

# *Roman Emperors: Gods, Men, Something Between Or An Unnecessary Dilemma?*

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The establishment of the Principate caused or precipitated vast changes in Roman political and religious life.<sup>1</sup> The formation of the imperial cult – or rather the establishment of a tradition of worshipping Roman emperors – was one of the most important and seemingly also most radical. It is commonly held opinion that religious worship of a human was totally unknown during the Republic and completely abhorrent to prevailing republican religious sentiments.<sup>2</sup> This claim, even though generally correct, is inaccurate in certain respects. Even in republican Rome some individuals were evidently given honours which very closely resembled those usually offered to gods. Historical evidence about Scipio Africanus is unclear,<sup>3</sup> but we know with some degree of certainty that brothers Gracchi received a cult after their death.<sup>4</sup> Even more significant are the cases of Gaius Marius and Marius Gratidianus (praetor in 85 BCE), who received libations

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- 1 For a general overview see Richard Gordon, "From Republic to Principate: Priesthood, Religion and Ideology", in: Mary Beard – John North (eds.), *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in the Ancient World*, London: Duckworth 1990, 179-198; Walter Eder, "Augustus and the Power of Tradition: The Augustan Principate as a Binding Link between Republic and Empire", in: Kurt A. Raaflaub – Mark Toher (eds.), *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretation of Augustus and His Principate*, Berkeley – Los Angeles: University of California Press 1990, 71-138; John Scheid, "Augustus and Roman Religion: Continuity, Conservatism and Innovation", in: Karl Galinsky (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Augustus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005, 175-192.
- 2 E.g. Lily Ross Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor*, (Philological Monographs 1), Middletown: The American Philological Association 1931, 54; Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, (Sociological Studies in Roman History 1), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1978, 213; Antonie Wlosok, "Einführung", in: ead. (ed.), *Römische Kaiserkult*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1978, 1-52: 16.
- 3 The opinion that Scipio Africanus was an object of a public cult, albeit short-lived, is held by Stefan Weinstock (*Divus Julius*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1971, 294-275); *contra* C. Joachim Classen, "Romulus in der römischen Republik", *Philologus* 106, 1963, 174-204: 180.
- 4 Plutarch, *Gaius Gracchus* XXXIX.



and sacrifices during their lifetimes.<sup>5</sup> These practices could certainly have been influenced by the Greek hero cult, a tradition of paying honors to exceptional men,<sup>6</sup> but their rather spontaneous establishment shows that even the Romans were inclined to give them in return for exceptional deeds or services.<sup>7</sup> Another example of this habit, this time in the private context, is the worship of the master's Genius by the slave inhabitants of a household.<sup>8</sup>

There were also other stimuli, which could have played some role in this process. The status of human participants in some rituals seems to be temporarily changed and they were closely related with the divine sphere. Roman triumphators on their way to the Capitol were traditionally dressed in the same attire as the statue of the Capitoline Jupiter.<sup>9</sup> Even though the tradition about the slave whispering into their ears the famous sentence "memento te hominem esse" (remember you are a man)<sup>10</sup> could be late, there is no reason to exclude the possibility that this interpretation – the temporal identification of a Roman general with Jupiter – could have arisen spontaneously in the minds of many bystanders.<sup>11</sup> By the way, there were at least two important precedents, which could give some support to such ideas: the apotheosis of Romulus, legendary founder of Rome, who was after his mysterious disappearance worshipped as the god Quirinus,<sup>12</sup> and also that of Aeneas, who was worshipped in Lavinium under the name of Pater Indiges.<sup>13</sup> Some scholars, admittedly, contend that this tradition about Romulus-Quirinus is very late and in fact reflects controversies about the deification of Gaius Julius Caesar.<sup>14</sup> This could certainly be par-

5 Gaius Marius: Valerius Maximus VIII.15.7; Plutarch, *Marius* XXVII.9. – Marius Gratidianus: Cicero, *De Officiis* III.80; Seneca, *De ira* III.18.1; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia* XXXIII.132; see also Francisco Marco Simón – Francisco Pina Polo, "Marius Gratidiano, los *compita* y la religiosidad popular a fines de la república", *Klio* 82, 2000, 154-170.

6 As it is suggested by Duncan Fishwick (*The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire* I.1, [Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romaine 118], Leiden: E. J. Brill 1987, 53).

