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ISIS THE IMMIGRANT AND ROMAN TOLERATION

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Abstract: In adopting a foreign cult, ancient Roman worshippers were not searching for a new religion to replace their old one, but rather seeking to expand the range of gods and practices at their disposal. They assumed that all traditional gods and religions were valid and effective. There was, therefore, an implicit toleration built into the system of ancient polytheism, and this was admired by the thinkers of the Enlightenment, though the Roman state never guaranteed freedom of worship. The cult of Isis was distasteful to the Roman élite, and the government often reacted brutally to particular actions by her worshippers. Nevertheless, her cult was always popular with the general public and the state never wished to abolish it, and eventually built a public temple to Isis. The worshippers of Isis tested the limits of Roman toleration and demonstrated its vitality.

Keywords: Roman empire, Enlightenment, toleration, persecution, religion, superstition, foreign cults, Isis, Cybele, Judaism

Enlightenment Rome

The Roman empire was an extraordinary mixture of races and religions, and it is hard not to envy the peace and harmony in which they managed to live. Gods and goddesses from every part of Africa, Asia, and Europe blended in nicely with local ones, and were worshipped along with them. The gods of the ancient world may have been jealous of human beings, but they were not jealous of each other. This peaceful coexistence came to an end when Christianity and Islam replaced and obliterated the pagan religions of the empire.

Looking back on fourteen centuries of monotheistic supremacy, David Hume felt compelled to ask whether it had done more harm than good: “The intolerance of almost all religions which have maintained the unity of God is as remarkable as the contrary principle of polytheists. ... I may venture to affirm that few corruptions of idolatry and polytheism are more pernicious to political society than this corruption of theism.”¹ A decade later, when Voltaire was writing his *Treatise on Toleration* in 1763, he likewise held up the ancient Romans as models of

¹ Hume 1993, 162-3.

this lost virtue that he was trying to inculcate in his countrymen. Until the Christians started quarreling with the pagan priests, he assures us, “you do not find a single person who was persecuted because of their beliefs.”² Gibbon in 1776 starts his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* with a similar picture of toleration and harmony:

The devout polytheist, though fondly attached to his national rites, admitted with implicit faith the different religions of the earth. ... Such was the mild spirit of antiquity, that the nations were less attentive to the difference than to the resemblance of their religious worship.³

These champions of the Enlightenment were aware that the persecution inflicted on Christians was a remarkable exception to this general toleration of religious difference, but modern scholars of ancient religion have questioned whether the Romans ever had any notion of toleration. They have emphasized the difference between the passive, indifferent toleration of the ancient world and the active legal right to freedom of religion that was fought for during the Enlightenment. Momigliano pointed out long ago that political freedom in the ancient world did not entail freedom of religion,⁴ it was never a right. And yet in Athens “freedom of cult and of religious opinions remained a basic feature of the three centuries after Plato,”⁵ and in Rome “the aristocrats of Republican Rome seldom had to fear religious dissent.”⁶ Like the writers of the Enlightenment, Momigliano believes that “religious intolerance spread into the pagan world” from Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity.⁷ The tolerance shown by the ancient Roman pagans was what Garnsey calls “toleration by default” (but he restricts it to their treatment of the Jews alone);⁸ it was, as Armstrong put it, “a temper of mind rather than a formal, systematic doctrine.”⁹

Before even beginning to discuss the religious toleration of Republican Rome in his classic article on the subject, North felt obliged to point out its limited nature:

We certainly do not know at any period of any theoretical principle of allowing plurality of worship or belief. The toleration, if that is what it was, was a function of situation not theory.¹⁰

² Voltaire 2016, 39.

³ Gibbon 1909, v.1, 32-33.

⁴ Momigliano 1978, 180.

⁵ Momigliano 1978, 189.

⁶ Momigliano 1978, 193.

⁷ Momigliano 1978, 190-191. David Hume likewise criticized the intolerance of these three religions in his *Natural History of Religion* (Hume 1993, 162).

⁸ Garnsey 1984, 9.

⁹ Armstrong 1984, 9.

¹⁰ North 1979, 86.

North may wonder whether such an attitude even deserves to be called “toleration”; Garnsey is quite sure that it does not. For Garnsey, toleration must be a “combination of disapproval and acceptance,” and perhaps it even requires a certain amount of fear against the external religion.¹¹ His article on the topic begins with the following definition of toleration:

Toleration implies disapproval or disagreement coupled with an unwillingness to take action against those who are viewed with disfavour in the interest of some moral or political principle. It is an active concept, not to be confused with indifference, apathy or passive acquiescence.¹²

This is a very Christian and Kantian definition of toleration. It implies that the virtue of toleration requires a prior struggle against the sin of bigotry and persecution, that the proper good will must be actively exercised in obedience to a general moral principle. The eudaimonic morality of the ancient world, however, regards virtue as a necessary component of happiness and self-love, not a victory over them.¹³ And yet, Garnsey is surely right when he refers to the policy of Roman leaders as “inaction” and “passive acquiescence”; it was merely “an implicit recognition of their inability to control their subjects beyond a certain point.”¹⁴ His characterization of the religious policy of the Romans is borne out by the conclusions of Rutgers on their behaviour towards the Jews: “Clearly, such officials did not display tolerance. They were just being indifferent.”¹⁵ Modern scholarship ultimately agrees with Gibbon’s conclusion on “the mild indifference of antiquity.”¹⁶

In spite of this mild indifference in Roman practice, religion had no legal protection in Rome. If the government ever felt threatened by a cult and decided to attack it, the followers of that religion could not appeal to any law in their defence. The Roman state always had the power to attack any religion without restraint, and it did exercise this power.¹⁷ There was not even an ideology of toleration. It was neither morally wrong nor socially unacceptable for members of the

¹¹ Garnsey 1984, 25. Just as Momigliano had remarked that the Romans “seldom had to fear religious dissent,” Garnsey notes that “the Romans had nothing to fear from them” (foreign gods). This absence of fear prevents the Romans from developing a theoretical principle of toleration and a legal right to religious freedom.

¹² Garnsey 1984, 1.

¹³ Irwin 1989, 101-102 (Plato), 133 (Aristotle), 158-159 (Epicurus), and 173-174 (Stoics).

¹⁴ Garnsey 1984, 11 and 12.

¹⁵ Rutgers 1994, 71.

¹⁶ Gibbon 1909, v.2, 76.

