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Religion in the making: the Lived Ancient Religion approach

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ABSTRACT

For the past five years (2012–2017), the Max Weber Center of Erfurt University has hosted a project on ‘Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning “cults” and “polis religion”’, financed by the European Research Council and embedded in the research group on ‘Religious individualisation in historical perspective’ (see Fuchs and Rüpke. [2015. “Religious Individualisation in Historical Perspective.” *Religion* 45 (3): 323–329. doi:10.1080/0048721X.2015.1041795]). It was designed to supplement existing accounts of the religious history of the Mediterranean area at the time of the long Roman Empire, accounts traditionally centred upon public or civic institutions. The new model focuses on the interaction of individuals with a variety of religious specialists and traditions, taking the form of material culture, spaces and text. It emphasises religious experience, embodiment and ‘culture in interaction’. On the basis of research into the history of religion of the Roman Empire, this co-authored article sets out to offer new tools for research into religion by formulating three major perspectives, namely religious agency, instantiated religion and narrated religion. We have tried to illustrate their potential value by means of 13 short case studies deriving from different geographical areas of the central and eastern Mediterranean area, and almost all relating to the period 150 BCE to 300 CE. These short descriptions are summarising research pursued by the members of the team of authors, published or to be published in extended form elsewhere, as indicated by the references.

KEYWORDS

Lived religion; religious agency; narrativity; material religion; ancient Mediterranean; religion in the making

The aspirations of the LAR project

The initial formulation of the Lived Ancient Religion project (‘LAR’, cf. Rüpke 2011b) was a proposal about how one might re-think the conceptualisation of the vast, amorphous, heterogeneous body of material that bears upon what is conventionally known as ‘the

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religion of the Roman Empire'. The very topic had itself hardly existed before the 1980s, being regularly confused with 'ancient Roman religion' on the one hand, and the 'Oriental religions of the Roman Empire' on the other hand (Bonnet and Rüpke 2009; Rüpke 2011c). The initiative was grounded in three specific challenges to existing approaches: (a) we criticise the implicit assumption that all inhabitants of the Empire, from the Republican 'empire of booty' to the supposedly Christianised empire of Theodosius I in the late 4th century CE, were equally religious (the 'homo religiosus' fallacy). (b) We also question the focus upon civic, i.e., collective, institutionalised religious practices. This is vital because that focus produced a series of supplementary sub-categories (which are at the same time conceptual strategies), in order to grasp, but also exclude phenomena that were very present, but neither collective nor necessarily institutionalised. These categories, such as 'mystery-religions', 'oriental cults', 'indigenous cults', 'votive religion', 'funerary rites', admitted the phenomena, yet did not elucidate their relation to civic practice. Thus, they are sub-categories that are neither empirically convincing nor analytically adequate. (c) Thirdly, we criticise the practice of treating 'pagan' religion, Judaism and Christianity as though they had existed historically in quite separate worlds – enshrined in a disciplinary division of labour that has been enforced since the rise of Neo-humanism in the late 18th century.

The long-term price paid for such commitments has been to uncouple the ancient world from shifts of approach that have long since been established in the mainstream or global study of religions, to the extent that it no longer has a place in many standard works, and is at best confined to its own safe little corner (such as the excellent handbook edited by Salzman and Adler (2013)). Where are the individual religious agents in a framework fixated upon 'festivals' and 'collective practice'? What are we doing by making entities such as 'Roman religion' or 'Christianity' the subject of constative sentences? What is the historical value of an archaeological practice dominated by a concern for individual monuments and 'gods'?

The mantra of the Annales School was that 'the evidence only yields the answers if one knows how to pose the questions' (Bloch 1944 [1997], 77). A change of questions is a change of subject; fruitful new questions are stimulated by work in neighbouring disciplines. The main thrust of the LAR initiative was to resist the easy reification of 'religion' (as though we all know what is involved) in order to emphasise its ceaseless construction through individual action within the loose parameters provided by traditions, ideals and institutions ('religion in the making', Rüpke 2016a). That is, to view religion as a precarious practice, whose referents ('gods') and communicative strategies are constantly in need of investment-labour of different kinds in order to maintain their plausibility. In the absence of a sufficiently broad indigenous concept of religion, the continuity of many practices and concepts later captured under incipient conceptualisations (*religio*, *thrêskeia*, *ta theia*), we opted for a wide substantialist definition, namely the *ascription of agency to non- or super-human agents* regarded as 'ancestors', 'gods' or 'demons', *usually performed in communicative action*. 'Religion in the making' was the title of the Lowell Lectures of Alfred North Whitehead as published in 1926. Apart from a formulation in the introduction, the phrase is never used again. Whitehead's account is of a universal history of religion, its necessary change in the course of development of a rational worldview and its permanent individual reproduction on the basis of aesthetic experiences that bring together the material and the noetic world. Whereas Whitehead's was a philosophical

critique questioning the stability of religion and dogmas in Whitehead, Rüpke's making, instead, focuses on the inherently dynamic quality of those cultural products that we identify as a religion in the course of historical analyses.

'LAR' does not pretend to be either a distinctive methodology or a general theory of religion, but is an eclectic approach marked by a specific range of interests. It seeks to complement other approaches by framing new questions that can be posed to a wide range of different types of evidence, deriving primarily but perhaps not exclusively from the Graeco-Roman world. Our approach is intended to provide the stimulus to integrate 'the' evidence on a new basis, invoke new types of evidence, challenge existing classifications of material or focus on neglected types of religious action. In view of the development, reception and transfer of 'religious action' to different contexts and in relation to new concerns, we work with a general model of the historically contingent establishment of 'religion' as a socially recognised field of action within the Empire (Rüpke 2011b, 2011c; cf. Beyer 2009). The long-term aim was from the beginning to provide new narratives of religious change in the Roman Empire based upon the methodological points of departure and insights of the research thus inspired (see, e.g., Rüpke 2018b).

While invoking 'lived religion' as understood in modern contexts (e.g., Orsi 1997; McGuire 2008), there are clear differences in the application and implication of the concept. Starting from 'Lived Religion in America' (Hall 1997), the change of focus indicated by the concept was from a description of religion based on its dogmatics to religion as practised. Nancy T. Ammerman thus choose a whole group characterised by ethics instead of dogmas (the 'Golden Rule Christians') as her point of departure (Ammerman 1997). The concept became more and more to be equivalent with 'everyday religion', paying close attention to subjective experience and meaning (see Ammerman 2007). 'LAR' was neither restricted to 'everyday religion' (as opposed to organised or dogmatic religion) nor particularly focused on subjective experience, which is anyway hardly represented in the available evidence. Instead, it flagged four key terms aimed at straddling the dichotomy between subjectivity and communicative action. These were appropriation, competence, situational meaning and mediality. All of these were intended to sharpen the accounts of the dynamics of ancient religious experiences, practices and beliefs.