7 Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2002, 51-53.

8 *Ibid.*, 32-44.

9 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* XXX.111-112.

10 Tertullian, *Apologia* XXXIII.

11 Mary Beard – John North – Simon Price, *Religions of Rome I: A History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, 44-45.

12 For the most famous account of his apotheosis see Livy I.16.

13 Livy I.2.6; Dionysios of Halicarnassus I.64.

14 Cf. Antonie Wlosok, "Einführung...", 17-18; Danielle Porte, "Romulus-Quirinus, prince et dieu, dieu des princes: Etudes sur le personnage de Quirinus et sur son évolution, des origines à Auguste", in: Hildegart Temporini – Wolfgang Haase (eds.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.17.1, 1981, 300-342: 333-336.

tially true, but some elements of this legend were evidently archaic.<sup>15</sup> Also the cult of the dead forefathers – *divi parentes* and *divi manes* – suggests that posthumous divinization of humans was in complete agreement with Roman ideas and attitudes and thus perfectly acceptable for very wide segments of the Roman population.<sup>16</sup>

What remains controversial is divinization and a cult paid to living individuals. It is especially the question of divine status of living emperors that have caused the indignation of many generations of scholars and exercised its negative influence on the study of the Roman imperial cult. Until now, two predominant attitudes toward this question were assumed in modern scientific research:

1. Roman emperors were not gods and it is absurd to claim (even to think) that they could have ever been seen as such.<sup>17</sup> That they were called as such by the poets or court flatterers does not change this fact. The Roman imperial cult was a political institution, a special kind of homage paid to rulers,<sup>18</sup> and its religious significance was tenuous, if any. Some ‘bad’ emperors like Caligula, Nero or Domitian could pretend that they were gods, but their claims met with severe resistance and had no more significance and longevity than the ravings of any madman.<sup>19</sup>
2. Roman emperors were considered to be more than average humans, but not gods, and certainly not when alive.<sup>20</sup> Their rule was considered to be divinely supported or inspired and it was believed that they enjoyed special relationship with Roman gods or their personal deities. They often let themselves to be depicted or sculpted with

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15 S. Weinstock, *Divus Julius...*, 176-177; endorsed by Duncan Fishwick (*The Imperial Cult...* I.1, 53-54).

16 Bernardette Liou-Gille, “Divinisation des morts dans la Rome ancienne”, *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 71, 1993, 107-115.

17 E.g. Elias Bickerman, “Consecratio”, in: Willem den Boer (ed.), *Le Culte des souverains dans l’empire romain*, (Entretiens Fondation Hardt 19), Vandœuvres-Genève: Fondation Hardt 1973, 1-37: 10.

18 E.g. Arthur D. Nock, “Religious Developments from the Close of the Republic to the Death of Nero”, *Cambridge Ancient History* X, 1934, 465-511: 481-482.

19 For a more balanced analysis of their actions see Christopher J. Simpson, “Caligula’s Cult. *Imitatio Augusti*”, *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 75, 1997, 107-112; cf. also I. Gradel, *Emperor Worship...*, 140-161.

20 E.g. Peter Herz, “Der römische Kaiser und der Kaiserkult: Gott oder primus inter pares?”, in: Dieter Zeller (ed.), *Menschwerdung Gottes – Vergöttlichung von Menschen*, (Novum Testamentum et orbis antiquus 7), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1988, 115-140: 139; Matthias Peppel, “Gott oder Mensch? Kaiserverehrung und Herrschaftskontrolle”, in: Hubert Cancik – Konrad Hitzl (eds.), *Die Praxis der Herrscherverehrung in Rom und seinen Provinzen*, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 2003, 69-95: 70-71.



attributes of various Graeco-Roman gods (fig. 1) and tried to exploit this “ambiguity” politically,<sup>21</sup> but we cannot speak about their virtual identity.<sup>22</sup>

### What it means to be a god?

The crux of the problem is, of course, closely connected with the question of whom or what we will and can consider a god (or goddess). If we try to answer this question, manifold difficulties confounding any process of defining a god/goddess will reveal the vast complexity of the whole enterprise. A search for *the* decisive feature (or features, if a polythetic definition is preferred) of divinity – what really makes you a god – is often made with equally unsatisfactory and insufficient outcome as is the case when we try to define a religion.

