

Roman Religion and its Religiosity

Keiko Kobori

1. Introduction

The characteristics of Roman religion have been a highly controversial topic for the last two centuries. Some scholars have considered it as a static religion from which its essential characteristics can easily be extracted.⁽¹⁾ Others, however, have considered that its true nature changed as time passed. In the latter school of thought, three main trends can be observed. One regards Roman religion as existing in its purest form at the beginning of the regal period, but subsequently being influenced by foreign religions and gradually losing its true essence by the end of the late Republic.⁽²⁾ Another considers that there was no genuine Roman religion from the very beginning, that is to say, so-called Roman religion was merely a mixture of various foreign religions, a mixture which came to be more complicated as time went on.⁽³⁾ The third view has recently been proposed by other scholars who argue that it is more productive to search for elements of subtle change as well as elements of continuity by studying the tangible materials, such as inscriptions, relevant contemporary literature, and archaeological evidence, rather than pursuing the origin of the Roman religion. Nevertheless, even in this latter view, any discussion on the religiosity of Roman religion appears to have been avoided or neglected.⁽⁴⁾ However, it has to be asked whether this is an appropriate approach to work on the subject of religion and whether it is possible to discuss the nature of a religion without considering the characteristics of its religiosity. Some scholars may insist that it is difficult to capture the religious feeling in any period of antiquity merely through the archaeological remnants of ancient times or the writings of ancient authors, as the former offer limited help with understanding the religiosity, while the latter tend to have other outside influences (for example, the influence of Greek philosophy on Cicero). Consequently, such scholars have regarded the problem of the religiosity as unproductive. This writer, however, considers that any discussion of a religion must examine both its 'outside', i.e. its systems or rites, and its 'inside', i.e. its religiosity (a definition of the term 'religiosity' will be discussed in the following paragraph). Therefore, it is the purpose of this essay to examine the religiosity of Roman religion through focusing on its ritualistic characteristics and to illuminate the religiosity by attempting a comparison between Roman religion and Shinto, the traditional religion of Japan.

The term 'religiosity' originally means the characteristics of a religion, which are not only the essence of the religion but can also be observed in seemingly non-religious phenomena, akin to the nationalist or tribal fervour often witnessed in football games. However, in the case of ancient religion, religiosity should be considered as having the former meaning, i.e. the intrinsic characteristics and essence of that religion. In the former case, religion refers to the external system or rites while religiosity often gives the individual feelings or beliefs based on personal experiences. In other words, it can also be described as emotional sympathies or devotion to the religion. The term 'religiosity' is quite difficult to define. However, in this essay, it should be considered as having the meaning discussed in this paragraph. Some scholars thus believe that religiosity does not contain feelings based on a group identity since they seem to be highly influenced by western individualism, so that they recognise religiosity merely in the individual identity or activity; others, including this writer, believe that a religion based on mainly group activity coherent with the surrounding society also has adequate religiosity. This is the essential issue in gaining a full understanding of non-Judaean-Christian religion, such as Roman religion, Shinto, or other primitive religions.

Therefore, in the next section, a definition of a 'religion' in an ancient context will be attempted. In the following three sections, the characteristics of Roman religion will be analysed through a comparison with Shinto. Since the point of this essay is to illuminate a new perspective on Roman religion and religiosity, not to compare both religion, the focus will be only on the similarities of both religions. In the final section, by contrasting both Roman religion and Shinto with westernised religions that inherit the Judaean-Christian tradition, the essence of the religiosity of Roman religion will be examined through an analysis of the written evidence. The religions generated from the Judaean-Christian tradition have tended to leave a vast amount of writings based on their respect for the early verbal accounts. Thus it is possible to measure their religiosity from the remaining records. Religions such as Roman religion or Shinto, on the other hand, rarely retained written records that reveal the inner feeling of the followers. If such records remain, they are mere descriptions of rites, or the records of their calendar. The most important thing to remember, however, is that the lack of writings that reveal the inner feeling of followers does not mean that these religions lacked religiosity.

2. Definition of Religion

In this section, the term 'religion' must be examined. The implication of the word 'religion' is different in each society. Nevertheless, ancient historians seem not to have been able to escape from a conception of religion that is modelled on Judaean-Christian traditions. Although the two main schools of thought in modern studies of religion have been based on either anthropology or sociology, and have been trying to develop criteria applicable

to every kind of religion in the world, ancient historians have hardly been influenced by their views, among which two particular strands can be recognised. One view, the so-called intellectualist approach, has also largely been rejected by ancient historians. This approach can be exemplified by Tylor, who defined religion as “the belief in Spiritual beings”,⁽⁵⁾ and Mircea Eliade, who claimed that myths deserve priority in explaining how people view the world, human beings, god or history.⁽⁶⁾ They claimed that religion comes to surpass any other element of society; religion is not an element of the society, but presides over it. This study of ideas is an effective way to understand religion in societies in which people leave an enormous literature and later researchers can easily examine the materials. However, in the area of ancient history, the materials are quite limited and their survival depends on chance. Therefore, scholars faced the temptation to rely on their imagination to fill in gaps or create links in a way that contradicts the true objective method of historians, thus rendering this approach unsuitable for ancient historians. In contrast, the other view, the so-called symbolist approach, seems to be more suitable than the intellectual approach. For example, Durkheim considered that religion is not an explanation of the world but a way of making symbolic statements about society.⁽⁷⁾ Furthermore, Geertz offered the celebrated definition that “religion is [1] a system of symbols which acts to [2] establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by [3] formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and [4] clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that [5] the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic”.⁽⁸⁾ In the view of these schools of thought, religion is thought to be an element or a system of society. Consequently, this conception of religion seems to facilitate the reconciliation between “religion” and society. As a result, ancient historians have had a tendency to use Durkheim or Geertz in interpreting so-called religious phenomena.

