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## ARCTOS – ACTA PHILOLOGICA FENNICA

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## LUCRETIUS, *IMPIETAS* AND RELIGIOUS DEVIANCE

VISA HELENIUS\*

**Abstract:** Lucretius' Epicurean manifesto *De rerum natura* includes criticism of different aspects of ancient culture, such as classical mythology. Although from the textual evidence it is indisputable that he criticises the traditional Roman religion and its customs, the claim, defended in this article, that Lucretius was a religiously deviant thinker in a potentially harmful way for the ruling elite is controversial. It is controversial because there was, to some extent, freedom of religion in the late Roman republic. However, I argue that those in power had weighty reasons to consider *De rerum natura* as a religiously deviant work and thus Lucretius as an impious thinker (i.e., a person who lacks reverence towards the Roman gods and religious traditions). To be precise, his views are, even in the Roman intellectual context, radical. I use Varro's *theologia tripertita* ('threefold theology'), the sociological definition of religious deviance by Fritz Sack and John Scheid's terminology of Roman religion to analyse Lucretius' position.

**Keywords:** *De rerum natura*; Lucretius; religious deviance; Epicureanism; Roman religion; *theologia tripertita*

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The Epicurean manifesto *De rerum natura* ('On the Origin of Things') by Titus Lucretius Carus (first half of the first c. BCE) – hereafter abbreviated to DRN – includes unconventional theological views and critique both against superstitious traditional beliefs and mythological explanations<sup>1</sup> as well as the customs of Roman religion and the Roman politico-religious system.<sup>2</sup> Concerning the theological views of Lucretius, I have argued elsewhere that the DRN does not contain sufficient information about the true nature of the gods; it is even possible that Lucretius argues implicitly for atheism.<sup>3</sup> As regards the criticism, his standpoint raises a question: Is it possible that the Roman ruling elite perceived Lucretius' views as a threat? This question is important for the studies of religious deviance in antiquity, the connection between philosophy and religion, the late Roman counter-culture and, more generally, social deviant behaviour.<sup>4</sup> This article contributes to these fields of research although mostly to the first. Jörg Rüpke explains the importance of the study of religious deviance of antiquity as follows: "deviance and the evidence of behaviour called deviant offer an important insight both into public religious norms and into the primacy and persistence of individual religious experience and claims built upon it."<sup>5</sup> This article primarily examines the connection between the criticism expressed in the DRN and the Roman religion. The two-part research question is: How does the DRN represent *impietas*, and how is this related to religious deviance in the late Roman context? It is to be noted that there is no evidence as to how the elite reacted to the DRN (if they reacted at all), and that the question whether Lucretius' DRN was perceived as a religiously deviant work by the elite is challenging since to some extent there was intellectual freedom in the late Republic.<sup>6</sup> However, I offer a novel interpretation of this complex issue by means of contextualisation and a textual analysis.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding the first, see Lucr. 1,44-49; 5,146-155; regarding the second, see Lucr. 1,62-126; 5,114-125; regarding the third, see Lucr. 2,600-659 and 680; 5,114-125; 6,379-422.

<sup>2</sup> Cf., e.g., Lucr. 5,110-114 and 1198-1240; 6,379-383.

<sup>3</sup> Helenius 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the first, see Rüpke 2016b; regarding the second, see Most 2003; regarding the third, see Beard – Crawford 1999; regarding the fourth, see Goode 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Rüpke 2016b, VII.

<sup>6</sup> North 2000, 56; Scheid 2003, 28 and 29.

<sup>7</sup> Lucretius' theological and religious views and their various connections have been interpreted differently: John Colman (2009) examines Lucretius' views regarding religion and politics and their

I argue that the ruling elite of the late Roman republic had reasons to consider Lucretius' DRN as a religiously deviant work. Specifically, some claims of the DRN are radical even in the Roman intellectual context, which I analyse and explain. I also apply Marcus Terentius Varro's (116–27 BCE) *theologia tripertita* ('threefold theology'), the sociological definition of religious deviance by Fritz Sack and John Scheid's terminology of Roman religion. My primary sources are the DRN by Lucretius and that part of Augustine of Hippo's (354–430) *De civitate Dei contra paganos* ('The City of God', 426), in which he describes Varro's *theologia tripertita*. The latter concerns Varro's view of the philosophy of religion, which is presented originally in his lost work *Antiquitates rerum humanarum et divinarum* ('Antiquities of Human and Divine Things'). Furthermore, I believe that the *theologia tripertita* can be applied to the DRN since Varro was Lucretius' contemporary and his threefold theology is thus suitable for the analysis of Lucretius' views. First, I clarify the context of the DRN and the nature of Roman religion, both its tolerant and intolerant aspects. Second, I deal with the term religious deviance and other relevant terms, such as *pietas*, *impietas*, *religio* and *superstitio* and Varro's *theologia tripertita*. Third, I analyse four passages from the DRN in connection with the object of this study and offer a commentary and interpretative remarks. Fourth, I explain on what grounds Lucretius' DRN can be considered an impious work and an instance of religious deviance in the Roman context.

## 1. Contextual remarks

Most of Lucretius' life is unknown, and the DRN is the main source of our

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connection with modern atheism; Martin Devecká (2021) considers how Roman *religio* and ghosts are linked with Lucretius' philosophy; Juraj Franek (2011) explains how Lucretius can be seen as the precursor of contemporary critique of religion; I argue (Helenius 2021) that Lucretius' view of the gods leads to a hidden dilemma and explain how he may implicitly endorse atheism; Herbert Howe (1957) clarifies Lucretius' view of *religio* and its context; Jacob Mackey (2022) considers the connection between Lucretius' philosophy, ancient cults and the modern cognitive science of religion; John Minyard (1985) examines the background and intellectual history of Lucretius' philosophy and his radical societal mission; Alessandro Schiesaro (2007) clarifies Lucretius connection to Roman politics, history and *religio*; Lawrence Springer (1977) thinks about Lucretius' view of *religio*, *solvo* and *ratio*.

knowledge about him.<sup>8</sup> It is likely that Lucretius was a Roman citizen, possibly of aristocratic birth, who acted in the Roman literary circles:<sup>9</sup> a piece of critical evidence is that the DRN is dedicated to a Roman aristocrat named Memmius,<sup>10</sup> a person whom Lucretius addresses many times.<sup>11</sup> The DRN represents Epicureanism,<sup>12</sup> according to which friendship, modest pleasures and a tranquil life are the greatest good.<sup>13</sup> However, Lucretius does not only aim to introduce Epicureanism to Roman audiences but also applies this doctrine to Roman culture.<sup>14</sup> One problem is that Lucretius discusses theological, religious and political matters in various places in the DRN, thus requiring that the whole work is considered.

The DRN was written during the turbulent end of the Roman Republic. Although there has been disagreement about the nature and consequences of the collapse,<sup>15</sup> Jürgen von Ungern-Sternberg explains the end of the Roman Republic as being violent and a “genuine crisis whose problems should not be minimized[.]”<sup>16</sup> John Minyard summarises that “[t]he crisis was, at least, political, military, cultural, and intellectual [...] [and] perhaps also social and economic.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the first half of the last century BCE in Rome included many societal problems, which culminated in wars and barbarism. For example, the Social War (91–81 BCE) claimed about one hundred thousand lives, and many thousands of Spartacus’ men were crucified along *Via Appia* at the end of the Third Servile War (73–71 BCE). Considering this background, I note that cultural criticism of the DRN<sup>18</sup> is not surprising. Following this line of argumentation, Mary Beard and Michael Crawford have propounded that there

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<sup>8</sup> Holford-Strevens 2002; Trépanier 2023, section 1.

