Valentino Gasparini

Introduction to Section 3

The concept of “religious agency” at the core of the present volume consists of a twofold kind of agency, on the one hand ascribing powers to “not unquestionably plausible supernatural agents” (ancestors, spirits, demons, gods),¹ on the other enlarging (or, occasionally, reducing) the human capacity to act and communicate with these non- or super-human addressees: “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.”²

This statement implies the basic assumption that religious agents act and communicate within complex spatio-temporal contexts.³ In Foucault’s words:

the space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things (...) we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another.⁴

Of course, the space in which religious agents are embedded is first of all the situational result of the entanglement of landscape (that is ecological/environmental features) and “things”.⁵ Within this space, religion can be instantiated through a virtually endless range of different media like gestures (e.g. prayers and sacrifices), objects (e.g. lamps and vessels), monuments (e.g. altars and sanctuaries), images (e.g. statues and paintings), and texts (e.g. inscribed stele and curse tablets).⁶ But space is, also and above all, social (i.e. cultural) space, a “network domain”.⁷

1 Rüpke 2015 and 2018, 24.

2 Albrecht et al. 2018, 571. See also Rüpke 2018, 24.

3 Albrecht et al. 2018, 572.

4 Foucault 1986, 23.

5 Hodder 2012.

6 Albrecht et al. 2018, 572–574.

7 White 2008, 7–9. Cf. also Eidinow 2011, esp. 15–18.

1 Space as social space

Thrown in multiple temporally evolving relational contexts,⁸ humans build their own personal perspectives through an intersubjective process of emergent events that require a continual negotiation between old and new, past and future.⁹ The simultaneous embeddedness of social agents within manifold temporalities and spacialities constantly changes their relationship to networks and represents the very first source of their creativity in interactive response to the problems posed by these changing historical contingencies.¹⁰ Indeed, individual social actors do not limit themselves to a mechanical employment of routines, but are constantly engaged in problematic episodes, choose among several plausible alternatives according to specific needs and aspirations, elaborate strategies of selection and modification (i.e. appropriation) of social schemas and patterns in the effort to locate “correctly where given experiences fit within them and thus keep social relationships working along established lines”,¹¹ and find out their own creative responses. Thus, agency is historically variable and the reproductive and/or transformative dimensions of actors’ agentic orientations can vary (increasing/decreasing), according to different factors, in different times and places.

Actors who are positioned in complex matrices of political, economic, and religious relations and differently structured networks (e.g. cities and metropolises) can develop greater capacities for creative and critical intervention, while a smaller availability of cultural resources (e.g. in countryside and outskirts) can inhibit actors’ ability to build new creative trajectories of action and revert the agentic action to more routinized (eventually local) patterns. Group-styles of religious gathering in cities can deeply differ from those taking place in non-urban contexts. The peculiar environmental conditions of life (let’s call it, in Paul Lichterman’s words, the “scenes”) strongly influence the “binds” of the local religious groups (that is the cultural “map” of reference points – other groups, individuals, social categories – in relation to which the group draws its boundaries”), their “bonds” (that is the “set of assumptions about how the actors are obligated to each other in the setting”) and their “speech norms” (that is the set of “assumptions about what kinds of communication are appropriate in the setting”).¹²

⁸ Joas 1996, esp. 148–167.

⁹ Mead 1932, *passim*.

¹⁰ Among many others, see Lynch 1972; Gell 1992; Gosden 1994; Loizou 2000; Dyke and Bardon 2013.

¹¹ Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 980.

¹² Lichterman et al. 2017, 4.

This is precisely the topic of this third section. Through the magnifying lens of the archaeological and epigraphic materials, the four following contributions (specifically focusing on the 2nd-3rd centuries CE) deal with the relationship between actors (individuals as well as groups) and scenes in very different geographical contexts of the Roman Empire (north-western corner of the Iberian peninsula, Syria, Rome's *suburbium*), in very different topographic contexts (including both extra-urban and urban sacred places: rock sanctuaries, temples, catacombs), and involving a wide range of actors (shifting between local Iberian or Aramaic people, Roman senators, Christian and Jewish communities, and so on).

2 Rural religion

In rural contexts, the more than reasonable concerns related to the meteorological conditions played a crucial role and implied some degree of prediction, for example trying to adjust the agricultural calendar by using the available public *parapegmata*, or mitigating social harm and economic risk by means, for instance, of what is currently called “magic” (namely the consultation of seers, itinerant diviners and specialists of astro-meteorology). As shown by Antón Alvar Nuño, these strategies were just part of the available set of religious resources and were deemed by the local communities as particularly effective group-styles.¹³ The hierarchies of and the rituals performed by the religious specialists in the cities could differ from the countryside. In the context of a common rural *villa*, the absenteeism of the landowners (who spent, in particular during the late Republican period, good part of the year within their urban *familia*) could change the relationship between the various members of the rural *familia* to religious rites: in case of absence of the landowner, the *villicus* (a freedman or even a slave) could replace the *dominus*, who delegated to him his sacrificial tasks and related knowledge, something that was in principle interdicted in an urban context and which temporally undermined local social hierarchies and ritual praxis.