Appropriation denotes the situational adaptation and deployment of existing practices and techniques, institutions, norms and media to suit contingent individual or group aims and needs (Raja and Rüpke 2015a; Arnhold and Rüpke 2016; Rüpke 2016b). Starting from the notion of ascription of agency, the catchword 'competence' was intended to underline the priority of personal engagement, knowledge and skill in the provision of services of all kinds, whether on an occasional or a professional basis, including public and private performance, authorship, teaching and networking (Gordon 2005; Hüsken 2009; Petridou 2013, 2017a). In speaking of the situational construction of meaning, we assumed that religious meanings were not generated by world-views but by the complex interplay of interests, beliefs and satisfactions in specific situations (Raja and Weiss 2015). Finally, the focus on communication (both vertical and horizontal) required specific concern with the roles of material culture, embodiment and group-styles in the construction of religious experience, in short: mediality (Malik, Rüpke, and Wobbe 2007; Meyer 2008; Hjarvard 2011; Lövheim 2011). Insofar as communication requires materiality, this amounts to a demand for a new approach in the archaeology of religion (the 'archaeology of religious experience', Raja and Rüpke 2015a; Gordon 2017).

Thus, against a tradition of scholarship heavily invested in concepts of ‘tradition’ and ‘sacral law’, LAR does not reconstruct local ancient religion as an ahistorical set of ‘symbols’ of fixed meaning or from individual experiences (and so ‘belief’, cf. Scheid 2016), but from the historical agents that are the producers of our ‘sources’. It emphasises the social context of action deemed ‘religious’, and specifically the ‘group-styles’ (based on Goffman’s symbolic interactionism) that influence linguistic and behavioural patterns in specific cultural contexts, such as the (non-nuclear) family, neighbourhoods and associations (Lichterman et al. 2017). From this perspective, public cult appears less as a set of ideals that can in practice never be lived up to, more as a scheme of ordering priorities and distinctions whose effect is to outline (rather than define) an imagined community.

Perspectives

In applying the initial conceptual tools to a variety of empirical material taken from across the Mediterranean world during the long Roman Empire, some perspectives emerged, which turned out to be particularly useful across the historical depth and geographical span of our inquiry, namely religious agency, instantiated religion and narrated religion. These three perspectives are laid out in summary fashion in this section. In the following section (3), they are illustrated and further fleshed out by means of the case studies.

Religious agency

Within this grid, we employ the concept of religious agency in order to capture the dynamics of practice and historical change. We understand ‘religious agency’ as a special type or aspect of the capacity to act in the historical societies under consideration, which results from the kind of agency involved in the context of communication with non- or superhuman addressees (or ‘senders’; see Rüpke 2015a). We understand such agency thus in a twofold sense, the powers ascribed to non- or superhuman addressees (which is the semantic or performative content of such communication), and the resultant modification of human action. To the extent that such communication ascribes agency to actors qualified as ‘divine’, that agency is privileged (‘religious’ in our definition), while the agency of the human initiators or principals of such communication is modified: mostly by being enlarged (e.g., acting in accordance with, or out of reverence for, the gods; as a legitimate descendant within a family cultic tradition, etc.), but occasionally in being reduced, for example when agency is ascribed to the will of the gods only. Depending on their plausibility or degree of acceptance, the claims implied in such communication will also modify the wider social environment and so the agency attributed to an audience. From the point of view of social action, therefore, ‘religious agency’ opens up endless opportunities for both creating and managing complex scenarios. We also want to argue that it should be seen as a source of social and cultural change, including innovation in the realm of religious communication itself, its addressees, its forms and its plausibility. Mediterranean antiquity offers abundant examples of the upscaling as well as attempts at controlling and restricting such agency.

Doing religious communication does not start *ab ovo*. We view human agents as embedded in multiple cultural frameworks that include traditions of communicating with or about divine communicators. At the same time, these agents are constrained or

supported by existing power relations. These structures are not simply abstract constraints but inform all situations in which competence is demonstrated. People perform religious communication in specific spatial and temporal contexts and in doing so produce specifically religious space and time: for instance, processions delimit territory, a complex ritual sequence transforms a day into a festival. Conversely, a temple presents itself as the preferred place to contact the divine, a holiday demands gifts for the gods.

The spatio-temporal and the social context together afford agency. Religious agents feel empowered or empower themselves to act by drawing on divine agency; they are also driven by personal problems, economic needs, by political aspirations and moral codes. On their way to an important event, individuals might stop at some point and mark out a religious space by means of a simple prayer and offering, but such a claim could easily be ignored by others taking the same route, as the philosophic adventurer Apuleius pointed out in the 2nd century CE (*Florida* 1). Drinking vessels repeatedly used in rituals may be marked as 'special' by carrying written invocations (e.g., the so-called Spruchbecher of the north-western provinces). A patient might set up a small altar in thanksgiving, which might be seen for decades in a sanctuary. Objects form part of the ongoing sacralisation of specific spaces, that is, constitute investments in their character as sites particularly appropriate for religious communication (Rüpke 2016c), and advertises the principal's 'piety' and hence social standing – or might invite criticism of his or her 'superstition' (hence throwing doubt upon their competence).

The choice of place and time (Rüpke 2012) might be influenced by (imagined) inclusion in a group or could be instrumental in creating and sustaining such a group, for instance as followers of Isis or Christ (see Wedekind 2012). Religious action is however not confined to institutionalised religious contexts. The concept of 'grouping' is one of the more obvious possibilities here, whereby religious communication can be effected on a purely short-term basis without long-term consequences (Rebillard 2015; Rebillard and Rüpke 2015). An example here might be the invocation of divinatory signs (bird-flight or animal-entrails) by Greek or Roman generals in front of their soldiers to legitimate decisions about whether to engage or not (Patzelt 2018). Thus, human religious agents and 'audiences' can ascribe agency to one other.

The consequences of situational religious agency go beyond immediate space and time. Roles are claimed and negotiated in ways that condition expectations in future situations. Media, whether in the form of objects or texts, may out-last their originary occasions. Grouping processes may establish lasting networks (Lichterhan et al. 2017). Thus, religious agents do not only depend on, selectively use, and reproduce the resources they draw upon. They also modify them, both in the short and even in the long term. We use the concept of 'appropriation' (as outlined above) to refer to the adaptation and instrumentalisation of such resources. Religion from this point of view is a dynamic process, is always 'religion in the making'.

Dynamics of instantiated religion

Shifting the focus from the agents to the dialectics of expression and experience in religious communication and the many material or textual forms relevant in such connections, a second perspective emerges, which we term 'instantiation', thus shifting the focus from the agents themselves to the form and content of their actions.