<sup>9</sup> Bailey 1947, 5–8.

<sup>10</sup> Trépanier 2023, section 1.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g. Lucr. 1,42; 5,1282.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g. Lucr. 1,62–79; 3,1–30; cf. Rawson 1985, 285.

<sup>13</sup> For more on Epicureanism, see Konstan 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Barbour 2007, 150 and 151; Beard – Crawford 1999, 23; Helenius 2021, 61–65; Long 2003, 196.

<sup>15</sup> Beard – Crawford 1999, 1; von Ungern-Sternberg 2004, 105 and 106.

<sup>16</sup> Von Ungern-Sternberg 2004, 105 and 106.

<sup>17</sup> Minyard 1985, 1.

<sup>18</sup> See Barbour 2007, 149–151; Schiesaro 2007.

was then a counterculture of literary circles including Lucretius.<sup>19</sup> Based on this perspective,<sup>20</sup> it can be argued that Lucretius' criticism concerns the Roman ruling elite and their values. Since politics and religion were intertwined at that time,<sup>21</sup> it is not surprising that Lucretius' criticism also concerned the traditional Roman religion.

The Roman religion was a fusion of foreign influences,<sup>22</sup> with the Greek polytheistic religions being very influential.<sup>23</sup> Regarding the characteristics of Roman religion, two issues should be noted: only a limited number of sources remain on Roman religious actions and customs,<sup>24</sup> and a clear-cut definition of Roman religion is impossible since it was "a vast category, comprising many different elements"<sup>25</sup> with complex questions about religious agency, identity and

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<sup>19</sup> Beard and Crawford (1999, 23) specify: "A different use of Greek philosophy is shown by the philosophical poem of Lucretius [...] *De rerum natura*. Rather than integrating the Roman with the Greek, this Epicurean poem implicitly and explicitly attacks some of the most traditional Roman religious and cultural attitudes. This raises the problem of what we may call counter-culture. By the late second century, literature was used at Rome to attack traditional aristocratic values and to present a positive alternative. This was a result of the tremendous cultural take-off – whose impetus was such that it could not any longer be delimited by the needs of the governing class – and also of the growing number of independent writers. [...] Our picture of literary activity in Rome and Italy in the first century is thus one of activity over an enormous range, accessible in common to writer and reader alike."

<sup>20</sup> See Barbour 2007, 150 and 151; Long 2003, 195 and 196; Minyard 1985, 69 and 70; Schiesaro 2007.

<sup>21</sup> North 2000, 29; Scheid 2003, *passim*.

<sup>22</sup> North 2000, 15 and 16; Rüpke 2007b, 2–4; Scheid 2003, 8.

<sup>23</sup> See North 2000, *passim*; Rüpke 2004, *passim*; Rüpke 2018, *passim*; Scheid 2003, *passim*. The Greeks did not have a separate word for religion; cf. θρησκεία: religious worship, cult, ritual. Greek religions were not monolithic entities as each πόλις ("city state") often had their own pantheon, mythology, religious calendar and religious festivals. Religious activity was also public and communal rather than private and individual (Bremmer 1994, 1; see also 93), and it was often based on an established scheme, such as ancestral or traditional customs with communal norms. One reason for this was that veneration of cosmological, social and political boundaries was thought to require individual and communal purity, which could only be maintained by this kind of a scheme. (Bremmer 1994, 4 and 5.) Nevertheless, there are verified cases, in which an individual introduced a new god for the establishment of a cult (Hupfloher 2012, 28 and 29). This shows that there was religious freedom early on and that Greek religion was based on traditions and innovations.

<sup>24</sup> Scheid 2003, 9 and 10.

<sup>25</sup> Beard – Crawford 1999, 25.

communication.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, as Rüpke remarks, “Roman religion neither existed as a discrete cultural practice in its own right nor could it be found hidden beneath other cultural practices.”<sup>27</sup> Despite these limitations, the Roman religion had recognisable characteristics. According to Scheid, *the central principles of Roman religion* are as follows: the religion did not have revelation, scripture, dogma, or orthodoxy; it was essentially ritualistic and traditional, although personal speculation was permitted;<sup>28</sup> religious practices were separated from explicit expressions of belief; it did not have initiation and teaching; it was a social religion; it did not have a moral code; it was not interested in transcendental ideas but earthly well-being, and was thus self-interested in a sense; communal and religious actions were intertwined; religious authority was shared; it did not have a founder or founders; it was a polytheistic religion.<sup>29</sup> These principles are justified on the grounds of the accumulated knowledge about the Roman religion. Furthermore, since the political function of religion became stronger in Rome, religion was “deeply involved in Roman political life at all periods we know about.”<sup>30</sup> Regarding the DRN, Lucretius’ criticism concerns both parts of this power distribution, that is, both Roman politics and the traditional religion.

Was there freedom of religion in Rome? Paradoxically, the Roman religion was both tolerant and compliant but also authoritarian and violent. Regarding the first, the Romans were tolerant and compliant only to some extent.<sup>31</sup> John North clarifies that there is evidence that “a major characteristic of the religious atmosphere was an openness to innovation and adjustment at almost all periods about which we have any worthwhile information at all.”<sup>32</sup> However, only those things were tolerated which were regarded as harmless and not potentially dangerous.<sup>33</sup> Christian Raschle remarks that the import of foreign gods and cults

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<sup>26</sup> Rüpke 2018, 11–21.

<sup>27</sup> Rüpke 2004, 179.

<sup>28</sup> Rüpke 2016a, *passim*.

<sup>29</sup> Scheid 2003, 18–20. For more on this topic, see Rüpke 2012.

<sup>30</sup> North 2000, 29; see Scheid 2003, 20 and 117–119.

<sup>31</sup> North 2000, 63; Scheid 2003, 28 and 29; Raschle 2020, 88 and 89.

<sup>32</sup> North 2000, 56.

<sup>33</sup> North 2000, 63.

into Rome was “an integral part of Rome’s political culture[.]”<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the main restricting conditions were that unfamiliar religious individuals and groups must not be dangerous in any way, and that the minimal core of public religion must not be harmed; this core consists of certain norms and rules regarding religious action.<sup>35</sup> I clarify this requirement by means of the character of Roman religion in the following sections. At this point, one may assume that Roman religion was mostly tolerant towards non-traditional as long as the “the minimal core” of public religion was respected.

Nevertheless, Roman religion had a darker side: it was occasionally authoritarian, conservative, narrow-minded and violent. There were “professional bearers of traditions” in Lucretius’ time, such as priests, who oversaw the fulfilment of religious duties. The *raison d’être* of the allowable religious knowledge was to safeguard Roman ancestral traditions.<sup>36</sup> Those norms, customs, individuals and issues, which were conceived as holy (*sanctus*), must not be offended at all. The holy issues included among other things, city boundaries, laws, treaties, tribunes of the people, official ambassadors, tombs, sacred objects and, in certain cases, deities. Consequently, impious acts<sup>37</sup> disturbing the correct performance of rituals or offending against a deity whether accidental (*imprudens*) or deliberate offences (*prudens dolo malo*) were punishable acts.<sup>38</sup>

Regarding Roman religious intolerance, the ruling elite organised wide-ranging persecutions and violent measures in the late Republic. I present three striking examples: first, a persecution took place against the old cult of Bacchus in 130s BCE, despite the cult having connections with the local and traditional cult of Liber Patre. For some reason, the ruling elite experienced that the cult was a threat to the Roman order. North considers that the elite most likely conceived the cult of Bacchus as a challenger to them since it was widespread and popular

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<sup>34</sup> Raschle 2020, 87 and 89.

