

WENDT, HEIDI. *AT THE TEMPLE GATES: THE RELIGION OF FREELANCE EXPERTS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE*. 1ª ED. NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016. 262P. ISBN: 9780190267148.

Ana Paula Scarpa¹

In *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire* (2016), the classicist Heidi Wendt bases her study in a variety of textual sources to analyze the existence and growth of what she considered a category of agents, the “autonomous religious experts”. She defined such category as “self-authorized actors whose practices directly enlisted gods and similar beings to a significant degree” (Wendt, 2016: 30). According to her, these individuals provided a particular class of religious activity attested in the first two centuries of the Roman Empire. They were therefore self-authorized priests, prophets, initiators of mysteries, *magi*, sacrificers, astrologers, preachers, apostles, among others. Although safeguarding specificities of performance, language, skills and services, they occupied the same social niche in the Roman world.

Contrary to earlier perspectives that characterized them as “charlatans,” especially those of Ramsay McMullen and Morton Smith, Wendt understands the activities of these multiple agents as authentic forms of acting. From her perspective, these were valid ways in which specialists capitalized for themselves the interest in knowledge, rites, and techniques understood as alien or foreign through a competitive landscape created by the opening of multiple options for contact with gods and other sacred beings. In this way, the author draws special attention to those who were able to perform such activities intellectually – like Paul of Tarsus and the Apostolic Fathers. For this reason, they achieved greater scope and authority using written tradition and incorporating elaborated philosophical debates.

In this way, the author addresses the growth of diversification, specialization, “ethnic coding” and influence exerted by such actors as a reflection of a culturally heterogeneous imperial context. This scenario, in

¹ PhD Student - University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil. Email: anacarvalhohist@gmail.com

turn, reflected the various processes of mobility, connectivity and sociocultural exchanges in the ancient Mediterranean at the time. This is the assumption that permeates the whole work and supports the thesis presented: that the performance of these characters, independently or semi-independently of groups and institutions, had a direct impact on the transformations of the imperial religious scene of the first and second centuries – as, for instance, in the emergence and consolidation of Christianity. In order to support this thesis, Wendt presents her arguments in five chapters, besides the introduction and conclusion.

In the Introduction, called *Freelance Experts in the Study of Religion*, the author presents the initial definition of the category of “autonomous religious specialists” and the main analytical and conceptual parameters that permeates the work, like the defended conception of religion. According to the explanation provided, she considers religion all forms, normative or otherwise, by which “human beings in all their cultures have thought about and engaged with divine beings” (Wendt, 2016: 32). Such definition justifies the plurality and fluidity of the criteria that classify individuals as religious specialists. In addition, the author advocates the use of textual documentation as an effective tool for understanding both what other authors thought and wrote about these individuals and what the religious specialists registered about their own performances.

In the first chapter, entitled *The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire*, Heidi Wendt analyzes the growth of influence, performance, and charisma of these specialists over the first and second centuries, as well as the recognition of this growth by the Roman authorities. She argues from two indicatives. The first one refers to the increasing of the terminology to designate them (*haruspices, sacrificuli, vates, sortilegi, magi, augures Marsi, astrologi, harioli, Chaldaei*, etc.) or the changing of the connotation of earlier terms that identified them. The second one relates to the increased frequency and severity of policies and legal actions contrary to the performance and permanence of these individuals, especially in Rome. The author thus highlights the various cases of expulsion of Jews, Egyptians, astrologers and public burnings of prophetic and oracular books, mainly between 33 BCE and 93 CE. Such episodes support the argument that Roman legislation itself understood the category of autonomous religious experts as a unit – albeit a diverse one – made up of individuals considered foreign, exotic, or on the margins of what should represent the traditional Roman identity.

