The religious thought of any brief period, such as the age of Hadrian, can never, of course, be isolated and defined as a self-contained unit, even when the period in question is one of religious revolution or striking innovations. The age of Hadrian was not such a period. To well-born Romans of the time it must have seemed, in fact, rather an age of conservatism in religion, of revival and renewed adherence to the ancient and time-honored forms and practices — this, despite the ferment of Christianity working beneath the well-ordered surface of paganism, and, less obvious still, the more subtle virus of anti-rationalism that was sapping the strength of paganism at its core.

To provide a suitable focus for our survey, we may concentrate on the key figure of the age, Hadrian himself. The scant literary evidence can in part be supplemented by the evidence of coins and inscriptions, enabling us to form some idea of his religious policies and activities, if not, with any degree of satisfaction, of his personal religious feelings, so variously reflected both in his bold assertion of divinity and in the disarming candor of his Animula vagula blandula.

The character of Hadrian is notoriously complex and difficult to interpret. He was, in the words of the Augustan biography (14.II): "grave and gay, affable and dignified, impulsive and cautious, mean and generous, secretive yet open, cruel and gentle, and, in sum, consistent only in his inconsistency." Granted even a measure of truth in this estimate of the man it is easy to see why the evidence should appear at times contradictory. Perhaps Tertullian (Apol. 5.7) was nearer to the truth in his characterization of Hadrian as a man of insatiable curiosity (curiositatum omnium explorator). Weber, if I understand him correctly, postulates a traumatic break in the emperor’s personality as the key to the apparent contradictions. Writing of the worship accorded him as a god on earth, he adds: “His despotic striving towards the divine in all the world, the self-enhancement of his mysterious power, its setting forth for show in the image of the
highest god of the Greeks and Romans, tokens of his intoxicating illusionism, offspring of his mystically dark imaginings ... dissipated themselves at last in an outbreak of insanity. When he grew calm again, he found that light pleasure in trivial pursuits, that self-irony and scepticism towards all human activities and human life which wholly alienated him, lonely though worshipped as he was, from men” (CAH XI, p. 306).

Be this as it may, two points are clear: that Hadrian himself set great importance on the religious aspects of his imperial program; and that he consciously took Augustus as his model, even to the extent of inviting comparison with his great predecessor.

Hadrian's concern with religion is illustrated both by his coinage and by his building program. The coinage of Trajan had stressed, to the point of monotony, that emperor's concern with military affairs and with the glorification of his conquests. The coinage of Hadrian, though almost bewildering in the number and variety of its types, is equally faithful in reflecting the main concerns and preoccupations of the ruler, and even a cursory survey of the types reveals the emphasis placed on religion throughout. While the emperor himself remains, directly or indirectly, the main focus of interest, this is achieved largely by the use of types relating either to his protecting deities or to the imperial virtues represented as divine personifications. Even when all due allowance is made for the tendentious and propagandistic element in this as in most imperial Roman coinage, one senses behind it all a genuine personal mystique, the conviction that by and through his person Divine Providence was acting to bless and prosper the Roman people and the peoples of the Empire.

The character of his extensive building program is perhaps even more convincing proof of the importance he attached to religion. The Life of Hadrian in the Historia Augusta records his building activities at Rome, Pausanias for some parts of Greece, and the list could readily be extended. Much of it consisted in the building, reconstruction, or adornment of temples and sanctuaries; and it is well to note that here at least self-glorification was not an overriding consideration, since the temples that he rebuilt at Rome continued to bear the name of the original donors. The Pantheon, with its inscription of Agrippa on the facade, is the most familiar example, but the Life testifies to the fact that this was his general practice.