<sup>35</sup> Rüpke 2016b, 12–32, 113 and 114.

<sup>36</sup> Rüpke 2016b, 31, 32 and 106.

<sup>37</sup> For examples, see Scheid 2003, 27 and 28.

<sup>38</sup> Scheid 2003, 25–27. It was in the late fourth century, when alternative religious knowledge (see Rüpke 2016b, 38–42) became generally problematic. E.g., traditional polytheistic cults, Judaism and Christian sects were labelled as heretical by followers of the Nicaean Christianity, which was also defined as Rome’s official *religio* (Kahlos 2009, section 6.1).

and had a structured hierarchy.<sup>39</sup> In other words, the power of the cult had grown too great. Second, the elite conducted violent measures against the cults of Isis and Serapis in the first c. BCE. The problems between the Romans and these cults originated from the tensions between Romans and Egyptians. Consequently, the Senate ordered an expulsion of the priests of Isis and Serapis and the destruction of their altars on Capitoline hill in 58 BCE. In 53 BCE, it was decided that privately erected shrines of the cult of Isis were to be prohibited with the aim of banning the cult from both the religious centre and the perimeter of Rome, that is, the *pomerium*. In 48 BCE, the precincts of Isis and Serapis on Capitoline hill were destroyed since *haruspices* ('soothsayers') accused the cults of a bad *prodigium* ('omen'). Recent studies about these acts of violence were focused on the concepts of *mos maiorum* (Roman traditional customs) and *Romanitas* (Roman cultural identity) as well as connected to racial prejudices and xenophobic issues, although the main motivation for the violence was political.<sup>40</sup> Third, there were a total of fourteen expulsions of notorious astrologers between 139 BCE and 175 CE. It is remarkable that violent persecution was directed towards individuals rather than groups and religious monuments; the individuals were, according to Raschle, "street astrologers, philosophers and esoteric jacks-of-all-trades with non-elite customers." One reason for the persecutions was to allow the religious authorities to maintain control over divination and prophecy since the street astrologers and other soothsayers affected public opinion with their views and rumours. Raschle also remarks that those who were in the favour of the elite "might attract political criticism but tended not to be targeted with expulsion."<sup>41</sup> This observation is important: those who were under the protection of the elite, could express their opinions more freely. Nevertheless, the protection of the rulers was not limitless in antiquity, as witnessed by the cases of Socrates (death penalty in 399 BCE), Cicero (exile in 58 BCE, murdered in 43 BCE), Seneca (forced to commit suicide in 65) and Epictetus (banishment from Rome c. 68). In my view, this reflects the complex relationship between the rulers and intellectuals; there was, in the end, a thin line between protection and sympathy and repulsion and hate.

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<sup>39</sup> North 2000, 63 and 64.

<sup>40</sup> Raschle 2020, 92–98.

<sup>41</sup> Raschle 2020, 100–102.

To summarise, the claim that Roman religion was predominantly or exclusively tolerant and compliant is untrue since the Roman religious mindset certainly was not liberal and broad-minded at all times; it was even occasionally violent.

## 2. Religious deviance, *impietas* and Varro's threefold theology

The intolerance of the Roman religion is linked with religious deviance, as I explain in the following. However, the question is how should “religious deviance” be defined here? Consequently, “religious” in this context means anything which is related to religion, and by “religion” a shared frame of reference to theology, belief, worship and customs; there are, of course, individual belief systems and religions, but this article is concerned with communal and social religions, which is what the Roman religion was essentially. Regarding the concept of deviance, I follow Sack's sociological definition, which is summarised by Rüpke as follows:

“Deviance [*Abweichung*] is any activity perceived to infringe a generally valid norm of a society or of a particular group within that society. Thus deviance is not a phenomenon that is regarded merely as atypical or unusual [...] [.] In order for behaviour to be regarded as deviant, it must be judged to offend against binding, socially defined standards. And, as many such standards, but not others, are codified in statutes, the phenomenon of deviance includes criminal behaviour [*kriminelles Verhalten*] [...] but also behaviour that, while not regarded as illegal, is generally seen as unethical, immoral, eccentric, indecent, or simply ‘unhealthy’ [*krank*].”<sup>42</sup>

According to this definition, deviant behaviour is something that is opposed to accepted standards or ways of behaving in society or any group within society.<sup>43</sup> It consists of two components, which I call *proper illegal activity* and *otherwise exceptionable activity*. According to the first, serious deviant actions are legally punishable, and according to the latter, lesser deviant actions are only

<sup>42</sup> Rüpke 2016b, 3, transl. Richardson; orig. Sack 2007, 184.

<sup>43</sup> For more on deviance and deviant behaviour, see Goode 2015.

socially reprehensible. Furthermore, deviant behaviour is deliberate, so that a deviant person acts for reasons.

In the following, I make three claims and present two comments. I begin with Sack's definition, which is suitable for a religious context since religious action is very often public, social and rule based. Consequently, proper illegal religious activity is seen to include blasphemy, heresies and violations of other religious taboos,<sup>44</sup> whereas the otherwise exceptionable religious activity can include, for example, heterodoxic theological beliefs and radical religious ways of life and customs, such as self-punishment. Second, I claim that Sack's definition is suitable for the context of Roman religion because it was public, social and rule based as shown by Scheid's principles. Thus, the question is not whether there was religious deviance in the late Republic, but *who were the perpetrators that were considered to be religiously deviant and on what grounds*.<sup>45</sup> Third, I claim that Sack's definition is compatible with the concept of *impietas*, which I explain a little later in the text. Regarding the comments, first, I think that Sack's definition can be applied in the case of Lucretius. This application does not lead to an anachronistic result since the definition is general enough to concern many cases of deviant social action; such action was found in Rome, as we saw in the three examples.<sup>46</sup> My second comment is explanatory. Religious deviance relates to *religious oppression* and *violence* because religious deviant behaviour can be associated with such actions by those in power,<sup>47</sup> I conclude, therefore, that there was religious oppression and violence in the Roman republic, as was exemplified by the three examples.

The key concepts of Roman religion included *sacer*, *sacrum*, *profanus*, *religiosus*, *sanctus*, *pius*, *pietas*, *impius*, *impietas*, *religio* and *superstitio*.<sup>48</sup> Only the following are relevant for my argument: *Religiosus* applied in a broader sense to pious people. *Sanctus* ('holy') was, Scheid defines, "a term applied to anything which it was a religious offence to violate[.]" such as "city boundaries, certain laws, treaties, tribunes of the people, and official Roman ambassadors"; *sanctus* also applied to "anything inviolable and therefore pure [such as] tombs[.] [...]"

<sup>44</sup> For more on this topic, see Allan 2018.

<sup>45</sup> See Rüpke 2016b, VII and 9–11.

<sup>46</sup> For more on the limits of this approach, see Rüpke 2016b, 91 and 92.

<sup>47</sup> Bremmer 2020; Cliteur 2010, 242; Dijkstra – Raschle 2020; cf. Cavanaugh 2009, 3, 4 and 7.