There occurs, however, another problem. Even though they used such excellent theories, their models of religions are still founded on that of Judaeo-Christian traditions, as stated at the beginning of this section. For instance, they tried to adapt the models of relationship between god and men or the creation of the world by God of Judaeo-Christian tradition to the Roman religion to find that the model did not suit to Roman religion. They consequently judged Roman religion as an inferior religion since it had no creeds, no scripture, nor a systematic network of thoughts. This might be related to the fact that the great ancient historians in the nineteenth century tended to be brought up under the influence of the Judaeo-Christian traditions; e.g. in the family of a pastor. In addition, even though some scholars succeeded in abandoning their models based on Judaeo-Christian traditions, they sometimes adapted the models of Greek religion to Roman religion, whose attitude might be attributed to their rapturous adoration for the Greeks. In the twentieth century, there can be found numerous scholars who tended to consider the Romans as a people inferior

to the Greeks. For example, H. J. Rose insisted that the Romans were much more slow-witted than the Greeks and they had never abandoned the old, half-savage practices, which they had inherited from simple ancestors, peasants and herdsman of prehistoric days.⁽⁹⁾ Such prejudice seems to have prevented the appropriate understanding of Roman religion. Therefore, in order to reach a more acceptable definition of religion in a Roman context, it is necessary to dismiss the influence of Judaeo-Christian traditions (the influence of which will be discussed in Section 4 and excessive adoration of the Greeks).

3. A Comparison between Roman Religion and Shinto

3.1. General Comparison between Roman religion and Shinto

In this section, the characteristics of Roman religion will be examined through a comparison with Shinto, a similar polytheistic religion. (This writer considers the classification 'polytheistic' or 'monotheistic' as out-of-date. However, the confines of this essay do not permit a discussion of this issue.) As previously stated, since this essay seeks to offer a new standpoint on Roman religion and religiosity, the approach will be to concentrate only on extracting the similarities, not the differences. Firstly, the subdivisions of the two religions should be illustrated. Roman religion can be divided into three subdivisions, as can Shinto. These subdivisions are the public religion of the Romans that is almost equivalent to Shrine Shinto (a member of a Japanese household is automatically registered with the local shrine and so the consciousness of belonging is not a product of the citizen's will but merely of the registration); the private religion that is similar to Folk Shinto (beliefs, mainly held by peasants, that there were spirits of mountains or fields or households); and mystery cults that had been gradually imported into or generated from the original religion in later periods, which can be compared with Sect Shinto (sects mainly influenced by Buddhist or Confucian beliefs). In order to simplify the point, this essay will focus merely on the first type of religion, the public cult of the Romans and Shrine Shinto.

The common characteristics between the public religion of the Romans and Shrine Shinto⁽¹⁰⁾ are as follows: they have no scripture, no founder and no creeds; they are ritual-centred religions, and they demonstrate some generosity in their acceptance of other cults.

Scripture will be examined in a later section since the existence of scripture is very much part of the attitude towards writing. However, the fact that both have no founder and no church is important and the consequence of that can be explained here. In the case of Roman religion, all priests were simultaneously ordinary citizens (but in reality celebrated to some extent) although they normally held office for life. There was no special professional or hereditary priesthood, at least in late republican Rome, although recent scholars have suggested that a trace of religious professionalism might be recognised in the regal period

and at the beginning of republican period.⁽¹¹⁾ What are sometimes called the 'followers' of the public religion were also members of the surrounding society. However, here one should be sensitive about the usage of the term 'follower', which does not indicate that the members believed in an established doctrine nor followed any founder's teaching nor were distinguished from the surrounding people by a peculiar form of behaviour. On the contrary, they might simply have resembled a clan or a group, which had some form of family relationship or who shared the common interest to a certain deity. The 'followers' were subdivided into various kinds of colleges (*collegia*), whose divisions were based on criteria such as generation, family relationship, place of birth, and occupation.

Similarly, in the case of Shinto,⁽¹²⁾ the leader of a clan used to preside over the rituals held to honour the clan deity and there was no independent professional clergy in the ancient period until at least the middle of the seventh century although the differentiation between the political leaders and religious leaders only gradually began after the seventh or eighth century. For example, although the Reformation of *Taika* in 645 was designed to separate political and religious leadership functions, in reality the same individuals performed both roles until the beginning of the eighth century. Although the difference with Roman religion can be observed since their status was hereditary, the point that there was no professional clergy during this period should be noted. Another example is that the title of the priesthood, *Tayu*, was originally the title of middle class government officials, not Shinto clerics. As for the ordinary people who lived in the province and expected to attend the rituals, throughout the history of Shrine Shinto they may not have been spontaneous believers or followers. Here the same problem occurs, since it must be doubtful whether these people could be called 'followers'. It might be more suitable to use the term 'parishioners', but this appears to be too catholically biased. Which rituals they attended depended simply on where they lived. Similar to the Roman collegium was the *Kou* (tenth century and later), a guild or college for those sharing the same occupation, which was a religious college at the same time.

In brief, the fact that there were no professional clergy and the members of the religion were at the same time members of the surrounding society has been considered as proof of the traditional interpretation that these religions are inferior to so-called superior religions that are based on Judaeo-Christian tradition. However, if the membership is based not on internal desires or feelings but external elements such as locality, generation or occupation, it must be asked whether this makes the religion in any way inferior. Religiosity based on group identity can certainly exist and the consciousness of belonging to a group which offers to members a way of looking at the world, human beings, gods, nature and history should be regarded as the same in character whether the group consists of members who are there by choice or members who are there simply because they live in the same area or share a similar occupation. In offering a group identity to members, both types of religion

should be regarded as equally effective despite the fact that their social status is contrastive. The differences between them are that the members who have chosen to join a particular group have two identities; a religious one and a non-religious one. To sum up, both Roman religion and Shinto have religiosity based on the identity of belonging to the same group that is coherent with the social groups and the characteristic of both religions is that both are ritual-centred.

