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Authors: Lichterman, Paul / Raja, Rubina / Rieger, Anna-Katharina /  
Rüpke, Jörg

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Paul Lichterman, Rubina Raja, Anna-Katharina Rieger, Jörg Rüpke

## Grouping Together in Lived Ancient Religion: Individual Interacting and the Formation of Groups

The present volume focuses on the dynamics of groups in religious contexts. How do groups come into being? How do the members interact, internally and externally? What is the role of religiously determined groups in changing societal and political situations? And how are collective and individual identities in and of these groups shaped, negotiated and communicated?

Once religion is conceptualised as an individual resource or strategy to redefine the 'reality' of a situation,<sup>1</sup> this new reality can be viewed both as an invitation to others to concur in the redefinition and as a move in a power-game. It thereby provides the opportunity to form groups – more or less stable or fluid, momentary or continuous. The formation of groups or of networks is a classificatory enterprise of the individuals involved as well as a strategy of interaction. The concepts of 'culture in interaction' and 'group styles' are central to the approach of 'lived ancient religion'.<sup>2</sup> These concepts allow for theorising situational differences in creating and reproducing religious representations, knowledge and practices – away from public norms and religious specialists in ancient societies that control the conduct of a given set of religious practices by groups and individuals. The concept of 'group styles' has been developed in the ethnographic analysis of contemporary societies to distinguish different ways in which people group together and coordinate their action. 'Culture in interaction' signifies that people interpret and use the same codes, discourses or other collective representations differently in everyday settings that are orchestrated in different styles.<sup>3</sup> Different modes of speech, texts, selection of objects, dress and gesture, as well as choice of time and place might be significant in order to establish groups or classify people, at least on a temporary basis.

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1 Rüpke 2015b.

2 Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lichterman 2006; Rüpke 2012.

3 Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003, 735. 782.

Focusing on situational communication in groups, this perspective aims to identify specific ‘styles’ which modify the use of linguistic as well as behavioural registers within social settings. Groups are not regarded as pre-defined, fossilised ‘cults’ or ‘religions’, but as precarious, potentially unstable, short-term ‘groupings together’. Commonly, studies take a ‘group’ as a pre-existing entity that then develops a subculture.<sup>4</sup> The group style perspective, in contrast, investigates different styles of coordinating action that *produce* different kinds of groupings in different settings. Different styles thereby produce different kinds of ‘membership’, which participants signal in their uses of objects and texts, rituals or other forms of communication. Taking account of the situational communication in, of and about groups challenges the view of ancient Mediterranean societies as consisting of equally and permanently religious individuals.<sup>5</sup> The approach of defining groups via *styles* and *scenes* is highly suitable to understanding groups as fluid entities of societies, past and present. Four heuristic concepts help distinguish different styles of group life. First, as people are coordinating action, they come to share a ‘map’ of reference points – other groups, individuals, social categories – in relation to which the group draws its boundaries. Second, actors share ‘group bonds’, a set of assumptions about how the actors are obligated to each other in the setting. Third, actors share ‘speech norms’, or assumptions about what kinds of speech are appropriate in the setting.<sup>6</sup> Fourth, new work clarifies that the same grouping of people may coordinate themselves in different styles even as they continue being co-participants in the same physical setting – a public assembly chamber, or a household, for example. When the group style has changed among people in the same physical setting, the ‘scene’ has changed. Distinguishing ‘scenes’ further assists our grasp of lived ancient religion, especially in fluid, short-term groupings.

This modular set of group styles and scenes allows for revising both the notion of collective identities<sup>7</sup> imposed and reproduced by a ruling power (state, institutions, specialists) and the assumption that stable groups exist behind scriptures or rituals, as research in the field of religious studies of the Ancient Mediterranean claims.<sup>8</sup> They provide tools for inquiring into the experience of a single participant and/or agent in a group, mediated and varied according to context and situation. Porous borders, varying ascriptions, shifting identities, and continuous adaptations of the styles as coordi-

4 E. g. Fine 2010.

5 Raja and Weiss 2015.

6 Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003, 739; Lichterman 2012; Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014.

