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## Appropriating Religion: Methodological Issues in Testing the 'Lived Ancient Religion' Approach\*

### Abstract

This article presents the concept of 'lived ancient religion' as the methodological perspective underlying the contributions to this issue. For antiquity, the term is employed in order to denote an approach that focusses on the individual appropriation and embodiment of traditions, religious experiences and communication of religion in different social spaces, and the interaction of different levels facilitated by religious specialists. This approach is intended to replace the dated (and, with regard to Mediterranean antiquity, anachronistic) model of 'state religion' and 'religions'/'cults' in its variants.

**Keywords:** appropriation of religion, lived religion, social space, religious experience, culture in interaction

### 1 Historical and Sociological Problems in Analysing Ancient Religion

The History of Religion in the ancient Mediterranean is traditionally conceptualised as a history of co-existence, then competition, and finally suppression of religious traditions. Such a framework focusses research on the different units of such a grand narrative. Interaction is just a – contingent – element of the resulting descriptions, usually organised along local, ethnic or confessional lines: Athenian and Roman, Jewish and Punic, Isiac and Christian religion – or 'cult', if one wishes to stress the embeddedness of such a unit within a larger polytheistic framework. Interest is in the character (if not essence) of these units, their specific rules and narratives in ritual and belief

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systems, their architectural infrastructure and institutions, their identity and the way of life and attitudes related to them. In the end, internal decline or external clashes, change and survival form part of such a history.

What is wrong with that? Sociologically speaking, the balance between structure and individual agents is shifted to the one pole of an overwhelming and engaging structure here. Historically speaking, contemporary experiences of the diversity of religious practices and beliefs, of the heterogeneity and plurality of culture, and even of the failure of states (as well as the laborious and reversible process of state formation) have suggested paying more attention to the other pole. If individuality is not restricted to Western modernity, but is an analytically fruitful category for ancient and recent India as well as medieval Europe and the Hellenistic and Roman Mediterranean, as has been argued recently,<sup>1</sup> more attention must be paid to the other end of the spectrum. This holds true for religion as much as for state formation, for instance.<sup>2</sup> The concept of the polis was a project of an elite. Civic religion in antiquity was too. As in other cultural institutions, from the perspective chosen here, religious traditions are religions in the making.

How might ancient religion be analysed and described if the model of ‘state religion’ underlying the concepts of ‘polis’ or ‘civic religion’ has to be dropped for Mediterranean antiquity? This issue proposes to replace this model by the concept of ‘lived ancient religion’.

## 2 Lived Ancient Religion

Within History of Religion, the concept of ‘lived religion’ has been developed for the description and analysis of contemporary religion by the American anthropologist Meredith McGuire in a book published in 2008.<sup>3</sup> Instead of starting from religious organisations, elaborated belief systems and their always insufficient reproduction by individual members and believers, ‘lived religion’ focusses on the individual’s ‘usage’ of religion. It is actual everyday experience, practices, expressions, and interactions that could be related to ‘religion’, which take pride of place. Such ‘religion’ is understood as a spectrum of experiences, actions, and beliefs, as well as communications

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1 Rüpke 2012b; Rüpke and Spickermann 2012; Rüpke 2013a, 2013b; Rüpke and Woolf 2013; Fuchs and Rüpke 2015.

2 Terrenato and Haggis 2011.

3 McGuire 2008. For the following see also Rüpke 2012a and the brief summary in Rüpke 2014, 118–120. For the reception in Religious Studies see e.g. Piegeler, Prohl and Rademacher 2004; Heimbrock 2007.

hinging on human communication with super-human or even transcendent agent(s), which the ancient Mediterranean usually conceptualised as ‘gods’, but also as ‘heroes’, ‘demons’ or ‘angels’ or even in a pantheistic mode. Even if the existence of such an ontological level is frequently taken for granted, it is a difficult and competitive enterprise to catch its attention, to make it act on one’s own behalf, to feel being listened to, to tap resources inaccessible or even unknown by others. Thus, ritualisation and elaborate forms of representation might be called upon for the success of communication with these addressees.<sup>4</sup>

### 3 Finding and Interpreting Evidence

In thousands of instances it is the remnants of such acts of communication and their media, calling for attention and underlying the relevancy of one’s wishes and gratefulness towards gods and demonstrating the success of these efforts to one’s contemporaries, which dominate our evidence. Classifying such evidence according to the symbols (in particular named gods) used or group memberships (‘cults’, ‘religions’, ‘heresies’) postulated is hardly adequate, even if culturally stabilised forms of rituals and concepts are of importance as constraints (as much as results) of individual action. Individuals themselves are constituted inter-subjectively.<sup>5</sup>

