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Introduction to Section 4

1 A serviceable Goffmanian framework

In a famous chapter of *Frame Analysis* that opens with a discussion of non-human animals at play, Erving Goffman points out that “not all serious activity is unkeyed, and not all untransformed activity can be called serious” (Goffman 1974, 46). The fourth section of this volume takes its inspiration from the first part of the quote. Few people – believers or not – would consider religion to be unserious. Religion is not what we first think of when imagining a playful act. Nevertheless, religion can, in some senses, be said to share an important property with “unserious” activities like sports and games: it often relies on a prior schema of interpretation and description of “what is going on” and then alters this pattern significantly in certain respects.

In Goffman’s terms, we can say that individuals and groups do not always select religion as a “primary framework” (Goffman 1974, 21–39).¹ Religion, in fact, is neither always nor necessarily used to make meaningless or unguided events (like thunder) meaningful and guided (thunder interpreted as a supernatural sign). Religious activities, experiences, and ascriptions of meanings often depend on a “systematic transformation” of materials that have already been situated within a background conceptual framework without which the religious transcription itself would be meaningless. For, on the one hand, religion offers just one possible way out of a variety of culturally available options to meaningfully define and effectively organize an undetermined situation (Rüpke 2016, 19–20). On the other hand, thinking, feeling, and behaving religiously is often about *coding* strips of thoughts, experiences, and actions that are already meaningful in themselves according to prior schemata. Such religious doings (e.g. sacrifices or the Agape) appear as activities patterned after ordinary “guided doings” (Goffman 1974, 22) and transformed in such a way that participants come to see them as something quite different (e.g. a sacrifice is a systematically altered session of gift-giving or exchange; the Agape is an utterly

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¹ To follow up on Goffman’s distinction of primary frameworks between two classes, natural and social, we may say that religion functions as a “social primary framework,” inasmuch as it “provide[s] background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency, the chief one being the [super-]human being. Such an agency is anything but implacable; it can be coaxed, flattered, affronted, and threatened” (Goffman 1974, 22; slightly modified).

changed segment of a banquet). Goffman calls these transformations “keyings” (Goffman 1974, 40–82).

Religious ways of keying abound. To borrow from Goffman’s taxonomy of the “basic keys employed in our society,” (Goffman 1974, 48) religion is replete with forms of “make-believe” (or “as if”: see Benavides 2000, 233; Burkert 1987, 154),² it elicits theatricality and choreographed “ceremonials,” may demand rehearsals and “technical re-doings,” and not infrequently implies the “regrounding” of ordinary domains of activity (Goffman 1974, 48–77).³ Psychoanalysts (Freud 1933 [1907]), ritual theorists (Bell 1992), and cognitive scholars of religion (McCauley and Lawson 2002) have long explained “ritualization,” which boils down to a repetitive transposition of an otherwise ordinary strip of activity, as the basic keying of a religious way of doing things. “Sacralization” has most recently been reconceptualized along the same lines (see Rüpke 2018, 24–27). Religion largely functions by keying and coding human activities that are vulnerable to transformation.

Against this theoretical backdrop, we take here a further step. We suggest that *switching the code*,⁴ that is “rekeying” (Goffman 1974, 79) a material that has already been coded religiously (e.g. the Eucharist is a significantly altered sacrifice), is how religion frequently appears to operate when it is *studied historically* across an already stratified religious landscape and when we zoom in on *the level of the individual*. “Keyings,” Goffman explains, “are themselves also vulnerable to rekeying.”

So we must deal with retransformations as well as transformations. Nor can any obvious limit be seen to the number of rekeyings to which a particular strip of activity can be subject; clearly multiple rekeyings are possible. [. . .]. A New Yorker cartoon can depict two male models posing (under the direction of a photographer) at a chess board for a

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2 “By this term I mean to refer to activity that participants treat as an avowed, ostensible imitation or running through of less transformed activity, this being done with the knowledge that nothing practical will come of the doing” (Goffman 1974, 48).

