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Jörg Rüpke

Creating Groups and Individuals in Textual Practices

Corpora of literary or epigraphic texts have been taken as the primary evidence for the existence of religious traditions. ‘Greek religion’ is constituted by what Greek authors narrate about religious practices of their peoples and what they themselves offer in terms of reflection on religion; Judaism is what is described in the *tenakh*, Rabbinic Judaism what is to be found in the Mishna and its Talmudic enlargements; Christianity, what is narrated and theorised in the so-called ‘New Testament’ and patristic writings. Other religious traditions are reconstructed on the basis of corpora of shorter texts, inscriptions: both ‘Mithraism’ or ‘Isism’ for instance, being helped by a few ancient literary narratives or descriptions which help to fill in the many blanks. Sometimes, the basis of evidence is even smaller. What we might conceptualise as ‘Palmyrene religion’ for instance, has to rely on images as much as on inscriptions. In all cases, archaeology is usually employed to support rather than challenge the narratives thus established and in many cases bolstered by quasi-canonical reproductions of such ‘master narratives’.

This issue takes up the agenda of an earlier issue in developing new perspectives in order to achieve a richer description of ancient religion by analysing it as ‘lived ancient religion’.¹ Here religious practices are seen as situational appropriations² as well as individual realisations of locally or regionally established, family or group ‘traditions’. It is the latter, however, that have been given pride of place in observers’ accounts, who took for granted that a coherent set of religious networks³ and cultural rules defined individual behaviour. This issue thus engages with ancient evidence that is usually read as supporting the latter view and explores the intertwined pro-

1 Raja and Rüpke 2015.

2 On the concept of appropriation see Certeau and Voullié 1988, also Füssel 2006; the fragmentary aspect remains central for de Certeau: Certeau 2009.

3 On ancient religious networks see Rutherford 2007; Eidinow 2011; Rüpke 2013; Collar 2014.

cess of constituting individual religious agents and collective identities (or even tangible social groups).

Such an approach, focusing on the individual agent rather than ‘systems of symbols’ or ‘religious groups’, has to build on a corresponding notion of religion for the ancient world. I propose to conceptualise religion as being characterised by communication that is addressed to, or claims the situative relevance of, agents who are not unquestionably plausible. These divine powers, gods, angels or demons, dead ancestors or malevolent spirits might be accepted by other participants in principle, but not necessarily in the particular situation or at the command of the human individual speaking. Other participants might regard them as invisible, silent, inactive, or simply absent. We can speak of religious action hence, wherever in a particular situation at least one human individual includes such agents in his or her communication with other humans, whether by merely referring to those agents or by directly addressing them.⁴

Of course, individuals could and did base far-reaching claims on the support of agents that were far from commonly accepted even in principle, and might thereby have been successful in establishing their agency as visionaries or prophets. They thus arrogated an authority that might give them power in later situations. More frequently, however, agents based their situational claims on more commonly shared concepts and operated within collective religious identities that they presumed was shared by the other participants, thus having agency without establishing permanent religious roles. The concept of ‘collective identity’ has been justly criticised wherever it postulated a permanent or even exclusive individual awareness of belonging and self-description as a member of those who are ascribed permanent membership in some social group.⁵ However, given the effects, empirically validated, of even vague forms of belonging for individual behaviour,⁶ it is useful to combine the perspective on action implied in the concept of ‘agency’ with the concept of ‘collective identity’. At the same time it is necessary to employ a differentiated and dynamic concept of such identities. Recent research in social psychology has offered a number of attempts.⁷ I will follow Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe, who argue for a sevenfold scheme of factors

4 See in detail Rüpke 2015, also for the following.

5 See e. g. Rebillard 2012 and below, who, following Brubaker, opts for the concept of ‘salient identity’.

6 For ‘social identity theory’ Tajfel 1974, esp. 69 for the definition of ‘group’; Turner 1975. Succinctly Ellemers, Spears and Doosje 1999.

7 E. g. Cameron 2004, 241, who distinguishes three factors: cognitive centrality for the individual agent, ingroup-affect and ingroup-obligations.

so as to fully, distinctively, and sufficiently grasp the facets of the phenomenon. What is important for the combination of the approaches is that these factors are conceptualised on the level of an individual's imagination and behaviour, not on that of an empirical social group. For the hermeneutical enterprise proposed for this issue this helps to differentiate between an author's claims about the existence of groups and the empirical evidence of such networks or even organisations.

The elements listed by Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe are: self-categorisation; the evaluation of the membership (whatever its form) by individuals and their perception of others' judgments; the importance ascribed to this particular group membership; the attachment, that is the emotional involvement felt, and the sense of interdependence (potentially reaching into a large overlap of personal and collective identity); 'the degree to which a particular collective identity is embedded in the person's everyday ongoing relationships' (social embeddedness); the shaping of this person's behaviour by the particular collective identity; and finally the whole cognitive dimension of imaginations and narratives about the values, characteristics and history of the relevant group as known and entertained by the person.⁸ 'Group' does not necessarily imply an organised association, but any situational grouping of actors (not only human), to which the individual ascribes him- or herself or from which the observers distance themselves.

It is important to avoid any essentialisation of these groups and associations. Such religious identities could simply be seen as particular frameworks of situations⁹ and hence be integrated in the action theoretical model of agency. *Vice versa*, acting might be described as a situational result of identities.¹⁰ However, by differentiating both, the dynamics and diachronic structure of the concept of 'agency' can be combined with the rather synchronic analysis of the horizontal structure of social context. By replacing an essentialised concept of 'traditions' or even 'religions' by a complex model of collective identities of individual agents and the agency that is attributed to them in a situation we are able to analyse processes of the formation of religious groups in their different paths and varying strength.