3.2. The Ritual-Centred Nature of Roman Religion and Shinto

The ritual-centred attitude of both the public religion of the Romans and Shrine Shinto should now be compared. Without scripture or explicit doctrine, the basis of Roman religion was ritual.⁽¹³⁾ However, it is far from easy to recover much of the detail of these rituals.

There is information about the dates of festivals. Even a brief examination of the Roman calendars from the Augustan period that survive as inscriptions or wall paintings from Rome and Italy clearly indicates that they recorded the precise days of festivals of various deities. However, despite the fact that the festival days written in the calendars were the official ones, none of the calendars is exactly the same,⁽¹⁴⁾ which means that these calendars actually reflected the particular rituals of each period. For example, the festival of the Parilia was celebrated on April 21st in the first century and still celebrated in the fourth century, while the festival of the Robigalia celebrated on 25th April in the first century ceased in the fourth century and was replaced by the festival of the Serapia. Furthermore, following this sequence of festivals, people could divide the passage of time into segments they could recognise, as the festivals became symbolic of the need to perform actions such as sowing and harvesting.

However, it is much more difficult to make use of what may appear to be helpful contributions from Roman writers. For example, even though Ovid offers rich accounts of the festivals and rituals of the first six months of the year in his '*Fasti*', written in the reign of Augustus, it is problematic whether his accounts are a true explanation of the original Roman rituals. On the contrary, most of his accounts of Roman rituals were certainly intertwined with Greek myths. It is difficult to distinguish which accounts maintain the original form and which are decorated by the inspiration of the poet, or which accounts might reflect the rural rituals or the rituals held in the city of Rome. It cannot be denied that the interpretation of the poet and the changes in the ritual itself in the social context era by era are highly complicated.

Therefore, it can be said that it is the nature of rituals that they are always re-interpreted and re-explained by participants to meet the needs and desires of their own particular period.

Here it should be noted that the analysis of the remaining ritual documents is useful to extract the religiosity of Romans from numerous rituals. Rappaport defined the relation

between ritual and selves as follows, “It is in the canon that the selves engaged in ritual find meanings which refer to themselves”. Subsequently, he concludes that ritual’s self-referential messages would be meaningless or non-existent without canon.⁽¹⁵⁾ In the case of Roman religion, there seems not to be a canon such as the Old Testament. However, in this case, the loss of documents should be considered. Ancient historians fully took account of the documents kept in the archives of temples, i.e. the records of events or laws, which have been entirely lost in the modern era. One might doubt that laws or mere records could be a canon. However, especially in the case of ancient societies, it is possible to extract religious ideas or religious regulation from them. Suffice it to illustrate that the Old Testament, the holy canon of Jews and Christians, contains Leviticus, which consists of mundane records of laws and regulations. However, it is the mundane laws and regulations that reveal the religious concept of the ancient Israelites and their religiosity. Consequently, in the Roman case, given the loss of such documents, rituals could complement the missing canon. Nevertheless, it is useless to try to discover or reconstruct such documents. It might be more efficient to speculate about the ritual texts themselves in order to find the religious ideas or religiosity of Romans with taking into account Rappaport’s theory that there is no ritual without canon.

Returning to the ritual texts of Roman religion, limited evidence is sometimes provided by providential discoveries in inscriptions. One such inscription is that on the Secular Games⁽¹⁶⁾ and another records the Acta of the Arval Brethren. The latter, comprising extensive fragments, contains the bulk of the annual records of this priesthood and was discovered at the site of their sacred grove; it illustrates the rites conducted by this priesthood from the reign of Augustus to the beginning of the fourth century. Even though most of the Acta are mere fragments, some of them are sufficiently well preserved to allow the content of the records to be easily restored. From the analysis of these records,⁽¹⁷⁾ the names of priests, the dates of the inscriptions, the dates of the festivals held in that year, the places where they held the rites, the names of the emperors and imperial family members or the deities to whom the priesthood offered sacrifices or vows, and other lesser events can be clarified. For example, in A.D. 21 in the reign of Tiberius, this priesthood offered a sacrifice to Dea Dia in the minor festival on 11th January, and offered sacrifices again to Dea Dia in the major festival on 17th, 19th and 20th May in a place described as *regia*. Since the characteristics of such records are closely connected with the Roman attitude to written records in general, this will be discussed in section 4. Here it should be noted that these records reveal the name of the priest, that of the deity and the emperor, dates, places, and the kind of rites, while they keep silent about the content of each rite, and thus fail to provide clues to the nature of the beliefs. Nevertheless, it is uncertain whether they did not want to or need to write the content or there was just no space to write it down on the plate.

One exception to this is the Arval Hymn of A.D. 218 found in the Acta, but this is the only

example. An analysis of this hymn shows it to be similar to *Norito*, the prayer of Shinto. It was sung by the Arval Brethren during the festival of Dea Dia. Even though the inscription dates from A.D. 218, the content of the hymn itself suggests that it was written at the latest in the fourth century B.C. .⁽¹⁸⁾ What should be noted here is the date of the inscription. It was when the Emperor Elagabalus reformed Roman religion by introducing the Syrian Sun god. Following his reformation, the priests of the Arval Brethren might have desired to record the old form of the hymn in the form of the inscription. The translation of the hymn is as follows:

“O Lares, help us; O Lares, help us; O Lares, help us. Mars, O Mars, do not let the dissolution and destruction swoop down the people; Mars, O Mars, do not let the dissolution and destruction swoop down the people; Mars, O Mars, do not let the dissolution and destruction swoop down the people. Eat your fill, savage Mars, jump to the frontier, take up a position; eat your fill, savage Mars, jump to the frontier, take up a position; eat your fill, savage Mars, jump to the frontier, take up a position. You invoke the Semones all together in turn; you invoke the Semones all together in turn; you invoke the Semones all together in turn. O Mars, help us; O Mars, help us; O Mars, help us. Triumph; Triumph; Triumph; Triumph; Triumph.”⁽¹⁹⁾

Firstly, the Lares are invoked with a plea of aid and then the object of the invocation moves to Mars with a plea to avoid disaster. After the prayer to Mars to demonstrate his soldierly virtues, Mars is asked to call on the gods of the crops, the Semones. Finally, there is a plea to Mars for help and a cry of the victory they hope will come. Each refrain is repeated three times except the last one, which is repeated five times. Since Lares is spelled as Lases, the date of the original hymn can be specified as the early republican period. In addition, it is interesting that Mars is described as both the war god and the invoker of the agricultural gods. This reflects the character of Mars as a war god and an agrarian god. It might be related to the fact that the Arval Brethren had originally been the priesthood of agricultural festivals in the republican period, as was stated in the work of Varro.⁽²⁰⁾

Due to the extremely archaic style, it is dubious whether the majority of the participants who listened to this hymn understood the meaning. However, it should be stated that there is a difference between understanding the lyric words and a consciousness of being involved in a religious atmosphere. Even though they may not have understood the meaning, the collective religious atmosphere would have evoked religious feeling in the participants. More material of this nature would have been of great assistance in further elucidating the characteristics of Roman religion. It should be stressed, however, that the lack of material expressing personal beliefs or describing rites should not necessarily suggest any lack of religiosity. Furthermore, despite the fact that it is difficult for later researchers to interpret the extant material since even contemporary participants sometimes did not know the meaning, speculation about

rituals is essential to help studies of Roman religion to progress as stated above.

Similarly, Shinto is also considered to be a ritual-centred religion. It also lacks specific doctrines, especially in the ancient period. Shinto, of course, continues to be practised, so considerable changes have occurred through the ages. For example, something approaching a doctrine was written in the medieval period after the long conflict with Buddhism. The basic characteristics of Shinto are festivals, prayers to the deities, ascetic disciplines and social service.⁽²¹⁾ Since Japanese culture was based on agriculture until the nineteenth century, their festivals are still established on an agrarian calendar cycle although these festivals were gradually given more modern names by post-war governments. People indicate their will to obey and serve the authority of the gods by conducting the appropriate rites of the festivals. Through the visual ritual of a festival, the god promotes his or her authority and the people also receive and enjoy the authorised power of the god.⁽²²⁾

The ordinary order of a festival in a Shinto shrine ordained by national rules is as follows: early in the morning of the festival day, the shrine is cleansed and decorated for the festival; at the fixed time, the chief priest, the representative of the festival or the parish, the attendants or the parishioners proceed to the place of purification and are purified by a priest (*Shubatsu*), after cleansing their hand in clear water; then all of them sit in fixed places; after a reverent bow from the chief priest and the others, the associate chief priest and senior priests offer the ordained food to the deity, *Shinsen*, during elegant ritual music; next the chief priest relates the official prayer, *Norito*, to the deity while all the attendants are prostrating themselves on the floor; after that, the priests play music and then the chief priest offers to the deity a branch of the evergreen tree, *Sakaki*, and bows once; then the other priests follow him and all attendants bow once together; following this, the representative offers to the deity another branch of *Sakaki* and bows once, and all parishioners bow again; then the associate chief priest or senior priests remove the food from in front of the deity, and all of them make the final bow; after that, all attendants including the chief priest and the other priests move to another place for a feast with rice wine and ordinary dishes. This feast was originally held in order to share the food previously offered to the deity. However, today a typical formal Japanese menu is offered for this feast, and sometimes a small bag containing a piece of the *Shinsen* is distributed to all the participants. This feast is a part of the rites of the festival. After finishing the feast, all the attendants leave the shrine, marking the end of the festival rites.⁽²³⁾ With respect to the ancient style of the Shinto rites, this can be restored from the digest, *Engi-shiki*, collected in the middle of the 9th century A.D. The change from the more ancient period can be observed. However, it is still useful to examine the differences and similarities between the ancient and modern periods. The precise comparison must be omitted since the purpose of this essay is to study Roman religion, not to compare both religions in detail.

Judging from the order of the festival rites, the words of the prayer, *Norito*, seem to be important and it might be wondered if this prayer could be compared with the prayer or preaching in westernised religion. The very contrary is the case. *Norito* has been defined as a religious statement addressed to the deities in Shinto rituals.⁽²⁴⁾ A *Norito* usually contains five elements. The evocation of the name of the deity comes first; this is followed by an explanation of the origin of the deity or the ritual, or the reason for this particular ritual sometimes including the myth; next comes words of praise to the deity; then there are expressions of the gratitude for protection and favour given; finally come prayers for the successful completion of the matter in hand. It is written in a classical style of Japanese, using only Chinese characters, which is unusual in Japanese even when written in such a classical style. Moreover, the words are chosen to convey beauty and have a certain rhythm. Although a tendency to improve the *Norito* by using contemporary expressions to help people understand its contents can be observed today, it seems still to be difficult for most people to understand the meaning of the prayer on listening to the lyric words in the middle of a rite. Feelings of reverence are not blocked by a lack of understanding of the content of the prayer. Moreover, it can be inferred that participants experience these feeling through the ritual itself, not through the content of the words.