Individual and group appropriations are approaches to, modifications or even inventions of practices, narratives or (informal) institutions, which re-enact and/or transform traditions (Rüpke 2011a, 2016b). This means that individual and group action draws upon shared knowledge but at the same time allows variation. The tension between existing knowledge and invention creates a dynamic, which is in principle never-ending (Gordon 2013a, 2013c). With respect to religious traditions – especially ancient ones – it is usually assumed that individuals and groups followed a strict set of existing pre-defined rules. However, even in antiquity individuals and groups disposed of a range of possible models for action depending on context and situation, quite apart from means of communicating with the other world. Just as today, not everybody was necessarily equally religious. The public performance of religious activity, for example, setting up a statue or leaving a votive offering, correlates with expectations related to individual or group status – or, contrariwise, may break with them. In other words, resort to certain religious practices or narratives may be an important status marker within an (imagined) community, or it may assert difference. Physical mobility may increase the range of choices of modes of expression at a given location, if newcomers take objects and ideas along with them to a new place of residence or settlement (Tacoma 2016, *passim*). On the other hand, the experience of migration may transform selected religious practices and narratives into an important anchor of individual or group identity. In that case, the satisfaction of conformity may strongly reinforce membership of a(n imagined) community.

Fundamental to the instantiation of religious communication is recognition and acceptance of the types of expressive media available in a given context within specific cultural milieux. Such acknowledgement is the pre-condition for all religious action as manifested in the world, from spitting onto one's own breast to ward off ill-luck, through the offering of fruits to a deity, to the grandest possible individual euergetic gesture, such as the extremely rich donation of the Crypta Balbi at Rome or the sanctuary of Zeus Olympios at Gerasa/Jerash in modern Jordan. At the same time, the instantiation of the decision once made opens up options, quite limited in the case of how best to spit, virtually unlimited in the case of the grand gesture – for instance putting up further images of deities, organising religious festivals or constructing further sacred spaces (de Polignac 2009; Rüpke 2013; Belayche 2014; Cooley 2015; Van Andringa 2015; Raja 2015c; Gordon, Petridou, and Rüpke 2017). Such options are themselves a form of power, and thus critical to the ascription of agency. In a word, instantiation, making some action manifest as 'religious action', requires resources, imaginative (i.e., competence) but also material. In a complex agrarian empire such as the Roman Empire, both types of resource were very unevenly distributed within the population as a whole, partly because of the massive concentration of the population in the agrarian sector, at the bottom of the chain of both information and wealth, but mainly because of the highly unequal distribution of status and wealth. It is above all in the density and diversity of urban environments that the investment choices within the elite condition and frame options lower down the social scale. The instantiation of motivations and experiences as 'religious' is thus inherently a matter not merely of desire but of resources.

Such instantiations are often taken at face value as direct expressions of intentions; they may, however, also be viewed as outcomes of complex processes involving a range of choices, intentions and negotiations. Previous instantiations, their scale and locations,

are part of the conditioning environment. The final form, whether gesture, object, text or edifice, had their effects, great or small, upon contemporary and future ways of embarking on, or developing, religious initiatives. While choices or possibilities were of course closely linked to the scale of investment, and therefore also to social status and social styles, a wide range of instantiations, which did not in principle require heavy investment, might also come to have an immense impact on subsequent expressions of religious action and rituals (Rieger 2016b). Gift practices might range from scattered individual offerings to accumulations of mass-produced terracotta votives offered over decades at one site. While the latter may give the impression that they all express the same intention, such motivations may, in fact, have differed immensely. The number of religious spaces within an urban context, whether monumentalised or not, may, for example, tell us about the long-term efforts of the political elite, but might also be expressions of individual aspirations to local and wider fame.

Religion narrated, narrating religion

‘Instantiations’ have been treated above all as synonyms of material forms in the previous paragraphs (cf. more generally Walker Bynum 2011; Droogan 2013; Mol and Versluys 2015; Raja and Rüpke 2015b; Knott, Krech, and Meyer 2016). Many instantiations of religion, however, from three line inscriptions to multi-volume literary texts, take the form of (at any rate implied) narratives. Indeed, we might well say that narration, in both oral and written forms, is more or less omnipresent in religious practice, preparing, accompanying and reflecting communication with ancestors or gods (Rüpke and Degelmann 2015). From a theoretical point of view, narrations have medial, communicative and locative dimensions. They play a role in instantiating religion in three distinguishable ways.

Any experience that may be interpreted as a communication with the divine (whether in dreams, visions, epiphanies or prophecies) demands a choice whether it is to be revealed to others or not. In many cases, silence may be the preferred option (Smolak 2001). The choice to communicate, that is to say, to ‘externalise’ an experience interpreted as ‘religious’, in turn involves further choices: how is one to narrate the form of such an encounter and the divine presences involved? Whatever the choice made, we can properly understand the composition of such narratives as the production of religious knowledge. Such knowledge is however thoroughly ambiguous. Positively, it may open up opportunities for earning cultural, and specifically religious, capital (for this concept, see e.g., Urban 2003) of a recognised kind, which can be operationalised for strategic purposes in specific situations. Negatively, they may expose narrators to the risk of being accused of claiming an unmerited or unwarranted privilege, e.g., as ‘false prophets’ (Stroumsa 2013).

No narration begins from a *tabula rasa*: contextual knowledge plays an irreducible role in their creation. In the first place, the process of creating a narrative demands that one draw upon ready-made figures, tropes and schemes (see Koschorke 2012) that mediate between the ‘original’ experience, whatever it may have been, and the various products that emerge from it, whether (auto-)biography, historical works, (apocryphal) acts, informal stories, exhortative texts or even rhetorical performances. Secondly, narrators may formulate, retell and re-arrange them more or less endlessly, and thus transfer them to new and different social or spatial settings. Religious narrations are thus dynamic elements

in the communication between individuals, audiences and the divine agency they refer to, enabling the creation of new relationships and new imaginations (Rüpke 2018a).

Narratives are heard by audiences. Audiences too have choices: they may engage with the narrative, remain indifferent or reject it in whole or in part. Either option allows the members of the audience to become in their turn religious agents, whether by re-telling, renewing, re-elaborating or contesting the knowledge gained, in the light of their prior assumptions, knowledge and interests. By negotiating the narrative of a healing event to be set up in or near a temple, the individuals who financed such inscriptions could enlarge their own range of action and so reduce that of the priests (Gordon 2016; see also Petridou 2015, 2017a). Thus, claims to competence do not cease with the original narrative, but may be amplified, but also modified, in later communicative undertakings. Moreover, thanks to audience networks, the process of appropriation of the narrative message from the initial performance or reading can have no imaginable end (cf. Eidinow 2011).

