

**Belousov A. V. Ancient Greek and Roman Religions  
of the New Testament Epoch. Educational and methodical manual  
for the course “Religious environment of Early Christianity”.  
(Writings of the Historical Faculty of Moscow State University, vol. 165.  
Series II: Historical Research. 104). Moscow, 2019. 152 p.  
ISBN: 978-5-19-011465-2**

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*Russian Journal of Church History*. 2020;1(1):11. (In Russ.) doi:10.15829/2686-973X-2020-1-1-11

The proposed Manual is supposed to be a succinct monographic research and a handbook, a lexicon of religions and cult practices during Principate and Early Empire in Rome. This small book (circa 150 pages) contains all main concepts, ideas and methods limited to a strict topic and chronological framework of the exact academic discipline in a concentrated form. The manual has appeared as a result of the extensive research in the field of textology and epigraphics in context of religious life in Roman Empire during the reign of Severan dynasty. Above all other papers this work brought the PhD thesis of the author, his first monograph “Flavius Philostrates in Religious Context of His Time” (2012<sup>1</sup>), and the special course Religious environment of Early Christianity”, lectured in 2009-2013 at the Department of Church history in M.V. Lomonosov Moscow State University (MSU). This course is dedicated to a wider historical and religious environment and the other circumstances, under which the Christianity and the Ancient Church was developed, and the synchronous processes in traditional Roman cults.

<sup>1</sup> Belousov, A.V. (2012) Flavius Philostratus in the religious context of his time “The Life of Apollonius” and “Heroics”. Publishing house PSTGU, Moscow, 2012, p. 246. ISBN 978-5-7429-0746-6.

The book has following structure: a brief introduction explaining the goals and objectives, as well as the possibility of adapting the proposed special course to the requirements and capabilities of the audience, a brief synopsis consisting of three topics, a summary of the course and an appendix.

Each topic is divided into 5 chapters (corresponding in practice to lectures or seminars), the summary contains the most briefly formulated main provisions of the course, the appendix offers a “list of additional literature”, “course program”, “main topics” and “bibliography”, divided according to the declared ten topics (which are actually the topics of lectures).

The bibliography placed at the end of the book a list of literature and lecture lists consist mainly of classical history, philology and religious studies of the late XIX — first half of XX century: a monograph writings and articles by prominent authors and studies on significant texts, referring to religious practices and cults. For example, there are books by Eric Robertson Dodds “Greeks and the Irrational” or Martin Persson Nilsson “Greek Folk Religion”, published in Russian in the late 90s and early 2000s, or the fundamental research of Russian archaeologist V. V. Latyshev “An Essay on Greek Antiquities”. Among the untranslated classical studies are the books of Walter Burkert, which changed the idea of “pagan religion” in the middle of the last century, the “magical” texts about the cult of Isis, commented and translated by John Gwyn Griffiths, the first studies of Mithraism by Franz Cumont, as well as a conceptually and ideologically reviewed study of the cult of Mithra made by Cumonts disciple and successor Martin Joseph Vermaseren, a Dutch historian who published a *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* in the 1950s. Of course, the list of literature recommended for special course participants is significantly reduced in comparison with the huge array of multilingual literature that A. V. Belousov attracted when compiling it. The careful selection of books and articles in the short bibliography was obviously due to the factor of their availability to the student and teacher of MSU. However, the fact that A. V. Belousov’s research interest in this topic is permanent and ongoing is evidenced by the fact that the text of the book itself contains references to completely new publications — 2013-2019 (see the article footnotes on pp. 15, 45, 55, 63, 74, 88, 112), that is, after reading a special course and until the publication of this manual.

Next, the course program is attached with a short list of sources and literature that the student must master in order to study the material. A separate list of electronic resources is provided. In contrast to the literature offered for reading, which can be found in libraries in Moscow, or legally and for free on the Internet, access to some of the presented electronic databases has a limited or paid basis (publishers DeGryuter, Loeb; Research program of University of California, — Thesaurus linguae Graecae). The application ends with a list of questions for the exam for a special course.

However, it should be noted that both sections of the bibliography contain some inconsistencies and publishing errors that are inevitable when working with multilingual text. For example, it is not clear why the first list is called “additional” literature, if a number of significant publications are duplicated in the literature for lectures, (however, the repetition of units of literature recommended for different lectures, based on practical experience, is absolutely justified due to the human factor). It is not entirely clear what is included only in the list of literature for the lecture, and marked with an asterisk as a “particularly significant” book by Manfred Clauss about the cult of Mithra, which is quite available in libraries and also has, in addition to the original German-language edition (1990), an English translation (2000, perhaps more accessible to non-German students), as well as a monograph on the same topic, easily readable (in French), but older (first edition of 1979) monograph by Robert Turcan. Perhaps the author’s professional opinion about the lesser value and content of the books of Turcan and Clauss in comparison with the works of Franz Cumont and Maarten Vermaseren is important here.