<sup>48</sup> Scheid 2003, 22–27.

sacred objects and, in certain cases, [...] the deities themselves”. *Pietas*, Scheid continues, “covered the correct relations with parents, friends and fellow-citizens as well as the correct attitude with regard to the gods”, and also implied purity. As regards *impietas*, it was the opposite of *pietas* and implied impurity. An act of *impietas* was, according to Scheid, either “accidental or deliberate [...] with malicious intent”. In the latter case, the act was criminal and inexpiable, and the offender remained forever impious and could never be expiated. Scheid then goes on to say that *religio* had two definitions. The first concerned “a set of formal, objective rules, bequeathed by tradition” regarding religious obligations, and it was not “designated [...] any direct, personal, sentimental link between an individual and a deity[.]”<sup>49</sup> The second comes from Cicero: [*religio*] *deorum cultu pio continetur*,<sup>50</sup> that is, “[religion] consists in piously worshipping [gods]”<sup>51</sup> or “the pious cult of the gods”[.]<sup>52</sup> In my view, *religio* was thus related to communal rules or norms regarding religious actions and worshipping deities. To be precise, both definitions concern the common acceptable ways of describing religious actions, although it is not likely that every rule or norm was formalised. Then, personal religious and theological beliefs, such as idiosyncratic theological beliefs, were not relevant. Lastly, *superstitio* referred to “a whole set of religious attitudes in the widest sense”, such as acts of reconciliation for wrongdoings. It was caused by fear of the gods, in which case the gods were conceived as evil and tyrannical (cf. δεισιδαιμονία).<sup>53</sup> I point out that the concepts of *religio* and *superstitio* are related to the DRN since although Lucretius only uses the first word<sup>54</sup> he occasionally imbues with the latter meaning, as I explain below.<sup>55</sup> I

<sup>49</sup> Scheid 2003, 22. Cf. the meanings of *religio* in *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *religio*.

<sup>50</sup> Cic. *nat. deor.* 1,117.

<sup>51</sup> Transl. Rackham 1952.

<sup>52</sup> Scheid 2003, 23; transl. Lloyd.

<sup>53</sup> Scheid 2003, 22, 23 and 25–27; transl. Lloyd. *Superstitio* designated to the religion of a false god or pagan gods and *religio* belief in the one god but not until the Christian period (Scheid 2003, 22 and 23).

<sup>54</sup> This result is based on searches in the Perseus Digital Library and Digital Loeb Classical Library (LCL 181).

<sup>55</sup> For more on *religare* and *relegere*, see Scheid 2003, 22. For more on *religio*, see Beard – North – Price 1996, 215–219 and *passim*; Gordon 2008; Rüpke 2018, 180 and 181. For more on *superstitio*, see Beard – North – Price 1996, 215–219; Gordon 2008; Rüpke 2007a, *passim*; Rüpke 2016b, 6–9.

also explain how these terms and especially *impietas* are related to the DRN.

Regarding Sack's definition of religious deviance and Scheid's terminology of Roman religion, I claim that they are compatible. For example, there is a connection between the idea of deliberate *impietas* and Sack's definition, according to which serious deviant actions are communally and legally punishable; due to the fact that a deliberate act of *impietas* was against both the concepts of *sanctus* ('holy') and *pietas* ('piety', 'purity'). Deviant actions were also those deemed as being against both definitions of *religio* ('traditional rules of religious obligations', 'the pious cult of the gods') and pious people (*religiosus*). Therefore, a deliberate act of *impietas* was a genuine illegal activity and subject to punishment and as such was a religiously deviant action for the Romans. In other words, since a deliberate act of *impietas* was against the socially defined religious standards of Rome, it was an instance of a punishable religious deviance.

A philosophy of religion already existed in Lucretius' time,<sup>56</sup> and Varro was one of the Roman philosophers of religion. His view of *theologia tripertita*<sup>57</sup> is relevant in Lucretius' case since it offers perspectives on Lucretius' religious deviance. Augustine describes Varro's threefold theology as follows:

[1] [d]einde illud quale est, quod tria genera theologiae dicit esse, id est rationis quae de diis explicatur, eorumque unum mythicon appellari, alterum physicon, tertium civile? Deinde ait: Mythicon appellant, quo maxime utuntur poetae; physicon, quo philosophi, civile, quo populi. Latine si usus admitteret, genus, quod primum posuit, fabulare appellare inus; sed fabulosum dicamus; a fabulis enim mythicon dictum est, quoniam μῦθος Graece fabula dicitur. Secundum autem ut naturale dicatur, iam et consuetude locutionis admitlit. Tertium etiam ipse Latine enuntiavit, quod civile appellatur. Deinde ait: "Mythicon appellant, quo maxime utuntur poetae; physicon, quo philosophi; civile, quo populi."<sup>58</sup>

"[1] Next, what is the significance of [Varro's] saying that there are three kinds of theology, that is, of the account that is given of the gods? Of these one is called mythical, another physical, and the third, civil. If Latin usage

<sup>56</sup> Scheid 2003, 182–186; see Most 2003.

<sup>57</sup> For more on Varro's *theologia tripertita*, see Lieberg 1982; Rüpke 2014; Van Nuffelen 2010.

<sup>58</sup> Aug. *civ.* 6, 5 p. 252, 17–27 and p. 253, 1–4.

allowed, we should call the kind that he placed first “fabular.” But let us call it “fabulous,” for the term “mythical” is derived from fables, since in Greek a fable is called *mythos*. The second kind may be called “natural,” as common usage already approves. To the third kind Varro himself gives a Latin name, that of “civil.” Then he continues: “They call the theology that is used chiefly by poets ‘mythical,’ that used by philosophers ‘physical,’ and that used by city-states ‘civil.’”<sup>59</sup>

Therefore, Varro’s three kinds of theology are the mythical (*mythicos* or μυθικός) – or fabulous – the physical (*physicon* or φυσικόν) and the civil (*civile*); the target groups of these are poets, philosophers and the population and rulers of Rome.

What precisely does Varro’s *theologia tripertita* mean? Augustine explains that in mythical theology the fictious gods of poets are anthropomorphic, contemptible, miserable and unbelievable creatures.<sup>60</sup> This theology is linked with the concept of *superstitio*, according to which people believe in the existence of evil or senseless divine powers due to fear of the gods. Although Lucretius was a poet, he did not support this theology, as demonstrated below. It is to be noted that criticism against mythical theology was probably not considered very impious since the Roman pantheon was not an organised or doctrinal system (cf. Scheid’s principles). Further, Augustine describes the second item on the list, the physical (or natural, cf. φυσικός) theology as follows: Varro thought that there were diverse gods for the philosophers, which were created or founded by means of reason. Concerning the connection between the first two theologies, Augustine remarks that *superstitio* was widespread among Romans, so that harmful beliefs about the gods controlled the everyday life of many. Mythical theology was popular in the Roman culture, whereas more critical physical theology was only mainly possible in the philosophical schools.<sup>61</sup> Concerning Varro, he thought, based on Augustine’s description, that physical theology was more truthful and practical than mythical theology, despite the latter being much more popular. Lucretius’ DRN has clearly a connection with the second theology as it represents physical theology since the world is explained

<sup>59</sup> Transl. Green 1963.

<sup>60</sup> Aug. *civ.* 6,5 p. 252,28–30 and p. 253,1–4.