For sure *density* (and thus the change of the concept of proximity and neighborhood) was able to influence (on a qualitative as well as quantitative level) the media employed to diversify religious offers, memorialize them, stress group-styles, and consequently modify social and power relationships.

¹³ Alvar (forthcoming).

Evidently, monumentality was not a prerogative of cities, and local entrepreneurs could be equally ready to mobilize conspicuous sums of money, invest them in religious communication in rural settlements, and negotiate between urban models and local variables.

Rural religion did not mechanically reproduce urban rituals and religious hierarchies and the rural world was not a space of cultural and religious resilience against a very Romanized urbanity. Rural areas represented instead an arena for very situational processes of negotiation between, on the one hand, Roman administrative patterns (for example the so-called “*pagus-vicus* system”), related social configurations (for example the *villa* system based on the figures of a *dominus* and a *villicus*) and spaces, and, on the other hand, processes of social conformance to the very characteristics of a local specific rural environment, of adaptation to its peculiar *habitus* and religious customs (involving supernatural beings whose competences directly mirrored a specific geophysical environment). Borrowing Emiliano Urciuoli’s concept of “citification” (see below), I will call all this complex process “rurification”.

The first case study dealt with in this session (Valentino Gasparini, “Renewing the Past: Rufinus’ Appropriation of the Sacred Site of Panóias (Vila Real, Portugal)”) is set at the rock sanctuary of Panóias, not far from modern Vila Real de Trás-os-Montes, in northern Portugal. The article aims to show how individuals could engage themselves with a pre-existing rural sacred site by introducing a new cult, reshaping the local architectural configuration, creating new behavioral norms and fixing the memory of their personal religious innovations. The protagonist of this study, the senator G(aius) C(?) Calp(urnius) Rufinus lived between the late 2nd and mid-3rd century CE, selected for his personal act of devotion an eccentric (though maybe locally-famous) extra-urban sanctuary, whose granite outcrops naturally evoked a religiously-charged attractive force. Its innovation (the introduction of the cult of Isis and Serapis) was introduced, displayed and negotiated via specific micro-strategies including code-switching communication (see the bilingual use of Latin and Greek in one of the five related inscriptions), epiclesis (e.g. *hypsistos*) positioning his privileged addresses at the top of the local divine hierarchy, mystery features (viz. the Eleusinian allusion to Korê), infrastructures (a number of *lacus* and *laciculi* used for sacrifices), and behavioral instructions regulating in the future a correct ritual performance. This analysis is a good example of what can be conceptualized as “temporary sacralization” of space, that is when “a place is used for religious communication and subjected to specific interpretations, maybe even rules of behaviour for the duration of the communication”.¹⁴

¹⁴ Rüpke 2018, 26.

The second chapter of this session (Anna-Katharina Rieger, “This God is Your God, This God is My God: Local Identities at Sacralized Places in Roman Syria”) moves to Roman Syria, specifically exploring the Lebanon mountains, the Mount Hermon area and the Beqaa plain (Niha, Hosn Niha, Temnine el-Fouqa, el-Taht). Again, the interest of this article does not lie on urban or large sanctuaries, but rather on small-scale, local, and low-density sacralized contexts. The aim of the author is to analyze the local social constellation and its related political and economic dynamics (control of the water regime, agriculture, husbandry, etc.) in order to explore how people felt to belong to the local sacred places, how they built their spatial layout, and how this was conceived in relation to the architecture of other nearby sacred places. Through the analysis of the epigraphic and archaeological evidence, it is possible to detect the different strategies through which it was possible to build identity markers as locals (ethnically natives), communicating them to gods through toponymic epithets, sharing them with other members of their communities (families, associations, villages, etc.), but also creating boundaries from close neighbors and using gods to reinforce them.

3 Urban religion

Urban religion is a phenomenon pressing religious actors to adopt and adapt city features, to engage with the socio-spatial conditions of city life, including appropriating city-spaces, localizing or de-localizing religious practices, providing specific infrastructures in order to attract, collect and host large groups of people (theaters, for example), facilitating processes of “intellectualization” of religion, authorship, and, more generally, competition.¹⁵

Two case studies about these processes of “citification”¹⁶ are collected in this session. The third chapter (Rubina Raja, “Come and Dine With Us: Invitations to Ritual Dining as Part of Social Strategies in Sacred Spaces in Palmyra”) heads north in Roman Syria, and deals with the example of Palmyra. Here the focus is on the practice of sharing non-funerary banquets, analyzed through the study of banqueting tesserae. These tesserae were mainly in clay, mostly measuring few centimeters per side, in more than 1,100 different lots characterized by a wide range of different iconographies including religious symbols, deities, and Palmyrene priests (sometimes accompanied by inscriptions indicating their names) wearing their

¹⁵ Urciuoli (forthcoming). Cf. also Rüpke 2018, 28–32 and Urciuoli and Rüpke 2018, esp. 120–124.

