

Religion in the Mirror of the Other

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We may now agree that our modern scholarly concept of religion has few, if any, analogues in the languages and cultures of antiquity (or, for that matter, non-western cultures today). But if we remain justified in our own “etic” definitions of religion, we ought still to wonder how ancient cultures might themselves have objectified and conceptualized religion beyond the merely semantic – that is, as a system of ritual activity and group devotion. While some historians (Stroumsa, Boyarin) have found an incipient objectification of religion in Christianity itself, or in some of the late Roman cultural trends it incorporated (like the definition of a sacred race), I will show how various literary depictions of the Other, like barbarians, *magoi*, heretics, and heathens, were actually working out the borders of religion itself in their concern for what binds him, what constitute core ceremonies or sacrifices, what symbolic traditions sanctify social relations, and what materials are deemed powerful and efficacious. These features of the Other may be repeatedly held up for shock, prurience, or derision in the literature, but they amount to a construction of “religion,” albeit negatively, as a powerful social force. I will show the background of this negative construction of religion in Roman literature, then its various interests in the construction of ritual, sacrament, and holy community in such late antique writers as Pseudo-Dioscorus, Shenoute of Atripe, Pseudo-Nilus of Ancyra, Epiphanius of Salamis, and John of Ephesus.