<sup>61</sup> Aug. *civ.* 6,5 p. 253,10–32.

by reason and experience and not by mythology or fantasy. Third, Augustine describes that according to Varro's civil theology the citizens and the officials share norms regarding permitted religious customs, such as rites, beliefs and suitable worship. I would add that this theology clearly relates to the term *religio*, according to which there were normative communal rules regarding religious obligations, which were transferred by tradition. Augustine summarises that Varro thought that the first theology was manifested in theatres, the second in philosophical and scientific explanation and the third in politics and communal activities. Augustine concludes that Varro preferred physical theology because it was concerned with the world and truth and not false (but perhaps practical) beliefs and fiction, such as false theological views of traditional folklore, which belong to mythical and civil theologies. Therefore, Varro thought that the first and the third theology were essentially connected since the rulers made use of mythical theology in order to affect and govern the masses.<sup>62</sup> Regarding the DRN, Lucretius argues for Epicureanism and against Roman traditional religion, which had an association with rites and rituals, as demonstrated below.

Does Varro's *theologia tripertita* reflect a general way of thinking of the late Roman republic? To begin with, Augustine mentions that Varro writes about Quintus Mucius Scaevola Pontifex (140–82 BCE)<sup>63</sup> who thought like him that there were three kinds of gods, that is, the gods of poets, of philosophers and of statesmen (*principes civitatis*). Nonetheless, Scaevola judged, according to Varro, that the first were trifling since the poets had invented unworthy entities, the second do not suit states since they are superfluous and harmful for the people to know about, and the third are not based on true images of gods.<sup>64</sup> In modern studies, Godo Lieberg argues that an idea or theory of a threefold theology was popular in antiquity but was applied differently. Varro and Dio Chrysostom used it explicitly.<sup>65</sup> Scheid explains that the Romans began to systematically reflect on their traditions in the third century BCE due to the influence of Hellenism, which led to critical analyses of the Roman religion, and that Varro was certainly

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<sup>62</sup> Aug. *civ.* 6,5, p. 254,14–31 and p. 255, 1 and 2.

<sup>63</sup> Scaevola, who, in a sense is a founding father of the scientific jurist's law, was murdered publicly by the supporters of Marius in 82 (see Tuori 2004).

<sup>64</sup> Aug. *civ.* 4,27, p. 179,19–27.

<sup>65</sup> Lieberg 1982, 52.

involved in this tradition.<sup>66</sup> Peter Van Nuffelen propounds that *Antiquitates rerum humanarum et divinarum* was likely “a work written with a philosophical program behind [Roman religion]”.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, I conclude that Varro’s threefold theology accurately reflects the general view of theology at that time. Despite Rüpke’s remark that Varro’s book “can no longer be understood as part of the Roman Republic” due to the time of its publication, which was possibly as late as in 47 BCE,<sup>68</sup> I think that Varro’s *theologia tripertita* is applicable to the DRN because Lucretius lived on the threshold of the imperial era.

### 3. Lucretius on the Roman traditional religion

In this section, I analyse four passages of the DRN, in which Lucretius deals with mythological, religious and political topics. I also present some commentary and interpretative remarks. To begin with, Lucretius praises Epicurus as follows:

[h]umana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret / in terris oppressa gravi  
sub religione, / quae caput a caeli regionibus ostendebat / horribili super  
aspectu mortalibus instans, / primum Graius homo mortalis tollere contra /  
est oculos ausus primusque obsistere contra, / quem neque fama deum nec  
fulmina nec minitanti / murmure compressit caelum, sed eo magis acrem  
/ inritat animi virtutem, effringere ut arta / naturae primus portarum  
claustra cupiret. [...] / quare religio pedibus subiecta vicissim / opteritur,  
nos exaequat victoria caelo.<sup>69</sup>

“When man’s life lay for all to see foully grovelling upon the ground, crushed beneath the weight of Superstition [or Religion], which displayed her head from the regions of heaven, lowering over mortals with horrible aspect, a man of Greece was the first that dared to uplift mortal eyes against her, the first to make stand against her; for neither fables of the gods could quell him, nor thunderbolts, nor heaven with menacing roar,

<sup>66</sup> Scheid 2003, 176–178.

<sup>67</sup> Van Nuffelen 2010, 186.

<sup>68</sup> Rüpke 2016b, 17.

<sup>69</sup> Lucr. 1,62–71 and 78–79.

but all the more they goaded the eager courage of his soul, so that he should desire, first of all men, to shatter the confining bars of nature's gates. [...] Therefore Superstition [or Religion] is now in her turn cast down and trampled underfoot, whilst we by the victory are exalted high as heaven."<sup>70</sup>

Lucretius argues here figuratively and in the spirit of naturalism how Epicurus defeated fear of the gods and the wrong kind of traditional beliefs. This may mean that Epicurus was against religion in general, which is hinted at in the translation by Cyril Bailey.<sup>71</sup> However, the meaning of *religio* is ambiguous because it can refer to either *religio*, that is, a set of formal and objective traditional rules, or *superstitio*, that is, a set of superstitious religious attitudes, which are caused by the fear of gods (see Scheid's explanation above). William Rouse and Martin Smith clarify that *religio* does not mean 'religion' but 'false religion', which refers to the traditional religion, according to which gods govern the world.<sup>72</sup> Paul Friedlander again argues that Lucretius had to use the word *religio* instead of *superstitio* because of metre, and thus one of Lucretius' wordplays is to combine the meanings of *religio* and *superstitio* in one word.<sup>73</sup> Lee Fratantuono's interpretation is that Lucretius does not argue for atheism here, despite the fact that he may not have believed in the existence of immortal beings.<sup>74</sup> I agree with him: it is possible that Lucretius endorses implicitly atheism, as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>75</sup> Nonetheless, Lucretius does not propound here an anti-religious view but takes an anti-superstitious and naturalistic stand.<sup>76</sup>

Lucretius criticises mythological explanations as follows:

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<sup>70</sup> Transl. Rouse – Smith 1992.

<sup>71</sup> Bailey 1947, 179 and 181.

<sup>72</sup> Rouse – Smith 1992, 9, nt. a.

<sup>73</sup> Friedlander 1941, 19.

<sup>74</sup> Fratantuono 2015, 23.

<sup>75</sup> Helenius 2021, 57–61.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Bailey 1947, 52–60. Springer suggests that Lucretius also means by *religio* any ideology that constrains man in his quest for truth (Springer 1977, 61), but this meaning, however, differs from the general definition of the word.

[1] *omnis enim per se divom natura necessesit / immortalis aeo summa cum pace fruatur / semota ab nostris rebus seiunctaque longe; / nam privata dolore omni, privata periculis / ipsa suis pollens opibus, nihil indiga nostri, / nec bene promeritis capitur neque tangitur ira. / [2] terra quidem vero caret omni tempore sensu, / et quia multarum potitur primordia rerum, / multa modis multis effert in lumina solis. / [3] hic si quis mare Neptunum Cereremque vocare / constituet fruges et Bacchi nomine abuti / mavolt quam laticis proprium proferre vocamen, / concedamus ut hic terrarum dictitet orbem / esse deum matrem, dum vera re tamen ipse / religione animum turpi contingere parcat.*<sup>77</sup>

“[1] For the very nature of divinity must necessarily enjoy immortal life in the deepest peace, far removed and separated from our affairs; for without any pain, without danger, itself mighty by its own resources, needing us not at all, it is neither propitiated with services nor touched by wrath. [2] The earth indeed lacks sensation at all times, and only because it receives into itself the first-beginnings of many things does it bring forth many in many ways into the sun’s light. [3] Here if anyone decides to call the sea Neptune, and corn Ceres, and to misapply the name of Bacchus rather than to use the title that is proper to that liquor, let us grant him to dub the round world Mother of the Gods, provided that he forbears in reality himself to infect his mind with base superstition.”<sup>78</sup>

This section consists of three parts. Lucretius begins by briefly describing his view of the Epicurean gods: they do not interact with our world, are not overwhelmed by emotions or have a desire for revenge and are not threaten by anything. Furthermore, gods do not live in our world but in a space between the worlds (*intermundia*; μετακόσμιον).<sup>79</sup> Since Lucretius does not deny the existence of gods explicitly and gives a vague description of their nature, it was difficult to accuse him of atheism. Nonetheless, there is a possibility that, ultimately, gods for him had no substantiality.<sup>80</sup> Second, Lucretius argues

<sup>77</sup> Lucr. 2,646–659 and 680.