7 Ashmore et al. 2004; Rebillard 2012; Rebillard and Rüpke 2015.

8 Cf. Stock 1983 for the Middle Ages.

nating action are the instruments which can further our understanding of grouping together.<sup>9</sup>

For the most thoroughly defined and stable social contexts of ritual interaction – namely the nuclear and wider family (including slaves), clans, neighbourhoods and voluntary associations – group styles and scenes help theorise situational differences in creating and reproducing cultural religious representations as well as in evoking less widely shared knowledge and practices. Here modes of speech (e.g., in formulaic texts of votives or tomb inscriptions), the specific or ad hoc selection of everyday objects (e.g., lamps or ceramic vessels), dress codes and gestures, as well as the time and place of gatherings, establish distinction from an external world and alterity to other individuals.

How, then, can religion be employed to bring people together on specific occasions or on a recurring basis? What practices are adopted to reproduce or perpetuate such groupings? The volume aims at examining different situations and strategies by which individuals unify and specialise in, establish authority by, or articulate religious groups. Scholars from a wide range of disciplinary fields bring material and sources to bear on a dynamic perspective on religious grouping. Religious traditions influenced individual and group behaviour, but they were upheld and reworked in the constant interaction of individuals with the agents of traditions and providers of religious services in various fields. Since the approach of lived ancient religion is interested in individual appropriations and expressions of such rituals and norms, their negotiation and reformulation through ad hoc developed modes of speech, use of objects or sets of gestures in religiously identified groups provide for insights into how people adapted to and adopted different settings and agents.<sup>10</sup> The perspective of lived religion<sup>11</sup> – suggesting a set of experiences of, practices addressed to, and conceptions of, the divine which are appropriated, expressed, and shared by individuals in diverse social spaces – paves the way to examine religion from the perspective of individuals and groups and not as the carrying-out of a set of rules and regulations.

The contributions to this volume are based on papers given at a conference at Copenhagen, organised by the Max Weber Centre's research group 'Lived Ancient Religion' and hosted at the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters in June 2014, financed by the European Research Council.<sup>12</sup> In a comparative take on material and sources, the authors offer per-

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<sup>9</sup> Lichterman 2012; Lichterman 2015, 249.

<sup>10</sup> Rüpke 2012; Raja and Rüpke 2015.

<sup>11</sup> McGuire 2008.

<sup>12</sup> ERC Advanced Grant under the 7th Framework Programme (2008–13), contract no. 295555.

spectives on the dynamics and dimensions of groups among and beyond Mediterranean traditions, amplifying constraints and possibilities of the approach of lived ancient religion. Shifting the focus towards the experience of individuals and groups as intrinsic to the approach of lived ancient religion and employing the sociological concepts of group styles and scenes, they analyse the production both of unity and of diversity, even micro-diversity, in different situations – e. g., feasting, social gatherings, travelling, or reading – by examining language, gestures, clothing and eating. Another aspect is the consolidation, and inversely the dissolution, of organisations, texts or textual canons. Attention is also paid to processes of professionalisation and the construction of authority, and inversely again to individual renunciation, self-effacement or withdrawal.

The employment of religious resources in the particular situation of highly mobile people encroaching on often foreign or new individuals is dealt with in one contribution. The arising problem of revealing religious identities, of adopting encountered ones or creating a third way of religious expression, is grappled with by Anna-Katharina Rieger. Archaeological and epigraphical material, representing mobile people like military personnel, merchants, herders and construction workers, shows whether and how religious identities were declared in the situational context of being *en route*. Graffiti as ego-documents at road-side sacred spaces in the Arabian Desert of Egypt are read closely in terms of uttered personal details and demands, while their spatial relations shed light on situationally defined groups. The local and temporary contexts for the more or less religious expressions left on the way and the supposed demand of the individuals for a group affiliation under these peculiar circumstances attest, in the sense of lived ancient religion, how malleable the concept of religion is. A clear-cut adoption of group bonds and boundaries as well as a clear definition of religious utterances become porous at the stop-overs, but open up forms of social togetherness: the network and shared experiences hinging on certain speech norms.

The challenging issue of self-ascription of individuals to certain groups and, conversely, the etic labelling of groups, is the topic of Tim Whitmarsh's paper on atheists in Classical to Hellenistic times. In the perspective of lived ancient religion, embracing deviation, the possibility to opt out of adhering to tradition, becomes a more differentiated issue than in previous research. Testing atheism as analytical category, he explores a probable group identity of *atheoi*. Starting in philosophical circles (Platonic corpus), intellectuals doubting the gods and expressing non-normative religious attitudes were neither an in-group nor out-group. Only through Late Hellenistic doxographical texts was being an atheist invested with a cultural significance and

valence, establishing something like a group mentality. Virtual networks of atheists established through texts – in contrast to the place-based philosophical schools of Classical and Hellenistic times – but covering different civic spaces, developed then in the second century CE Roman Empire.