From the extant evidence, the inter-subjective dimension of religious communication can be accessed through the records of the individuals by enquiring into their communication, their juxtaposition, their sharing of experiences and meaning, their specific usage and selection of culturally available concepts and vocabulary.<sup>6</sup> Here the concept of ‘appropriation’ as developed by Michel de Certeau<sup>7</sup> is extremely helpful. Rather than stressing the ‘reproduction’ of culture, appropriation focusses on the partiality, the occasional character, the deficits, the incoherency, but above all on the strategic selectivity of the individual agent’s making prefabricated meanings one’s own. Accordingly, the cumulated effect of these appropriations is the precarious and ever-changing character of what claims to be normative tradition.

Thus, for the analysis of religion in the Roman Empire as well as elsewhere, meanings constructed by situations rather than coherent individual

4 Rüpke 2010. For the concept of ritualisation see Bell 1992; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994.

5 Classical: Mead 1934; Mead and Miller 1982; Archer 1996; Emirbayer and Mische 1998.

6 Ammerman 2007.

7 Certeau 1984, 2007.

worldviews should be identified. Likewise, the focus is on experience rather than symbols and the reconstruction of 'symbolic systems' and ritual rules. 'Experience' stresses the role of the viewer and user of images, of more or less sacralised space in temples, open sanctuaries or domestic and funeral contexts, again starting from the individual without neglecting dominating regimes of visibility.<sup>8</sup> Sound, too, and regimes of hearing should not be underrated.<sup>9</sup> Recent analyses of the phenomena related to experience have produced a concept of experience that takes into account the connection between personal experience and communicated meaning. As Matthias Jung has formulated, 'personal, lived experience in its qualitative-emotional dimension remains dumb and has no power to transform behaviour as long as it is not articulated symbolically ... any system of convictions and practices, that from the first-person point of view is no longer seen as expressive of qualitative experience, becomes increasingly obsolete.'<sup>10</sup> Such a concept of experience also opens up a new perspective for material culture as is shown in an 'archaeology of religious experience'.<sup>11</sup>

Experience also demands a refocussing on the analysis of ritual. Here, one can draw on the notion of 'embodiment', bringing together the materiality of our evidence and corporeal experience as a perspective thereupon. The concept stems from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and his preference for movement and gestures over mind; the body is thus given the principal role in perceiving environments and structuring the world. The performance of gestures, even though they do not cover the whole range of bodily experiences, contextualises natural entities and their bodies by conveying mental dispositions and enacting emotions, and shapes culturally informed meanings. The human body, along with the conditions of perception it entails, is what nuances subjectivity and places the individual self within culture and society, thus turning it into an 'embodied self'.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding communication with the invisible, the represented or even epiphanic 'other', ritual action is encoded in bodily movements. Given that memory is inextricably intertwined with sensorial mechanisms, feelings arising out of sensory input in diverse social contexts are embedded in bodily experience. Thus, religious experience was stimulated by and registered

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<sup>8</sup> E. g. Elsner and Rutherford 2005; Raja 2015; Rüpke 2010 and below the contributions of Arnhold and Dirven. For the concept of visibility see Simon 2010; Jensen 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Meyer 2008, 2009; for ancient religion see e. g. Meyer-Dietrich 2010 and below the contribution by Rüpke.

<sup>10</sup> Jung 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Raja and Rüpke 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Noland 2009.

in the form of sensations and movements as well as in postures taken, for instance, in prayer or in processions. Religious experience is shared by the inter-subjective coordination of bodily movements and reactions. Religious practices in the epoch under analysis were only rarely taught through formal religious instruction. Much more frequently it was acquired through appropriation and imitation of movements stored in and enhanced by memory. Thus images of rituals or gods in corresponding gestures could evoke embodied knowledge. Garments, paraphernalia as well as wreaths, the use of incense and the touch of amulets change bodily status for an extended period of time – demanding attention for gender differences. Literary evidence can help to corroborate hypotheses built on ancient images and artefacts, as will be shown by several contributions in this issue.

#### 4 Case Studies

Lucinda Dirven's article on Mithraic caves as 'tableaux vivants' exemplifies the potential and problems of such a refocussing on ritual performance and individual emotional involvement in ancient cults. According to her interpretation, it is not the production of some religious specialists that construes divine presence in the sanctuaries. Informed in many locations by the special shape of the ritual space, helped by visual effects of controlled natural light and artificial lamps, and intensified by appropriate dress, participants in the ritual stage and reshape narratives and are thus submitted to intense emotions. In arranging and decorating space for these rituals and in the actual performance, traditional meanings are as much reproduced as modified.