<sup>78</sup> Transl. Rouse – Smith 1992.

<sup>79</sup> Bailey 1947, 69.

<sup>80</sup> Helenius 2021, 59–61.

that everything is based on the *primordia rerum*, ('atoms'), and consequently inorganic nature cannot be a sentient being. Third, he admits that someone can anthropomorphize inorganic nature, for example believing that Neptune is the sea – *as if* the sea were a divine entity – and speak of nature allegorically; however, he does not believe that this manner of speaking corresponds to reality. In other words, Lucretius refutes a mythological explanation, which was one root of Roman religion.<sup>81</sup> Bailey notes that although Lucretius speaks of the popular sense of Neptune and Bacchus, his criticism may be also directed to Stoicism, which contains arguments for personifications of nature.<sup>82</sup> The interpretation by Fratantuono is that Lucretius' main point is to offer a correct understanding of divinity, which concerns atoms and the materialistic world.<sup>83</sup> In my mind, this passage is illustrative as in it Lucretius answers three fundamental philosophical questions concerning theology, ontology and mythology: the human being has a vague conception of the (Epicurean) reclusive and remote gods by reason, atomism is true and mythological explanations are false.

Lucretius describes the harmful consequences of false beliefs and the wrong kind of piety in three separate parts of the fifth book:

[1] *qua prius adgrediar quam de re fundere fata / sanctius et multo certa  
ratione magis quam / Pythia quae tripode a Phoebi lauroque profatur,  
/ multa tibi expediam doctis solacia dictis[.] [...] [2] O genus infelix  
humanum, talia divis / cum tribuit facta atque iras adiunxit acerbas! /  
quantos tum gemitus ipsi sibi, quantaque nobis / volnera, quas lacrimas  
peperere minoribus nostris! / nec pietas ullast velatum saepe videri / vertier  
ad lapidem atque omnis accedere ad aras, / nec procumbere humi prostratum  
et pandere palmas / ante deum delubra, nec aras sanguine multo / spargere  
quadrupedum, nec votis nectere vota, / sed mage placata posse omnia mente  
tueri. [...] [3] usque adeo res humanas vis abdita quaedam<sup>84</sup> / obterit, et  
pulchros fascis saevasque secures / proculcare ac ludibrio sibi habere videtur.  
/ Denique sub pedibus tellus cum tota vacillat / concussaеque cadunt urbes  
dubiaeque minantur, / quid mirum si se temnunt mortalia saecula / atque*

<sup>81</sup> Scheid 2003, 178–181.

<sup>82</sup> Bailey 1947, 908 and 909.

<sup>83</sup> Fratantuono 2015, 126.

<sup>84</sup> Bailey 1947, 1519, clarifies that the expression *vis abdita quaedam* refers to atoms.

*potestates magnas mirasque relinquunt / in rebus viris divum, quae cuncta gubernent?*<sup>85</sup>

“[1] But before I begin to utter my oracles on this matter, more solemnly and with more certain reason than those which the Pythia declares from the tripod and laurel of Phoebus [that is, Apollo], I will expound to you many consolations in words of wisdom[.] [...] [2] O unhappy race of mankind, to ascribe such doings to the gods and to attribute to them bitter wrath as well! What groans did they then create for themselves, what wounds for us, what tears for generations to come! It is no piety to show oneself often with covered head, turning towards a stone and approaching every altar, none to fall prostrate upon the ground and to spread open the palms before shrines of the gods, none to sprinkle altars with the blood of beasts in showers and to link vow to vow; but rather to be able to survey all things with tranquil mind. [...] [3] So true is it that some hidden power grinds down humanity, and seems to trample upon the noble rods and the cruel axes, and hold them in derision. Then when the whole earth trembles beneath our feet, when cities are shaken and fall or threaten to fall, what wonder if the sons of men feel contempt for themselves, and acknowledge the great potency and wondrous might of gods in the world, to govern all things?”<sup>86</sup>

Initially, Lucretius argues that his philosophy gives better answers than the Pythian priestess and her prophesies. I interpret that this criticism as being directed to a Roman religious foundation and concerning the Sibylline Books; these had great importance in the religious history of Rome and the founding of different cults and were also used in political decisions.<sup>87</sup> According to tradition, the Sibylline Books came from the sibyl of Cumae, and Pythia, the priestess of the Temple of Apollo, was a successor of the sibyl of Delphi, who again was a contemporary of the sibyl of Cumae. Here, Lucretius is cunningly connecting Greek and Roman religious customs, although I argue that he is actually against this Roman foundation. Subsequently, Lucretius criticises certain Roman

<sup>85</sup> Lucr. 5,110–113, 1194–1203 and 1233–1240.

<sup>86</sup> Transl. Rouse – Smith 1992.

<sup>87</sup> North 2000, 54 and 55.

religious customs as not being true piety. Bailey enumerates these customs as follows:

“*velatum*: it was the Roman custom to pray with veiled head (*opero capite*)  
 [;] *vertier ad lapidem*: [...] the Roman approached with the statue of the  
 god on his right hand, then after making his prayer turned round facing  
 it and prostrated himself[;] [3] *omnis accedere ad aras*: ‘to approach  
 every altar’ [...] a Greek custom in origin, but by [Lucretius’] time firmly  
 implanted in Roman ritual[;] *procumbere humi prostatum*: the attitude  
 of worship in prostration after prayer[;] *pandere palmas*: the attitude of  
 prayer, in which the hands of were outstretched with upturned palms[;]  
*deum delubra*: refers [possibly] to the oriental cults [such as the cult of  
 Isis][;] *aras...spargere*: i.e. with the sacrificial blood of the victims[;] *votis  
 nectere vota*: [...] ‘to link prayer with prayer’ [which refers possibly to  
 votive-tablets.]”<sup>88</sup>

Bailey’s explanation seems fitting,<sup>89</sup> and thus Lucretius can be seen as criticising Roman religious customs. Fratantuono’s interpretation is that Lucretius begins to define further what real *pietas* is in this part: *pietas* does not consist of the conventional traditions of Roman liturgical and religious practices for Lucretius but is a form of contemplating the world in peace in the Epicurean way.<sup>90</sup> To be exact, Epicureans valued friendship, a tranquil life and moderate desires and believed that the remote gods are in a state of blessed happiness, which we should pursue.<sup>91</sup> Consequently, Lucretius reminds us that even rulers are subordinate to nature, such as natural disasters, and that ignorance of atomism and Epicureanism<sup>92</sup> leads to the fear of gods, superstition and irrational religions. Interestingly, Lucretius uses the expressions *pulchros fascis*, which refers to a fasces or a bundle of rods, and *saevas securis*, referring to an axe, which together formed a Roman ritual axe. Since lictors used these axes, they were a symbol of power. For this reason, I think that Lucretius is indirectly

<sup>88</sup> Bailey 1947, 1509, 1515 and 1516; bold print removed.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Scheid 2003, 11, 31–34, 79–93, 97–101 and 109.

