religions End, Die, or Dissipate* (London; New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020); Michael Stausberg, ed., *Numen* 68, no. 2–3 (Special Issue “The Dissolution of Religions”; 2021). Both publications are open access: <https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/book/the-demise-of-religion-how-religions-end-die-or-dissipate/> and <https://brill.com/view/journals/nu/68/2-3/nu.68.issue-2-3.xml> respectively.

Jeffrey Brodd's contribution "Theorizing the Demise of Greek and Roman Religions," focuses on a besetting problem of premodern scholarship: the dearth of evidence, and the ways in which the presence or absence of data shapes narratives of religions' 'disruption, transformation, and demise.' Bringing into conversation the history of the Ghost Dance with the Emperor Julian's intentions – or lack thereof – to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple, Brodd argues for the necessity of reasoning from silence and the importance of establishing strategies for doing so responsibly.

Olivia Stewart Lester's essay ("Death, Demise, and the Decline of Prophecy"), by contrast, concerns itself with the silencing effects of ancient decline narratives. Late Antiquity knows numerous accounts of the 'end of prophecy' in Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman sources. Yet to focus on these narratives, Stewart Lester argues, obscures continuities of practice: they efface the continued vitality of and interest in prophecy among these religious groups, well past the point of prophecy's ostensible demise.

If Brodd's and Lester's contributions examine the alleged death of religions and religious practices, Frankfurter and Undheim evince greater interest in their existence *postmortem*. In this process, David Frankfurter ("The Dwindling and Haunting Persistence of Ancient Religions") draws on Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology to examine the agency exercised by material spaces. Drawing widely upon the ruins of Egyptian temples, Mayan and Aztec religious buildings, and the Jerusalem Temple destroyed in 70 CE, Frankfurter urges their treatment not as 'remains' – the corpses of dead religions – but as religious presences in their own right, even in the absence of adherents and practitioners.

In a similar vein, Sissel Undheim ("Vestal Virgins Revived. Some Reflections on Dead Religions, Reception and Afterlives") looks towards a selection of 'revivals' surrounding the cult of the Vestal Virgins. The latter appears in a variety of guises, ranging from contemporary Greek paganism to museums' efforts to make exhibits come alive for the benefit of their audiences. All of these, Undheim argues, reflect ongoing creative processes of the cultural production of religion, and should accordingly be as reflecting a kind of continuity. Death, in this context, thus emerges as a 'matter of interpretation' and 'not a finite state.'

Gerhard van den Heever's response to these essays provides an important, forward-looking synthesis of the issues raised by their contributors. It is not my aim to reduplicate these salutary efforts here. Instead, I merely hope to highlight a couple of the central terms whose negotiation shapes scholars' engagement with the demise of religions. Chief among these is, unsurprisingly, the category of 'religion' itself. Questions concerning the usefulness of the former have figured prominently in conversations about premodernity for at least the

past decade. A number of contributors indeed reference seminal works by Carlin A. Barton, Daniel Boyarin, Brent Nongbri, and, in the context of the topic at hand, Jan Bremmer. It thus should not come as a surprise to the reader to find that different contributions evince differing levels of comfort with the term 'religion' and propose differing definitions for the term. The spectrum ranges from Brodd's use of Bruce Lincoln's quartet of markers – a definition that allows for a relatively clear and definite identification of a cultural phenomenon as 'religious' – to Stewart Lester's emphasis on practices, including prophecy, as superior starting points for scholarly engagement. Frankfurter and Undheim locate themselves along this spectrum: the latter, by focusing primarily on the question whether modern appropriations of the Vestals 'count' as religious; the former by proposing a reading of religions as 'assemblages that combine bodies in performance with the material agencies of landscapes and structures.'

These conceptions by necessity shape contributors' approach to their topics, including the notion that a religion might 'die' and the role ritual spaces play in their arguments. While Frankfurter thus rejects death and the human lifespan as unsuitable to the discussion of religions and Stewart Lester's essay proposes a category shift to make sense of practices' 'demise,' Brodd and Undheim are both able to speak not only of religions' demise but of their afterlives. In a similar vein, while all contributors engage in more or less explicit ways with temples, these edifices take on different functions for each, including, for example, as a marker of institutional support in Brodd, a space for practice in Stewart Lester, and as the defining element of religion itself, in Frankfurter. The resulting set of essays reflects a vibrant, provocative, and inspiring conversation, an on-going exchange not only among the volume's contributors, but within the discipline of Religious Studies, broadly conceived. It has been an honor to host the beginning stages of this dialogue, alongside Gerhard van den Heever and Barbetta Spaeth, under the big tent of the Greco-Roman Religions Section, and a pleasure to watch it unfold in new and exciting spaces ever since.