3 “What is involved is the performance of an activity more or less openly for reasons or motives felt to be radically different from those that govern ordinary actors” (Goffman 1974, 75). See Benavides’ observation that “rituals connected with work frequently attempt to establish a distance between the celebrant and real labour: when, for instance, Chinese (and Vietnamese) rulers performed agricultural rituals, the amount of land ritually ploughed increased as the status of the ritual performer decreased. In other words, if the emperor ploughed three furrows up and three back, the three princes each ploughed five furrows up and back, the nine high officials turned nine furrows each, and so on, it being left to the peasants to do the actual work” (Benavides 2000, 233).

4 On the reasons why Goffman opted for “key” rather than “code,” see Goffman 1974, 44 note 14.

liquor ad, apparently deep in play, one saying to another, ‘I wish I had learned to play the game.’ [. . .]. And, of course, not only can a particular stage play be presented in various versions or styles, from classical to modern dress, but also one of these versions can be satirized, guyed, camped, or played broad, *the persistent purpose being to use a traditional presentation as a substance in its own right, as something itself to work upon.*

(Goffman 1974, 80–81; emphasis mine)

Viewed as rekeyings of already religiously keyed frameworks, code-switching religious practices are the subject of this section of the volume. At first sight, such practices look bewilderingly heterogeneous. They can be either discursive (such as penning a word or swearing an oath) or non-discursive (such as wearing a type of clothing or giving up pork). They can be instantiated by texts as well as performed despite of, or against, textual prescriptions. They oscillate between authoritarian hermeneutic strategies of the “strong” (e.g. a late 4th-century Christian exegesis of Jewish scriptures) and life-saving tactics of the “weak” (e.g. a double-edged statement during a criminal trial). They can serve functions as opposed as the dogmatic policing of the boundaries of a discourse (for instance, when a specialist authors a biblical commentary) or the wholesale changing of the rules of a conversation (for instance, when an emperor engages in the re-semanticization of a term). They can be “lived” in the most easily grasped sense of the performance of a daily prayer or in the more subtle character of a literary bricolage. Some are accomplished on the spot, some cover an adult human life-span, and some span centuries. In general, code-switching religious practices crisscross the border between production and consumption (de Certeau 1984 [1980]) and, needless to say, cut across *religions*. Nevertheless, what eventually unifies this miscellaneous array of practices is that, in order to perform them, an individual has to alter – or re-alter – the character of a more or less firmly established and closely scripted religious, or religiously infused, practice.

Before introducing these code-switching activities in detail, it will be necessary to briefly consider their implications in the context of the collective historical enterprise that is the study of “lived ancient religion”.

2 “Lived ancient religion”: beyond “traditional symbolic interactionism”

The “lived ancient religion” approach (Rüpke 2011; Albrecht et al. 2018) construes and investigates religion as the intrinsically precarious and ceaselessly constructed outcome of individual actions that navigate the “*loose parameters* provided by traditions, ideals, and institutions” (Albrecht et al. 2018, 569;

emphasis mine). Therefore, on the one hand, the Goffmanian framework of this section of the present volume is nothing but a recognition of the original *interactionist* agenda of the “lived ancient religion” conceptualization of “lived religion” as “religion in the making,” set against a tradition of scholarship that has heavily invested in “the existence of a-priori norms and thought of behaviour as determined by membership of a specific group” (Albrecht et al. 2018, 584). “Interactionism,” an appropriately loose term, sociologically grounds the “lived ancient religion” historical study of religion at the level of the individual (see Rüpke 2013). Therefore, on the one hand, it positions the “lived ancient religion” approach in theoretical contrast to perspectives on religious self-identification and patterns of religiosity that are too laden with notions of normativity, and theories of identity, philosophies of actions, and ethnographies of grouping processes that are too structure-oriented. On the other hand, the interplay and cross-fertilization between anthropological and archaeological theories of human-object interaction (Miller 1998; Brown 2003; Latour 2005; Hodder 2012), varieties of relational structuralism (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) and group-centered cultural sociology (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003), and bio-cultural embodied approaches to religious world-making and experience (Geertz 2010; Grieser and Johnston 2017) work to provide the “lived ancient religion” perspective with a programmatic sensitivity towards “the resistance of objects, the durability of institutions, and the tenacity of human bodies and minds” (Rüpke 2015, 352).