Continuing the previous discussion, in the subsequent chapter – *Ethnically Coded Experts and Forms of Religion* – the author explores the fascination of Roman elites with foreign religions and the fact that religious specialists often identify themselves in an “ethnically coded” way. That is, they presented themselves from their alleged ancestry and provenance in order to legitimize their specific skills and the services they offered. Using the examples of the Egyptians, and especially of the Jews, Wendt argues that the latter ones worked to mobilize elements of their ethnic tradition (Holy Scriptures, myths, and mythical characters) in order to gain notoriety and perform specific religious activities (e.g. exorcisms), as did the Greek, Etruscan, Persian, Chaldean, among other, religious specialists and their respective “ethnic religious features”. Thus, the author seeks to overcome the traditional conception of Jewish proselytism as an institutional project in order to highlight two points. The first refers to the growth in the number of non-Jewish adherents to certain Jewish practices – the so-called “Judaizers” – attested in the criticism recorded by authors such as Cicero, Tacitus and Juvenal. While the second relates to the fact that similarities in performance justify the belonging of these and other specialists to a common class of religious activity, despite inner ethnic differentiations.

In *Rethinking 'Magic', 'Religion' and 'Philosophy'*, the third chapter of the book, Heidi Wendt investigates the interconnections in the activities of *magi*, philosophers and interpreters of religious traditions, questioning the conventional atomized understanding of areas as “magic” or “philosophy” guided by modern assumptions. The author presents the subcategory of “intellectualized religious specialists”, composed of individuals capable of matching intellectual abilities, reading and interpreting of writings considered divinely inspired – such as the Sibylline and Chaldean Oracles, the *Hermetica* and *Orphica* poetry, the Hystaspes Books or even the Jewish Holy Scriptures. By valuing the prophetic and esoteric contents of these records, these actors performed different activities of creation and interpretation of myths, oracular and allegorical readings, revelations of mysteries, exegesis, among others. However, despite the diverse skills, interpretations, and practices contained in these different traditions, Wendt defended that “they all shared common tactics of authorization, basic philosophical terminology, and alleged sources of wisdom” (Wendt, 2016: 137). Likewise, all those who based their religious actions on these references – whether magical, religious or philosophical – was a member of the class of autonomous religious specialists.

The last two chapters are devoted to conducting case studies that aim to prove the validity of the main category of the book – the “freelance religious specialists” – as specified above. In chapter four, entitled *Paul, the Rare Witness to the Religion of Freelance Experts*, the author defends Paul of Tarsus's belonging to this class of religious actors based on six central elements of Pauline apostolic action: (1) the ethnic characteristics of his practice; (2) the differing interpretations of the Jewish Scriptures; (3) the conjunction of other intellectual discourses and abilities; (4) the punishments Paul claims to have received; (5) his itinerant movement and (6) his economic practices. In this sense, Wendt points to the historical value of the epistles since they provide an internal perspective to the context presented. For her, Pauline performance correlates with that of other autonomous religious specialists. Moreover, this can be proved by his circumstantial attachment to the Jewish tradition for legitimation and/or differentiation, by the competitive context among fellow Jewish missionaries that he experienced or by his mobilization of a philosophical concept – the *pneuma* [πνεῦμα] – to create a religious program extensible to the Gentiles. In the same vein, the skills he demonstrates and the services he offers are also equivalents to the category: purification; character reform; essence change and divinization; acquisition of specialized religious skills; salvation and escape from eschatological judgment; deification and immortality. Wendt proposes, therefore, the understanding of Pauline apostolic action in view of a broader field of independent experience, detached from the teleological reading characteristic of the approaches of Early Christianity scholars.

In the fifth chapter of the book – *Christian Rival Within the Framework of Freelance Expertise* – Heidi Wendt continues the exercise of contesting a unique beginning for Christianity. She analyzes the textual production of the so-called “writer-intellectuals” like Marcion, Justinus, Valentinus, Ptolemy and Irenaeus, in order to demonstrate how their agencies, as well as the competition between them, permeated the contexts of the different discursive constructions on Christianity(ies) during the second century. The author takes up references such as Karen King, Daniel Boyarin and Kendra Eshleman to theorize the diversity as the main aspect of these individuals' performance, as well as placing them within the category of freelance religious specialists. Wendt thus highlights the belonging of these actors and their texts to a “broader literary network” considered rich and regular, especially in Rome. In this network, individuals were aware of the contemporary textual productions and, therefore, developed their own reflections in order to differentiate them from others. However, the search

for the most complete exegesis of the Scriptures, the most compelling revelation, the unraveling of the greatest mystery, or the elaboration of the most complex and esoteric cosmogony has extrapolated the discursive realm and can also be witnessed in the formation of different adherent communities. Therefore, in the chapter's final argument the author proposes "that the context of freelance experience offers a tenable social settings for investigating the 'origins' of religious phenomena first attested in the first and second centuries" (Wendt, 2016: 190).