Some definitions depend heavily on the concept of religion and are evidently circular: a god/goddess is a being people engage with religiously; religion is a way humans engage with gods. The elusiveness of these “definitions” is quite conspicuous.<sup>23</sup> Other definitions are seemingly more subtle. They operate with categories of “superhumanity”, “transcendence” or “supernaturalness”.<sup>24</sup> For example, in Hans H. Penner’s opinion “superhuman agents [i.e. gods] refer to beings that can do things you and I cannot do.”<sup>25</sup> But as Ivan Strenski argued in reaction to Hans Penner’s claim, this definition is again no definition at all. There are many beings “who can do what you and I cannot” and are in no sense religious – from Alien to Terminator.<sup>26</sup> The same problem undermines also the otherwise very laudable and promising concept of *counter-intuitiveness*, introduced by Pascal Boyer.<sup>27</sup> According to Boyer, a god/goddess could be characterized by

21 John Pollini, “Man or God: Divine Assimilation and Imitation in the Late Republic and Early Principate”, in: Kurt A. Raaflaub – Mark Toher (eds.), *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretation of Augustus and His Principate*, Berkeley – Los Angeles: University of California Press 1990, 334-363; Marianne Bergmann, *Die Strahlen der Herrscher: Theomorphes Herrscherbild und politische Symbolik im Hellenismus und in der römischen Kaiserzeit*, Mainz: Philipp von Zabern 1998.

22 M. Bergmann, *Die Strahlen...*, 25.

23 Illka Pyysiäinen, *How Religion Works: Toward a New Cognitive Science of Religion*, (Cognition and Culture Book Series), Leiden: E. J. Brill 2001, 13.

24 Sometimes other equally unclear categories can be called to stand the ground: “sacredness”, “otherworldliness”, “ultimate reality” or “numinosity”.

25 Hans H. Penner, “You don’t read a myth for information”, in: Nancy Frankenberry (ed.), *Radical Interpretation of Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, 153-170: 169.

26 Ivan Strenski, “Hans Penner, Horatio and the Terminator: a review essay of *Radical Interpretation of Religion*”, *Religion* 34, 2004, 53-64: 56.

27 Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas*, Berkeley: University of California

his/her counter-intuitive features or abilities that would be in contradiction with panhuman expectations connected with the ontological category “person”. For example, a god would have most common abilities and features of a normal person (e.g. intentionality, continuity of existence, ability to remember people and things etc.), but also some extraordinary ones (e.g. invisibility, immortality etc.). This *minimal* counter-intuitiveness of gods, closely related to another important concept of Pascal Boyer – *cognitive optimum*, makes them highly memorable, better than beings with common (a man who grows old and will eventually die) or too many – and bizarre – abilities and features (someone who sees through opaque walls and only sees what does not happen behind them),<sup>28</sup> and a potential target of many useful inferences. Together with other factors this quality can cause god concepts to have better chance of being culturally selected and faithfully transmitted from generation to generation.<sup>29</sup> But again: many beings around us can have these features and abilities – and they are not religious at all. This so-called “Micky-Mouse problem”<sup>30</sup> thus creates a great obstacle for the Cognitive Science of Religion as well, even though some interesting suggestions about what really differentiates religious counter-intuitive beings (i.e. gods) from non-religious ones have already been made.<sup>31</sup>

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Press 1994, 91-124; id., *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors*, London: William Heinemann 2001, 58-105; id., “Why do gods and spirits matter at all?”, in: Ilkka Pyysiäinen – Veikko Anttonen (eds.), *Current Approaches in the Cognitive Science of Religion*, London: Continuum, 68-92.

28 P. Boyer, *Religion Explained...*, 98-100.

29 Both of Boyer’s claims, very central to his concept of religious representations, have been recently questioned. Gregory D. Alles (“The So-Called Cognitive Optimum and the Cost of Religious Concepts”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 18, 2006, 325-350) has argued that the perseverance and apparent capability of religions to successfully survive cannot be explained with the help of *cognitive optimum*. Lauren O. Gonce et al. (“Role of Context in the Recall of Counterintuitive Concepts”, *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 6, 2006, 521-547) and Mary Harmon-Vukic – Jason D. Slone (“Problems with the ‘Minimal Counter-intuitiveness [MCI] Hypothesis’”, conference paper [Symbolization in Religion, Cognition and Culture, Aarhus, May 31 – June 2 2007]) have made some experiments which suggest that contextual integration is more important than counter-intuitiveness for the memorability of various concepts.