To sum up, the comparison of two areas of rituals, festivals and prayers, reveals a considerable similarity. Although precise knowledge of ancient rituals and prayers is difficult to obtain, it can easily be inferred that the participants could easily acquire a feeling of unification through the rituals. Rappaport suggests that rituals offer three levels of meanings to the participants; distinction, similarities, identification or unification, the last being the higher-level of meaning. He considers that participants could feel identification or unification with others; e.g., another person, or other people, or the cosmos, or the divine, through experiential rather than intellectual rituals.⁽²⁵⁾ Therefore, rituals could elevate the feeling of unification with the members of the same group. Furthermore, the sense of tradition enables people to feel the continuity between their ancestors, themselves, and their would-be descendants. Both religions have traditional and antiquarian aspects, which can be partly deduced from the analysis of the Arval Hymn and *Norito*. In this case, the participants feel the unification with the other members of the same group whose generations are widely different. Consequently, it can be said that the sense of tradition creates a sense of unification from generation to generation. Such a sense seems to be extremely different from the personal and individualistic western sense, but it is still of great significance.

3.3. The Essence of Roman Religion and Shinto

Despite the lack of a distinct doctrine, it is possible to form a notion of how the Romans considered their religion. Cicero, who was a politician and a philosopher, wrote down the

characteristics of the religion of Romans in his *De Legibus* and other works. According to him, surprisingly, it was only in religious piety that the Romans were superior to other nations. In his *De Haruspicum Responsis*, he wrote: —

“We (Romans) have excelled neither Spain in population, nor Gaul in vigour, nor Carthage in versatily, nor Greece in art, nor indeed Italy and Latium itself in the innate sensibility characteristic of this land and its peoples; but in piety, in devotion to religion, and in that special wisdom which consists in the recognition of the truth that the world is swayed and directed by divine disposal, we have excelled every race and every nation”.⁽²⁶⁾

Thus, he considered the characteristic of Roman religion to be piety to the gods. In other words, the Romans recognised being pious to gods as their role. This was also expressed in his *De Legibus*,⁽²⁷⁾ where he stresses that the gods, who are the lords and rulers of all things, are great benefactors for men and they observe with what intention and what piety a man fulfils his religious duties. Concerning the term ‘*religio*’, he wrote again that the Romans are superior to others in their reverence for the gods.⁽²⁸⁾ It can be explained that the Romans performed the rituals in a pious manner with having enough reverence to the gods in their mind. The influence of Greek philosophy, particularly Stoic, on Cicero has been discussed for a long time. Although he himself was not a Stoic, there is no doubt that Cicero was influenced from the Stoics to a large extent and he depicted it on various occasions. However, concerning the system of Roman religion and the attitude of the Romans to the gods, most of his narratives appear to be coherent with the tradition of the Romans rather than the Greek philosophy. In fact, in the dialogue, *De Legibus*, Atticus, the close friend of Cicero, claims that the law Cicero proposed in his work is not so different from that of Numa or that of their ancestors.⁽²⁹⁾ Therefore, the system and attitude Cicero described was not so different from the reality of his time, even though his description tends to relate the ideal features. Consequently, *religio* and *pietas* are important concepts in considering the religiosity of the Romans, although they never form a systematic and explicit doctrine.

In the case of Shinto, it must be asked whether there is anything similar to Roman *pietas* or *religio*. The same problem occurs as in Roman religion. The written records of Shinto only date back to the fifth century A.D., and the clear descriptions of rituals can be seen from the beginning of the eighth century. As Shinto had already been influenced by Mainland China since the fourth or fifth century, it is difficult to extract the uninfluenced and seemingly original characteristics of Shinto. Despite this weakness, it has been deduced that the essence of Shinto is ‘sincerity’, ‘purity of heart’, or ‘uprightness’, which means the best attitude towards every sphere of life.⁽³⁰⁾ For instance, the writer of the encyclopaedia explains that this attitude reveal the gods’ truthfulness and humanity. However, this explanation sounds too ethical and modern. In fact, in the ancient period, this attitude was also described as

'bright', a word which is designed to show that there is no darkness or dirtiness in Shinto. Whichever words we use, keeping such an attitude, 'sincerity' or 'brightness', in one's mind is very significant and it creates a mirror of the divine condition, which enables men to commune with gods and to receive their blessings.⁽³¹⁾

It should be noted that a simple comparison of the essence of Roman religion and Shinto might not be helpful; nevertheless, there is a clear similarity in the attitude towards gods, especially in communing with gods.

3.4. The Acceptance of Other Cults by Roman Religion and Shinto

Both the public religion of the Romans and Shrine Shinto demonstrated some generosity in accepting other cults. In Roman religion, this can be testified by the fact that new gods, goddesses, and rituals were imported and introduced into the public rituals of Rome from the early republican period. The Romans assimilated the new gods, goddesses, and rituals into the existing old cults almost without difficulty, although they explicitly recognised them as non-Roman. These were accepted through the ritual of *evocatio*, which was 'a ritual held in the course of a war by a Roman general who would attempt to deprive the enemy of divine protection, by formally offering their protecting deity a new home and cult at Rome',⁽³²⁾ through the vows of generals or through the recommendation found in the Sibylline Books.⁽³³⁾

Examples of new gods that came to Rome through this period are as follows: Juno Regina came from the Etruscan city of Veii in 396 B.C. through *evocatio*; Minerva came from Falerii in 241 B.C. through *evocatio*; Apollo, originally one of the Greek Olympian gods, arrived in Rome during the plague of 433 B.C. following the recommendation of the Sibylline Books, but his temple was dedicated at a place just outside *pomerium*; in 291 B.C., Aesculapius, the god of healing, was transferred from Epidauros to Rome to become associated with a miraculous legend, and had a temple in the middle of the island, Tiberina; the ritual of Fortuna Primigenia at Praeneste was adopted at the end of the third century B.C.; Magna Mater, also called Cybele, was officially brought to Rome in 204 B.C. during the second Punic war, although the festival days were limited only to the *Megalesia* and the temple of this goddess was served not by priests who were Roman citizens, but oriental. In the last case, the ritual of castration associated with the cult of Phrygian Cybele was hated by the Romans and the Senate prohibited Roman citizens from taking part. Other cults were less well received. One of them was the cult of Dionysus. In 186 B.C., the Senate issued a decree that strictly regulated its organisation and activities.⁽³⁴⁾ A copy of the decree demonstrated that the Senate did not entirely ban this Bacchic cult, but they prohibited Roman citizens, Latin-status citizens, and all allies including women from having shrines, being priests, and performing rites when more than five men and women were gathered together, without the permission of the urban praetor and the senate. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the