By concentrating on an agentive approach to narrated religion, we try to avoid treating narratives as though they offered stable meanings to reverent audiences. We understand the chiffre ‘religion narrated/narrating religion’ as a way of underlining the complexity of the communicative process and the inexhaustible variety of selective appropriations in ‘making religion’ (Raja and Rüpke 2015c).

Case studies

These three lines of enquiry, religious agency, instantiated religion and narrated religion, may now be used to structure the findings of the specific studies that have been produced in the course of the project that has now come to an end.

Studies thematising religious agency

The six studies grouped here, though evidently different in substance, focus on a number of common themes. They treat religious agency as a form of (self-)empowerment in specific social situations, in which the human actant stands to lose or gain a strategic good. At the same time, the degree of agency ascribed to deities varies sharply between the different cases, from the maximum implied by cursing (ascribing to the deity the power to punish or even kill the target) to the minimum implied by negotiation for status within ad hoc dining groups where the deity addressed simply looks benignly upon the human initiative.

Cursing

The act of cursing offers an extreme example of individual religious agency acquired in the context of perceived threat to the principal’s social or existential status. The issue here is not the ‘objective’ or ‘juridical’ justification for a curse against a target but rather the degree of anxiety, fear, anger or distress that subjectively warranted recourse to a curse. Such resort was an option realised at one specific moment in a longer, perhaps much longer, self-authored narrative, sometimes one repeatedly rehearsed before family, friends and supporters, in others perhaps a more spontaneous reaction, detailing a more or less serious threat to the social standing, honour, possessions or integrity of

the principal (Gordon 2015). This narrative provided the moral justification for the resort to a curse, one of the major sanctions available to individual agents, and might of course continue long after the actual utterance or (in the case of a written curse) deposition of the demand to the other world. Yet it is hardly ever drawn upon in formulating the curse itself, which is to be understood as a form of ‘hard words’ or ‘hard thoughts’ concentrating solely upon the rhetorical effect upon the explicit or implicit addressee. As a result, the precise aim of a curse is often quite uncertain (Alvar Nuño 2017). By invoking, explicitly or implicitly, the sanction of divine punishment, curses relied on a conception of a cosmos in which human action is subject to constant scrutiny by the other world, which was imagined as capable of direct action whose effect was to restore the socio-moral balance between the two (or more) parties involved in a conflict (Versnel 2010). In thus imagining the possibility of direct divine intervention, the private curse was a ‘naïve’ appropriation of a wider institution sanctioned by the dominant theodicy, ‘naïve’ in the sense that the latter had long since rationalised the lack of fit between a nominally moral cosmos and individual deserts (cf. the argument of Plutarch’s *De sera numinum vindicta*: ‘the mills of the gods grind slowly but surely’; ‘the wronged will be recompensed – in the world to come’).

In the nature of things, no actual oral curses survive; what do survive are written curses, mainly written on lead or pewter sheet, a few on papyrus (e.g., Daniel and Maltomini 1990, nos. 37–41, 43–45, 56, 58–62). As is to be expected, given the sheer size and cultural diversity of the Empire, the textual strategies used vary greatly. The variety is partly related to levels of literacy and partly to different levels of ingenuity in appropriating discursive materials from the local stock of informal knowledge of ‘how to do such things’. This informal knowledge might also include the notions of prayer and votive as suitable strategies. Curse tablets thus offer a privileged insight into individual appropriations of religious resources and lived religion in antiquity. The body is used as a key medium here: working from the representation of illness as a divine punishment, some curses seek to force the target to interpret illness as the consequence of having done wrong (Gordon 2013b); others attempt to attack the target’s physical and social body by disarticulating it item by item, as in a cinematic panning shot. In other cases again, cult details are used as sources of persuasive comparison. If we turn to specialists, we find them exploiting new niches, such as the circus and the brothel, where clients again found themselves exposed to unpredictable hazard. Here, we can speak of risk-minimisation (Eidinow 2007).

Performing prayer

By focusing on agency, we can highlight the performance of (public) prayer rather than its text. The distinction between profane and sacred gestures as well as public and private prayers is then secondary to the personal knowledge and competence that the agent activates when required. Rather than reproducing a fixed set of mandatory formulas and obligatory sequences of gestures, as allegedly required by civic institutions and traditions, it is up to the orant (the ‘praying agent’) to master the situation through performance.

The best example is a prayer by Clodius (mid-1st century BCE), which his contemporary Cicero alleges went disastrously wrong (Cicero, *On his House* 139–142). Clodius, just like other aristocrats in a similar situation, has to perform his prayer in public, as it were on stage. In general, we can say that in such cases the assisting pontiff composed a text, with which he prompted the orant, that is, the acting magistrate – or, in this case, the

tribune of the people. The orant, however, has to activate his own physical resources in order to perform the text convincingly before the audience. These personal resources are of course not specified in any ‘prayer book’, nor are they a constituent of the religious knowledge transmitted by priests. Reading between the lines, we see that Clodius used his rhetorical skills in order to fulfil the expectations of the audience, which included, if we are to judge from the rhetorical manuals (e.g., Cicero, *On the rhetor* 3.151–156; 195–198), emotional arousal. Whilst his colleagues seem to prefer gestures of raising one’s hands up in the air, or covering one’s head as devices to arouse the audience (Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* 11.3.114–116), Clodius opted for performing a wild dance, similar to that of the *Salii*, ‘dancing’ or jumping priests at Rome. Likewise, he enhances the dramatic modulation of the voice by uttering ‘meaningless’ sounds, ‘just like women’ (Patzelt 2018). Clodius, in other words, ‘appropriated’ a particular style of prayer performance in order to exceed ordinary expectations. The orant evidently does not merely ‘convey’ his or her concerns to a deity. As the example of Clodius shows, the orant needs to establish a communicative bond not just with the deity/ies addressed but also with a public, whether a regular audience or a momentary grouping. Since, as various CSR studies on prayer have shown, this communication relies on interaction rules rather than on mandatory liturgy (Schjødt 2009), we can say that such a situation ascribes a degree of agency to the audience. The agency ascribed to the deity, on the other hand, is essentially produced by the communication process and therefore admits of a huge variety of individual strategies, as Seneca’s description of devotees on the Capitol at Rome exemplifies (*On superstition* fr. 36–37).

