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Cult and Identity

by Jörg Rüpke

This essay explores the role that collective religious identities played in the religion of the Roman Empire. For this purpose, it suggests a concept of collective identity that lays emphasis on the awareness of belonging, and the manner in which belonging is attributed. What regimes of identity can be identified and how are identities activated? At the core of this investigation, therefore, lies the notion of religious action in its various social and spatial spheres, as well as the actual and virtual locations that co-produce identities. Ultimately, this paper reveals that collective identities as held by individuals do not necessarily correspond to actual specific religious groups.

1. *Identities*

The notion of ‘religious identity’ comprises two difficult components¹. Even though in the context of this paper particular attention shall be paid to the second conceptual component, I, nevertheless, feel inclined to briefly outline how I have come to understand the first one. For the purposes of conducting a large scale analysis of the religious history of Mediterranean Antiquity I refer to the tradition of defining religion in a substantialist way – and since any terminological definition can only ever be meaningful and expedient but never fully true, I consider it paramount to clearly state the intention of this study at this stage. In this vein, I therefore categorize religion as the extension of specific environments that human actors inhabit beyond the immediately plausible social context of their fellow, living human beings, and often even animals, as undertaken by said human actors. This extension results in specific new ways of attributing agency to other and different acting entities, as well as in distinct forms of communication with, and the formulation of new identities for, those entities.

However, what aspects of a relevant environment may emerge as no longer ‘immediately plausible’ can differ between various cultural settings. Plausibility, the ability to meet with approval, is a rhetorical category of communica-

¹ The reflections and findings presented here have been developed within a project entitled ‘Lived Ancient Religion’, which is funded by the 7th Framework Programme of the European Union (2008-13) under Agreement 29555. The project is being carried out at the Max-Weber-Kolleg at the University of Erfurt from 2012 to 2017. I was able to present a first version of the project’s findings at a conference on religious identities held in Ebernburg, Germany. The English translation of the German original was kindly undertaken by Sandhya I. Fuchs, Oxford.

tion in itself. While in one cultural setting it may contain the departed, it can also refer to personal gods in another instance and to topographically unidentifiable locations in a third one. Of course, the interpretation and inclusion of those things that are contested - and thus 'religious' according to my framework- within a particular culture, admittedly also depends on the boundaries drawn by religious scholars themselves. In short, whenever agency is primarily evoked with reference to deities, whether it be through statements, acts, roles or institutional arrangements, we are dealing with religion². Hence, I focus on religion as something that is constantly being re-invented or re-emerging. Moreover, I posit that religion is simultaneously a resource for, and a product utilized by, individual actors as they act on their environment as temporal beings, and as they turn to communicate with their social surroundings or position themselves within these surroundings. Culture cannot be conceptualised without individual actors³.

However, I do not intend to discuss individual identity or the manner in which individuals reconcile their personal experiences with the internalized ideas and concepts that are attributed to them by others⁴. The Classical Greek and Hellenistic tradition is marked by a programmatic separation of 'philosophy' and 'religion'. This separation produced a situation in which reflexions on the self were primarily considered philosophical practices⁵. The fact that this matter is viewed differently in Judaism and Christianity is not as much due to tangible differences between the various traditions, but rather an outcome of our own optical lens that causes us to view religion as a powerful classificatory category, which can comprise a plethora of phenomena. In relation to ritual action, however, the aspect of identity that has been termed 'collective identity' has been foregrounded. It is precisely this aspect that I want to turn to in the following.

The notion of 'collective identity' has come under rightful scrutiny. These criticisms have been levelled at the conception of the term as ascribing a permanent state of belonging to a particular community, which also, necessarily, implies a steady and exclusive sense of belonging in the mind of its members⁶. In other words, the problematic assumption is that he who is a Roman must constantly think about being Roman and nothing else. This process is equally as misleading as the idea that particular collective identities - such as 'I consider myself a *popularis*' - must necessarily point to membership in a specific group (these are generally imagined as party-like factions like the ones one encounters in a modern Senate). In reality, the reference point for collective identities can both be a real and an imaginary association of people. What does the statement 'I am European' even denote in our contemporary world? Yet, since the impact that group membership - however vague - can

² See Rüpke 2015.