¹⁷ The Roman government had no qualms about inflicting banishment or death on the Bacchantes in 186 B.C., the Jews and the worshippers of Isis in A.D. 19, and the Christians from the 1st to the 4th centuries. What is frightening in each case is the casual way in which the usual Roman

élite to abuse and insult any religious group.¹⁸ Cicero, speaking in a court room, denounces the “barbarous superstition” and the “passionate masses” of the Jews (*Flac.* 67); writing as a philosopher, he mentions with contempt those who worship a dog or a cat as gods (*Leg.* I 32). Seneca, writing at a time when Judaism and the cult of Isis were well established in Rome, makes fun of these two religions in his work *On Superstition*.¹⁹ And yet, no matter how entitled they are, legally, morally, and socially, to indulge in these rants, the very nature of polytheism forces them to confess that every real religion is directed at a real god, and that it would probably not be a good idea to alienate any of these gods. Cicero accepts that “different people have different opinions” and that the Egyptians who worship dogs and cats “are afflicted with the very same superstition that all other races are” (*Leg.* I 32). Cicero may dislike Judaism, but he must admit that it is as good a religion as any other one: “each state has its own religion, we have ours” (*Flac.* 69). Seneca likewise acknowledges that the followers of Isis only go mad during her festivals, that the Jews do at least understand their rituals, and that the official cult practised on the Capitol itself is just as absurd as any foreign one.²⁰ As Rutgers remarks in his article on Roman policy towards the Jews, “negative remarks on Jews and Judaism went hand in hand with a tendency to confirm rather than to abrogate Jewish privileges.”²¹

The social prejudices of the élite went against the inclusive and open structure of Roman polytheism, against what Gibbon calls the “implicit assent” that it granted to other religions,²² but these prejudices did not undermine what Gibbon rightly calls the “mild indifference” of the government’s practice. Whenever Jewish communities complained about anti-semitic actions by their gentile neighbours, the indifferent and passive Roman government always intervened on their behalf. Both under the Republic and under the Empire, the Romans pursued “a policy aimed at guaranteeing the unimpeded observance of Jewish cult practices.”²³ This benevolent indifference was, however, no more than a “temper of mind” and a “tendency,” however deeply it may have been built into the structure

indifference suddenly changes into murderous violence. The excuses in each case (sexual promiscuity, sometimes combined with human sacrifice) are so absurd that it is almost impossible to find a real explanation for these outbursts.

¹⁸ Greek anti-semitism: Garnsey 1984, 11. Roman anti-semitism: Stark 2006, 21-22. Other forms of bigotry: Stark 2007, 108-110.

¹⁹ This work survives only through quotations by Augustine in his *City of God*.

²⁰ *De Superstitione* as quoted by Augustine at *C.D.* VI 10 (Isis) and VI 11 (Judaism).

²¹ Rutgers 1994, 72.

²² Gibbon draws attention to structural rather than ideological or legal nature of ancient toleration when he speaks of “the *implicit* (emphasis added) assent and reverence which the nations of antiquity expressed for their respective traditions and ceremonies” (Gibbon 1909, v.2, 77).

²³ Rutgers 1994, 68.

of ancient polytheism. Its lack of any legal or ideological basis was a fatal flaw. The pagan state always had the power to turn against any religion on the slightest provocation and to attack its followers with extraordinary brutality. And because the toleration or indifference of the Romans was an unconscious and unintended byproduct of their polytheistic system, the pagans themselves would later have no legal or ideological defences for their own religious tradition when a very different type of religion gained control over the state.²⁴

Immigrant Gods

In speaking of the Roman government's attitude towards Judaism, Gibbon wonders whether it arose from "the moderation or the contempt of the Romans."²⁵ Garnsey believes that their general attitude to foreign religions was one of contempt.

This was an expanding community bent on subjecting foreign peoples and their gods. Gods were treated as booty to be destroyed, transported, selectively assimilated, or simply left behind, defeated gods in defeated communities.²⁶

Garnsey's image of defeated gods in defeated communities is a powerful one, because "defeated gods" is the very expression used by Virgil to describe the gods of Troy that Aeneas and his defeated community bring to Italy.²⁷ But these gods of Aeneas are defeated only while they are refugees without any status, wandering between their old home in Troy and their new home in Italy (Lavinium and ultimately Rome). Once foreign gods have been transported to Rome, once they have migrated there, they enjoy the same status as any other gods. Garnsey's conclusion seems too harsh:

²⁴ Grodzynski 1974 shows how *superstitio* originally meant an excessive devotion to any religion, but changed in the 2nd century A.D. to mean a foreign religion. This left the pagans defenceless when the Christians proclaimed that paganism was foreign to the new Rome.

²⁵ Gibbon 1909, v.2, 79. This remark sounds disturbingly anti-semitic, but he says similar things about Christianity: "contempt must often have relaxed, and humanity must frequently have suspended, the execution of those laws which they enacted against the humble and obscure followers of Christ" (Gibbon 1909, v.2, 87). The elite did indeed feel contempt for anyone who was not among them, but public opinion and government policy did not share their contempt for other religions (with the exception of Christianity).

²⁶ Garnsey 1984, 24-25.

²⁷ *Victosque deos* (Verg., *A.* II 320); *victosque Penates* (Verg., *A.* I 68 and VIII 11).

The gods in question had been made subject together with the communities to which they were attached; the Romans had nothing to fear from them ...²⁸

Lucretius makes it clear that the immigrant goddess Cybele “has the power to fill the ungrateful minds and wicked hearts of the masses with terrified dread at the power of the goddess” (II 622-3). There was plenty to fear from her. In spite of his Enlightenment idealism, Hume is more correct in saying that the adoption of foreign gods implies their equality with the national gods of Rome:

Idolatry ... naturally admits the gods of other sects and nations to a share of divinity, and renders all the various deities, as well as rites, ceremonies, or traditions, compatible with each other.²⁹

The Romans are, therefore, quite different from the Greeks. As North remarks, “there is nothing at Rome which corresponds even to the Greek *asebeia* proceedings.”³⁰ When Camillus, the new founder of Rome, is urging the Roman people not to abandon their city but to rebuild it, he lectures them on the correct approach to religion:

But, like men mindful of their ancient religious duties, we have even brought in foreign gods to Rome and set up new ones. When Queen Juno had been brought here from Veii, what a great day it was and how many people were present because of the extraordinary enthusiasm of the Roman women when Juno’s temple was dedicated on the Aventine! We ordered a temple to be built for Aius Locutius because of the voice from heaven that was heard on the New Road (Liv. V 52,10-11).

The new god Camillus mentions, Aius Locutius, was a mysterious voice heard by a Plebeian called Caedicius as he was walking along the New Road at night (Liv. V 32,6). A Plebeian called Socrates had been put to death by the Athenians for believing in a similar god, who revealed himself only by speaking to Socrates. The Roman reaction was quite different. At first they laughed the story off, but later they raised a temple to the new god.³¹ Nobody ever suggested arresting Caedicius for impiety or putting him to death.

As a precedent for introducing a new god to Rome, Camillus mentions the Etruscan goddess Uni of Veii who was welcomed into the city as the goddess *Juno Regina* by the process called “evocation.” Hume had used this procedure to show that polytheism “naturally admits the gods of other sects and nations” and

²⁸ Garnsey 1984, 25.

