

Religion in the reign of augustus



Religion in the Roman Empire:

At the end of the 1st century BC, under the guidance of Augustus the Roman Empire was still under great influence of religion. It filled the existence of the Romans with sense and made up the identity of the nation. The Roman ideology and system of values was determined by patriotism first of all, and it was expressed not only in the readiness to sacrifice their lives for their motherland, but also it meant deep respect and faith to its heroic past, traditions of ancestors. The Romans always had a strong feeling that their nation was chosen by gods, a peculiar one. And they believed that their victories were predetermined by fate. Augustus based his reign entirely on all those ideas. The first emperor restructured temples and it caused a lot of essential changes of the status of Rome and throughout the empire. At that time it returned to the form of monarchy “ in all but name” (Rives 2007).

It is recognized that “ the reign of Octavian was a crucial political turning point in Rome’s history.” (Wells 1992). The main rule of governing for him was not revolution but restoration. First of all, restoration of Rome itself as the city had sacral meaning for the citizens. When the Gauls ruined the city, the Romans were advised to move to the town of Veii, but they couldn’t do that because they were living on the land of their ancestors, on the land of their traditions and ancient cults. “ We have a city founded by the auspices and augury; there is not a corner of it that is not full of our cults and our gods; our regular rituals have not only their appointed places, but also their appointed times”, in this way it is introduced in the book of Livy (Livy 2004). So, the aim of Augustus was to promote Rome as the heart of the empire. His plans included reconstruction of some of the buildings important from

the religious point of view and the rebirth of the mythology and history of the city.

In the view of scholars, the system began to work when the new name was taken by the emperor. As it is widely known, by birth he was named Gaius Octavius Thurinus. Then, after his father was dead, his great-uncle Gaius Julius Caesar adopted him in 44 BC, so that he was also officially called Gaius Julius Caesar between 44 and 31 BC. But when he defeated Mark Antony and received so much power, this official name was no longer enough to reflect the outstanding status of Octavian. Some people even proposed to name him Romulus as the second builder of Rome. But there was too much negative in the image of that hero and the alternative was necessary. In 27 BC the Senate gave him the honorific Augustus (which was interpreted as “the revered, respected, chosen one”). Hence he became Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus. Being a son of the divine Julius, *Divi Iulii Filius*, Augustus was also deified by people and consequently led to the personal cult of the emperor (Beard, North, and Price 1988).

The name Augustus meant that he was favored by gods to serve the nation of the Romans. The appropriate legend appeared. According to it, when Octavian was guiding the campaign for his 1st consulship, people saw 6 large vultures. And when Octavian was elected, 6 more vultures appeared. This auspice was symbolizing the patronage of the spiritual higher forces and foretold that he was the minion to rebuilt Rome.

Further on, old cults were modified and the new ones were introduced. For example, if earlier festival devoted to the Lares was celebrated on the 1st of

May, with Augustus it was obligatory to celebrate it also on the 1st of August, “probably in honor of the Genius Augusti”, scholars suppose (Zanker 1989). While the Lares were seen as some vague deities (sometimes understood as idolized spirits of the dead), the Lares Augusti were presented as the ancestors of the emperor Augustus and the Spirit of Augustus was Genius Augustus himself. In this way Augustus made the cults of his own family general for the country, and from private cults they turned into common. From this, it was necessary to build places of worship at the crossroads in each ward. A. Price gives the example of a small monument, about 3 meters high, 2 and a half meters wide, with a modest altar. The five steps led to it where there were images of the Genius Augusti and the Lares Augusti to worship them.

In rebuilding the temples Augustus was also very careful and active. For instance, he reconstructed the temple of the Magna Mater. But in contrast with other temples built by him, this one was made not in marble but in the traditional coarse stone, rufa like most of the early Roman temples.

Then, not far from this temple of the Magna Mater and at the same time not far from his own apartments the emperor Augustus erected the temple of Apollo. The land it was built on was administratively his own belonging. In 36 BC this place was struck by the lightning. It was successfully interpreted as a good sign of god's will for some sacral building. Augustus announced it the public property and dedicated to Apollo. The temple finally became one of the most impressive in the city. It was decorated plentifully by sculptures of Danaus and fifty Danaids, his daughters, placed between the columns in the front gallery of the temple. The door was carved with ivy and bared the

picture of Diana and Apollo killing the Niobe's children. The other side was decorated with the scene of the Gauls expelled from Delphi. The best sculptors from Greece made the figures of Apollo, Diana and their mother Latona for the interior. The place quickly received a very high religious status, and even the old Sibylline Books were taken here from the temple of Jupiter as Sibyl got her gift of prophesy directly from Apollo.

The historians reflect this outstanding fact in the way that Augustus brought the temple not only into the sacred boundaries of the city but into his own house, “ a single house that holds three eternal gods”, by Ovid (Jones 1951). It was for the first time in history that divine and human residence were combined (the temple of Apollo, the shrine of Vesta and the palace of the Emperor), and it couldn't help working as a strong divine association for benefit of Augustus.

