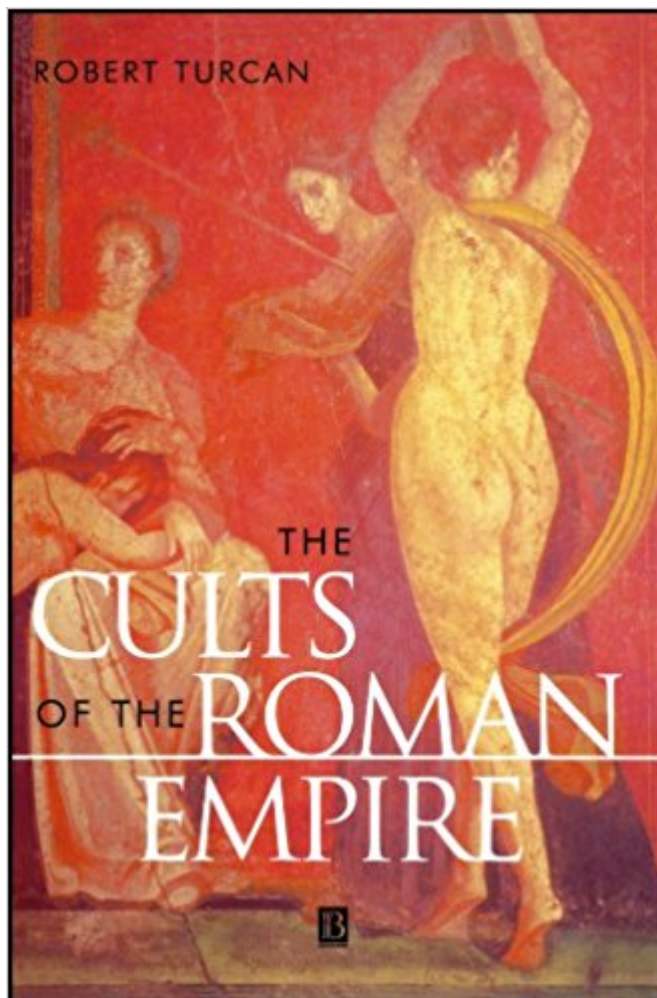


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The Cults Of The Roman Empire



Synopsis

This book is about the multiplicity of gods and religions that characterized the Roman world before Constantine. It was not the noble gods such as Jove, Apollo and Diana, who were crucial to the lives of the common people in the empire, but gods of an altogether more earthly, earth level, whose rituals and observances may now seem bizarre. As well as being of wide general interest, this book will appeal to students of the Roman Empire and of the history of religion.

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Customer Reviews

"... a treasure trove of information on the nature and diversity of mystery cults." Westminster Theological Journal

This book is about the multiplicity of gods and religions that characterized the Roman world before Constantine. It was not the noble gods such as Jove, Apollo and Diana, who were crucial to the lives of the common people in the empire, but gods of an altogether more earthly, earthy level, whose rituals and observances may now seem bizarre. The book opens with an account of the nature of popular religion and the way in which the gods and myths of subject peoples were taken up by the Roman colonizers and spread throughout the empire. Successive chapters are devoted to the Great Mother, Isis, the cults of Syria, Mithras, The Horsemen, Dionysus, and to practices related to the performance of magic. It was above all with these popular religions that the early Christians fought for supremacy. In the concluding part of the book Professor Turcan describes this contest and its eventual outcome in the triumph of Christianity throughout the Roman world. The author

assumes little background or specialist knowledge. Each chapter is fully referenced and where appropriate illustrated with photographs and diagrams. The book includes a guide for further reading specifically for English-speaking students. As well as being of wide general interest, this book will appeal to students of the Roman Empire and of the history of religion.

As the cliché goes, this book often loses the forest for the trees. Full of boring and mind-numbing detail, it belongs in every scholarly or specialist library, but if you are neither a scholar or a specialist then you will probably be much happier with Burkert (*Ancient Mystery Cults*, Harvard U. Press, 1987) or Godwin (*Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*, Thames & Hudson 1981). Twenty years later (2008), I do feel that the time is ripe for a new popular survey of this subject, and hope that someone else will pick up the ball!

If you want the knowledge, it is here. The price you have to pay is slogging through a bloated and meandering writing style that hardly makes it an easy read. Perhaps it's the translation. Worth the effort, but it is an effort.

This book contains copious information regarding the geographic spread of various pagan "Gods" not members of the original Roman pantheon. If you need this information, the book becomes indispensable and should be in any serious student's library who is concerned with the religious atmosphere of the Roman World circa 300 BCE to 400 CE. This being said, that is the long and the short of it. The translation from French is not the best. The deeper insights one might expect are largely missing. And the explanation of the triumph of Christianity as presented is shallow and of little value. This book, one of a series of translations and reissues in the English language, commissioned by the University of Manchester, hangs its hat on the fact that it is an update of the classic work of Franz Cumont. For the generalist, the book is a loss and confusing. For the specialist, who needs a travelogue of certain Gods, the book is indispensable. Expect to work hard for what you get. Expect the prose to flow like mud, and where the translation breaks down expect confusion. I stress that this was a necessary read for my interests. There is much to be gained here. You only have to decide if you wish to pay the price.

A superb book!!!!!!

If you're looking for a wealth of information with every detail listed then this is an excellent choice.

The book is perhaps better used in the way of an encyclopedia: read up on a particular item that interests you; reading the book front to back is a bit tough as the text doesn't flow well and there's too much information to keep it all in mind. Some great primary texts are *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* and *The Syrian Goddess: De Dea Syria*.

Turcan has given us the needed updating on Franz Cumont's work. *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, for the most part, avoids the unwarranted history-of-religions inferences Cumont made. Turcan sticks mainly to geographical evidence and iconographic description and analysis. This book is a necessary companion to Keith Hopkins' "A World Full of Gods" in that it conveys the individual and collective power of the so-called Oriental cults, which, in fact, were Romanized when they reached their zenith in the Antonine Age. According to Turcan the oriental gods who had the greatest following were Magna Mater (Cybele) and Isis. Mithras occupied a second tier in the popularity pole as did Jupiter Dolichenus. Other deities interested primarily local cultists. The chapter on Dionysus and his rites is especially interesting in that the author details the ritual and presents instructive data on the belief in afterlife. Turcan does stray from the positivist historian to offer his psychological explanations for the victory of christianity over the cults. While sympathizing with his views, I think he has glossed over the more important socio-political explanation: episcopal christianity alone provided the strongest social cohesiveness enforced by ecclesiastical sanctions. It was this strength that moved Constantine to attempt to co-opt the episcopal church rather than throw the future of his empire in with Mithras or Isis. *The Cults of the Roman Empire* is a must for students of christian origins. If they ignore the evidence contained in this volume, they will not fully appreciate some of the dynamic possessed by the victor.

I used this text in preparing a 4 session workshop on ancient mystery religions ([...] I appreciate that this text is thorough and attempted a balanced position on the death of these religions and the rise of Christianity. I believe Turcan did a better job with task one than with task two. The primary drawback to this text is that it has the less-than-stimulating literary style of an older encyclopedia. Final summation: great reference work if you know the larger issues up for debate on Roman Cults. Excellent, scholarly, one-stop shopping for most cults of interest.

For anyone seeking the true history of religion, especially in regards to the melting pot of deities that bore the Christian faith, this book is a fascinating journey. Do not expect to be entertained or coddled; but seekers of detailed translations of lesser known religious movements in the classical

period will be rewarded.

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