²⁹ Hume 1993, 160.

³⁰ North 1979, 85.

³¹ “Because of the low status of the informant, as usually happens, this was scorned” (Liv. V 32,7). Camillus ordered the building of the temple after the Gauls had been expelled from the city (Liv. V 50,5).

makes all religions “compatible with each other.”³² When Juno moves to Rome, she arrives as a queen, not as booty, or defeated, or a mere subject that Romans would have no need to fear. In asking her to abandon Veii and come with him to Rome, Camillus addresses her with deference and with respect. He promises her that “a temple worthy of her grandeur would welcome her” (Livy. V 21,3).

North suggests that there is a parallel between this expansion of the pantheon and the extension of citizenship in the Roman world:

It seem hardly possible or sensible to separate the deeply-rooted Roman tradition of having open boundaries to new gods from the policy of having open boundaries to new Roman citizens. The one is the projection on to the symbolic level of the social reality of the other.³³

He has been criticized for this statement,³⁴ but this openness in the religious and political sphere is a remarkable aspect of the Roman outlook and it contrasts strikingly with the attitude of the Greeks. When the Carthaginian general Hanno naively suggests to the Greek citizens of Croton that they might take in the Brutians as fellow-citizens, they reject this plan with horror:

They said that they would sooner die than mingle with the Brutians, change over to foreign rituals, customs, and laws, and eventually even change their language (Liv. XXIV 3,12).

This dramatic statement shows that for the people of Croton, at any rate, there was a very clear and terrifying connection between admitting immigrants as new citizens and accepting innovations in culture and religion. The Romans are unusual in not experiencing any such fears, and they were very much aware that this made them different from other nations.

Greek states may have claimed that their citizens were born from their native land, but the Romans openly acknowledged that they had started off as “a crowd gathered from neighbouring peoples, without any distinction between who was free and who was slave” (Liv. I 8,6). The shocked Greek historian, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, assures us that slaves were excluded from the new state; refugees were welcome “provided only that they were free” (II 15,3), but Roman historians recorded no such restrictions. Elsewhere in the ancient world, the normal rule of war was that the men would be killed and the women and children enslaved,³⁵

³² Hume’s note on evocation (Hume 1993, 186-187) is attached to his chapter on persecution and toleration (Hume 1993, 160).

³³ North 1976, 11.

³⁴ “One scholar has even seen a resemblance between Roman ‘openhandedness’ in religion and in the political sphere, between the adding of new gods and cults and the adding of new citizens,” Garnsey 1984, 6.

³⁵ “You yourselves would be massacred, and your wives and children would be seized and dragged away into slavery in accordance with the law of war,” Liv. XXI 13,9.

but Camillus urges the Romans to follow “the example of their ancestors and expand the Roman state by welcoming the defeated as citizens” (Liv. VIII 13,16).

The Romans were not, of course, motivated by any abstract principles of humanity or toleration, but in spite of themselves, their behaviour was both tolerant and humane. Their goal, as Camillus clearly states, was expansion and they achieved this by accumulating as many supporters as they could, both human and divine. They accepted as a consequence that they would ultimately have to welcome these newcomers as full and equal members of their citizen body and their heavenly pantheon.

Even though additions to the gods were welcomed, there was a risk that they might disrupt the protected tenants who were already occupying the heavenly mansion. There had never been any difficulty inducing the Greek, Italian, and Etruscan gods to adapt themselves to the wishes of the previous inhabitants, but the “oriental” religions were different enough to threaten disruption. Although none of these cults were monotheistic, they did require an intense personal devotion to one god or goddess that could easily have given offence to all the others. Modern scholars agree that the cult of the Great Mother Cybele caused a shock to the tolerant system of Rome when she was brought to the city from Phrygia in 204 B.C. Garnsey wonders “how much advance knowledge Roman senators had about the cult”,³⁶ North notes that “the State’s religious policy becomes a good deal more cautious.”³⁷ The government did take measures to restrain the wilder aspects of her cult (Roman citizens were not allowed to castrate themselves and become her priests), but Garnsey goes too far when he speaks of Cybele as “captive and tamed.”³⁸ No man who valued his physical integrity would have dared to capture or tame the great goddess Cybele, and the Romans were still terrified of her in the days of Lucretius (II 622-3). The immigrant gods and goddesses retained their divine status when they moved to Rome.

New Supplies and New Demands

One of the first great scholars of the eastern religions, Franz Cumont, saw them as a first step in the direction of monotheism: “The preaching of the Asiatic priests also unwittingly prepared for the triumph of the church which put its stamp on the work at which they had unconsciously labored.”³⁹ Solmsen notes

³⁶ Garnsey 1984, 7.

³⁷ North 1976, 8.

³⁸ Garnsey 1984, 8.

³⁹ Cumont 1911, xxii.

the general scholarly assumption that these religions are competing for a monopoly over the Roman world and that this competition ends with the victory of Christianity.⁴⁰ Walter Burkert, in his work on eastern cults, remarks that “seen in contrast to Christianity, mysteries appear both more fragile and more human.”⁴¹ The conclusion is then inevitable: “The basic difference between ancient mysteries ... and religious communities, sects, and churches of the Judeo-Christian type ... is borne out by the verdict of history.”⁴² Christian scholars in America, wishing to justify their faith by the works of the free market, come by a mathematical path to the same verdict: “In the end, the traditional temples proved incapable of holding their own in a free market.”⁴³ In each case, all paths lead to the same City of God: every pre-Christian religion is doomed to failure by the march of truth, the verdict of history, or the workings of the free market.

The traditional gods who hosted these newcomers were not, however, in a state of decline, they were not yielding to a new future. The very fact that the Roman pantheon could welcome and coexist with gods from elsewhere was a sign of its strength and vitality, and as we shall see later, the Roman state took measures to ensure that the old gods could live on peaceful terms with their new neighbours. The foreign gods came to Rome neither as prisoners-of-war who would tamely serve their conquerors nor as part of an oriental invasion that would eventually replace the pagan world with a new and holy Roman Empire. They simply joined what was already a very large, noisy, and diverse gathering of gods.

The ancient world did, of course, eventually abandon its exceptionally rich and diverse conglomeration of cults and divinities, and it adopted Christianity and Islam instead. These modern and exclusive religions compete for the undivided attention of each believer; absolute faith and total commitment are essential. The traditional Greco-Roman perspective is very different. In the ancient world, the spiritual needs of a human being are a distraction and a nuisance.⁴⁴ The only relevant fact is that so many gods and goddesses exist, both Roman and foreign, and that everyone must try to win their favour. Even the Epicureans cannot imagine that the gods do not exist. For Lucretius, our strange religious needs

⁴⁰ Solmsen mentions “the various Oriental religions which, as we are in the habit of putting it, compete for the conquest of the Roman Empire” and “the final victor, St. Paul” (Solmsen 1979, 5).