In the part dedicated to the conclusion of the book – *Freelance Experts in the Religious Marketplace?* – the author gives a brief exposition of what has been discussed in previous chapters, including the reinforcement of the relationship between the broader and more diverse category of "freelance religious specialists" and the subcategory of "intellectualized religious specialists". Then, she emphasizes that the attention given "to the preconditions of the intellectualized forms of religion should not, however, overshadow the prominence of autonomous specialists who had no intellectual or philosophical pretensions" (WENDT, 2016: 218). In this sense, Wendt mentions the importance of other forms of written records (such as collections of spells and sayings, horoscopes, divinatory books and *defixiones*), and of objects totally devoided of this characteristic (such as amulets, gems, initiatory symbols, objects and funerary images). With this, she proves the broad performance of the self-authorized freelance religious specialists. Finally, the author rejects the approach of "marketplace" as an effective metaphor for thinking about the diversity of performances, ethnic codifications and services provided by the religious context of freelance activity through the first two centuries of the imperial period – especially in regard to its use for provide explanations of the origins of Christianity (like proposed by Rodney Stark). While recognizing the usefulness of the emphasis on individual agency and competition among actors, for Wendt "theorizing freelance expertise and its intersections with other forms of religious activity and social practice requires finer instruments and units of analysis than the market metaphor" (Wendt, 2016: 223).

From a general perspective, it can be argued that the marked degree of autonomy attributed to self-authorized religious experts is debatable; and that there is sometimes an overvaluation of the individual agencies, especially when approached in a detached way from the social, institutional and even contextual relationships that permeated the lives of these individuals. Similarly, it can be conjectured that the amplitude of the

proposed approach prevents the author from further analyzing case studies relating to other cultural traditions beyond the Judeo-Christian one. However, these are not factors that disallow the validity of the proposal presented in *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire*.

It should be emphasized that Heidi Wendt contributes to the field of ancient religion studies by constructing an interpretive model that addresses religious activities and diverse individuals from the same analytical parameter. From this perspective, the author demonstrates the concern to contemplate the complex nature of historical conjunctures rather than the fractional interpretations linked to specific schools and areas of knowledge. An important example can be glimpsed from the dismissal of the idea of an origin of Christianity, centered on a single character or a definite event. On the contrary, she emphasizes the heterogeneous feature of the performances of intellectualized religious specialists, and thus she avoids the projection of later concepts – such as *heresy* and *orthodoxy* – for the context of the various “Christianities” in the second century.

Equally important is the amplitude and diversity attributed to the category of freelance religious specialists, which allows scholars to reflect on the possibility of thinking about it in other temporal and spatial scopes as well. According to the format in which they were categorized, both the central class of individuals and the religious activities that characterized it are not closed to the chronological clipping or textual sources contemplated in the book. One can go further. Therefore, we verify not only the wide knowledge of varied sources and the specialized bibliography demonstrated by the author, but also the topicality of the proposal she presents in view of its correlation with the contemporary studies about the ancient world. As same as Wendt's these works has sought to emphasize more and more the multiple processes of connectivity, exchange and mobility of ideas, goods and people in ancient conjunctures.

In short, because of the validity of the proposition of a new interpretative key and the overcoming of the old judgment values that it engenders, we believe that the work exposed here has much to contribute to the research of all who are dedicated to understanding the many facets of religious activities verified in Antiquity.

Reference

WENDT, Heidi. *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire*. 1ª Ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.