In 390 CE, the emperor Theodosius I was held responsible by Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, for a massacre in Thessalonica by imperial troops. Denied communion, Theodosius, the last ruler of the whole Roman world, did public penance in church, prostrating himself before Ambrose and his Milanese congregation. Priest and State came face to face, sacral and secular power embodied, setting a pattern for the subsequent history of religion in Europe (one thinks of the coronation of Charlemagne and Henry IV at Canossa). This sort of distinction and interaction between Priest and State was, however, a new phenomenon in the Roman world in the fourth century; the relationship between political and sacral authority for the previous millennium had been much less clear-cut.

The variety and complexity of relationships between priesthood and state in the Roman world emerges from this volume of papers, edited by James Richardson and Federico Santangelo. Priests and State collects twenty-four essays on topics from the aristocratic priesthods of the Roman city-state to the evidence for persistence of the Jewish priesthood in the imperial legislation of Constantine. The essays are divided into two groups of twelve. The first twelve papers discuss priesthoods in relation to the central structures of the Roman state, both Republican and Imperial; these papers are focused, for the most part, on the city of Rome. The second twelve essays discuss priesthoods outside Rome and the impact of Roman imperial structures on regional and local priestly institutions.

On the whole, these papers reflect both new trends and established paradigms for the study of Roman religion. Interest in the institutional history of Roman priesthoods goes back at least as far as Varro’s Antiquitates Rerum Divinarum (mid-first century BCE). Jörg Rüpke’s monumental Fasti Sacerdotum (reviewed by Schultz in JRE 2 (2009) 309-31) is the latest major contribution to this historiographical project. Rüpke’s essay in Priests and State indicates the utility of his Fasti: he shows how the prosopographical data can inform our understanding of the major Roman priesthoods qua institutions. Similarly, Rich’s paper on the felial priests, who were responsible for the rituals of Roman “international relations,” and Glinister’s essay on the Saliae priestesses provide full reviews of the histories of those sacerdotal colleges.

Another well-established approach to Roman priesthoods is the legal one: here Mommsen’s ghost still looms large. The papers in this volume by North, Kvium, Richardson, Dalla Rosa, Hunt, Noy and Raggi all consider the role of law and legal thinking for the history of priesthoods in the Roman period. Finally, the imperial cult, perhaps the best-studied aspect of Roman religion in the last three decades, is the topic of several essays (Goffaux on Hispania Citerior, Capponi on Egypt,
Priests and State also includes essays that signal new directions in the study of Roman religion. Glinister, Isayev and Gaspar (the latter two are essays on priestesses of Ceres) discuss issues of gender and identity. The recent “provincial turn” in the study of Roman religion is also well-represented here and the essays by Goffaux, Capponi, Aleshire and Lambert, Reynolds, Rossignol and Haeussler all demonstrate the impact of Roman imperial governance on local religious institutions. Anna Clark contributes a novel essay that discusses the role of magistri of Italian collegia without using the category of ‘religion,’ reflecting contemporary anxiety about the applicability of the term to the ancient world. In Clark’s view, interaction with divinities was just a particular type of social relationship.

The variety of material and historical approaches in Priests and State is impressive and the strength of the book. However, the detail can be overwhelming and, aside from Clark and Rüpke, many contributors show a disappointing unwillingness to generalize and conceptualize and most of the studies are technical and limited in scope. This makes the volume much less interesting for non-specialists. It also represents a missed opportunity, because the topic of the collection raises fundamental questions for the history of ancient religion. For example, what was “a priest” in the Roman world? This book contains essays on a wide variety of “priests,” from Roman augurs to Christian bishops, but the category of “priest” itself never receives sustained consideration. Is it legitimate, for instance, to categorize the Jewish priesthood in the fourth century CE (Noy), an hereditary status cut off from the rhythm of ritual practice in the Jerusalem Temple, alongside the annually-elected eponymous priests of Apollo at Cyrene (Reynolds)? On this problem, one can compare Priests and State to an earlier collection of papers on a similar topic: Pagan Priests, edited by Mary Beard and John North (a contributor to Priests and State), raised precisely this question and followed the Weberian concept of a priest as a mediator between people and the gods. Weber’s ideal type led Beard to suggest that the Republican Senate was the principal site of mediation between human and divine at Rome. Although Beard’s argument has proven controversial, the reflection on the category enabled a new view of Roman religious authority. Aside from Clark’s paper, Priests and State does not include such willingness to radically re-think established categories. There is potential: for example, does the title of neokoros (“sacristan”), which was awarded to cities in Roman Asia that were home to temples for the imperial cult, discussed by Dmitriev, imply that the city was a priest? Clearly, such an idea is totally alien to the Judeo-Christian notion of a priest, but might be suggestive of the potential scope of the category in the Roman world.