⁴¹ Burkert 1987, 28. “Mysteries were too fragile to survive as ‘religions’ on their own. They were options within the multiplicity of pagan polytheism, and they disappeared with it” (Burkert 1987, 114).

⁴² Burkert 1987, 53.

⁴³ Stark 2006, 23.

⁴⁴ “As distinct from modern religions, the primary purpose of the traditional Roman religion was not to satisfy emotional needs, although they could be fulfilled during cultic actions, but the maintenance of a favorable reciprocal relationship between gods and humans” (Takács 1995, 13).

are the source of all evil (I 62-63, I 80-101, and V 1194-1203), but however much he hates *religio*, he believes firmly in *pietas*, a sense of duty to others, and the gods are included among these others.⁴⁵

If we look at the Roman practice of *evocatio*, we shall discover that the modern free-market model of religions supplying the demand of human worshippers is reversed.⁴⁶ In the ancient world, the supernatural is taken for granted and exists everywhere, so human communities are the producers who supply worship to the ubiquitous and demanding divine consumers of hymns and incense. When the Romans ask a god to abandon an enemy city, they “promise him the same or even more splendid worship among the Roman people.”⁴⁷

Verrius Flaccus cites trustworthy authorities to show that it was the custom, at the very beginning of a siege, for the Roman priests to call forth the divinity under whose protection the besieged town was, and to promise him the same or even more splendid worship among the Roman people.

(Plin., *Nat.* XXVIII 18).

These are not the words of men searching for a higher and truer form of religion, or of enlightened philosophers looking for a more profound spirituality, or of consumers choosing a religious commodity. These are the words of a salesman who is desperately trying to sell his commodity, worship, to a very important consumer, a god from another city. Like every salesman, the Roman worshipper promises that he will sell the same product, or an “even more splendid” one, at the same price as his rivals. Instead of looking at the Roman worshipper as if he were a consumer searching for the best religious commodity, we should view him as a salesman searching for as many customers as possible. His dream is to sell his worship to all the gods and goddesses in the world, and this makes his religion very different from a modern one. A globalizing monotheistic religion like Christianity and Islam wants to offer its world-view to as many believers as possible, and its greatest problem is a weak demand, a lack of believers, or a loss of faith by its believers.⁴⁸ Ancient worshippers, on the other hand, want to win the favour of as many gods as possible, and their greatest problem is a very different kind of weak demand. They fear a lack of gods to whom they can offer

⁴⁵ *Religio*, not Epicureanism, is a violation of *pietas* (Lucretius I 80-83).

⁴⁶ Berman, Iannacone speak of “religious producers” (sects and churches) satisfying the demand of “religious consumers” (their congregations) for “the supernatural” (Berman, Iannacone 2006, 111 and 114-115).

⁴⁷ “Promittique illi eundem aut amplioem apud Romanos cultum,” Plin., *Nat.* XXVIII 4,18.

⁴⁸ See Berman, Iannacone on the danger of “free-riders” (Berman, Iannacone 2006, 116-117).

their worship, or a narrow devotion to one cult alone, that excessive and compulsive commitment which modern religions call “true faith” and the Romans called “superstition.”⁴⁹

Fighting for Attention

The goal of ancient religion was to win the *Pax Deorum*, the favour and good will of the gods.⁵⁰ People naturally made sure that their own local gods were happy, but there was no need to restrict their worship to these gods alone. When Valerius Maximus starts off his collection of exemplary stories that will serve as models for proper Roman behaviour and attitudes, these are his first words:

Our ancestors organized the regular annual festivals by means of the traditional science of the Pontiffs; they guaranteed success in public affairs through the observations of the Augurs; they interpreted the predictions of Apollo from the Books of the Seers; and they averted evil portents by the rites of the Etruscans (I 1,1).

Valerius Maximus is a good source for mainstream Roman thought because he wants to transmit stereotypes rather than to question or analyse them; he has no desire to present us with interesting and subversive new ideas, for his only goal is to spare his reader “the trouble of spending time on research.”⁵¹ When he wants to describe the earliest stage of Roman religion, he can only imagine it as a compound of Roman, Greek, and Etruscan elements. Cicero agrees with him; when he imagines a perfect law code in his *De Legibus*, he takes it for granted that his ideal republic will use Etruscan Haruspices, that women will worship Ceres in the Greek way, and that the servants of the Mother Goddess from Ida will beg for alms (*Leg.* II 21-22). This patchwork of religions was not just a legend repeated by Valerius Maximus or an ideal upheld by Cicero; it was a reality, and the archaeological evidence shows that Roman religion was indeed a mixture of Etruscan, Greek, and Latin elements.⁵² But even this original international mixture described by Valerius Maximus was not enough for the Romans, and he

⁴⁹ Originally (until the 2nd century A.D.) *superstitio* meant a distortion of *religio* based on empty fear (Grodzynski 1974, 39-44).

⁵⁰ Madejski shows that the phrase *pax deorum* does not refer to a state of peace with the gods, but means rather the grace and blessing of the gods (Madejski 2010, 109-119).

⁵¹ “*Ut ... longae inquisitionis labor absit*,” V. Max. 1: Praefatio.

⁵² Beard, North, Price 1998, 12-13.

assures us that “our ancestors were very eager not just to preserve religious observance but even to expand it.”⁵³ He goes on in the same section to tell us how the ancient Romans adopted the Etruscan science of ritual, brought in a Greek priestess to serve the goddess Ceres, and went overseas to places like Sicily and Asia Minor to thank Ceres and the Mother of the Gods (I 1,1). Later in Book I, he tells us how the Romans imported Asclepius from Epidauros and Juno Regina from Veii (I 8,2-3). The diversity of the gods worshipped by the Romans simply reflects the diversity of the gods in the real world.

This diversity has nothing to do with toleration, and the Romans were not responding to demands by Greek, Etruscan, or Asian immigrants when they welcomed these foreign gods and goddesses. As we discover from the case of the priestess Calliphana in 97 BC, the opposite was sometimes true: in order to please the goddess Ceres, they had to welcome her priestess Calliphana and grant her Roman citizenship. By worshipping the widest possible range of gods, the Romans are not abandoning or compromising their ancient traditions; this diversity is the oldest of all their traditions and the ideal towards which they should strive. There is almost a desperation in the extraordinary efforts the Romans make to win over gods from foreign countries. They will use every possible form of worship to entice every possible type of god to grant their favour to the Roman Republic.⁵⁴ As Burkert says, “Votive religion is, rather, of an experimental character: one may well try several possibilities to find the really effective expedient ... perhaps a new god will do better.”⁵⁵

The right of each person to experiment in this way was sometimes given limited recognition in Roman law. The emperor Antoninus Pius declared that if anyone took an oath in accordance with “their own personal superstition” (*propria superstitione*), the oath would be legally valid” (*Dig. XII 2,5,1*). By his time, every foreign religion is regarded as a *superstitio*, so he is not merely referring to personal religious scruples but rather to whatever religion that person has chosen to follow.⁵⁶ The three Christian emperors Valentinian, Valens and Gratian declare in 371 that the old Etruscan practice of haruspicy is not a criminal form of black magic, and that no religious practice permitted by the ancestors should

⁵³ “*Tantum autem studium antiquis non solum servandae sed etiam amplificandae religionis fuit,*” V. Max. I 1,1.