Sociologically speaking, this leads to an eclectic and balanced interactionist perspective that does not allow identities, roles, and meanings to be unrestrictedly defined and constructed anew in any situation.⁵ The materiality of things does matter (Miller 1998; see Raja and Weiss 2015; 2016); structures and agencies relate to one another and constitute each other (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; see Rüpke 2015); “group styles” are recognizably patterned and relatively durable “elements of culture” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; see Lichterman et al. 2017; Rebillard and Rüpke 2015); habitus are stockpiled in series and thus come in the plural (Lahire 2003; see Arcari in this section); meanings are bordered fields that individuals can poach their way across (de Certeau 1984 [1980]; see Urciuoli in this section).

Indexing processes of individualization based on religion, the code-switching practices outlined and investigated in this section arise out of this loosely policed and never reified web of structures, lines of actions, and

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⁵ For the tendency to “dissolve social structure in a solvent of subjective definitions” as the shared commonality of so-called “traditional versions of symbolic interactionism,” see Stryker 2000, 27; Burke and Stets 2009, 33–37.

meaning-making processes. A whole variety of religious and non-religious motives can account for the strategies pursued by individuals to creatively re-key and adapt existing signs, beliefs, settings, and practices to their own personal ends. This sort of creativity is clearly not a prerogative of socio-political elites or religious specialists, that is, of those privileged urban agents endowed with forms of capitals that entitle them to manipulate religiously coded signs and symbols. Nor should the inventive way in which these practices insinuate themselves into prior systems of meanings be associated with the limited power resources of the dominated sectors of the Roman imperial population: while certainly including authentic “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985), these code-switching moves cannot be restricted to the ingenious manners “in which the weak make use of the strong” (de Certeau 1984 [1980], xvii) in order to face and overcome conditions of marginality and situations of exclusion. Top-down attempts to typify meanings and bottom-up efforts to appropriate them will be investigated equally in this section. Differently empowered individuals, such as emperors, senators, and literate and illiterate members of religious minorities, all have a stake in this transformational game, in which words and deeds are transcribed and re-transcribed without losing any of their *ascribed* religious seriousness.

3 Individual contributions in the section

This fourth section of the volume focuses on heterogeneous items that the technical jargon of related disciplines and specialized bodies of knowledge have traditionally worked to isolate from one another, for instance by tagging them as conversion and Judaization (Berthelot), apostasy and Hellenization (Boin), narrativization (Degelmann), textualization and interpolation (Arcari), commentary (Bracht), and accommodation (Urciuoli). In this volume, these items are all grouped together under a general heading that treats them as techniques and procedures by which non-discursive practices, discourses, and writings are rekeyed/recoded within religiously framed contexts of meaning-making and interaction. In addition to this unifying function, the “Switching the code” designation has a second advantage: it keeps together transformational activities that Goffman himself would rather distinguish into two classes, “keyings” and “fabrications,” according to the varying intentionality of the practitioner/s. While the former have been already introduced, the latter refer to

the intentional effort of one or more individuals to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on.

(Goffman 1974, 80–83)

In some cases, transformation clearly requires a difference in the participants' view of what is going on. A Roman patrician who ostentatiously refuses to display symbolic mourning wants his public to share the *key* in order to appreciate the gesture. By contrast, a Christian martyr playing at riddles *fabricates* a frame that is meant to divide the awareness of the audience, that is, to deceive some outgroup persons while instructing an ingroup who are provided with the correct code. In this latter case, a different "transformational vulnerability" of human activities is at stake insofar as "the rim of the frame is a construction" that only the fabricators can see (Goffman 1974, 84). Yet the question of whether or not a scribe interpolating and modifying a text acts deceptively, and for what reason, can be difficult to answer: she may, in fact, think her intervention is meant to alter an already transformed text and/or aim to restore or reveal its genuine meaning. By the same token, non-Jews mentioned among Jewish benefactors for their financial contributions to the construction or refurbishment of buildings used by the Jewish community might have at least partly concealed from their Jewish public, or euphemized, their non-religious motivations for acting. All in all, by glossing over the distinction between fabrications and keyings, "Switching the code" emphasizes that, in all the cases addressed by the chapters of this section, a particular religiously-laden body of behaviors and/or words within which action has meaning is recorded.