30 This term was coined by Scott Atran, see id., *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion*, Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press 2002, x.

31 Pascal Boyer (*Religion Explained...*, 171-191) and Todd Tremplin (*Minds and Gods: The Cognitive Foundations of Religion*, Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press 2006, 121-132) argue for the social relevance of some counter-intuitive beings which makes them crucially different from mere counter-intuitive ones. Nevertheless, this argument sounds quite circular in many ways: some counterintuitive beings are believed in, because they are socially important; why they are socially important?; because they are believed in.



### Is ontological divinity in the study of the Roman imperial cult really important?

But there is another problem. What is really in the center of polemics about the status of Roman emperors is very often the question of their ontological divinity. Or to put it differently: was Augustus *ontologically different* from any other people living in his days? Did he participate in some *divine* essence? But these questions, as Ittai Gradel correctly argues, are rather meaningless or, even worse, completely misleading.<sup>32</sup> Firstly, we have no scientific tools at our disposal with which we could scientifically and reliably ascertain whether Augustus was *really* essentially different (i.e. better) than other Romans. The falsification or verification of claims that Augustus was mere man or, on the other hand, *deus preasens*, is thus completely impossible.

Secondly, the whole problem is inadvertently translated into a theological polemic: certainly it is quite clear that miracles performed by Jesus are qualitatively different (therefore, again, better) than those Vespasian made during his visit to Alexandria.<sup>33</sup> But the motivations lurking behind this conclusion are unabashedly apologetic. The bottom-line is here: Jesus *is* God/ Vespasianus *was* mere man.

Thirdly, the concept of divinity is rather fluid and, of course, influenced by a particular culture. If we begin to apply, without any qualifications, our contemporary notions of religion and divinity in the cultures where these concepts are either non-existent or substantially different, the danger that we will end in anachronistic moral judgments is imminent and almost inescapable. The most blatant example of the negative influence of these prejudices is the tenacious reduction of the emperor worship to mere political act, stripped of any serious religious significance.<sup>34</sup> Other assessments, deeply influenced by Christianizing assumptions about the nature of divinity, follow. All dedications to emperors (or other Hellenistic

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32 Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship...*, 27-32.

33 Tacitus, *Historiae* IV.81; see also Gabriele Ziethen, "Heilung und römischer Kaiserkult", *Sudhoffs Archiv* 78, 1994, 171-191.

34 The most influential paper in this regard is probably E. Bickerman, "Consecratio...", based on one of his former studies (Elias Bickermann, "Die römische Kaiserapotheose", *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 27, 1929, 1-31).

35 For a list of dedications made to Hellenistic rulers see Simon R. F. Price, "Between Man and God: Sacrifice in the Roman Imperial Cult", *Journal of Roman Studies* 70, 1980, 28-43: 37, n. 93 (with necessary references).

kings)<sup>35</sup> are quickly marginalized, or simply explained away.<sup>36</sup> Information coming from our historiographical sources, for example about the deification of Julius Caesar in the last month of his life, are unnecessarily questioned and complicated theories invented in order to get this unpleasant data right.<sup>37</sup> Prayers to rulers are found deficient compared with prayers to real (at least pagan) gods: what the people uttering them really wanted were mere „temporal benefits“, not more noble (i.e. more religious) things like „peace of soul“ etc.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, in most ancient prayers we know of (besides literary ones) what is really asked for are exactly “temporal benefits” which kept the whole complex of votive religion in motion.<sup>39</sup> Why should it be otherwise? Graeco-Roman gods and goddesses were not sublime entities with highly abstract features like omnipotence, omnipresence or impassibility. Their power and their importance – the reason why they deserved cult and worship – lay in their ability to actively help those who prayed to them. They seem to be only superficially interested in moral questions and most Greeks and Romans would probably be very surprised by our opinion that it should be predominantly existential questions that gods are supposed to answer. Of course, even this concept of gods is not totally unknown from the Graeco-Roman antiquity, but it was, paradoxically, various philosophical schools which were preoccupied with these problems and questions.<sup>40</sup>