⁵⁴ Dodds argues that this was a weakness: “The religious tolerance which was the normal Greek and Roman practice had resulted by accumulation in a bewildering mass of alternatives... you could pile one religious insurance on another, yet not feel safe” (Dodds 1965, 133). Whether we regard such diversity and tolerance as a weakness or a strength, it was a fact of Roman life.

⁵⁵ Burkert 1987, 14.

⁵⁶ Around 110-120, the urbanized Roman elite start to speak of foreign religions as “superstitious cults,” Grodzynski 1974, 47; Beard, North, Price 1998, 221.

be regarded as a crime. They conclude with these remarkable words: “each individual is granted the freedom and ability to worship whatever they have conceived in their mind.”⁵⁷ These are, of course, immediate responses to a very specific legal problem and not declarations of any general right, but it is interesting that even Christian emperors would automatically respond in this way.

Behaving properly

There were restrictions, however, to the toleration of the Romans, and although they welcomed many gods and goddesses into their state, they would not accept any misbehaviour by the worshippers of these divine immigrants. If Valerius Maximus admires the ancient Romans because they paid so much respect to religion and even welcomed foreign gods and rituals, he also warns against “fake religiosity” (*simulata religio*) and denounces “superstitious cults” (*superstitiones*). By “fake religiosity” he means the abuse of religious feelings by powerful, charismatic leaders who claim that they have a special, personal connection with some god or goddess.⁵⁸ In speaking of a “superstitious cult,” he means one that requires excessive and irregular devotion from its followers, a religion that is too intense, that is based on fear.⁵⁹ Cicero’s ideal law-code declares that “nobody should have gods separately, neither new ones nor foreign ones, unless they are approved of by the state” (*Leg. II 19*).⁶⁰ Actual Roman Law follows the same principle and a ruling recorded in the 3rd century A.D. severely punishes people “who introduce new doctrines or religions unknown to reason, by which the minds of men are disturbed.”⁶¹ The emperor Marcus Aurelius had earlier punished with banishment “anyone who did anything by which people’s fickle minds are filled with a superstitious fear of the divine” (*Dig. XLVIII 19,30*). New gods

⁵⁷ “*Unicuique, quod animo inbibisset, colendi libera facultas tributa est.*” *Codex Theodosianus* IX 16,9.

⁵⁸ Valerius Maximus cites the examples of Numa and Egeria, Scipio Africanus and Jupiter, Sulla and Apollo, Marius and his Syrian priestess, and Sertorius and his white doe, *V. Max. I 2*. This chapter survives only in the later abridged versions of his work by Julius Paris in the 4th century and Nepotianus in the 5th century.

⁵⁹ Grodzynski 1974, 41-44; Beard, North, Price 1998, 217-218. Valerius Maximus does not mean foreign religions, because it is not until the second century A.D. that the Roman élite start to speak of them as “superstitious cults” (Grodzynski 1974, 47; Beard, North, Price 1998, 221).

⁶⁰ Having “gods separately” (*separatim deos, Leg. II 19*) is later called having “one’s very own gods” (*suos deos, Leg. II 25*).

⁶¹ “*Qui novas sectas vel ratione incognitas religiones inducunt, ex quibus animi hominum moveantur.*” *Pauli Sententiae ad Filium V 21*. The penalty was extremely harsh, banishment for honourable men, death for the humble. Julius Paulus Prudentissimus, who recorded this ruling, was Praetorian Prefect from A.D. 228 to 234.

and new cults were welcome, but they had to be authenticated as genuine, well-established religions, not private cults invented for personal self-advancement;⁶² and they had to be well-behaved religions, not ones that might alarm or offend other gods or humans in any way.

By restricting new religions in this way, the state was not interfering with the free exercise of religion. On the contrary, it was guaranteeing that the state and its people would benefit from the good will of every god and the free exercise of every religion. It had to please not just the new immigrant gods, but also the well-established gods who might not wish to be disturbed in their old neighbourhood inside the *pomerium*. To put it in modern terms, the Romans would have welcomed a Hindu temple, but not in Saint Peter's Square. The Roman attitude is encapsulated very nicely by Momigliano: "They were operating within the ideology according to which a State protects its own gods. This in its turn presupposed a society which recognized foreign gods provided that they did not disturb local gods."⁶³

The Troubles of Isis in Republican Rome

When Voltaire praised the Romans for their religious toleration, he did note that their reaction to the goddess Isis seemed to be an exception.⁶⁴ The Roman desire to keep all the gods happy, including their own gods, explains why Isis ran into problems in establishing her cult in Rome. These problems arose only within the *pomerium*. This sacred area had always been reserved for the traditional gods of Rome and, in exceptional cases, for external gods officially installed there by the Roman government. Her exclusion from the *pomerium* does not imply that Isis was a lesser goddess, or that the Romans disapproved of her cult in any way. Meetings of the Tribal Assembly had to take place inside the *pomerium*, for religious reasons; meetings of the Centuriate Assembly had to take place outside, in the Campus Martius, again for religious reasons.⁶⁵ And yet the status of the Centuriate Assembly was no lower than that of the Tribal one. As far as Isis was concerned, the Senate never interfered with her cult outside the *pomerium*. She

⁶² Burkert notes that this insistence on the authenticity of a religion was found elsewhere. King Ptolemy IV of Egypt insisted that Bacchic priests prove that their rituals go back for three generations (Burkert 1987, 33).

⁶³ Momigliano 1978, 190.

⁶⁴ Voltaire 2016, 39.

⁶⁵ The Tribal Assembly had to take place in the *templum* defined by the *pomerium*; the Centuriate Assembly was a military gathering and no weapons could be carried inside the *pomerium*.

had a temple in Puteoli by 105 B.C.,⁶⁶ and in Pompeii before 80 B.C.,⁶⁷ where, as an Isis scholar remarks, she was “received with open arms.”⁶⁸ In Rome itself, Isis had a temple dating from the same period, and it was located in the Campus Martius, safely outside the *pomerium*.⁶⁹ Her worshipper Apuleius tells us that a *Collegium* of Shrine-Carriers (*Pastophori*) was founded in Rome during the dictatorship of Sulla (*Met.* XI 30).⁷⁰ His statement that Isis was a very ancient *collegium* shows that it had been allowed to function without interference, so it must have been associated with her perfectly legal temple in the Campus Martius.