The performance of symbolic mourning

Using the Lived Ancient Religion approach can also improve our understanding of Roman political culture, which was in many respects structured by rituals and ritualised by structures (Hölkeskamp 2010; Arena and Prag 2017). On this reading, significant actors could first appropriate signs and gestures from a ‘primary’ context and then adapt their usual meaning in keeping with their own aims (Lüdtke 1995). The case chosen here is ‘symbolic mourning’, a strategy sometimes employed, mainly by members of the political elite in Republican Rome, on occasions of existential personal or even more general crisis. This involved entering public spaces, for example the Forum or a law-court, dressed in soiled clothes, and allowing the beard grow (at a time when the norm was for adult men to be close shaven), both of them regular signs of mourning, though dark or dirty clothing might also be taken as a sign of low social status (Degelmann 2018). In other words, signs and gestures of mourning were employed as strategies to negotiate (sometimes even to intensify) political conflicts.

Romans were acutely aware of the import of such strategies. Gossip and rumour flew fast. The ‘mourner’ might be demanding sympathy or abasing himself in public, both options requiring an emotional response from passers-by. Such strategies could save individuals from exile and death, but might be used before resort to violence or even at times of civil war. Sometimes, however, they failed (a regular risk in the case of all performative acts), for example when no one was willing to pay heed; and sometimes, the principal had to amplify the range of his appeal by staging his children in court, or by weeping. It was not merely clothes, hair, performance and audience that were important,

however: the specific associations of different locations in the city of Rome must have been significant, even though we know very little about this aspect.

Contextual appropriation of religious knowledge in Roman Egypt

In Roman Egypt, well-trained and -educated practitioners ('priests') dominated the tradition of cultic practice in temples by a variety of means including the production of texts and the organisation of festivals, thereby enlarging their own range of action. Whereas such activities were constrained by rather rigid rules, a few such individuals were also able to creatively appropriate elements from other religious traditions.

An excellent example is a papyrus written by an Egyptian cult-official named Pakysis early in the 3rd century CE. This man was born about 166 CE and lived in Soknopaiou Nesos on the northern edge of the Fayum (c. 100 km south of modern Cairo) in Lower Egypt. As a *stolistes* of the main local temple, he had the prestigious task of dressing the cult-figures. When off-duty, however, he worked as a book-keeper for a large estate. So far, 20 accounts from this archive have been published (cf. Jördens 1998, 219–227; Geens 2015). One of these, written on reused papyrus and fairly chaotic in layout, is particularly interesting in the present connection. It begins with an invocation to four Greek deities: Agathe Tyche, Kerdon, Hermes and Aphrodite.

Such invocations are unknown from Egyptian temple administration. The sequence of deities is highly exceptional and only found in three other published Greek papyri, all originating from 2nd-century Fayum. Although all are very fragmentary, they seem to derive from the context of book-keeping and commerce. All four deities played a role in economic contexts: Agathe Tyche embodied Good Fortune, Kerdon was personified Gain, Hermes was the god of merchants and Aphrodite the goddess responsible for good relations. Perhaps, Pakysis learned the formula from another book-keeper or by studying other accounts in relation to his work.

Pakysis wrote the names on a private draft, and thus intended no human audience. It seems most likely that his (at any rate implicit) addressees were the four deities and that he was appropriating a practice already known among local accountants. We would then have a case in which a high-ranking Egyptian temple-official could assign religious agency to other, acculturated Greek, accountants and appropriate their knowledge for his own purposes. Context may here be crucial: Pakysis interacted with the Greek divine agents not in his temple but privately, while acting in a non-sacerdotal role.

Competing for status at Palmyra

Research undertaken on material from the oasis city of Palmyra in the Syrian Desert relating to the activities taking place in the various main sanctuaries of the city has led to a more nuanced understanding of various aspects of religious life in this city (Raja 2015a). A large group of tiny religious dining 'tickets' (Latin: *tesserae*), mostly made of clay, provide an important case study, which impels us to review religious agency and the dynamics of instantiated religion in a different light (Raja 2015b, 2015c). More than 1100 different types of these *tesserae* are known. Some have even been found in what is assumed to be complete series. The objects were used as entrance tickets to religious banquets, which were held by invitation in the main sanctuaries of the city. They carry detailed iconography and sometimes also inscriptions in Palmyrene Aramaic giving the name of the sponsor(s) of the event and in some cases also the names of deities as well as the

date. Often Palmyrene priests, who were the sponsors of these banquets, are depicted on one side of the *tesserae*, with a variety of iconographic symbols on the other, ranging from depictions of deities, to astral symbols, measures of drink and food distributed at the banquet.

When scrutinised in detail, the iconographic language of the *tesserae* tells us about the ascription of religious agency in these situations, since the banquets were sponsored by a variety of Palmyrene priests. These were all depicted in a generic ‘Palmyrene’ fashion, but the rest of the iconographic language was chosen with much care from a varied visual repertoire, which was influenced by local, regional and imperial traditions and constantly in the making. While the *tesserae* seem to have had no importance once the guest had been admitted to the relevant banquet (they were often disposed of in the banqueting hall or nearby), considerable effort was expended in making each series unique (Raja 2016).

Through their detailed and individualised visual language, the Palmyran *tesserae* provide information about religious agency (the donor and the guest) in the city as well as being an instantiation of religion there. Each series is also a material expression of local tradition. As such, they seem to be specific to Palmyra itself, for none have been found in other locations where expatriate Palmyrenes lived, such as at Dura-Europos or Rome (Equini Schneider 1993; Dirven 1999).

Isiac cults and religious agency

The concept of religious agency is also of value in analysing religious practices related to Isis, Serapis, Osiris, Harpocrates, Anubis and several other Graeco-Roman deities supposed to have formed a divine ‘family’ originally worshipped in Egypt. It helps to explore the different strategies by which the agents involved (individuals as well as groups of varying sizes) constructed their personal idea of Egypt. We were interested in exploring how different small-time religious providers and entrepreneurs appropriated, instrumentalised or even invented religious offers, sometimes by avoiding tricky Egyptian themes, sometimes by drawing upon what they knew or imagined about ‘Egyptian behaviour’.

Avoidance: whereas in Egypt Isis was one of the numerous deities associated with *heka*, ‘magic as a divine power’, her Greek reception systematically avoided this aspect of her activity. Even in the Demotic and Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri, texts closely associated with the temple tradition, we can trace the attenuation of her association with magic, which disappears virtually without a trace in her reception outside Egypt. In the only two *defixiones* (curse tablets) in Latin that invoke her, she is viewed as an ordinary member of the local pantheon. This phenomenon is to be understood as a strategy of avoidance on the part of the mediators of the Isiac cults to the Graeco-Roman world, where ‘magic’ was criminalised, involving its deliberate re-presentation as marvel or wonder (Gordon and Gasparini 2014).