It is strategies of inclusion and exclusion, of hiding and exposure, rather than inherent specifics of religious symbols, that allow us to take a closer look at individual appropriations and thus lived ancient religions, as Marlis Arnhold's analysis of religious communication and practices featuring Bona Dea reminds us. Undoubtedly, pervading characteristics have to be acknowledged, for instance with regard to gender discrimination and the exclusion of men in many instances. Concentrating on variety, however, allows one to see the effect of locality as well as social factors and their interaction in creating the unique profile of specific local group styles. Freedmen and slaves demonstrate appropriation of Bona Dea at Ostia, which markedly differs from the literary tradition centring on Rome.

In order to bring 'Lived Ancient Religion' to bear on the available evidence, research has to concentrate on individual appropriation in diverse social spaces, not limiting itself to religious groups. The primary space of the

home and familial interaction (including familial funeral space) – which in its individual elaboration goes far beyond the religion of the ‘Here’ as characterized by Jonathan Zittel Smith<sup>13</sup> – is of utmost importance and will figure in this issue alongside the secondary space of religious experience and interaction in voluntary or professional associations just referred to. Further social spaces accrue, on the one hand, as spaces shared by many individuals or groups in the public sites of sanctuaries or festival routes, and on the other as the virtual space of literary communication and the intellectual discourses formed therein. The very different modes of appropriation of religion are illustrated by the articles of Weiss, North, and Rüpke as well as of Dirven and Arnhold. Only analysis of the whole spectre of social interaction ranging from domestic cult to public spaces and professionals will allow a sufficiently complex notion of individual appropriation in lived ancient religion to form. Of course, the use and construction of these social spaces by individual agents have to be contextualised in terms of locality and time.

Lara Weiss’ article on ‘the consumption of religion in Roman Karanis’ takes up the challenge of an archaeological analysis in the framework of Lived Ancient Religion by focussing on the domestic space of an agricultural town in Roman Egypt, and more precisely in the northern Fayum. The analysis of figurines called ‘dolls’ or ‘statuettes’ is as sensitive to contexts as it is critical of a functional analysis that loses sight of the fact that function, too, is a category mediated by the people dealing with the objects. Context, thus, is as much a situational configuration as a moment in the life of an object. Instead of postulating ancient norms about usage, the historian of religion has to acknowledge a variety of different usages and to reflect on their interactions. Ethnographic comparison might help in controlled imagination.

The challenge to allow for temporal variables in the ritual performance and situational ascription of meaning is reinforced by an important source for ancient religion, that is descriptions or prescriptions organised according to calendars. Ovid’s commentary on the Roman calendar is analysed with this problem in mind. More specifically, however, the article by Jörg Rüpke on the implied or rather ‘connected reader’ as a window into Lived Ancient Religion deals with the problem of identifying evidence for individual appropriation of religion beyond the authors of literary texts. It is not easy to take the text at face value in its description of religious practices. Yet it is an important document for the interaction of specialists’ elaborated descriptions and interpretations in the shaping of contemporary (as well as later) recipients’ construction of religion and appropriate religious action.

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<sup>13</sup> Smith 2003, 24–27.

Concentrating on the questions Ovid is asking, or has his figures ask, the article suggests that reader-response criticism offers a tool for reconstructing lived ancient religion. The Why and What and When of the narrated reader allows one to reconstruct a profile of what is questionable and worth knowing for the implied reader by this exceptionally preserved 'antiquarian' text.

Religious traditions are more than a product of providers of religious knowledge and services, 'priests' or professionals. Most of the evidence at our disposal is best to be interpreted neither as 'authentic' individual expression nor as institutional 'survival', but as media, as the result of a 'culture created in interaction'.<sup>14</sup> Institutionalised roles or priesthoods, the reformulation of religion as knowledge that is kept and elaborated by such professionals, and complex rituals are products of historical developments and subjected to change, but they are also testimonies of synchronic tensions and conflicting claims, as is exemplified by the analysis of John North.

Within the different phases of Roman funeral rituals, the final stages are characterised by the performance of a funeral dirge by a group of hired female mourners, the so-called *naenia*. The status of its performers and their female leader, probably hired from the professional undertaker associated with the *Lucus Libitinae*, is ambivalent and in contrast with the praising role of male (and noble) performers of laudatory speeches and other rituals before. Clearly, widely shared concepts of individual heroic status and the post-mortem dissolution of individual identity into the community of the *di Manes* clash, a clash resolved in terms of chronological sequencing, gender and status differences. Religious roles and shared meanings are of importance for any individual appropriation of religion, as North's article reminds us.

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<sup>14</sup> Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lichterman 2009.

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