³ See e.g. Swidler 1986, p. 277.

⁴ Mead, Miller 1982; Mead 1988; Öhler 2013.

⁵ Fowden 2005, p. 528.

⁶ See Rebillard 2012, pp. 2-5, who opts for the term 'salient identity'.

have on individual behaviour, it would be unwise to simply do away with the term 'collective identity'⁷. Instead, we should aim to employ a concept of collective identity that can adequately capture the nuances and dynamics of the relationship between the individual and his/her real or imagined others. Recent socio-psychological research has attempted to tackle this challenge in various ways⁸.

Personally, I want to build on a theory of collective identity proposed by three psychologists from New York, even though their framework does not specifically refer to religious themes. The aforementioned researchers distinguish seven elements of collective identity. All these different elements are located on the level of the individual and do not denote group dynamics. However, due to their collective outlook, they emerge as distinct from the arena of self-referential individual identity, which should be particularly differentiated in relation to religion.

Let me briefly present the various elements in turn:

- 1) self-classification;
- 2) the individual's own assessment of his/her own group affiliation and – as far as that is perceptible – his/her classification by others;
- 3) the meaning awarded to the individual's group affiliation;
- 4) the perceived emotional connectedness to, and dependence on, the coinciding of personal and collective identities up to the point where they completely overlap;
- 5) the degree to which group members are embedded in everyday group routines;
- 6) the level of impact that the aforementioned embeddedness has on personal behaviour, and finally;
- 7) the cognitive dimension or, in other words, the ways in which stories and imaginaries reveal the values, characteristics, and history of a group⁹.

When considering questions about the formation of religious groups, or even entire religions, in the Roman Empire¹⁰, I would like to stress that in this instance the word 'group' is not used to connote a strictly demarcated association of people, but simply describes a situationally specific grouping of actors (that can include non-humans) to which a reasoning individual judges himself to belong. Naturally, this can lead to highly complex collective identities that

⁷ The works of Tajfel and Turner were foundational texts in the field of 'social identity theory' (e.g. Tajfel 1974, p. 69 for the definition of 'group'; Turner 1975). Summaries by Ellemers *et al.* 1999.

⁸ E.g. Cameron 2004, p. 241, who distinguishes three factors of cognitive centrality (for the actor), as well as in-group affects and in-group bonds. In recent years such approaches have also been empirically applied to contemporary conditions of religious plurality, e.g. Verkuyten 2007; Brashears 2010; Verkuyten, Martinovic 2012; Tseung-Wong, Verkuyten 2013.

⁹ Ashmore *et al.* 2004, p. 83 for a summary table.

¹⁰ See Rüpke 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b.

comprise a multiplicity of affiliations (or conscious acts of distancing)¹¹. In the fourth book of his *Elegies (Elegiae)*, the Augustan author Propertius appears as a Roman, an Umbrian, an Augustan, an anti-Augustan, a nostalgic, a poet, a non-poet, an antiquarian, and an author of love poems, as well as in numerous other roles.

In this context religion can come into play in a variety of ways. It plays an important part in the familial identities of primary social groups, as well as in the formation of secondary groups. Religion pertains to the different positions of local, regional and supra-regional identities and to the shifts that occur between them. Here it is crucial to abstain from reifying or essentializing these groups or communities. With a view to the scholarly writings of Pierre Bourdieu, material archaeologists in particular have warned against attempts to use the solid material world to build arguments about stringent social structures. They point out that “[c]ommunity is ... what people do” and go on to argue that the power of doing lies with individual actors¹². The seemingly archaic stability of the local, of what lies in social proximity, is often misleading, as it can merely capture snapshots of much greater and wider temporal and spatial movements¹³.