‘Egyptian behaviour’: one of the most intriguing fields explored is the ‘spectacular’ and ecstatic aspect of Isiac cultic practice, which involved multiple strategies of dramatisation and emotional saturation within different sensory domains: haptic stimuli (e.g., worshippers beating their chests to re-enact Isis’ grief during the festival of the *Isia*) could arouse in the spectators latent physical impulses, giving them the impression of experiencing the ‘same’ pain; auditory stimuli (e.g., the shrill sound of the Isiac rattle, *sistrum*) had the potential to attract the attention of participants and passers-by and increase the emotional

impact of the proceedings (Gasparini and Saura-Ziegelmeyer forthcoming); a variety of visual stimuli increased the dramatic intensity of the theatrical performances staged in these contexts (Gasparini 2018). In short, physical and emotional intensification created a lived 'Egyptian' experience.

Instantiated religion

The following case studies focus on the use of objects or the modification of an environment that instantiates religion either directly or by physically commemorating religious experiences and practices, thus creating the infrastructure for further religious action by others. We treat these as spatial practices, but of course, their social impact extended far beyond those spatial limits.

Creating religious space

Despite their different ritual forms and materialities, practices of communicating with the divine, instantiating and narrating religion all involved specific or imagined space. Such practices were learned by doing or listening, sometimes even reading. The religious competence thus acquired, as well as the agency often accorded the religious agent, made it possible to apply them to new spaces and new situations.

In several Italian cities, the cult of the Lares, closely linked to the hearth as (one) religious focus of the private house, was instantiated on the external walls of houses or at cross-roads. The Lares thus became familiar to those (the great majority of the urban population) who lived over-crowded one-room apartments in some tenement building and for whom the street, therefore, functioned as a sort of extended multi-roomed home. The few owners or tenants of houses, on the other hand, as we know from Pompeii and Herculaneum, were able actively to configure the architectural features and decoration of their homes in order to create their own personal religious 'infrastructure', with living quarters decorated with scenes of religious practices and gardens full of mythic figures and gods (Rüpke 2018b, 229–234). This spatial infrastructure in turn surely triggered imaginative elaboration, perhaps even stimulated the performance of ritual, but could also be used by the permanent inhabitants, as well as by visitors, in many different ways.

Lighting played a large role here, for example in relation to the spatial elements, whether mural decoration or furniture, to be illuminated, and how. Religious agents used lamps as religious instantiations of the first order: the flames of oil-lamps, candelabras and braziers, often in considerable numbers, illuminated their bodies in action but also, of course, the figures of the gods they worshipped and other relevant objects. The suggestiveness of the play of shadows here should not be underestimated (Bielfeldt 2014, 202). Like circus scenes or erotic motifs, such objects became true 'eye-catchers', and the brilliant 'eyes' of flame might suggest the feeling that one were oneself actually the object of their gaze (Rüpke 2016c, 263–266).

Altars too are better seen as instantiations of religion rather than merely as cultic apparatus. For the person who caused an altar to be set up, it was an unmistakable sign of communication with a presence that was not otherwise immediately obvious to the eye, whether a 'god' or the dead. Its use was unthinkable without lighting a fire or pouring a libation: the upper surface was designed for just these modes of activation. Moreover,

in most cases, the lateral faces of an altar were themselves decorated with images of ritual instruments (usually a libation-dish and a water-jug) which alluded to blood-sacrifice. An altar was thus an instantiation of religion that expressed as much one's own competence and experience as it was part of an environment defined by other religious agents and negotiations of meaning. As such, it also implied an endless sequence of similar rituals, extending from the remote past to the indefinite future. But an altar could also be 'activated' with a minimum of effort, just by placing a lighted lamp on it, and mumbling an invocation or a song. Altars of all sizes, and quantities of votive lamps, played an ever-larger role in the imperial period, at the expense of depositions of figural objects such as statuettes (Rüpke 2016c, 266–267).

Religious praxis in houses (or in the street) was also brought to bear in institutional spaces designed for religious communication, such as temple-areas and temple-buildings themselves, that is, spaces shared by many users and even regulated by staff. If graffiti were welcome in the home, as an expressive response on the part of invited guests and an instantiation of their relationship to the hosts, this minimal but durable form of instantiation may also have played a role within the precincts of temples. Such was demonstrably the case at Dura-Europos on the river Euphrates, at the most easterly point of the Roman Empire. There, in the temples and assembly buildings of Jews as well as worshippers of Christ and Mithras, graffiti-writers endeavoured to perpetuate themselves with their requests to be remembered or blessed, as close as possible to the focal point of the original providers' religious instantiation, that is, the cult image, or on mural paintings, or in the corridors. In this way, they also appropriated the great two- or three-dimensional instantiations of religious communication and experiences set up by others, thus entering into the process of loose grouping mentioned above.

Transcending the categories of public and private?

LAR in the domestic space has also been studied under the rubric of instantiation in Karanis, a Roman town or large village again in the Fayum area of Lower Egypt. What was surprising, however, is how scattered and limited the archaeological evidence was. One influential view has it that later Roman Egypt was a period when religious practice gradually shifted from major temples to villages, and mainly the domestic sphere, since many larger temples had been closed (Frankfurter 1998, 97–144). However, the idea that religion 'moved into the domestic sphere' is historically questionable, since there is plenty of evidence for domestic religious practice already in Pharaonic times (Weiss 2015). More important for the present issue, however, is that the surviving evidence for domestic religious practice in Roman Karanis was found mainly in houses belonging to relatively wealthy individuals.

Despite the enormous number of finds recovered by the American excavation of Roman Karanis, the character of religious practice there remains nevertheless somewhat enigmatic. A case in point concerns the decorated wall-niches in the better-off houses, which contained images, whether two- or three-dimensional (Gottry 1995; Weiss forthcoming). Traces of fire-emplacements suggest that offerings were performed in front of some at least of these niches, as in Italy. Relatively wealthy families, including veterans from the army, manifested their good fortune by means of the tasteful decoration and architecture of their houses, but evidently also by performing appropriate (religious) practices. It seems probable that these practices also included other village-groups, such that

the assumption that ‘domestic religion’ equates with ‘private religion’ may be inaccurate. Despite the late date of abandonment (in the 5th century CE), there were no clear signs of Christian practice.

‘Doing religion’ in sanctuaries and grouping for religious practices in the eastern Mediterranean

The religious agents we can trace in shared sacred spaces of the Graeco-Roman Eastern Mediterranean, in the form of dedications, built structures and inscriptions, came there for different reasons, and with different interests. In order to reconstruct religious practices and their socio-spatial settings in larger spatial entities such as a region, a city or an oasis one needs to be clear about the cultural framework the religious agents living there could draw on (their ‘horizon of experience’ and their ‘horizon of expectation’). These horizons have an impact on actors’ interests and motivations for instantiating religion: ideas about how to depict a deity, how to address him, her or it, how to make an offering or stage a festival differed widely. Moreover, given the fluidity of the ways in which people practised religion or established short- and longer-term groupings, we can analyse these shared sacred spaces in modern Syria, Israel and Lebanon from two different points of view, (a) in terms of individual sites, such as Caesarea Philippi, and (b) under the rubric of short-term ‘grouping’ (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2003; Lichterman et al. 2017).

