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An Ancient Theory of Religion: Euhemerism from Antiquity to the Present. Routledge monographs in classical studies

Nickolas P. Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion: Euhemerism from Antiquity to the Present. Routledge monographs in classical studies*. London; New York: Routledge, 2017. 190. ISBN 9781138848931 $149.95.

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Euhemerus is one of those intriguing authors whose name is better known than his work. His *Hiera Anagraphe* (*HA*) describes the author discovering on the fictional island Panchaea an inscription recording how King Zeus instituted worship of himself and of his family. It survives only indirectly (in Diodorus, via him in Eusebius, in Lactantius, and in Cicero via Ennius' Latin translation). Subsequently, Euhemerism took on a life of its own, leaving one scholar to wryly observe that 'whether Euhemerus…himself was a Euhemerist is questionable'. This is no unusual situation: was Marx a Marxist, Christ a Christian, Darwin a Darwinist?

Roubekas begins with this paradox. The Introduction charts three phases of Euhemerism: The Euhemerism of *HA* in which the Olympian gods were deified kings and the 'truly divine' beings were celestial gods; 'Early Christian' Euhemerism, which used the former argument to reveal the falsity of paganism; and 'modern' Euhemerism, in which 'every case of deified dead people constitutes euhemerism' (p. 2).

Chapter one argues that *HA* constituted a 'theory of religion'. This definition only applies to one part of Euhemerus' two-fold approach, his identification of celestial bodies as divine. Chapter two considers Euhemerus' influences, but concludes that *HA* is distinctively unique. Chapter three argues that none of the antique and late-antique sources for the *HA* should be considered unbiased and therefore trustworthy transmitters of the original. Chapters four and five discuss the contexts for Hellenistic Euhemerism: atheism, ruler cult, and irony. Roubekas concludes that Euhemerus' purpose was not to justify ruler-cult; the work's utopian frame has political ramifications, and utilizes 'localized irony' (p. 107).

From this point, Roubekas takes up the reception of Euhemerism in earnest. Chapters six and seven consider Euhemerism in early Christian texts where it was used to disparage paganism, a move which required jettisoning the *HA* 's narrative frame and argument regarding the celestial gods. Chapter eight covers three disparate contexts: the treatment of Euhemerism as a form of myth interpretation; its appropriation by medieval and Renaissance writers; and the labelling of phenomena from other religious traditions as 'euhemeristic'.

Distilling this book's substance was frustratingly difficult. It is a difficult object to critique, being full of non-sequiturs, broad-stroke generalisations, context-less quotations, non-analogous analogies, and straw men; careful caveats are soon forgotten, and precisely-crafted definitions dissolve under the weight of special pleading. All this distracts from a quite simple central thesis.

Roubekas bills his work as a fusion of religious studies and Classics:

> [T]here is a disciplinary chasm […] that is either not taken into consideration or simply ignored. Scholars of religion have, either forced by their lack of expertise, or agitated by the overwhelming data, deliberately left ancient history to historians and classicists, and simply utilized their findings. […] Classicists and ancient historians, obviously with exceptions, tend to under-theorize rather than theorize about their data. This becomes even more apparent in any meta-theoretical examination of the ancient Greek world in general and ancient Greek religion in particular. Although I might seem to be generalizing, a survey of works on, say, ancient Greek religion, demonstrates the tendency to rely heavily on the sources and avoid any theoretical discussions, as if the field of ancient religion is in danger if a different approach, hooked more on theory rather than data, is employed. (p.10)

The key problem for Roubekas, however, lies in the data, since *HA* exists only in testimonia. This encourages circular thinking: 'Modern scholarship on euhemerism', Roubekas declares, has not overcome the misunderstandings of early Christians since 'most modern scholars resort to secondary or even tertiary sources about what euhemerism is, which are themselves largely influenced by the way the theory was altered in the first centuries of Christian domination'. Roubekas, by contrast, will go back to the 'earliest available testimonies', which offer 'substantial information regarding the original's content that, practically, negates the common view of what euhemerism is all about. Like the early Christian authors, modern authors still have little, if any knowledge of the exact content of Euhemerus' euhemerism in those earliest sources' (p.4). In other words, because the *HA* is preserved second-hand, other scholars have failed to understand it, whereas because Roubekas can (also) access this secondary tradition, he – uniquely – can resuscitate the original.