Bacchic cult had already been spread in a large area of Italy for a long time before the decree. Therefore, it can be concluded that the attitude of the Senate changed at a certain point only to limit the growth of the cult. Judging from these various examples, it may be deduced that the Senate had some criteria for accepting foreign cults. Scholars have argued whether this decree was the precedent for the Christian persecution or not. However, this was not a ban but regulation. The treatment of both the last two examples, the case of Magna Mater and the Bacchic cult, should be considered the result of acceptance of the foreign cults in Rome. In the time of the Republic, the attitude of the Senate towards foreign cults appears to have been that of acceptance under the control of the Senate as a general principle.

In addition, the identification of gods might be significant. The recognition of a foreign deity as the same as one that already existed in Rome enabled the Romans to locate the deity in the complex of Roman gods. The epithet given to the gods helped promote the process of assimilation. For example, in inviting the goddess from the Etruscan city, Veii, the Romans called her Juno Regina (queen), which indicated that that deity was different from Capitoline Juno, but at the same time she was the same Juno as the goddess widely worshiped in Italy. In the later period even Tanit, the great goddess of Carthage was regarded as identical to Juno. Thus, the Romans succeeded in planting foreign deities among the complex of their own gods.

Shinto, on the other hand, was confronted with Confucianism and Buddhism, which had already established a highly sophisticated theology or theory. Although the implanting of the Buddhist deities into Shinto or the identification of Shinto deities with Buddhist ones has frequently been commented upon, there is a difference in the way foreign gods were assimilated. Shinto developed an explicit logic in accepting foreign deities. From the eighth century, temples attached to Shinto shrines were built in every province of Japan. At the root of this was a simple but unique logic. First, it was claimed by local leaders that the Shinto deities, who were a part of the suffering in the world, should be saved by the power of the dharma of Buddha. Opposed to this view, the government then came up with the following opinion; the dharma is protected by the Shinto deities, which could be assimilated with the diva, the indigenous deities of India, imported into the original Buddhism. Thus, the Shinto deities were planted into the complex of Buddhist deities. In this process, it can be easily inferred that the same process occurred, as was the case in Roman religion. Nevertheless, a new view of this process emerged two centuries later. In the Lotus Sutra, it is claimed that there are two Sakyamunis; one being the historical Sakyamuni and the other being the Sakyamuni as an eternal existence. (Sakyamuni was a religious teacher and the founder of Buddhism.) It is similar to the issue of the historical Jesus and the Jesus Christ as eternal logos. These two images of Sakyamuni could be applied to the case of Shinto deities. Each Bodhisattva, every one of whom has the personified features of Sakyamuni in

the reincarnation and who is to have an eternal existence, took the form of one Shinto deity. The relationship between the Shinto deity and the original Bodhisattva was inseparable. This is nothing similar in Roman religion, although there are similarities in the process of acceptance.

In brief, although there was a difference in the explicit logic due to the difference of the historical condition, it can be observed that both the public religion of the Romans and Shrine Shinto had a common characteristic, namely that both had a system which easily accepted foreign cults and deities. Behind this characteristic, there seems to be a notion of continuity across generations. Both religions had a sense of tradition throughout their history. In accepting a religion of salvation such as the mystery cults in the Mediterranean world or Buddhism, it would have been easier for people to convert to the new religion and discard the indigenous religion. In fact, the participants of both Roman religion and Shrine Shinto did not do so. On the contrary, they accepted the foreign religions and implanted them into their own system of religion. It could be interpreted that this reveals that they tried to accept other religions but to maintain their original religion as far as possible. The reason may very well be their tendency to respect their own traditions. Maintaining their traditions and respecting the continuity across generations seems to be the basis of their religiosity.

4. A Comparison of Attitudes to Written Accounts

The main difference in terms of the attitude towards the verbal revelation of deity between Roman religion and Judaeo-Christian religion is that the latter intentionally tends to put into words, both spoken and written, the participants' inner feelings or personal beliefs, while the former usually neglected them. The written records of the Arval Brethren and Arval Hymn have been discussed above. Nevertheless, the conclusion was reserved for this section. Here, the difference in attitude towards writing will be investigated through a comparison with the Judaeo-Christian westernised tradition.

Primarily, the problems of scripture mentioned in the previous section must be examined. Scriptures such as the New Testament offer to their followers an established theology, which provides a clear worldview, an outlook on God and humans, and history. As the result of the inevitable influence of this tradition, westerners have often tended to make their model of religion out of Judaeo-Christian religions, which value verbal accounts and writing. Even modern new religious movements generated in the westernised tradition, which deny the existence of the Creator and emphasise a Higher Self or a Higher Consciousness, have a keen sense of the value of openly expressed feelings and beliefs. However, the creation of scriptures, especially the Old Testament, originally followed the typical process of the creation of any

ancient writings; people transferred the narratives by the oral tradition at first, then they were written down at a certain point in history to be edited or revised at a later period. The tendency of Judaeo-Christian tradition to value written expressions of feelings and beliefs must have been generated by the view of writing in the Mediterranean world from the end of Hellenistic period. Here, however, it is better to avoid going into the sphere of literary sociology any further. However, it is natural that religious meta-text material such as the Bible might be sought in Roman religion, but such an approach is merely a council of despair. For, the attitude to writings was so different in the ancient period that it is inappropriate to evaluate ancient writings from a modern standpoint.