### **The relative divinity: A key to understanding the Roman imperial cult?**

One provisional conclusion can be drawn: ontological divinity was not a pressing problem for many ancient Greeks and Romans, especially not with their polytheistic religious background. For Christians (or Jews and Moslems), the ontological status of God (his divinity) is sufficient reason for his worship: because there is only one God. But in ancient Rome – and

36 See Manfred Clauss (*Kaiser und Gott: Herrscherkult im römischen Reich*, Stuttgart – Leipzig: B. G. Teubner 1996, 29-38) and his criticism of some readings of ancient inscriptions, which could have been considered dedications to living emperors, but are not thank to various preconceived stereotypes.

37 I. Gradel, *Emperor Worship* ..., 54-61.

38 D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult* ..., 37-38.

39 Luther H. Martin, “Petitionary Prayer: Cognitive Considerations”, in: Brigitte Luchesi – Kocku von Stuckrad (eds.), *Religion in kulturellen Diskurs: Festschrift für Hans G. Kippenberg zu seinen 65. Geburtstag*, (Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 52), Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2004, 115-126: 122-123.

40 Hendrik S. Versnel, “Religious Mentality in Ancient Prayer”, in: id. (ed.), *Faith, Hope and Worship: Aspects of Religious Mentality in the Ancient World*, (Studies in Greek and Roman Religion 2), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1981, 1-64: 10.



also in most parts of the Mediterranean world – there were many gods: hundreds, possibly thousands.<sup>41</sup> Why were some of them worshipped and others not? Certainly not because they were gods – that simply could not have been the sole reason – but because they were members of a community and were in close relations with it. They were ontologically different – why deny this – but this fact alone was evidently not sufficient. They were seen as immensely powerful (although not necessarily omnipotent) and the actual division between them and humans were felt to be so great that it required special attitude to be at least temporarily crossed: we would usually call this practice “religion”. They had a cult because they provided protection and guaranteed prosperity, all in exchange for worship consisting of rituals and sacrifices.<sup>42</sup> This reciprocal relationship could be even subtly reversed if humans felt wronged: gods could be publicly humiliated if they “misbehaved”. A prime example (from Christian point of view certainly an outrage) of this attitude is Neptune being “kicked off” of the procession before the games by Augustus<sup>43</sup> in retaliation for his misdemeanor (allowing the sinking of a fleet due to exceptionally bad weather).

Roman emperors were worshipped because their unprecedented powers and incredibly high status, compared with that of their subjects who made their offerings to them, could not be overcome or at least mediated in any other way. What really mattered was, therefore, a difference in their relative social status, not their ontological divinity.<sup>44</sup> If we realize this fact (for us maybe a little strange) and accept its relevance as quite common, if not prevalent, in Graeco-Roman world, we will be able to understand various aspects of the Roman imperial cult in a more precise and less anachronistic way.

In the first place, we can dispense with the totally unhelpful and inappropriate dilemma of placing the imperial worship in either a political or a religious sphere, because this distinction is often completely irrelevant for ancient civilizations.<sup>45</sup> This radical solution as proposed by Ittai Gradel seems to be very helpful, but there are still some problems which are left unanswered and will not go away so easily. First, there evidently were communities for which the problem of ontological divinity was far more important that Ittai Gradel is usually willing to admit and they certainly

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41 Manfred Clauss (*Kaiser und Gott...*, 22) gives a provisional number of 3700-4000 gods and goddesses known from ancient literature and inscriptions.

42 For a detailed discussion see I. Gradel, *Emperor Worship...*, 27-32.

43 Suetonius, *Augustus* XVI.2.

44 I. Gradel, *Emperor Worship...*, 29.

45 *Ibid.*

cannot be put aside as “philosophers”: Jews with their sympathizers and Christians could reject emperor worship exactly on the grounds of their ontological insufficiency.<sup>46</sup> Second, the quite complicated process of official deification seems to have been, at least partially, preoccupied also with the question of the actual divinity of Roman emperors. Ittai Gradel can be right that death is a social fact as well as it is a biological one,<sup>47</sup> but dying gods obviously caused some problems for the way in which they were or could be conceptualized. And last but not least, it could be that Gradel’s concept of relative divinity is in reality much too great a concession to exactly those anachronistic tendencies he tries to avoid so meticulously. Is it not possible that for many Romans emperors simply were gods ontologically?