The sequence in which the chapters are presented deliberately avoids following the chronological order of the subject matter. They are rather arranged to create a sort of back-and-forth movement between textual and extra-textual materials that should help further highlight the extreme variety of what is used as a pattern for the transformations.

Christopher Degelmann's chapter opens in a most Goffmanian way. A Roman boy, son of a killed man and facing the impossibility of succeeding in a legal action, transposes a court scene into the streets of the capital by publicly displaying what earlier research has referred to as *squalor* and what Degelmann interprets as "symbolic mourning." Instead of performing his grief in the setting of a tribunal, the boy begins to follow the putative murderer while wearing rags. This keying strategy is somehow effective, since "the man fail[s] at the following election." Applying to Roman antiquity the Luhmann-inspired notion of "transformation," which indexes mechanisms of the creative appropriation of elements from the past, Degelmann sets out from this episode to survey the formal and functional changes that occurred to symbolic mourning practices over the centuries, swinging between Roman history and classical historiography,

and between classical historiography and other textual genres and non-literary sources. Already “a bricolage of numerous practices in Roman daily (political) life,” *squalor* undergoes continuous metamorphoses into different “mourning scene[s],” from the Middle Republic through to the Early Imperial era. The resulting impression is of a constant flux of altered motifs that are patterned after earlier historical episodes and literary depictions and which, in turn, influence subsequent narratives and actual modes of action. The reader is confronted with a deliberately puzzling chain of connections that draws the origins of the *squalor*, a custom that had become conventional by Claudius’ time, back to the founding myth of the city of Rome.

Code-switching devices and techniques applied to texts alone are no less influenced by extra-textual reality and factors that reach beyond semantics. Drawing on both relevance-theoretic and embodiment approaches, Luca Arcari addresses interpretive practices carried out by scribal experts on two exemplars of what he calls “living visionary texts”: P.Oxy. 1.5 and the *Codex Sangermanensis*. The redactor of the former both interpolates and modifies a few lines from a 2nd-century early Christian text, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, while the scribe copying the latter expunges a doctrinally problematic section of the Latin version of the Jewish apocalypse 4 *Ezra* (end of 1st century). By showing how textualization works to intensify complexity and to systematize extremely fluid and unstable scripts, Arcari stresses the role of the scribal agents in the meaning-making process: via either subtle manipulation or the “extreme operation of the cut,” interpretation consists in appropriating, transposing, and reshaping information that is contained in an “original” text and processed through mechanisms that require more than semantic means. The interpretive work creates pathways in long-term memory and generates meaning through the interplay of the “cognitive environment” and the social positionality of the interpreter.

Using literary and epigraphic evidence to shed light on textual and non-textual practices, Katell Berthelot focuses on so-called “Judaizers” as “non-Jews appropriat[ing] Jewish rituals, costumes, and beliefs.” Her chapter foregrounds two major aspects of this widely documented phenomenon by construing them in a way that is highly resonant with the “lived ancient religion” approach. First, Judaizing attitudes encompass a variety of personal modes of adopting and adapting, that is to say reworking, an environmentally available, meaningful Jewish cultural frame. Performed in a polytheistic world in which acknowledging the power of a god can often be seen as a safer option than denying it, such attitudes eschew conclusive attempts to range them according to categories (assimilation, acculturation, accommodation) charting the degree of the individual’s implication in a local or translocal Jewish “community”. Second, Berthelot’s observation that this wide array of appropriating practices seems to “elude

control and codification” intensifies the troublesome interpretive aspect of the “exact nature” of the relationship between the Judaizers and the local Jewish group/s. In consequence, it is rather the individualized, that is the de-traditionalized manner of performing Jewishness by Judaizing, that features prominently in the extant sources.