Roman ritual writings were the subject of a striking article by Mary Beard in 1985.⁽³⁵⁾ The view of religious ritual writing expressed in that paper was highly controversial. From the analysis of the *Acta of the Arval Brethren*, she concluded that these inscriptions were written for the purpose of validating the priests' status, not for utilisation. What she suggested is extremely significant: the writings of apparently mere records could imply super-literal meanings. For instance, compared with the first century A.D., the description of the rites in the *Acta* shows a tendency to increase the amount of detail through to the third century A.D. It seems to be consistent with the trend to use a "wordy and flowery style" in official writings. However, she proved that these inscriptions were neither official records nor self-referential writings. Therefore, she implies that the social status of this priesthood as a group became lower in the third century than in the first century. By this time, they came from a lower class which no consul or senator could be from, while in the first century its members had been from celebrated families. While the third century priests felt it necessary to validate their status and advertise the meaning of their priesthood to the society, their earlier colleagues, for whom the priesthood was just one of the offices they held, did not feel the need to advertise their existence in the same way. Beard's conclusion is essential to the argument of this essay, as it helps to explain the lack of a spoken and written account of rituals in Roman religion.

Returning to the problem of the lack of writings or spoken accounts in Roman religion, the fact that there was a lack of writings does not mean there was a lack of religiosity or religious consciousness was noted in the previous section. However, two possible explanations for this gap can be suggested. One is an idea from the viewpoint of religious studies; the other is from the historical viewpoint.

Firstly, the lack of spoken accounts can be explained from the viewpoint of religious studies. It is the inexpressibility or ineffability of things that is too awesome or uncanny to put into words. This is exemplified in the fact that the name 'God' in the Old Testament was unknown to the people of the time. The reason was that the people of Israel avoided calling the name

'God' directly as a result of the third Commandment; instead, they pronounced the name in the same way as the word for 'lord'. Consequently, through time they forgot the original pronunciation of the name of their God. The restored pronunciation 'Yahweh' was the result of the efforts of scholars in recent centuries. This means that it was too awesome for that people to call the name of their God. Another example can be seen in ancient China. Since it was too discourteous to call someone by the name given by his parents, people called each other only by a nickname. It could be interpreted that the reticence felt for the power of the name made the name inexpressible. Consequently, it may be conjectured that similar difficulties account for the lack of spoken accounts of rituals in Roman religion due to the reticence to the deities.

Secondly, this will be elucidated from the historical viewpoint. As mentioned above, the conclusion of Mary Beard is suggestive. There was no necessity for aristocratic citizens to explain the religiosity of Roman religion. It was too obvious for them to write down or explain since the meaning of the ritual was undoubtedly explicit for the priests and a certain part of attendants. Alternatively, there was no need to explain the meaning of the rituals whether or not they understood it, since no Roman citizens required the reason for them to be revealed. Indeed, the written records that they made are considered by most scholars to have been sufficient. Romans at the time were eager to collect the official documents and preserve them for the archives,⁽³⁶⁾ although doubt has recently be cast on how complete they are. Only the traditionalists such as Cicero or Livy felt it necessary to relate their religiosity in order to uphold the traditional values. With the exception of those people, ordinary citizens do not seem to have felt it necessary to express their attitude towards religion.

Moreover, there is a possibility that the desire to express a personal belief or a personal plea to the gods may have been fulfilled by the private domestic religion, which is beyond the scope of this essay. Similar to the case of the *Norito* in Shinto, there might have been no room to express private matters or feelings in the public religion of the Romans. Thus the issue of the consciousness of belonging to a group occurs again. It must have been possible for people who were not polluted by the conception of a religion that requires explicit verbal accounts to feel religiosity through the rituals without words but only with gestures or through atmosphere. They must have felt the unification of generations through the apparently unchanged rituals at the same time.

5. Conclusion

Following the comparison made with Shinto, it can be concluded that Roman religion has a considerable similarity. Whether Shinto is a religion or not by the standard of westernised religion was argued in the pre-war era but it is widely recognised as a religion in modern

society in both academic and general circles. As discussed above, the comparison between Roman religion and Shinto has brought a new perspective. There can be two possible conclusions. One is that the religiosity based on the consciousness of belonging to a certain group, whether it is social one or the one based on a certain belief or idea, is of considerable significance. As indicated in section 3.1 and 3.2, the religiosity of Roman religion and Shinto is based on rituals, which is effective for participants who are united merely through external factors such as locality or occupation. Since the citizenship of Rome was open to most freemen after 212 A.D., there was no shared identity except in the fact that people were Roman citizens. If there had been a fixed written doctrine in Roman religion, it would have been more difficult for the participants to share common feelings. Rituals were one of the factors that enabled the Romans to join their religion and unite them in the religion as well as laws and regulations. This may be applicable to the ancient Japanese. For, they were collectives of various kinds of ethnic groups, and the only common characteristic was that they used the Japanese language. There were no laws or regulations that ruled all over the country uniformly until the midst of seventh century A.D. Through the religiosity of Shinto, they could be united into one ethnic group. In both religions, what were important were rituals through which their sense of unity was perceived. This sense of unity was not only included the human participants but also the gods, which has been discussed in 3.3 on the essence of Roman religion and Shinto. The religiosity of the Romans appeared through the rituals. Only the rituals brought to the participants a sense of the unity with the gods.