This claim, most forcefully argued by the German scholar Manfred Clauss, is not so different from that made by Ittai Gradel. Clauss, too, contends that the main problem in the study of the Roman imperial cult is our tendency to fill the word “god” with a motley array of anachronistic contents which are completely inappropriate to the ancient context.<sup>48</sup> But he also claims that if we read our historical sources carefully we can occasionally see that Roman emperors were – at least for many inhabitants of the Roman Empire – gods, plain and simple.<sup>49</sup> Roman emperors were worshipped, in an evidently religious manner, by various people, professions or communities, sometimes in a purely private context.<sup>50</sup> Some of them could even consider emperor worship a special kind of mysteries.<sup>51</sup> The fact that some individuals or groups denied the relevance of the imperial cult or rejected emperors’ divinity, made it, as Momigliano argued, even more important and powerful.<sup>52</sup> This situation should not be very surprising, because there apparently were no universally accepted or officially promoted guidelines for what it meant to be a god<sup>53</sup> and what to believe in. There were, however, rather strict rules, even though usually only imperfectly policed, for how to worship Roman emperors in the public sphere.

46 Arnaldo Momigliano, “How Roman Emperors Became Gods”, in: id., *On Pagans, Jews and Christians*, Hanover: Wesleyan University Press 1987, 92-107: 101-102.

47 I. Gradel, *Emperor Worship...*, 22.

48 M. Clauss, *Kaiser und Gott...*, 20.

49 *Ibid.*

50 J. M. Santero, “The ‘Cultores Augusti’ and the Private Worship of Roman Emperor”, *Athenaeum* 61, 1983, 111-125; I. Gradel, *Emperor Worship...*, 198-233.

51 Henri W. Pleket, “An Aspect of the Emperor Cult: Imperial Mysteries”, *Harvard Theological Review* 58, 1965, 331-347.

52 A. Momigliano, “How Roman Emperors...”, 102.

53 Cf. Simon R. F. Price, “Gods and Emperors: The Greek Language of the Roman Imperial Cult”, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 104, 1984, 79-95: 79-85.



For some people the imperial cult was a mere act of political loyalty, for others an emotional religious act by means of which they could express their gratitude toward the emperor. Their real intentions and beliefs are, unfortunately, often completely unknown to us, at least in the majority of cases.

### **The Roman imperial cult: What to do?**

It seems to be quite evident that the concept of relative divinity alone, even if it can be regarded as a substantial improvement correcting many especially damaging preconceptions, cannot answer some crucial questions about the importance and working of the Roman imperial cult. We still cannot know how Romans conceptualized the divinity of Roman emperors according to the concept of relative divinity.<sup>54</sup> What we can really do is only a linguistic analysis of the use of words otherwise connected with the cult of other Graeco-Roman gods. We should therefore abandon this doubtful study of beliefs Romans have had about their emperors (an ideological part of Roman imperial cult) and, instead, reorientate our attention to the study of its ritual components. It seems to be much more useful to consider the Roman imperial cult with its complicated rituals and festivals as a symbolic system with a great evocative power, which was capable of playing many different roles and fulfilling various important tasks.<sup>55</sup> Instead of concentrating on the question of whether Roman emperors were gods, either ontologically or relatively, we should look more intensely at the problem of how their cult and various honors paid to them could have meaning for so many people for such a long period.

From the religio-political point of view, the Roman imperial cult can be considered an important constituent of the imperial religion common to all, otherwise culturally and religiously very different, regions and provinces.<sup>56</sup> Graeco-Roman polytheism, extremely fragmented into many only vaguely interconnected local religious systems, was utterly unsuitable for playing the role of a unifying element. The personality of individual emperors seemed to be much more amenable to this task and it seems there-

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54 Not to mention that this concept could be equally anachronistic as the concept of ontological divinity.