Roubekas' key claim (hence his title) is that Euhemerus proposed a fully formed 'theory of religion' comparable to modern ones. Roubekas argues in chapter one that *HA* puts forward a coherent theological framework; he never explains how this vision of 'a straight-forward case of a theory of religion' (5) might be squared with the text's irony, its political programme, and its utopian narrative frame, aspects highlighted only in later chapters. Roubekas argues that Euhemerus' theory was religionist rather than humanist (i.e., it held that religion had divine rather than human origins). Here is where, in Roubekas' view, Euhemerus diverges most clearly from 'Euhemerism'. The evidence, however, appears only in Eusebius (one of those Christian authors disparaged elsewhere as a pernicious influence). In his summary of Diodorus' sixth book Eusebius describes the historian deriving from Euhemerus a theology which differentiated the 'eternal' heavenly bodies from the Olympians (T25). Roubekas concludes from his discussion of Eusebius as a source that we should use 'considerable scepticism when we take his delivery of the theory at face value' (p.62). Eusebius probably had no access to the *HA* and (as Roubekas fails to mention) Diodorus does not name Euhemerus as his source for information about Panchaea in book 5. It is unclear whether he did so in book 6; the most we can say with certainty is that *Eusebius* made this connection. Moreover, Diodorus elsewhere attributes very similar two-part theologies to the Egyptians and Ethiopians in contexts unrelated to Panchaea (see Winiarczyk's commentary on T25). Yet when Roubekas argues that the *HA* included this religionist theory, he prefers Eusebius' references to these divine beings over what survives in Diodorus' fifth book and elsewhere: an explanation for King Uranus' name as a nickname given to him because he engaged in star-gazing, suggesting a more ironic stance in which the stars are just stars. As Roubekas notes, 'it comes as a surprise that in book five [Diodorus] somehow neglects such important information, only to return to it in book six' (p.56). Quite. To support the idea that *HA* maintained the divinity of the celestial bodies, Roubekas must argue without much data, since this is 'a position which is not easily identified in the available testimonies' (p. 2); so, we get knotty sentences like these:

> Euhemerus's view of the heavenly or celestial gods *radiates* a sense of acceptance of their divinity *regardless of the lack of sources* that would clarify this issue beyond any doubt. This position, embraced also by Marek Winiarczyk, virtually denies the traditional – already from antiquity – observation of Euhemerus' atheism […] *Still, the sources themselves are not much help on this matter* (p.73, italics added).

Roubekas is far from alone in noting a possible reference to true divinity in Euhemerus. He fails, however, to argue clearly and coherently for the soundness of Eusebius' comments on this point, or explain how they fit within Euhemerus' original narrative. Roubekas puts unusual weight on Euhemerus' religionist position; his central theme is

that subsequent Euhemerists failed to appreciate this crucial theological point; yet this reader is no closer to being persuaded of its authenticity or importance to *HA* than before.

Finally, Roubekas argues that a fully-fledged theory of religion requires general speculation on the very category of 'religion', not merely observations pertinent to one particular religion. Here Roubekas can only argue that Euhemerus' theory could at least be universalised, since later Euhemerists 'transformed the Greek-centric ancient euhemerism into a full theory pertaining to the origins of gods and religion wherever and whenever they are to be found' (p.28). And besides –

> we should not easily disregard the common view in antiquity of the centrality of the Greek culture in the Mediterranean world, partly exemplified in the known dipole of Greeks and barbarians. In this sense, one could argue that Euhemerus's view of the Greek pantheon and religious beliefs was a criticism of the most noble and superior form of religion, that is, *the* religion, which could therefore be applied throughout the rest of the ancient world (pp.28-9)

Such special pleading tests the very utility of Roubekas' theoretical approach. Roubekas' Procrustean paring is scarcely illuminating, unless one already agrees with Roubekas' conclusions.