Another view is that the religiosity of both religions is not only in the unity of contemporary people but also in that of people across generations. Since it can be difficult to understand the notions of the previous generation from written accounts as a result of the rapid changes that can take place in a language, the sense of unity across generation might have been hardly felt if they had merely had a spoken or written doctrine. However, rituals are visual and felt through the atmosphere that surrounds them. Therefore, it is possible to understand the notions of our predecessors only through rituals. In other words, the sense of unity of generations may be achieved through rituals. This is the reason why both religions have traditional aspects, as was discussed in the section 3.4 and 4.

Consequently, the religiosity of Roman religion should be seen more in the consciousness of belonging to a certain group and the consciousness of continuity through generations. In this way, after the meaning of the term, 'religion' in ancient Roman history was re-defined and the religiosity of Roman religion was clarified, it has been possible to have a more productive discussion of each area of the phenomena relating to Roman religion. This essay has been trying to offer a new perspective on Roman religion. Further work needs to be done on the analysis of the actual ritual texts following on the perspectives acquired through this essay.

Notes

- (1) Kerényi (1963), *Die Religion der Griechen und Römer*; Dumézil (1970), *Archaic Roman Religion*.
- (2) Wissowa (1912), *Religion und Kultus der Römer*.
- (3) Altheim (1938), *A History of Roman Religion*
- (4) North, Beard & Price, (1998) *Religions of Rome*, p.xff.
- (5) Bowie, F. (2000) *The Anthropology of religion*, p.22.
- (6) *Ibid*, p.157.
- (7) *Ibid*, p.17.
- (8) *Ibid*, p.23; Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p.90.
- (9) Rose, H.J. (1959) *Religion in Greece and Rome*, p.157.
- (10) Concerning Shinto, see Eliade, *Encyclopaedia of the world religions*, Vol.13 p.280ff.
- (11) North, Beard & Price, (1998) *Religions of Rome*, p.26.
- (12) Eliade, *Encyclopaedia of the world religions*, Vol.11 p.545ff.
- (13) Scheid, J. (1998) *La Religion des Romains*, p.20ff.
- (14) North, Beard & Price, (1998) *Religions of Rome*, p.5
- (15) Rappaport, R. (1999) *Ritual and Religion in the making of Humanity* p.106.
- (16) North, Beard & Price, (1998) *Religions of Rome II*, p.140ff. *CIL VI 32323; ILS 5050*.
- (17) See, Scheid, J. (1990) *Romulus et Ses frères*, Syme, R. (1980) *Some Arval Brethren*.
- (18) *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, written by Scheid, J. p.292.
- (19) Scheid, J. (1990) *Romulus et Ses frères* p.619f.
- (20) Varro, *De Lingua Latina*, 5.85.
- (21) Eliade, *Encyclopaedia of the world religions*, Vol.13.,p.280.
- (22) *The Dictionary of Shinto* (Jap.) p.212.
- (23) Concerning the order of the rites, see *The Dictionary of Shinto* (Jap.) p.238.
- (24) Eliade, *Encyclopaedia of the world religions*, Vol.10,p.468. *Engi-shiki*, vol.8.consists of several ancient *Norito* dedicated to the major deities of the public shrines.
- (25) Rappaport, R. (1999) *Ritual and Religion in the making of Humanity* p.70ff.
- (26) Cicero, *De Haruspicum Responsis*, 19. (LCL)
- (27) Cicero, *De Legibus*, 2.15-16.
- (28) Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 2.8.
- (29) Cicero, *De Legibus*, 2.23.
- (30) Eliade, *Encyclopaedia of the World Religions*, Vol.13 p.288.
- (31) *Ibid*.
- (32) *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, p.580.
- (33) North, Beard & Price, (1998) *Religions of Rome*, p.62.
- (34) North, Beard & Price, (1998) *Religions of Rome*, II, p.290f.
- (35) Beard, M. (1985) 'Writing and Ritual', *PBSR*, p.114-162.
- (36) *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, p.149f.

Roman Religion and its Religiosity

Keiko KOBORI

This essay examines the intrinsic qualities of the "religiosity" of popular Roman religion in the period between the late republic and the principate, through a comparison of Roman religion and Shinto, the traditional religion of Japan.

Firstly, in chapter 1, there is a review of issues specifically pertaining to Roman religion. The inherent religiosity of the Roman religious tradition has not been adequately evaluated due to difficulties surrounding the definition of the term "religion." Therefore, in chapter 2, a definition of religion as it pertains to the historical Roman context is discussed, with a special focus on the influence of Judeo-Christian and Greco-centric scholars on this concept.

Chapter 3 deals with a comparison between Roman religion and Shinto. Section 1 compares both religions in general and the public cult of Romans and Shrine Shinto in particular. In section 2 the ritual-centered nature of both religions is demonstrated through a discussion of the ritual process in both religions, with a special focus on the record of the festival held in May by the Arval Brethren. In section 3, the intrinsic qualities of both religions are examined, as well as historical sources that support notions of Roman religiosity, such as Cicero. The non-exclusive nature of Roman religion and Shinto is detailed in section 4. Both traditions were generous in their acceptance of other forms of worship. In the case of Roman religion, gods, goddesses and rituals were appropriated into the public rituals of Rome from the traditions of Rome's enemies, in order to deprive opposing forces of their divine protection by inviting their gods to Rome. The logic of acceptance was slightly different in Shinto, though similar shifts occurred.

Finally, a comparison of attitudes toward both religions found in written accounts is discussed in chapter 4. A further comparison is made between Roman religion / Shinto and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Although there is little in the written record outlining personal belief in the former religions, this is not necessarily due to a lack of inherent religiosity or a relative lower level of religious maturity, but derives rather from differences in the intrinsic nature of both religions.

This essay concludes by asserting that through a comparison with Shinto, characteristics of Roman religion are more clearly demonstrated than they have been in previous comparisons with Judeo-Christian religious traditions, which are expressed in terms that prejudice the latter over the former. Future comparisons between Roman and Shinto ritual will prove to be significant in further demonstrating this point of view.