<sup>90</sup> Fratantuono 2015, 381.

<sup>91</sup> Konstan 2022, section 6.

<sup>92</sup> Bailey 1947, 1513 and 1514.

criticising the traditional system of the ruling elite. As he has previously argued that it has many problems, it seems he believes that the traditional system should be replaced by Epicureanism and the elite should be converted to Epicureans.

Finally, Lucretius describes right and wrong beliefs about gods and their consequences:

[1] *[q]uae nisi respuis ex animo longeque remittis / dis indigna putare alienaque pacis eorum, / delibata deum per te tibi numina sancta / saepe oberunt; non quo violari summa deum vis / possit, ut ex ira poenas petere inbibat acris, / sed quia tute tibi placida cum pace quietos / constitues magnos irarum volvere fluctus, / nec delubra deum placido cum pectore adibis, / nec de corpore quae sancto simulacra feruntur / in mentes hominum divinae nuntia formae, / suscipere haec animi tranquilla pace valebis. [...]*  
 [2] *Hoc est igniferi naturam fulminis ipsam / perspicere et qua vi faciat rem quamque videre, / non Tyrrhena retro volventem carmina frustra / indicia occultae divum perquirere mentis[.]*<sup>93</sup>

“[1] Unless you spew all these errors out of your mind, and put far from you thoughts unworthy of the gods and alien to their peace, their holy divinity, impaired by you, will often do you harm; not that the supreme power of the gods is open to insult, so that it should in wrath thirst to inflict sharp vengeance, but because you yourself will imagine that they, who are quiet in their placid peace, are rolling great billows of wrath, you will not be able to approach their shrines with placid heart, you will not have the strength to receive with tranquil peace of spirit the images which are carried to men’s minds from their holy bodies, declaring what the divine shapes are.<sup>94</sup> [...] [2] This is to understand the true nature of the fiery thunderbolt, and to see by what power it plays its part; not by unrolling the scrolls of Tyrrhenian charms, vainly to search for signs of the hidden purpose of the gods[.]”<sup>95</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Lucr. 6,68–78 and 379–383.

<sup>94</sup> For more on *simulacra* and Lucretius’ theory of vision, see Lucr. 4,54–481.

<sup>95</sup> Transl. Rouse – Smith 1992.

Lucretius begins that the wrong beliefs about gods are not harmful for the gods – they may not even exist, as I have argued elsewhere<sup>96</sup> – except to the believers themselves. Thus, peace of mind and a tranquil religious and spiritual life are not possible because of the belief that these malicious gods can cause fear and anxiety. According to Bailey, this part is a rare exposition of the Epicurean religion and a metaphorical explanation of how Epicurus became a god among men.<sup>97</sup> To be precise, Bailey’s interpretation is only a figure of speech as Lucretius states elsewhere that Epicurus died like any other human.<sup>98</sup> Concerning the question of whether a good Epicurean could attend religious ceremonies, Fratantuono explains that Lucretius means here that belief in malicious gods prevents a peaceful mind including a reasonable religious life and thus is not a religious life.<sup>99</sup> I agree with this. Following this, Lucretius declares that the phenomenon of lighting cannot be understood as a source of the Etruscan lore of lighting divination, which was included in the holy books named *Tyrrhena carmina* (‘Etruscan Verses’ or ‘Incantations’). Bailey explains that Lucretius is here criticising superstitious beliefs in general as well as the Roman belief in divination by lighting<sup>100</sup> and possibly indirectly a Stoic belief in *μαντική* (‘divination’).<sup>101</sup> Fratantuono agrees with this by explaining that divine power was associated with lighting by means of these Etruscan charms.<sup>102</sup>

My reading of the previous four passages from the DRN is as follows: first, Lucretius opposes Roman *superstitio* in general and those forms of *religio*, which are related to the traditional religion, because he endorses Epicureanism. These doctrines are incompatible. Second, Lucretius denies that mythological explanations can be correct in view of the fact that atomism holds true. Regarding theology, he propounds an unconventional and ambiguous view about the reclusive material gods – it is possible the Epicurean gods are not real beings for Lucretius. Third, he verifiably opposes the traditional Roman religious foundation and different customs of Roman religion including the prophecies

<sup>96</sup> Helenius 2021, 57–61.

<sup>97</sup> Bailey 1947, 1560.

<sup>98</sup> Lucr. 3,1042–1044.

<sup>99</sup> Fratantuono 2015, 413.

<sup>100</sup> See Scheid 2003, 24 and 25.

<sup>101</sup> Bailey 1947, 1610 and 1612. For more on divination in the Stoic philosophy, see Man 2019.

<sup>102</sup> Fratantuono 2015, 424.

of oracles and the oracle tradition, the divination of holy books (the *Tyrrhena carmina*) and religious traditional rituals, such as praying with a veiled head and sacrificial killings; the Epicurean naturalism, materialism and empirical scientific explanation refute the need of these customs. Fourth, Lucretius denies Roman traditional superstitious theology as he believes in Epicureanism and the Epicurean way of life. However, he does not intrinsically oppose religious life.

#### 4. Lucretius' *impietas* and religious deviance

Lastly, I will demonstrate in this section how the above-mentioned views of Lucretius are impious and how they represent religious deviance in the late republic context.

To begin with, the two last centuries of the Roman Republic were violent and volatile times,<sup>103</sup> and Roman politics and religion were intertwined in many ways. One example of this is that offices were shared, meaning that officials were often responsible for both political and religious duties.<sup>104</sup> It is a recurring societal phenomenon that cultural and intellectual forces, such as artists, musicians, poets and philosophers, oppose the dominant but repressive or failed or dysfunctional dominant political system and its powers structures, even at the risk of death. Therefore, since Lucretius was a poet and philosopher with critical aims, it is possible that he was an antagonist of this kind, as has been argued by many.<sup>105</sup> Because of Lucretius' critical attitude, it is also possible that the elite saw the DRN as a threat. However, this is questionable for the following reasons: first, because, to some extent, there was religious freedom in the late Republic.<sup>106</sup> Second, as Lucretius acted within Roman literary circles, he probably enjoyed the protection of the elite.<sup>107</sup> Third, since Lucretius' DRN represents a physical, or, even better, a philosophical theology on the grounds of Varro's *theologia tripertita*, Lucretius apparently could express his views more freely. Nevertheless,

<sup>103</sup> Minyard 1985, 1; von Ungern-Sternberg 2004.

<sup>104</sup> North 2000, 22, 29 and 30; Scheid 2003, 20.

<sup>105</sup> See e.g. Barbour 2007, 150 and 151; Beard – Crawford 1999, 23; Helenius 2021, 61–65; Howe 1957, 332 and 333; Long 2003, 196; Minyard 1985, 69 and 70; Rawson 1985, 3; Schiesaro 2007, 48–58.

<sup>106</sup> North 2000, 56; Scheid 2003, 28 and 29.

<sup>107</sup> Raschle 2020, 101.

I argue in the following paragraphs that the previously mentioned four passages of the DRN could easily be labelled as impious by the ruling elite.