Which are the models along which individuals shape the forms of grouping together, and how do they adapt them? The styles chosen for a grouping together were modelled along social practices and anchored in existing patterns. Eating or commensality is a basic one. Clemens Leonhard's contribution analyses the relationship between the performance of rituals and the degree of adherence by focusing on the Eucharist, referring to textual sources from the first to the fourth century CE. In Late Antiquity, it becomes possible to witness the formation and development of distinct religious groups and to trace the porosity of group boundaries and exchangeable speech norms and bonds. Leonhard shows how variable the performance of Eucharist meals were in different local and situational contexts. Being a Christ-follower was communicated in different ways, though ritualised behaviour gained more significance and included certain stable elements.

With the aim of elucidating the dynamics of groupings and the appropriations of various elements from social practices, the contribution of Françoise Van Haepere focuses on texts and narratives.<sup>13</sup> Narratives are crucial for building up shared traditions that a group can use as sources of orientation,<sup>14</sup> though a consensus about (oral or written) narrations is not a given fact, but negotiated by the communication of the individuals or groups engaging with the text. How are texts and scripture employed to bring people together on specific occasions or on a recurring basis?

Shared sacred spaces are places where different groups were active. Their different strategies to communicate and to address others offer a layered insight into religious practices of groups on the one hand, and individual appropriations on the other. Françoise Van Haepere concentrates on Roman Imperial associations and their building of group identity. She applies Lichterman's categories of group bonds, spatial boundaries and speech norms to the epigraphic evidence from the Magna Dea campus at Ostia, and traces the complex net of agents engaged in dedications (the offering, the collegium or its members as donators, the addressed deities) and their dates. Different strategies are at work in order to establish distinction from, but also connections to, the outside world – be they the emperor, the city of Ostia or other *collegia*. Adjectives, addressees, and the location

<sup>13</sup> See also Rüpke 2016, which was originally presented within the context of the Copenhagen conference.

<sup>14</sup> Rüpke 2015a; Ricoeur 1991.

of the dedications can be employed for making in- or exclusions, while the bounds are not as clearly discernible apart from the self-ascription to a *collegium*. Speech norms are visible on two different levels: the texts work with repetitions and codified parts, whereas formal and iconographic similarities of the dedications also serve as recurring points of reference.<sup>15</sup>

Eric Rebillard starts his inquiry into second and third century CE Carthage with contemporary sources' paradoxical affirmations and negations that Christians were identifiable in the city. Here, the methodological tools as outlined above prove useful. The analysis demonstrates that we need not deny any strong sense of identity on the part of the agents when we observe very different behaviours in different contexts and situations. Proximate people knew about each other's religious preferences without these being permanently acted out. It was in particular in some public situations that people signalled their Christianness to other Christians. In other public contexts, their religious identity did not become salient, but was dominated by social or professional belongings.

The contributions offer differentiated insights into the complexity of groups defined through religious practices and ideas, their formation processes and perceptions. In negotiating the individual's wishes, experiences and demands, the bonds, boundaries, speech norms, and gestures of the group's members are subject to continuous negotiation. They can be perceived, re-enacted and used differently by both group members and those not belonging. Hence, group identity and self-understanding, as well as etic ascriptions of being a group, vary to the same extent in the processes of grouping.

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<sup>15</sup> Rieger 2011.

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### **Paul Lichterman**

Department of Sociology  
 University of Southern California  
 352 Kaprielian Hall  
 3620 South Vermont Avenue  
 Los Angeles, CA 90089  
 USA  
 lichterm@usc.edu

**Rubina Raja**

Classical Art and Archaeology  
Section for Classical Studies  
Institute for Culture and Society  
Aarhus University  
Nobelparken 1461–326  
8000 Aarhus C  
Denmark  
rubina.raja@cas.au.dk

**Anna-Katharina Rieger**

Max-Weber-Kolleg für kultur- und sozialwissenschaftliche Studien  
Universität Erfurt  
Postfach 900221  
99105 Erfurt  
Germany  
anna-katharina.rieger@uni-erfurt.de

**Jörg Rüpke**

Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies  
Universität Erfurt  
Max-Weber-Kolleg für kultur- und sozialwissenschaftliche Studien  
Postfach 900221  
99105 Erfurt  
Germany  
joerg.ruepke@uni-erfurt.de