By viewing religion as continuously in the making, we can perhaps re-think the difficult archaeological issues of why a specific site came to be heavily sacralised, and the significance of the shifts and changes effected over time by a variety of different agents. At the highly evocative sanctuary at Banias, the source of the river Baniyas (one of the major tributaries of the river Jordan at the foot of Mount Hermon) near ancient Caesarea Philippi, inscriptions and niches cut into the rock-face, statuary, buildings and courtyards together created a spatially differentiated sacralisation of the rock-face and the terrace in front of it, which reaches down to the river. Over a period of several generations, religious agents there invested in innumerable alterations, major and minor, thus creating dozens of individual sites of particular personal significance: The most intense interaction of these visitors with the divine, however, took place not in, or in front of, the buildings but in front of the rock-face, i.e., not in the closed articulated spaces, as we might expect, but in the open spaces (Rieger 2016a). At the individual level, the most memorable and effective investments were the brief inscriptions and small niches cut into the rock-face, rather than the marble images of deities (Friedland 2012; Rieger 2016a). It was in the interplay between spaces, materials and media, that religion was instantiated at this site, and the place sacralised.

As for ‘grouping’, regular inscriptions, graffiti, figural *schizzi* on stone surfaces, and dedications of objects at small road-side shrines along the routes criss-crossing the Arabian Desert reveal the temporary comings-together of travellers and caravans for a brief religious act, a whole variety of strategies (motives too) for gaining the aid of gods or spirits. While on the move, people stopped at sites where others before them had instantiated religion, and in their turn added yet another ‘trace’, and so on and on, over many generations – truly ‘religion in the making’. Each person’s horizon of experience and expectation shaped the way in which they added their names and dedications, thus establishing ‘thin’ communication with their largely unknown fellow-agents (see p. 14 above on

graffiti at Dura-Europos). The concept of ‘grouping’ helps to highlight how the situational aspects of religious action – time, place and agents – condition choices of how to establish contact with the divine. This is especially valuable for the archaeologist trying to find ways of moving beyond the mere dry description of small, scattered, rather insignificant religious sites.

Narrated religion

Grouping through narration

Narratives are a powerful instrument for the formation of groups. The very process of narrative emplotment renders persons, objects and events meaningful by setting them into temporal, spatial and social frames. Narratives however are rarely ‘closed’: the biographical narrative of the individual, for example, necessarily alludes to, even incorporates, the ‘public’ narratives of families, groups and polities, thus creating a complex narrative identity, which is not the mere sum of all the narrative vectors, but has been filtered through a variety of institutions and interests, each of which can be understood as itself a complex network of narratives and practices, whose ramifications have no natural limits. In the case of a citizen of Athens, such a dense ‘bio-narrative’, if limited to *ta theia* or *thrêskeia* (‘religion’), might result in something that we would call ‘Greek religion’ (Eidinow 2011). As such, narratives, the ‘emplotment’ of events and actions, embedded in time, space and personal relationships, were a major source of orientation for groups (Rüpke 2016d).

For the first and second centuries CE, two insights are of particular importance for narratological approaches in History of Religion. If we view religious narrative as a transformation of religious practices into knowledge, we cannot be satisfied with mere content-analysis. We should rather understand narratives as exercises in communication, and thus engaged in network-formation beyond ritual. Granted that in our sources such narratives are generally unique, we should not be misled into dismissing them for that reason. For the uniqueness of a transmitted text is often merely apparent: it had its antecedents, whether typological or substantive, and its very existence was an invitation to future re-telling (Rüpke and Degelmann 2015).

Formation of a network depended as much on consensus, on which schemata and shared traditions could build, as on the framing of relevant contexts in which the imagined group (‘we’) could elaborate a shared past. Such a ‘we’ was not simply given but needed to be sustained by unrelenting effort on the part of religious agents and their instantiations. The degree of explicitness and exclusivity could vary widely, depending on the choice of subject, the self-definition of the narrator (whether implicit or explicit), the choice of the literary convention (genre being itself a mode of communication always related to a specific social context) and the assessments offered. The implicit reader of Greek or Latin fables was less narrowly defined than the implicit reader of a grand historical narrative such as that of Livy, or the fully ‘connected’ reader of Ovid’s Augustan commentary on contemporary rituals in his *Fasti*, ‘On the calendar’ (Rüpke 2015b).

As can be seen from many historiographical or so-called antiquarian texts, narratives engaged with a preceding discourse on norms and knowledge, reproducing, modifying or actually challenging previous positions, be they consensual, hegemonic or conflicting; but they might even inaugurate quite new discourses, for example with reference to the figure of Christ. We can thus find plenty of strategies of authentication in ancient religious

narratives even if we can hardly judge their efficacy. Extra-textual references might reinforce the narrative's claim to veridicality, but plausibility was achieved rather by internal coherence in addition to the degree of conformity with common knowledge and authoritative grand narratives. Indicating the author's correct name (the 'orthonym'), though widespread, was neither a necessary nor a necessarily successful strategy. Attributing the text to someone else, or even a fictitious author (pseudepigraphy; pseudonymity), was an important mimetic strategy that claimed authority by virtue of the narrative form and content rather than the author's personal writ (Becker 2009, 377–378).

Narrating the suffering body

Approaching the body (human and divine alike) as a bio-cultural product certainly constitutes a major advance over earlier views. In the now-dominant Foucauldian conceptual framework of the 'care of the self' (Foucault 1986), the body is accorded a central place in the literary and cultural production of the so-called Second Sophistic, a major response of Greek intellectuals in the High Empire to the fact of Roman colonial power. However, our emphasis on embodiment in the religious field was an attempt to take a step back and look afresh at the surge of interest about the body and its care in Second-Sophistic narratives. We saw this not as a new development but as an intensification of much older ideas about the body and its dependence on the gods' care during illness. By engaging closely with the correlation between medical terminology and mystery-cult imagery in flagship narratives of the Second Sophistic, such as Aelius Aristides' *Hieroi Logoi* [the 'Sacred Tales'] (after 145 CE), Lucian's *Alexander, the Pseudo-prophet* (after 165 CE), we can construe medical practice in the Empire as embodied knowledge experienced and expressed in religious terms; while serious or 'major' illness can be thought of as challenging a patient's identity, a challenge experienced as crises requiring repeated, mainly oneiric, therapeutic communication with a privileged and persistent divine interlocutor (Petridou 2017b).