Seen in this section of the typos: F. Boll, C. Bezold, and W. Gundel. *Stern Glaube und Stern Deutung: die Geschichte und das Wesen der Astrologie*. Leipzig, 1931<sup>4</sup> — proofreader’s pass: 1931<sup>4</sup>, read as: 4th edition, Berlin-Leipzig, since this book, the first version of which was published back in 1917, was published at least six times, which is generally characteristic of the Golden age of classical philology and archaeology; Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion/Eds. C.A. Faraone, D. Obbink. NY&Oxford, 1991): a typo in the word “magic” has made it unreadable.

Since this publication is structured primarily on the plan of a special course, as well as due to the conciseness and brevity of the presented material, the author was not able to present some important and significant points that are pronounced during lectures and seminars consistently. As an example of the limited possibilities of such a laconic genre, it is enough to point to one example: historiographical relevance is mentioned only in one case — this is criticism on p. 90-92 scientific myth, namely, a set of ideas about mystery cults, formed at the initial stage of the study of the cult of Mithras by Franz Cumont. More such obvious references to outdated ideas in historiography are not noticed in this publication — however, due to the complexity and still insurmountable in the University environment, the unusual nature of the materials considered in the course of A. V. Belousov, this stylistically out-of-date passage cannot be attributed to the shortcomings of the publication. However, we note that the reference to the publication of the Russian translation of “Eastern religions in Roman paganism” on p. 90 after mentioning “a number of prejudices that modern science has been trying to overcome for several decades” is not quite clear: here you need either to point to the introductory article of the scientific editor of the publication, or directly to publications of recent decades that

criticize the Cumonts concept or to offer new interpretations, but such publications are partially mentioned for some reason in the previous footnote on the same page. Later in the same Chapter, the pathos of “debunking the myth” cannot be consistently sustained, since it does not seem logical and reasonable to develop a predictable refutation of the “first prejudice” about the late origin of mystery cults within the framework of a study chronologically limited to the first century BC — the first three centuries after Christ. Secondly, despite the statement of the antiquity of mystery practices that lasted for centuries, it is the last wave of popularity that falls into the field of view of a specialist in the New Testament era, including purely Greek local religious practices, whose adherents often resorted to appeal to the “Eastern” (equally Egyptian) origin in order to emphasize the antiquity of the origin of their cults. (Besides, we should not forget that the religious life of the Greek part of the Roman Empire had deeper and more extensive roots, those that connected the Greek world with the Eastern one, and which Rome was deprived of. A separate paragraph describing the fundamental differences between Greek and Roman in the religious life of the early Empire would probably be appropriate in this book). The combination of these non-contradictory points due to the compactness of the presentation was not quite successful, which, however, does not detract from the author’s competence in this matter. Besides, it is impossible not to pay attention to what archaeological finding of the existence of a sanctuary of Cybele in Phrygian Pessinunt in the XIII century BC and the evidence of Strabo (belonging to the turn of the Millennium) stretches a huge chronological gap, during which archaic cults (known to European culture as ugly, that is, faceless “paganism”, blamed for all possible vices) were preserved, changed, and influenced. Of course, it is not possible to describe this huge problem in the framework of a brief Handbuch and therefore cannot be attributed to the shortcomings of the publication.

The citation design generally meets the requirements of a modern academic publication, but in a couple of places either A. V. Belousov shows special confidence in the reader’s level of erudition, or these inconsistencies arose in the process of editing the text: for example, quoting the testimonies of Clement of Alexandria about the rites of the Eleusinian mysteries (p. 98, only the Russian translation is given, without specifying the cited work) and the cult of Cybele and Attis (p. 103, the translation, the original text, and a link to a place in the cited work); on p. 116 there is a quote from a “famous French scientist” without reference to the publication: it is unclear whether the author is ashamed to refer openly to Ernest Renan, or the editor. However, from the point of view of historiographical relevance, Renan’s works on Christianity have rather a fictional value. On page 93, Walter Burkert is named a Swiss philologist, probably because most of his academic career was spent at the University of Zurich. It would probably be more correct to call him a “Swiss professor”, since he did not renounce

German citizenship (unlike the German classics of an earlier generation who were forced to emigrate — Werner Jaeger, for example).

In general, the book by A. V. Belousov, despite the short format training manuals, is a strong contribution to the little explored by historians of religion and Churches in the region, representing the knowledge of a historian or a religious scholar to master in a related field outside the highly specialized research. Fundamental philological education of A. V. Belousov, combined with immersion in the historical context of religiosity (mostly Greek-speaking part of) the Roman ecumene are unique to our time is the phenomenon, typical for most of the last century a type of “classic” — a man equally with a knowledge of the ancient languages, and ancient history: meticulously supporting each hypothesis the relevant quote from the source, it creates a wonderful image of the ancient times described as exciting and convincing.