55 Simon R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984: 7-11.

56 Jörg Rüpke, "Römische Religion und 'Reichsreligion': Begriffsgeschichtliche und methodische Bemerkungen", in: Hubert Cancik – Jörg Rüpke (eds.), *Römische Reichsreligion und Provinzialreligion*, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1997, 3-23.

fore quite logical that a complicated system of expressing provincial loyalty was centered around Roman emperors.<sup>57</sup> But we still have to keep in mind that even though the practice of imperial worship was common to all Roman provinces, their particular forms could have been very different and influenced by local traditions.<sup>58</sup>

From a socio-religious perspective the Roman imperial cult can be seen as an extension of a traditional Roman system of giving and accepting (or rejecting) honors that established a complex web of mutual obligations and duties in social relationship between socially superiors and inferiors. Moreover, it seems that the Roman imperial cult also provided an important opportunity for holding socially relevant priestly offices by the members of lower segments of Roman society – slaves and freedmen, who were otherwise excluded from membership in traditional Roman state priesthoods.<sup>59</sup> Also the members of local elites willingly participated in various forms of imperial worship and their role in it confirmed and further consolidated their status.

From a religious point of view, an interesting question could be, given the importance of the terms divinization and deification in modern scholarship,<sup>60</sup> how the actual apotheosis of Roman emperors was processed and conceptualized. Because the idea of a man/woman becoming a god/goddess after his/her physical death is certainly much more difficult and abstract than a simple idea of a person always being a god/goddess, this problem could possibly be interesting also for various theories originating in the field of Cognitive Science of Religion.<sup>61</sup> Many ambiguities still prevail in the study of this topic. Was the actual apotheosis of an emperor, sup-

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57 Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*, Berkeley – Los Angeles: University of California Press 2000.

58 Ronald Mellor, “The Local Character of Roman Imperial Religion”, *Athenaeum* 80, 1992, 385-400.

59 M. Beard – J. North – S. Price, *Religions of Rome I...*, 357-359. – One of the most prominent imperial priesthoods – *vicomagistri* – was established by Emperor Augustus in the year 7 BCE, apparently on the pattern of the extinct cult of *Lares Compitales* (cf. Georg Niebling, “Laribus Augustis Magistri Primi: Der Beginn des Compitalkultes der Lares und des Genius Augusti”, *Historia* 5, 1956, 303-331: 309).

60 This distinction reflects the difference between German expressions *Vergottung* (deification: to be proclaimed a state god by a decree of the Senate) and *Vergöttlichung* (divinization: to become a god) and was established by Helga Gesche (*Die Vergottung Caesars*, [Frankfurter Althistorische Studien 1], Kallmünz: M. Lassleben 1968, 9-11).

61 Alison B. Griffith, “The ‘Modes Theory’ and Roman Religion: National Catastrophe and Religious Response in the Second Punic War”, in: Luther H. Martin – Panayotis Pachis (eds.), *Imagistic Traditions in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, Thessaloniki: Vaniass Publications (in press).



ported by an independent witness, really crucially important in the first century and only later abandoned,<sup>62</sup> or it was always a senatorial decree, which was sufficient and decisive for a factual deification of a Roman emperor and a report of an apotheosis only a spontaneously arisen redundancy relatively unimportant compared to the will of the Roman Senate?<sup>63</sup> And how much is this practice based on a normal process of the divinization of the dead in Roman religion?<sup>64</sup>

These (and many other) questions awaiting further analysis are exactly what make the study of the Roman imperial cult so interesting. On the other hand, the question of emperors' divinity, fascinating as it sometimes is, gives only a little promise for substantial refinement of our knowledge of this historically important religious phenomenon.

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62 E.g. Wilhelm Kierdorf, "Fusus und Consecratio: Zu Terminologie und Ablauf der römischen Kaiserapotheose", *Chiron* 16, 1986, 43-69: 58-59; Simon R. F. Price, "From Noble Funerals to Divine Cult: The Consecration of Roman Emperors", in: David Cannadine – Simon R. F. Price (eds.), *Rituals and Loyalty: Power and Ceremonial in the Traditional Societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987, 56-105: 91-92.

63 Elias Bickerman, "Diva Augusta Marciana", *American Journal of Philology* 95, 1974, 362-376; Duncan Fishwick, "The Deification of Claudius", *Classical Quarterly* N. S. 52, 2002, 341-349: 349.