Isis also had a private temple on the Capitol by the first century B.C., as we know from a funerary inscription that commemorates the citizen Titus Sulpicius and the freedwoman Procia Rufa, who were the priest and priestess of Isis Capitolina.⁷¹ Since this temple was on the Capitol, inside the *pomerium*, it was illegal and ran into trouble. The Senate demolished her altars on the Capitol, perhaps in 59 B.C., but this had been an unpopular move. When Aulus Gabinius, the new Consul in 58 B.C., upheld the Senate’s decision, he had to face protests from the angry people of Rome who wanted to rebuild the altars.⁷² The behaviour of the government against this specific religious space may have been strict and unpopular, but as Takács points out, it was not “a sweeping persecution campaign against the cult of Isis.”⁷³ There is no suggestion that the Egyptian religion is somehow unlawful in itself. When Catullus returns from Bithynia in 56 B.C., a young woman casually asks him for a ride to the Temple of Serapis, and this is considered the most natural thing in the world, not an invitation to join her in breaking the law (10, 26-7).

In 53 B.C., some private temples of Isis were demolished by Senate decree. Dio Cassius, our source for this event, points out that even when an official public temple was built for Isis a century later, it was outside the *pomerium*. His remark suggests that these private temples had been inside it, and were therefore once again violating the zoning laws of ancient Rome.⁷⁴

⁶⁶ Moehring 1959, 293; Takács 1995, 59; Turcan 1996, 84.

⁶⁷ Takács 1995, 59; Turcan 1996, 84.

⁶⁸ Witt 1997, 84. He discusses her cult in Pompeii at Witt 1997, 81-86.

⁶⁹ Takács 1995, 67.

⁷⁰ These are, in fact, the last words of his novel, so this college and temple must have been especially important for Roman worshippers of Isis.

⁷¹ Takács 1995, 56; Turcan 1996, 86; Orlin 2010, 204. Takács discusses the Capitoline Inscription, which proves the existence of a cult of Isis Capitolina at Takács 1995, 51-56.

⁷² Tertullian, *Ad Nationes* I 10, 17-18; Moehring 1959, 293-294; Orlin 2010, 204.

⁷³ Takács 1995, 62-63; Turcan 1996, 86.

⁷⁴ D.C. XL 47,3; Takács 1995, 64-65; Turcan 1996, 86.

It was probably in 50 B.C. that the Consul Lucius Aemilius Paullus demolished a temple of Isis and Serapis.⁷⁵ The workmen present at the temple refused to take part in its demolition.⁷⁶ The Consul had to pick up an axe and smash in the doors himself, but the refusal of the workmen is significant.⁷⁷ By this time, ordinary Romans had more respect for the Egyptian goddess than for the orders of their Consul or the decrees of their Senate. And once again, as Takács remarks, the Senate is “defusing a possible trouble spot rather than attempting to eliminate a foreign cult.”⁷⁸

The temple of Isis on the Capitol was back in operation by the year 48 B.C., when it was “once again” (*αὔθις*) demolished, this time by order of the prophets (*γνώμη τῶν μάντεων*) in response to a bad omen that had occurred nearby (D.C. XLII 26). This demolition marks the end of a ten-year campaign against temples of Isis that had been built inside the *pomerium*. At first sight, the Senate’s actions might seem to resemble its later persecution of Christianity, but there is no attempt to suppress the cult of Isis beyond the *pomerium*, and even the perfectly legitimate exclusion of her temples from the *pomerium* was opposed by the general public.⁷⁹ The real reason for the behaviour of the Senate is the one that Tertullian gave when he wrote about its first actions against the cult of Isis in 59 B.C.: the Consul felt that “the decision of the Senate was more important than the emotions of the masses” (*Ad Nationes* I 10,18). The Senate is upholding the law and asserting its authority over the People rather than taking action against a religion.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Takács 1995, 57; Turcan 1996, 87. The dating of this action is uncertain. It might have been carried out by Lucius Aemilius Lepidus Paullus, Consul in 50 B.C.; or by his father Lucius Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus, Consul in 182 and 168 B.C.; or by his grandfather Lucius Aemilius Paullus, Consul in 219 and 216 B.C. Takács slightly favours Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus, because such an attack against Isis and Serapis would make sense shortly after the Senate campaign against the Bacchantes in 186 B.C. (Takács 1995, 57-58). Most scholars favour 50 B.C. (Beard, North, Price 1998, 161; Turcan 1996, 86), or even 48 B.C. (Cumont 1911, 81; Moehring 1959, 293).

⁷⁶ Takács suggests that the workers might have been in the process of constructing the temple, which would make their refusal very natural (Takács 1995, 59).

⁷⁷ V. Max. I 3,4. This story is only preserved in the abridged version of Julius Paris (4th century). Since the emperor Tiberius had demolished the temple of Isis and crucified her priests in A.D. 19 after a sex scandal, Valerius Maximus was under some pressure to present the cult in a negative light and praise the Consul for attacking it.

⁷⁸ Takács 1995, 58.

⁷⁹ This respect for Egyptian religion contrasts sharply with the general hatred directed against Christians because of their “crimes” and “hatred of the human race” (Tac., *Ann.* XV 44).

⁸⁰ Orlin considers the impact that the relations of various Senators with Egypt might have had on the Senate’s decisions, but concludes that this is really a conflict between the Senatorial élite and the lower class (Orlin 2010, 205-207).

The broadbased popularity of Isis is clear from two events that occurred in 43 B.C. During the proscriptions of 43 B.C., the Aedile Marcus Volusius managed to escape death by borrowing a robe from a priest of Isis who was a personal friend of his.⁸¹ If an Aedile was a friend of her priest, the cult of Isis must now have been socially respectable within the Roman élite; and if the robe saved his life, Isis must have been popular with the ordinary Romans who protected Volusius because they thought he was one of her priests. The other event from that year was even more significant. The Triumvirs voted to build an official temple of Isis and Serapis,⁸² and they obviously expected that this measure would make them popular with ordinary Romans.

The Acceptance of Isis under the Empire

The promised temple did not appear, and it might seem that Octavian's war against Antony and Cleopatra should have inaugurated a new era of persecution against Egyptian cults. In his account of the Battle of Actium, Virgil does indeed make fun of "the barking god Anubis (*A.* VI 696-700)," but he says far worse things about the Italian and Roman goddess Juno. Other poets accept her cult as a normal feature of Roman life. Propertius is annoyed with Cynthia's devotion to Isis, Tibullus is more sympathetic to Delia's religious sentiments and to the cult of Isis itself.⁸³ Both of these poets do complain when their girlfriends refuse to sleep with them during the festival of the Isis, but these very complaints show how much Isis has become a part of their lives.⁸⁴ Tibullus does not hesitate to pray to Isis when he is sick (*I* 3,27-34), and Ovid asks Isis to save his girlfriend's life (*Am.* II 13,7-26). Ovid takes it for granted that everyone in Rome knows the Temple of Isis, and he includes it in a list of well-known spots in Rome where his reader would very likely meet a future girlfriend (*Ars* I 177-8).⁸⁵ He even uses the cult of Isis to prove that Augustus should forgive him. If Isis responds with mercy to anyone who had offended her but later repented, surely the god Augustus will behave with similar clemency (*Pont.* I 1,37-66). Ovid assumes that the emperor respects the goddess and will be flattered when he is compared with her.