¹⁶ Urciuoli (forthcoming).

typical hats and laying on *klinai* while consuming the ritual meal. A good part of these tesserae has been found in the banqueting hall of the sanctuary of Bel. Of course, these tesserae were used for a practical reason, that is as tokens to access the sacred meals periodically held in the local sanctuaries, but their significance goes far beyond their pragmatic use. The author suggests that their rich and very personalized iconography (possibly selected and commissioned by the priests themselves) could enable a negotiation between individuals and group-styles by providing the invited guests with specific vivid information concerning the sponsors of the events, their social status, the urban religious contexts within which the banquets were organized, and even the social norms which the guests were expected to adhere to.

The fourth and last chapter of the session (Barbara E. Borg, “Does Religion Matter? Life, Death, and Interaction in the Roman *suburbium*”) selects the 2nd–3rd centuries CE Roman *suburbium*, and specifically the sites of the *memoria* ‘*ad catacumbas*’ under the church of S. Sebastiano, and the Monteverde, Randanini, and Torlonia catacombs, in order to explore how the funerary realm of the Roman cemeteries was affected by the introduction of references to Christian and Jewish shared group-styles. Catacombs, originally built in imperial properties as independent (and heterogeneous, in terms of size and architecture) hypogea and mainly acquired by private benefactors, were actually used by mixed Christian and non-Christian groups of people (including imperial staff and élite military, or people tied by social links like “vocational associations or membership in a *familia*”), and not conceived as communal burial spaces for the very Christian community. A specific Christian habit, attested by chi-rho signs and references to Christ, can be identified only from the 4th century CE, when also Jewish communities started to leave (mostly Greek) epitaphs and images like the *menorah* or the *shofar* in (virtually) exclusively Jewish catacombs. The selected examples suggest that, if communal burial spaces in *columbaria* belonging to noble families or by groups sharing a common occupation (*collegia*) were quite common from the Augustan period up to the end of the 1st century CE, this custom comes back to be in use just at the turn of the 2nd to 3rd centuries, when it is possible to finally detect traces also of ethnic groupings by Jordanians, Pannonians and Pisidians. Only from this moment on is it possible to perceive the desire by groups of people to share common burials in order to strengthen their religious identity, including Christian and Jewish communities, which (despite the limited display of identity markers until the 4th century CE) probably started to tend to conceive themselves as ethnic groups too, or at least to use ethnic terms in order to build “a notion of an autonomous, disembedded *religious* identity”. Only from this moment on is there explicit evidence allowing to trace

efforts in activating and displaying a Christian identity in opposition to a Jewish and pagan one, that is to use a religious affiliation as a means of constructing an individual's identity.

4 From social space to lived places

Beyond the differences between rural and urban contexts, these four essays clearly show that, according to different times and different places, actors negotiated their relationship with other humans differently, used specific paraphernalia differently, experienced the divine differently (see the first section "Experiencing the religious"), in particular via bodily sensorial stimuli (see the second section "A 'thing' called body: Expressing religion bodily"), and built their communication with gods differently (see the fourth and last section "Switching the code"). This third part of the volume analyzes how individuals inscribed their religious experience and communication within shared spaces, modifying pre-established ritual patterns, introducing new conceptualizations (viz. sacralizations) of these spaces, elaborating micro-strategies in order to memorialize their religious acts through different media, negotiated these innovations with further individuals and crystallized smaller or larger groups gravitating around these places and sharing specific religious styles, later eventually socially reproduced and institutionalized as norms.

The main purpose of this section is going beyond the quite abstract concept of space by exploring unique places as "grounded in existential or lived consciousness".¹⁷

What space is depends on who is experiencing it and how. Spatial experience is not innocent and neutral, but invested with power relating to age, gender, social position and relationships with others. Because space is differentially understood and experienced it forms a contradictory and conflict-ridden medium through which individuals act and are acted upon. The experience of space is always shot through with temporalities, as spaces are always created, reproduced and transformed in relation to previously constructed spaces provided and established from the past. Spaces are intimately related to the formation of biographies and social relationships.¹⁸

Space is here conceived as constituted by contingencies of lived places¹⁹ and boundaries, shaping and being shaped by agentic behavior, as a performative

¹⁷ Tilley 1994, 15.

¹⁸ Tilley 1994, 11.

¹⁹ Lefebvre 1991, *passim*. Cf. Bergmann 2008.

act relationally arranged by living beings and “social goods”, and repetitively reproduced and changed in the everyday life’s flow of actions.²⁰

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