64 Cf. B. Liou-Gille, "Divinisation des morts...", 115.

## RESUMÉ

**Římští císařové: Bohové, lidé, něco mezi tím anebo zbytečné dilema?**

Otázka božství římských císařů po dlouhou dobu negativně ovlivňuje studium římského císařského kultu. Většina badatelů se kloní ke dvěma následujícím závěrům: (1) římscí císařové byli pouzí lidé a jejich kult lze spíše než za náboženský fenomén pokládat za systém výměny politických poct; (2) římscí císařové byli vnímáni jako bytosti těšící se mimořádné přízni bohů, nebyli však s nimi totožní, a to i přes to, že se někdy nechávali zobrazovat s božskými atributy a snažili se toto „příbuzenství“ využít politicky.

Tyto postoje však dostatečně nezohledňují skutečnost, že každý koncept božství je kulturně podmíněný a lze jej jen výjimečně aplikovat v prostředí jiných, často velmi odlišných kultur. Situaci komplikuje také neschopnost religionistiky vytvořit univerzální definici „božství“, kterou by bylo možné aplikovat na všechny historické a současné kultury. Největším problémem se potom v této souvislosti jeví přílišný důraz na ontologickou stránku božství, která má svou nespornou důležitost v prostředí monoteistických náboženství (jedinost Boží), žalostně však selhává v prostředí polyteistických náboženských systémů.

Jistým východiskem ze slepé uličky by mohl být koncept „relativního božství“ (Ittai Gradel), podle kterého je božství římských císařů založeno nikoli na jejich ontologické jinakosti, ale na propastném rozdílu ve společenském statutu císaře a jeho poddaných. I tento koncept však neposkytuje odpověď na všechny otázky. Je nesporné, že koncept ontologického božství hrál jistou roli i v prostředí řecko-římského světa (např. odmítnutí božských poct císařům ze strany Židů nebo křesťanů; procedury spojené s oficiální deifikací římských císařů po jejich smrti atd.) a mnozí obyvatelé antického světa mohli římské císaře pokládat za skutečné bohy (Manfred Clauss).

Spíše než zabývat se mnohdy problematickou diskuzí o „ontologickém“ nebo „relativním“ božství římských císařů bude nutné zaměřit se na důslednější studium kultické stránky římského císařského kultu a na analýzu rolí a významů, které mohl v Římské říši hrát a naplňovat. Otázku božství římských císařů je tedy vhodné spíše opustit, neboť hledání odpovědi nevede k prohloubení našich znalostí o náboženském světě pozdní antiky.

**Klíčová slova:** římský císařský kult, ontologické božství, relativní božství



## SUMMARY

**Roman Emperors: Gods, Men, Something Between Or An Unnecessary Dilemma?**

For a very long time the contentious issue whether Roman emperors were gods or not has negatively influenced the study of the Roman imperial cult. The majority of scholars is inclined to think that Roman emperors were either (1) mere men and their cult was an expression of political honors or (2) persons closely related with gods but never entirely assimilated to them, even though they sometimes let themselves to be depicted with divine attributes and tried to use this kinship politically.

These two attitudes, however, do not take into account sufficiently that every concept of divinity is culturally derived and thus only exceptionally applicable in other, sometimes profoundly different cultures. The situation is further complicated by the obvious inability of scholars of religion to propose a universally accepted definition of divinity. One of the confounding factors is probably a superfluous accentuation of ontological divinity, which is unquestionably decisive in monotheistic religious traditions but largely inappropriate in cultures with polytheistic religious systems.

A promising way how to avoid these difficulties seems to be a concept of relative divinity introduced by Ittai Gradel. According to Gradel, the divinity of Roman emperors was not based on their ontological uniqueness but rather on an enormous difference in relative social status between emperors and their subjects. But even this laudable adjustment is not able to put aside all existing problems. It is quite evident that the concept of ontological divinity played some role even in the Graeco-Roman world (e.g. Jews and Christians refused to participate in imperial worship because they rejected the notion of emperors being gods) and some people or communities could simply believe that emperors were real gods (Manfred Clauss).

Rather than running into often problematic discussions about the divine status of Roman emperors it seems to be more productive and rewarding to concentrate on a thoroughgoing study of ritual elements of the Roman imperial worship and an analysis of roles and meanings this religious phenomenon could play and fulfill during the Roman Empire. The question of the divinine status of Roman emperors should be abandoned because the search for answers probably cannot lead to any substantial improvement in our knowledge of the late antique religious world.

**Key words:** Roman imperial cult, definition of divinity, ontological divinity, relative divinity

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