Since the Maccabean period, *Ioudaismos* has formed a semiotic-semantic pair with *Hellenismos*. Ancient Christian writers have redesigned both words to wound, thus using them to stigmatize ritual misbeliefs and misbehaviors typical of the Jews, on the one hand, and Greek-styled slandered forms of life and religiosity, on the other. It is precisely within this age-old discursive tradition that Douglas Boin relocates and reinterprets *Hellenismos*, a term that scholars usually understand as the concept branding the alleged religious ideology and politics of the three-year reign of the emperor Julian (361–363 CE). The lasting stigmatic connotation, along with the observation that the “word appears nowhere in the epigraphic record” of Julian’s day, leads Boin to explain *Hellenismos* as an isolated attempt to claim, rekey, and assert the disparaging signifier into the technical label of a “coherent vision” opposing that of Christian “hard-liners.” Julian aims to recast it to fit a model of positive engagement with the Greco-Roman culture that could give voice to the nonrigid lifestyle of numerous Christian and non-Christian inhabitants of the empire. More unfortunate than untimely, the code-switching challenge carried out by the mightiest man on earth did not succeed in the top-down transformation of those “acting (too) Greek” into “good citizens” and, eventually, into the “real Christians.”

Katharina Bracht’s chapter starts with a period slightly after that investigated by Boin. The context, however, has significantly changed: the empire is now a legally Christian territorial entity where literate practices of sense-making are given a privileged focus, i.e. authoritative texts now have a canonical standing. Ever since the Bible started to become holy, processes of scripturalization and methods for re-signifying scriptures have always gone hand in hand. Yet the two protagonists of this chapter, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Jerome of Stridon, are somehow engaged in an unprecedented activity: the appropriation via commentary of the 800-year-old Jewish canonical book of Jonah. Drawing on Jan Assman’s theory of communication, Bracht elucidates the problem in terms of the “expansion of the communicative situation,” insofar as both the temporal distance between the original text and the contemporary audience and the religious difference between the early Jewish audience and the late antique Christian public had become huge. Therefore, it is only by re-keying the already christologically and eschatologically interpreted Biblical “pretext” via the “metatextual” operation of the commentary that it is possible to secure its relevance, gain signification, and produce the expected “normative

and formative effects” on the Christian readers. Bracht stresses how the dissimilar urban contexts and intended readerships, the different linguistic character of the chosen version of the pretext, and the diverse hermeneutic methodologies resulted in two different outcomes of Christian sense-making.

Code-switching techniques are just as useful for openly imposing new meanings and new definitions of the situation as they are for cunningly resisting impositions and, eventually, for deceiving. In the last chapter of the section, Emiliano Rubens Urciuoli enlists three pieces of conceptual apparatus, namely Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of mimicry, James C. Scott’s theory of infrapolitics, and Michel de Certeau’s analysis of poaching, in order to unearth and shed light on the so-called early Christians’ “pedagogy of trickery”. Proposing “a praxeological insight into non-confrontational forms of resistance,” Urciuoli sifts through early Christian literature to seek out different kinds of tricks that Christ-believing individuals might have used to cheat – or teach to cheat – different forms of power. Double-sided expressions, ambiguous speeches, riddles, euphemisms, and stratagems are all polysemic figures that indicate forms of noncompliance based on a differentiated understanding of the situation and explained by the will to avoid direct confrontation. Fabrication, Goffman shows, is another basic way in which meanings and activities can be transformed and in which new sense can be produced. To focus on the manners in which vulnerable individuals and groups can profit from the structural vulnerability of any meaningful situation – including religiously framed situations – thus seems to be an appropriate way to conclude a collective investigation of “lived ancient religion”. For religion-in-the-making also means a religion liable to be made, and re-made, *by anybody*, weak or strong, or even by the weak against the strong.

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