Scheid defined *pietas* as being concerned with correct relationships with fellow-citizens and the correct attitude to the Roman gods and religious obligations. *Impietas* again implied impurity. Furthermore, a deliberate act of *impietas* with malicious intent was criminal and inexpiable, and since this was a serious wrongdoing, the offender remained impious and the act could not be expiated.<sup>108</sup>

As observed earlier, Lucretius declared in the first passage that Epicurus conquered the false traditional *religio* and its superstitious myths. This was also applicable to Roman religion since it was based on Greek myths<sup>109</sup> and on superstitions and fear of the gods.<sup>110</sup> The first passage could be conceived as impious since here Lucretius is against the holiness (*sanctus*) of the Roman gods, the traditional *pietas* ('the correct attitude regarding the gods') and the theological traditions of Greco-Roman *religio*. In the second passage, Lucretius propounds the unconventional theological view, according to which the gods do not care at all either about the world or human beings. He also endorses atomism, from which it follows that nature is thoroughly material. In that case, (inorganic) nature cannot be living and its phenomena cannot be identified with divine beings. Consequently, mythological explanations are false, and natural phenomena are not caused by divine powers. In my view, in the same passage Lucretius denies the importance of the traditional Roman theology and nullifies common Roman beliefs about the interaction between gods and human beings, such as offerings and vows, which enabled humans to pray and receive help from the gods.<sup>111</sup> Therefore, this criticism is against both definitions of *religio* ('a set of formal, objective rules, bequeathed by tradition', 'the pious cult of the gods'), and possibly also against the holiness of the gods indicating that Lucretius is against the correct attitude regarding the (traditional) gods (*pietas*), and *superstitio*, which was a measure used for control. In the third passage, Lucretius even mocks the prophesies of the oracles and the oracle tradition, denies the rationality of the traditional religious rituals, and hints that the Roman ruling

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<sup>108</sup> Scheid 2003, 26, 27 and 175.

<sup>109</sup> North 2000, 4.

<sup>110</sup> Scheid 2003, 152.

<sup>111</sup> Scheid 2003, 99-105.

elite should convert to Epicureanism. Consequently, he is against several central traditional issues, which were *sancta*, such as religious traditional laws, both ideas of Roman *religio* and even *religious*, that is, the pious Roman people and the elite. Regarding rituals, Lucretius is against Roman traditional burial customs,<sup>112</sup> which certainly belonged to *sanctus*.<sup>113</sup> This part of Lucretius' criticism is the most serious regarding his *impietas* as religious rituals were an essential if not the most pivotal part of Roman religion.<sup>114</sup> Harshly criticising these rituals was at least potentially an act of deliberate *impietas*. In the fourth passage, Lucretius declares that the traditional Roman superstitious theology leads to a poor life, and that divination by means of the holy Etruscan books is absurd. Since he praises Epicureanism and refutes the traditional theology and the tradition of divination through lighting, it is, in my view, obvious that he is against Roman *superstitio* and the traditional *religio* and its customs.

Overall, the four passages of the DRN are impious as Lucretius opposes certain central views, values and customs of the Roman culture, which were holy, and not allowed to be violated. However, personal speculation was permitted in Rome, and there was ideological tolerance as well as intellectual flexibility (cf. Scheid's principles), and the Epicureans were not considered potentially dangerous<sup>115</sup> or likely to commit violence. Nevertheless, Lucretius' views did violate at least the norm that the minimal core of public religion must not be harmed. In addition to which, as John Minyard describes, Lucretius had a broader intellectual aim:

*De rerum natura* is meant to be a service to the redefined *communis salus* of the Roman world. [...] *Communis salus* is to be located in the framework of *voluptas*, *amicitia*, *pietas*, *fides*, and *pax* (*hominum divumque*) in their Epicurean definitions, and in the riddance from our minds of civil *religio*, *imperium*, *ius*, and *virtus*.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Lucr. 3,870–893.

<sup>113</sup> Rüpke 2016b, 14.

<sup>114</sup> North 2000, 44–53; Scheid 2003, 77–126.

<sup>115</sup> Mackey 2022, 239.

<sup>116</sup> Minyard 1985, 69 and 70.

According to Minyard's reading, which I regard as plausible but not necessarily completely correct, Lucretius, in fact, was against the core of the *mos maiorum*; this was a convention of Roman traditional customs, and *Romanitas*, that is, the Roman cultural identity. If this is correct, Lucretius' attitude was revolutionary and his criticism very radical and severe. Specifically, his aim was to replace the entire Roman traditional cultural ideal with Epicureanism. This leads to the subject of religious deviance in antiquity. I have explained above how *impietas* and religious deviance are connected. Regarding the latter, some views of Lucretius in the DRN were unethical, immoral and indecent from the perspective of the Roman ruling elite since he opposes Roman traditional religious foundations, and the views and customs that the elite utilised in many ways. Furthermore, his views were eccentric as they greatly deviated from the traditional theology. He maintained that the Epicurean gods are unconventional since they barely have any causal powers at all or any interest in our world,<sup>117</sup> and it is even possible that they are not real beings. Therefore, I claim that the views of Lucretius fulfil Sack's criterion concerning otherwise exceptional activity, according to which a socially reprehensible deviant act is unethical, immoral, eccentric, indecent, or unhealthy. Furthermore, if Lucretius' DRN was perceived as impious by the elite, then Lucretius' action had a deliberate malicious intent for the Roman elite; his aim being an intentional societal change by instilling Epicureanism in the minds of the elite. Regarding this, I propose the following clarification by means of Varro's *theologia tripertita*: Lucretius clearly refuted the mythical theology since he opposes *superstitio*, mythological explanations, and so forth in the DRN. He was an advocate of the physical theology as he was an Epicurean. Importantly, he aimed to replace the prevailed civil theology, that is, the historico-politico-theologico-religious hybrid of Roman religion, with a new one. It is implausible that this kind of aspiration and detailed plan would have been agreeable and fully acceptable to the ruling elite in the existing troubled times because it could have generated large-scale ideological, societal and violent campaigns against them. Therefore, I claim that the above-mentioned views of Lucretius also fulfil Sack's criterion of proper illegal activity, according to which a serious deviant act is legally punishable. I conclude, therefore, that there were a considerable number of reasons for the elite to conceive Lucretius and his DRN as *impietas*, religiously deviant and a threat.

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<sup>117</sup> Assuming Lucretius accepts that the gods exist, the vague images in our minds are the only sign of them.

## 5. Conclusion

Roman religion was not always liberal and broad-minded and was even occasionally violent. Regarding this point, Rüpke has argued that the study of religious deviance in antiquity is important because “deviance and the evidence of behaviour called deviant offer an important insight both into public religious norms and into the primacy and persistence of individual religious experience and claims built upon it.”<sup>118</sup> Concerning Lucretius, a Roman Epicurean, and the cultural criticism of his DRN, the work includes critical and radical views about the Roman religion: Lucretius opposes Roman *superstitio* in general and those forms of *religio*, which are related to the traditional religion, because of Epicureanism; he refutes mythological explanations because of atomism; he propounds an unconventional and ambiguous theological view of the reclusive material gods, and it is even possible ultimately that he endorses atheism; he opposes the traditional Roman religious foundation and different customs of Roman religion including the oracle tradition, the divination of holy books and religious traditional rituals (e.g., praying with a veiled head and sacrificial killings) since he believes that the Epicurean naturalism, materialism and empirical scientific explanation refute the need of these customs; he denies the Roman traditional superstitious theology as he believes in Epicureanism and the Epicurean way of life (although he does not intrinsically oppose religious life). Therefore, I claim that these were the reasons for the ruling elite to conceive Lucretius’ DRN as *impietas* and a religiously deviant work. Consequently, his Epicurean philosophy could have been a threat for the elite considering the context, that is, the turbulent end of the Roman Republic and the occasionally violent aspect of the Roman religion.

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<sup>118</sup> Rüpke 2016b, VII.

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