Moreover, the image of Apollo was changed significantly. He got the central role on the new Rome of Augustus. And the story was told that he helped Augustus to defeat Antony and Cleopatra in 31 BC. In addition, Augustus built one more temple dedicated to Apollo. It was situated in the City of Victory, Nikopolis, and gave birth to a great festival of Actian Apollo.

In the center of the new forum he founded the third great temple. It was the temple of Mars Ultor, the first temple dedicated to the god of war in the pomerium. This masterpiece was later called the most beautiful building of the epoch, and it also presents a successful combination of tradition and innovation, of continuity and restructuring (Galinsky 1998). The temple symbolized Augustus' military triumphs and divine protection of his land.

Inside the temple there was a statue of Mars, and of Venus too, which stood there for the divine origin of Caesar and Augustus. The figures of Aeneas, the kings of Alba Longa and the Julii, Romulus, the son of Mars, all in all 108 statues were making up the picture of Augustus' origin and presenting him as a heir.

Among the rituals, introduced by the emperor, there was an ancient hymn where the name of Augustus was added. " Now the name of Augustus must have rung out to listeners clear as a bell amongst the arcane and venerable mumbo-jumbo" (Rives 2007). At the same time Augustus insisted he was not god, but just the mediator for their will, and didn't overestimate his role in the eyes of his people. The people were to believe in his supernatural mission themselves. His numen, or divine power was also honored by public in Rome. There was no special cult for praising Augustus as a living god, but about 6 AD Tiberius built an altar near his house for piests to sacrifice to his numen. It was not accessible for common people and was not included to the official cult of ancestors. The matter is, this altar was to signal that the emperor was not worshipped as gods, but at the same time stood for a mere distance between Augustus and the gods.

The fact that already by life Augustus was honored as a god was not enough for him. To make the next generations remember and worship his was his task too. Although administrative reforms were not ceased, the princeps felt that his time was drawing to the end, and in 13 AD he evened Tiberius with himself in all the constitutional rights. Then August placed the testament and other documents in the temple of Vesta in Rome. In these documents

financial and military position of the Empire were briefly described and refined, though quite inexact and very partial political testament was given.

This great document, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* ("The Deeds of the Divine Augusti") reflected all his political career, accomplishments, public benefactions, military and other deeds and achievements. The governor was informed that after princeps Augustus had been buried and deified, the Senate should listen to his last will and testament and fulfill it. So, his will was to announce that account *Res Gestae* with all his accomplishments to the Roman people. The text of the account consisted of 35 paragraphs making up four sections and was engraved on two bronze pillars. These pillars were put in front of his mausoleum. But the Senate decided not to restrain the access to it to the people of Rome only, and the copies were made for people of province. The governor probably "summoned the residents of the capital to the theater or the marketplace to hear a reading of the text translated into Greek," Werner supposes (Eck 2004). Moreover, the text in Latin and Greek was carved in stone on the walls of a temple to Roma and Augustus.

When Augustus died, he was proclaimed to be immortal and a priestess Livia was assigned to perform sacred service for him. There was a man, Numerius Atticus, who swore that he saw Augustus ascending to heaven. The same was traditionally told about Romulus and Proculus. In addition to shrine built by Livia and Tiberius, the shrines for the dead emperor of Rome were built all over the state, often by own will of separate communities. In the temple of Mars they put a golden image of Augustus to pay all the necessary honors.

What is more, Livia organized a festival in the honor of Augustus which is held even today.

In this way the first princeps of the Roman Empire created an appropriate public image of himself by reshaping rituals, reorganizing the religious landscape and unobtrusively manipulating minds of people. In fact, he can't be accused of that as he really did much for his nation in the result. In the rule of Octavian Augustus the Roman culture experienced a brilliant bloom, its "golden age" (Galinsky 1998). The principate of Augustus the basic slogans of which were the renewal of republic and dispositions of ancestors, stopping of wars and strives, was perceived by contemporaries as a long-awaited delivering from civil discords and wars that had been shocking Roman society for so long. Therefore the Roman values, half-forgotten religious ceremonies, legends about the "valor of ancestors", "Roman myth" (i. e. legend about allegedly intended to Rome by Gods and fate of lordship over the world) were now in every way underlined and became one of the basic topics for all cultural figures of that time. The "Roman myth" was melted with the "myth of August" – peacemaker, deliverer from suffering, – both myths became the head stone of official ideology of the Empire.

All in all, Octavian Augustus was one of most gifted, energetic and intelligent rulers in the world. Unusually enormous work, pursuing far-going plans on reorganization and renewal, which was conducted by him in every structure of the great Empire, assisted creation of the new Roman world, in which all classes, up to the lowest, prospered due to the refined economical, political and cultural links and flourishing trade.

The autocratic regime, set during his rule (with taking into account the errors of Caesar), replaced the Republic falling into decay – though firstly there were a great number of conspirators – and was doomed to the protracted existence (Raaflaub 1993). He brought stability, safety and welfare unprecedented to greater part of population for more than two centuries; he provided survival and maintenance of political, social and cultural legacy of the classic world, both Roman and Greek, and provided a basis on which the seed of Christianity and Judaism were able to germinate while it was his age when Jesus Christ was born, and Israelite from a state-client was transformed into the Roman province.

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