Roubekas' lack of precision often restricts the success of his study. For example, when he criticises 'Euhemeristic' phenomena as insufficiently typical of the author, it is not always clear whose label this is. Roubekas' claims that incorporating pagan gods into Biblical history was 'the standardized form of what euhemerism meant after, more or less, the fourteenth century' (p.158). Meant to whom? One would have to consult the originals to know whether the authors described by Roubekas self-identified with this tradition. But a footnote reveals that Roubekas is relying on Luc Brisson's breezy summary of them, collected beneath the title 'Historical interpretation: Euhemerism', which label he does not explain in any detail. (It is odd that Roubekas, who has just concluded a categorisation of myth interpretation, does not interrogate *Brisson's* idiosyncratic categories.)

Such black-and-white casting prevents a more accurate, nuanced and – frankly – more interesting portrait of Euhemerism from developing. Roubekas' basic assertions are correct. Too often disparate phenomena *are* unthinkingly labelled 'Euhemeristic', and greater clarity in discussing modes of religious scepticism through time is a *desideratum*. But Roubekas makes this reception history a story of decline (the later tradition is 'corrupted', 'alienated', characterised by 'misuses', 'misunderstandings') and compounds the conflation. He simplistically subsumes modern references to Euhemerism beneath the rubric 'gods = deified people' and then protests that these are not in keeping with a long-lost original. Of course they aren't; but so what? Roubekas's study in fact uncovers a wealth of fascinating 'Euhemerisms' – ancestor worship in

Africa, Mesoamerican ruler-cult, Captain Cook's welcome as a god on Hawaii, the sober historicisation of myth – deserving of closer study; at issue should be not the correctness of using Euhemerus as poster-boy for atheistic speculation, but the cultural cachet accorded to this name and, indirectly, to Greek religion as a paradigmatic *comparandum*. I take no pleasure in writing this review. Presumably I might be dismissed as just another nit-picking Classicist too concerned with data to appreciate anything more ambitious. Yet how is a theory to fly if not from a firm foundation of accurate knowledge clearly presented? There is a defence in Roubekas' modest avowal, 'I do not assert holding *the* true interpretation of euhemerism' (p.11). Yet this shrugging relativism hardly squares with the trenchant rhetoric elsewhere (or the authority implied in the book's price tag.) And herein lies the fundamental problem; for all his equivocations, Roubekas time and again divides the scholarly community between those who are 'with' him, and those who are 'against'. Roubekas oversells his innovations (his approach is 'contrary to the various different interpretations and motivations that scholars have identified in the study of Euhemerus' theory' (5)), lavishes praise on scholars quoted in support of his argument, while undermining the contributions of others. Patrick O'Sullivan is dismissed as 'lack[ing a deeper understanding of how theorizing about religion functions' on account of 'neglect[ing] discussions in the field of religious studies in the last 300 years or so' (39). Scott Scullion and Hugh Bowden are mistaken when they describe Herodotus and Xenophon respectively as 'theorists', in contradiction of Roubekas' definition (43, nn. 68, 72). Such comments cast a pall of mean-spiritedness, suggesting little of worth in scholarship which did not ascribe to Roubekas's argument in advance of his having formulated it. They gratuitously highlight Roubekas' tendency to argue semantics with the secondary tradition rather than arguing from the primary evidence.

A colleague once patiently explained to me that scholars should begin all papers by punching (figuratively) their intellectual rivals, as if incivility were a hallmark of impressive scholarship. Roubekas' rhetoric brought this back to mind. The logic of Roubekas' approach requires that, for every point he makes, someone else must be shown to be wrong. Scholarship becomes a zero-sum game, an exercise in point-scoring. It is not. Beyond all the words and references and debates, a reader should come away with something substantial to think about, some new idea to ponder, some new conceptual framework. I closed Roubekas' book none the wiser.