As a consequence, the meaning of names, objects, and gestures employed in religious action cannot be taken as predefined, but is a result of the particular situations and the relationship to previous situations and identities established therein. This holds true for empirical interaction as well as imag-

⁸ Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe 2004, 83 with a summarising table.

⁹ Cf. Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 992, who point to the frequently retrospective character of the concept of identity.

¹⁰ Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe 2004, 101–104.

ination and equally for the production and consumption of media produced in, or in reference to, such historical or fictive situations. The contributions in this issue demonstrate that through the lens of ‘lived religion’, ancient religion, and above all religion in the Roman Empire, gains new facets.

It is not the Roman Empire, but a literary corpus that was created in the preceding period and continued to be read and valued throughout the subsequent centuries, which forms the starting point of the first contribution. In his article on ‘Lived Religion and the Construction of Meaning in Greek Literary Texts: Genre, Context, Occasion’ Anton Bierl reviews Greek literary texts, above all of the archaic and classical period, by authors like Homer, Alcaeus, Sappho, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes and the imperial novelist Heliodorus. These texts operate against the background of ritual practices and mythical narratives – a ‘mega-text’ – which they themselves form and modify. Bierl demonstrates how the protagonists of these texts are shown as acting out rituals, not as perfect performances of established scripts, but in a manner and in modifications that show their personal and emotional involvement in these religious practices. Figures like Achilles, Alcaeus, Antigone, Hippolytus, Dicaeopolis and Calasiris in their fictive roles do not exemplify some ‘Greek religion’, but are construed as characters who follow their own specific agendas and thus also embody their authors’ agendas. In a socio-historical perspective, these texts themselves are part of a long process of religious individualisation.¹¹

In the following article Ulrike Egelhaaf-Gaiser explores the potentials of literary media not only against the background of established ritual practices, but in competition with it. In ‘Giving the Gift of Eternity, or: The Medium is the Message in Statius’ *Silvae* 3.3’ the protagonist, Claudius Etruscus, is presented as the conductor of a funerary ritual for his father. Claudius is someone who knows about ritual traditions, but is innovative at the same time. Innovation here, however, is as much about the innovation of the author, Statius, as of the protagonist, and the text itself is a medium of reframing the ritual and its meaning, thereby transgressing established social boundaries. Again, it is personal involvement and individual agency developed within social and ritual structures which is centre-stage in this text from the end of the first century CE.

Michal Bar-Asher Siegal takes a comparative approach in analysing ‘The Collection of Traditions in Monastic and Rabbinic Anthologies as a Reflection of Lived Religion’. Here again literary texts – unfortunately always transmitted in a fragmentary manner only – are not primarily treated as ‘sources’

¹¹ See Rüpke and Spickermann 2012.

for the reconstruction of a supposedly coherent religious system. Instead their very character is interpreted as part of the media of individual religious agency and its coming to grips with previously established tradition. Bar-Asher Siegal builds her thesis on her reading of Mishnaic tractates and the *Apophthegmata patrum*, i. e., late antique texts. Her claim is that 'when a religious tradition is transmitted in anthologies, as opposed to edited (or) single writer texts, it might better represent its multi-vocality.' The composition and use of anthologies, even if referring to past voices, demonstrate that multi-vocality is not a memory from the past, but part of ongoing religious practices respecting beliefs as lived religion.

It is the multi-vocality of practices hidden behind often polemical texts that interests Eric Rebillard in his article on 'Everyday Christianity in Carthage at the Time of Tertullian'. Here, the concept of lived religion and the temporal and situational limits of individuals' collective religious identities are reformulated into the concept of 'everyday Christianity'. In comparing the full range of literary evidence about actual behaviour and the occasional voices of agents with the descriptions and polemics of the 'Church fathers', Rebillard reveals the discrepancies of a religious norm that Tertullian, for example, tried to establish by reference only to actual behaviour. Attribution of meaning to situations and behaviour in them differed widely. In hindsight, however, the success of Tertullian's textual creation of a group bound to the norms of 'Christianity' has to be stated.

It is this process on a larger scale that forms the central concern of Markus Vinzent's contribution. 'Embodied Early and Medieval Christianity: Challenging its "Canonical" and "Institutional" "Origin"' already indicates by its many quotation marks the conceptual tools of the literary creation of unified religious groups and their history. Vinzent describes what he calls a 'threefold-canonical fallacy', constituted by a post-apologetic romantic view of Christian origins, which interpreted early and apologetic texts within a framework that already presupposed the existence of an institutional and belief framework called Christianity. The assumption of such an institution is the second fallacy, while the third is identified as another romantic view in which Jesus Christ and the origins of institutional Christianity are assumed to be identical, presupposing a whole set of differentiated individual and collective religious and ethical behaviour, radically different from contemporary Judaism.

The final article extends the focus on media from literary texts to funerary inscriptions and sculpture. In 'Representations of Priests in Palmyra: Methodological Considerations on the Meaning of the Representation of Priesthood in the Funerary Sculpture from Roman Period Palmyra', Rubina

Raja analyses nearly 300 representations of priests, above all on sarcophagi (or boxes) and on lids of tombs hewn into rock (*loculi*). Standardised symbols of priestly appearance and office were used to depict individual sons or fathers or husbands. Variations between the archaeological genres and variations within these variations allow for the detecting of familial strategies implied in the reference to a religious office. Basically, it is only in family tombs for multiple burials that individual priests are depicted in isolation, yet clearly arrogated by their families in this context. Wherever this familial context is lacking or obscured by the isolated or screening positioning of a sarcophagus, priests are depicted among family. It is not a collective identity of a priestly class, but the elevated status of a family, boasting of one or even several priests in preceding generations, which is communicated. It is not a religious group that is thus created, but the standardised symbols of priestly offices are used to create individual sons or fathers or husbands.

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