No less important is how Aelius Aristides appropriates many of the ritual schemata and performances of the cult-officials of the Asclepieion (temple-hospital sacred to Asclepius) at Pergamon in Asia Minor (Petridou 2016), and uses his membership of the tightly-knit community of high-born 'therapeutae' (patients/worshippers) there to contest current religious and medical expertise and establish himself as an expert in both fields (Petridou 2017a). The 'Sacred Tales', once thought of as a purely private text, is more properly seen as an open, public one.

Narrating religious transgression

Several key scenes of Late Republican and Imperial Roman elite interaction can be analysed regarding their contemporary religious meaning and its impact on the emerging discourses. Concepts taken from the sociology of deviance (esp. Becker 1973; Schur 1980) afford an interactionist perspective that allows us to reject traditional ideas that assumed the existence of a-priori norms and thought of behaviour as determined by membership of a specific group. Interactionism emphasises that the construction of religious meanings is an ongoing process, affected *inter alia* by political and social debates, literary discourses, and encounters with authoritative or model figures and the strategies (and implicit mechanisms) they deploy. Applied to the political elite of the Roman Republic, the interactionist approach allows for a wider understanding of the appropriation of

religious motifs by its members as well as their need to ground religious claims for (non-elite) audiences. In this connection, given its boundary-crossing and boundary-affirming potentialities, the theme of religious transgression presents an especially fruitful point of entry.

An early key scene is the murder of the *tribunus plebis* ('tribune of the plebs') Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, whose office nominally granted him the most extraordinary protection that Roman law had to offer: When in 133 BCE Gracchus' political ambitions scandalised many senators, it was of all people P. Cornelius Scipio Nasica, the *pontifex maximus* ('supreme pontiff'), i.e., the head of one of the two major colleges of priests at Rome, who instigated the mob that lynched him in the Forum. In doing so, Nasica explicitly used the authority of his priesthood as symbolic capital to challenge the moderate course advised by the consul P. Mucius Scaevola. Nasica claimed that Gracchus had himself violated the law with respect to another (opposing) tribune, but is also supposed to have represented Gracchus as a (proper) sacrificial victim. He thus not only mobilised the religious capital deriving from his office but even insinuated that murdering an enemy of the state might actually be a fitting offering to a heaven eager to preserve the Republic, identified with the interests of the senators opposed to Gracchus.

Narrating religion to police the religious

The religious character of an action is, by and large, a matter of argument (Rüpke 2015a). Consensus regarding the ascription of agency to the divine world depends on a variety of factors, ranging, in a polytheistic system, from the very awareness of the 'existence' of a given deity through the degree of commitment to any member of the pantheon, to the assessment of the relevance and salience of a single such religious identity in a given situation. In consequence, what is instantiated may be deemed religious as well non-religious depending on the definition of a situation by the different agents involved. Narratives, whether oral or written, can enable such ascriptions to outlast the specific event (see also p. 8 above).

Surveying the history of ancient Mediterranean religions, now including Christianity, it is not rare to find that only one of the framings that made it into a narrative version has survived in textual form, while others are either lost or reported only from the perspective of the narrative that has survived. But what if a narrative has survived precisely *because* it strives hard to convince a contemporary audience that a given practice should be considered religiously laden, being a direct expression of good/bad, strong/weak religious motivations? This circumstance is pretty much the norm when it comes to early Christian literature.

How-to-die-gloriously booklets ('martyr acts') and how-to-live-truly hand-books (pastoral treatises) seek to instantiate religious meanings as the only possible outcome of discursive and non-discursive practices. The utterances 'God is my Lord' (*Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 6) and 'Caesar is the Lord' (*Martyrium of Polycarp* 8.2) are presented as alternative answers to the demand: 'To whom are you ultimately obedient?' The first would express a good/strong religious motivation; the second a bad/weak one. Yet it is possible to argue that, in extra-textual reality, the two statements did not necessarily share the same religious coding/connotation, the latter in some cases being either a declaration of a mere political deference, thereby refusing to interpret the situation in religious terms (Rebillard 2012), or a strategic tergiversation, issuing from a desire to

minimise commitment in a power-laden context (Scott 1990). The obligation to offer sacrifice, e.g., to the emperor's statue, would be a stumbling-block only in the case of the second option.

Conclusion: offering new perspectives

The three guiding perspectives set out here, religious agency, instantiated religion, and narrated religion, together with the 13 thumb-nail case studies based on a relatively wide variety of empirical evidence, are intended to illustrate the claim of the LAR approach to provide an effective model for a new approach to the religious history of the long Roman Empire.

As we have said, LAR is neither a methodology nor a general theory of religion but an eclectic approach marked by a specific range of interests. It aims to provide a critical complement to other possible approaches rather than simply replace them, by setting up new questions that, at any rate potentially, can be addressed to any empirical set of evidence throughout the Mediterranean basin in antiquity. On the other hand, its application to Ancient Mediterranean religions should not be considered an endpoint: 'leaving the disciplinary comfort-zone' has been part of its vision from the beginning. While taking its cue from inspiring research on contemporary religiosities and applying it to past religious contexts, LAR aims in turn to contribute to mainstream religious studies. Its ambition is to 'give something back' to the wider scholarship of religion beyond the lifetime of the project. By expanding the reach of the notion of 'lived religion' through the intensive historical and archaeological examination of ancient religions, LAR hopes to provide points of connectivity for future scientific enterprises.

Returning to antiquity, we view the LAR perspective as a significant contribution to the creation of future grand narratives of the religious history of the long Roman Empire. Here we can distinguish between city-based and overall perspectives. In view of the intensity of its internal religious dynamics, contacts and exchanges, competition and distinction, Rome itself is a prime candidate for an account highlighting agency and mediality (Rüpke 2016c). But that does not mean that it can be taken as a direct model for all the other cities and regions that were more or less dramatically altered by larger cultural and political processes initiated by the fiscal and administrative order imposed from Rome. Each of them has its own trajectory. Beyond that, the megalopolis of Rome will offer an important focus for a further line of inquiry on 'urban religion' based on the insights of LAR. Equally, one might frame the Empire as a whole as a dynamic field of action, a frame that contains a virtually unlimited range of religious phenomena. Themes here might be the resources available to religious actors, their affordances and potentials, the means through which individuals and groups created, institutionalised (and evaded) traditions, the perennial reality of religious change. The overall effect of these historiographical efforts would be to demonstrate the ability of the LAR approach to provide an effective framework not merely for individual cities but also for synthetic histories of large periods and spaces.

The major aim of introducing the concepts of religious agency, instantiated religion and narrated religion is to reconfigure current models of past religions. In our view, what are usually represented as static (or even crisis-ridden) ensembles of religious symbols, beliefs and practices are better understood as complex dynamic processes, as the interaction

between historical agents and their changing material and spatial environments. In a word, religion is to be viewed as ever in the making.

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