⁸¹ V. Max. VII 3,8; App. *BC* IV 6,47.

⁸² D.C. XL 47,15; Takács 1995, 69-70; Turcan 1996, 87.

⁸³ Solmsen notes the sympathetic treatment of Tibullus and contrasts it with the dismissive attitude of Propertius, which would be more common among élite Romans (Solmsen 1979, 68-71).

⁸⁴ Tib. I 3,26; Prop. II 28,61-2 and II 33,1-2; Heyob 1975, 116-117. Solmsen points out that these nights of sexual abstinence became a theme in love poetry (Solmsen 1979, 71).

⁸⁵ Heyob 1975, 114-116.

After the victory of Octavian at Actium, the state does as usual take action (in 28 and 21 B.C.) against the cult of Isis within the *pomerium*. In 28 B.C., Octavian reinforces the old rule that no foreign cult should be permitted inside the *pomerium*.⁸⁶ Her private temples are left alone, or at least those outside the *pomerium*. It is clear that Octavian is simply ensuring that the cult of Isis keeps within the law rather than attempting to restrict her worship, since he even provides money for the upkeep of her temples, but he does so anonymously.⁸⁷ The state allows the private cult of Isis, the emperor himself privately supports her temples, but he is not ready to provide open public funding; the government does not yet want to establish a public cult of the goddess.

The only case of a real persecution launched against the cult of Isis occurs under Tiberius in A.D. 19.⁸⁸ Takács notes that this was a very tense period for the emperor, because the immensely popular Germanicus had recently died in Egypt under suspicious circumstances, and there was also a grain shortage.⁸⁹ The ancient sources do not make this connection, and with the exception of Josephus give no reason for the behaviour of the Roman government. They simply take the persecution for granted, which is odd, since the cult of Isis had been officially established in Rome (in the Campus Martius, outside the *pomerium*, of course) by the time they wrote at the turn of the 2nd century A.D. Tacitus tells us that the Senate banished both the Jews and the worshippers of Isis from Italy;⁹⁰ Suetonius writes that the emperor banished them from the city of Rome, but he adds that both groups were forced to burn their sacred robes and equipment.⁹¹ According to our third source, Josephus, the government did expel the entire Jewish community because of an embezzlement scandal,⁹² but no such general measures were taken against the cult of Isis. One of her temples was involved in a sex-scandal, where the priests helped a young Equestrian called Decius Mundus to pretend he was the god Anubis. Disguised as the god, Mundus duped a naïve upper-class woman into sleeping with him in the temple. Tiberius crucified the

⁸⁶ Beard, North, Price 1998, 180; Orlin 2010, 211. Beard, North, Price wonder whether Octavian had not perhaps invented this ancient rule, but in note 40 they acknowledge the scholarly consensus that he was renewing an old rule.

⁸⁷ Augustus in 28 B.C.: D.C. LIII 2,4; Takács 1995, 75-77; Turcan 1996, 87. Agrippa in 21 B.C.: D.C. LIV 6,6; Takács 1995, 77; Turcan 1996, 88.

⁸⁸ This was the disappointing case of Roman intolerance noted, and dismissed, by Voltaire (Voltaire 2016, 39).

⁸⁹ Takács 1995, 81-83.

⁹⁰ Tac., *Ann.* II 85; Takács 1995, 81.

⁹¹ Suetonius, *Tiberius* 36; Takács 1995, 85-86.

⁹² A naïve Roman woman was cheated by four crooks who pocketed the money that she wanted to send to the temple in Jerusalem (Josephus, *Ant. Jud.* XVIII 3,5).

priests, demolished the temple, threw the statue of Isis into the river, and banished Mundus.⁹³

Some modern scholars have followed Voltaire in dismissing this story, and they regard it as “a Hellenistic romance.”⁹⁴ It is indeed a romantic story, and the sort of one we might expect to be fabricated in a Hellenistic city like Rome, because it combines three exciting and exotic elements: religion, sex, and foreigners. Unfortunately, this romantic combination is not just a device used to sell novels. We often find the same exotic triad whenever the Roman government is faced with a crisis and needs a scapegoat.⁹⁵ Whenever the Romans were confronted with a dangerous Gallic invasion, the Senate buried alive in a walled enclosure two Gauls, two Greeks, and (in a different enclosure) a Vestal Virgin who had very opportunely broken the chastity rule. These ritual murders took place three times.⁹⁶ Livy tells us that the Senate appealed to the same emotive mixture of religion, sex, and foreigners in 186 B.C. when it savagely suppressed the Bacchic groups (not, of course, the Bacchic cult),⁹⁷ but these elements are conspicuously absent from the Senate Decree that regulates future Bacchic groups.⁹⁸ The same three scapegoats appear again when the government wants to attack Christianity, and once again it is difficult to say how seriously the Senate believes its own propaganda.⁹⁹ This exotic triad of religion, sex, and foreigners is not, of course, unique to the ancient Romans. It will appear again in the Nazi triad of Jews, Gays, and Slavs, and again in the 21st-century triad of Muslims, Gays, and Immigrants. The violent over-reaction of the Roman government to the slightest perceived threat from the usual and useful scapegoats in A.D. 19 is typical and horrifying, but the Senate and the emperor are exercising ruthless control over the population of Rome rather than suppressing the cult of Isis itself. Four years later in Egypt, a relief depicts Tiberius offering sacrifice to Isis and

⁹³ *Ant. Jud.* XVIII 3,4; Beard, North, Price 1998, 230-231; Takács 1995, 83-85.

⁹⁴ Voltaire 2016, 39; Moehring 1959, 298-300; Heyob 1975, 117-119; Williams 2013, 72-73. Moehring adopts the view of Hadas that novels (and novelistic devices) were often used as a way of presenting minority religions in a favourable light (Moehring 1959, 303-304).

⁹⁵ Moehring notes that “practically all Roman persecutions of religious groups were based upon moral considerations,” by which he means alleged sexual misbehaviour (Moehring 1959, 295-296).

⁹⁶ They took place in 228 B.C., 216 B.C., and 113 B.C. (Beard, North, Price 1998, 80-81). Speaking of the Gauls and Greeks who were buried alive in 216 B.C., Livy claims that this was a very un-Roman thing to do, but he admits that there was a special walled enclosure that had previously been used for this purpose (Liv. XXII 55).

⁹⁷ Liv. XXXIX 8-19; Beard, North, Price 1998, 92-93; North 1979, 87.

⁹⁸ *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus*, 186 B.C. The Senate Decree is more concerned with the funding and organization of the group (North 1979, 90-94).

⁹⁹ Beard, North, Price 1998, 225-226; de Ste. Croix 1963, 20-21.

an inscription honours him for restoring the walls of the Temple of Hathor (“Isis-Aphrodite”).¹⁰⁰ He has no objection to the goddess or her religion.

The brutal attack under Tiberius marked the end of government action against the worshippers of the goddess. The cult of Isis finally received official support some time between A.D. 39 and 43, under Caligula or Claudius. The Festival of Isis at the end of October, which relived the Finding of Osiris (*Inventio Osiridis*), became an official event on the Roman calendar, and the Temple of Isis in the Campus Martius was built or rebuilt by the state.¹⁰¹ Later in the first century, the Egyptian gods were the special patrons of the Emperor Vespasian, and he and Titus spent the night in this temple before they celebrated their triumph in AD 70. This Temple of Isis in the Campus Martius even appears on Roman coins of the year 71. After all her trials and troubles, the immigrant goddess Isis has reached the top of Roman society. She has got her own official home in the city (but outside the *pomerium*) and she is embraced by the emperor himself.

Isis and the Romans

The reaction of the Roman government to the cult of Isis often shocks us by its brutal acts of bigotry and intolerance, and it seems absurd that the thinkers of the Enlightenment could ever have believed that a greater acquaintance with the ancient world would lead to toleration in the modern world. There were elements in the cult of Isis that the Roman élite always found alien, but the upper classes were generous and impartial in bestowing their contempt on lower-class worshippers, and their disapproval was not confined to foreign cults alone. The cult of the dog-headed Anubis did suggest an excessive credulity that could easily be exploited by unscrupulous priests;¹⁰² and the sight of sinners crawling on their

¹⁰⁰ “In honour of the Emperor Tiberius Caesar Augustus ... the building of the wall of the Temple of Aphrodite and Isis, the Greatest Gods, was finished in the 9th year of Tiberius Caesar Augustus,” *SEG* 8:654. See Witt 1997, 223.

¹⁰¹ Takács 1995, 90-91; Turcan 1996, 89-90. Cumont, Turcan give good descriptions of her festival (Cumont 1911, 97-99; Turcan 1996, 116-118).

¹⁰² “A man shakes a rattle, and pretends to do so by divine command; ... an old man wearing linen carries a lamp and laurel branch in the middle of the day and shouts that one of the gods is angry” (Sen., *Dial.* VII 26,8); Seneca mocks the worshippers who lament for the loss and rejoice at the recovery of Osiris (*De Superstitione* at August. *C.D.* VI 10); Anubis, or rather a priest dressed as Anubis, laughs at the crowds who lament the death of Osiris (Juv. VI 533-535); and of course Mundus can easily trick a woman into sleeping with him simply by dressing up as Anubis (Jos., *Ant. Jud.* XVIII 3,4).

knees and begging for forgiveness was disturbing.¹⁰³ The distaste of the élite was not entirely unreasonable, , but although its reaction to violations of the building code was extreme, but there was never an official government campaign of persecution.

When we read how the Consul Aemilius Paullus smashed the door of her temple with an axe, while the horrified workmen refused to help, it is hard not to think of the militant Christians of Alexandria who followed their bishop Theophilus into the temple of Serapis in A.D. 391 and destroyed it. This event was celebrated by the Syrian bishop, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, who was born shortly after it happened.

Going into the temple of Serapis, which was the greatest and most beautiful, as some people say, of all the temples everywhere in the world, Bishop Theophilus saw the huge statue, and how it overawed the spectators by its size... He ordered a man with an axe to strike the statue of Serapis vigorously. When the man struck it, everyone shouted out because they were terrified of what they had been told. But when Serapis received this blow, he didn't feel any pain, because he was a statue, and he didn't say a word, because he was lifeless. When his head was removed, mice ran out in crowds from inside: for the god of the Egyptians was only a mouse-nest. Cutting him up into small pieces, they threw some of them into the fire, but they dragged the head throughout the entire city, while his former worshippers looked on and laughed at the powerlessness of the god who had once been adored by them.¹⁰⁴

A pagan Consul with an axe attacks the Temple of Isis, while the workmen are horrified and refuse to help. A Christian workman with an axe attacks the statue of Serapis, while the rest of the mob are at first too scared to move. But in spite of these two men wielding axes, while a worried crowd looks on, the two situations are entirely different. The Christian was attacking a false god whose worship had to be annihilated, he was destroying a piece of wood infested with mice and evil spirits, he was upholding the one true faith in the one true God. The pagan Consul was not denying the divinity of Isis, or attempting to abolish her cult, or trying to impose religious orthodoxy. He was merely enforcing a zoning law and demolishing a building that had been erected in an illegal location. The open pluralism of a polytheistic system is fundamentally different from the revealed dogmatism of a monotheistic faith. Gibbon's summary of the pagan Roman attitude to religion may seem too beautifully expressed to be true, but it has not been superseded:

¹⁰³ "A woman cries out while crawling on her knees through the street" (Sen., *Dial.* VII 26,8); "naked and trembling, she will crawl across the entire Campus Marius on her bloodied knees" (Juv. VI 524-526). See Turcan 1996, 113-114. Ovid speaks of a sinner merely sitting in front of her temple to gain forgiveness (*Pont.* I 1,51-52).

¹⁰⁴ Theodoret, *Historia Ecclesiastica* V 22; Turcan 1996, 126-127.

The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful.¹⁰⁵

The migration of Isis to Rome is no exception to these general principles. She did run into unusual and unnecessary difficulties; she did come up against a strange, unnatural, and un-Roman wall of intolerance. There could not, however, have been any objection to the goddess or to her cult; nobody could have denied that it was a real and ancient one. Unfortunately, her followers were often naïve, melodramatic, and annoying. The intense devotion that she inspired could tempt her worshippers to violate the law and build temples inside the *pomerium*. The state did react very harshly against this illegal behaviour, and it did respond with brutal violence to the sex-scandal of A.D. 19, but it never acted against the cult itself. Her worshippers tested the limits of Roman toleration, but on the whole the Roman state passed this test. If toleration implies that a ruling group has the only correct belief, but is prepared to forgo the delights of persecution and willing to permit a false belief to exist within its territory, the Romans went far beyond toleration. For they never believed that their traditional gods were the only ones in the universe, and they never believed that every other religion was false. So the Romans had no desire to undermine the divinity of Isis or to abolish her cult. For them, the goddess Isis was a real goddess and was always welcome in Rome.

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¹⁰⁵ Gibbon 1909, v.1, 31.

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