2. Identity Regimes

To investigate the question relating to the significance of cults for identity formation, I would like to introduce one more distinction. At this point, I am not concerned with particular dimensions of identity, such as distinctions based on gender, culture or religion, and the manner in which the bearers of such ‘multiple identities’ process them¹⁴. Nor do I want to trace the flow of identity processes¹⁵. Instead, I mean to explore the different contexts and structures of places that give rise to experiences of identity formation (a), as well as the motives and metaphors that play a role in individual reflexions on identity (b) and, finally, the social and communicative settings where identities are debated and represented (c). While we might build on the debate regarding *lieux de mémoire*¹⁶ and talk about ‘identity locations’, I personally prefer to introduce the new term ‘identity regimes’ at this juncture¹⁷. I am convinced that this conceptual move will help me emphasise the various different structural conditions of identity formation, as well as concrete and di-

¹¹ See Ashmore *et al.* 2004, p. 84.

¹² van Dommelen *et al.* 2005, p. 56.

¹³ Vásquez 2008, p. 167, with reference to Appadurai 2000.

¹⁴ On the ‘model of multiple dimensions of identity’ see Jones, McEwen 2000; Abes *et al.* 2007.

¹⁵ Breakwell 2010 presents additional literature.

¹⁶ Nora 1984. The concept of ‘sites of memory’ has in recent years been utilized with increasing frequency and decreasing clarity: see François 2009.

¹⁷ Wahrman 2004, p. xiii talks about ‘*ancient régime* of identity’. However, he only uses this term to enquire into the historical conditions of the XVIIIth century.

verse biographical and historical factors. In this vein, I will make a point to strictly separate experiences, reflexions and representations in the following, without denying that obvious connections exist between them. However, due to the drastically different nature of these regimes, I consider such connections to be much weaker than they might seem at first sight.

What do all these deliberations imply, not only for places of remembering, but also for cult sites? Without doubt they link important processes of identity formation to experiences that are made in specific locations in the context of rituals and the memory of such rituals. Below, I will engage with this particular question and these considerations. Even the aforementioned ritual experiences are usually not open matters of discussion, they become explicit through language and expressible through retrospective reflexions. Thus, they transform subsequent experiences¹⁸ and even impact on language and linguistic repertoire through their very articulation, thereby changing the landscape of the spoken word that can be accessed by others¹⁹. The 'sites' that emerge as reference points of reflection during such processes do not have to coincide with those experiential locations that I had originally assumed. Jerusalem perhaps serves as the best example for such a change in the arena of religious identity. In turn, the development and meaning of such places in the Roman Empire will form the central part of my subsequent reflexions.

I am, however, particularly interested in exploring circumstances under which identity becomes an issue of discussion. Identity is not simply an ID card, a *carte d'identité* one carries around in one's back pocket – or is it? For the most part of a day, a week or even a year, people do not spend time thinking about the markers that are listed in such documents as constitutive of their identity. This fact not only holds true for characteristics like eye colour or height, but also for nationality and other details that remain unmentioned: denominations or an academic profession are only some of these details. In many situations, even the long-term adoption of roles does not necessarily lead to continuing conscious debates or ruminations about their meaning ...In short: questions about the types of people that come to be defined by identities constituted by a *lieu de culte*, are just as pertinent as those that ask when such identities are needed or invoked in the first place.

3. Places/Locations: Cults and Identity

There is no question that large, public rituals represent especially significant mirrors of social structures. Simultaneously, they play an integral part in the creation and development of normative and social orders – values, hierarchies or political structures²⁰ – despite the fact that in pluralistic societies

¹⁸ For more extensive discussion of this process see Jung 1999, 2004, 2005, 2006.

¹⁹ Schlette, Jung 2005.

²⁰ Theories of ritual have arrived at these conclusions from a variety of different perspectives: see, for example, Staal 1980; Burkert 1981; Bernardi 1984; Heesterman 1986; Rappaport 1992.

the level of contribution of such rituals tends to decline²¹. On the individual level rituals have a comparable effect²². They feature in the routinization of the reproduction of fundamental social relationships and constitute a repeated form of embodiment, in short, the corporealization of collective memory²³. Studies focusing on performance have often stressed how acts of appropriation always bring along with them a continuous reinterpretation and affective charging of the initial ritual script²⁴. Hence, it is hardly surprising that important ritual roles can be foundational to identity development²⁵.

However, four crucial observations, serve to limit any sweeping conclusions that one might be tempted to draw from these contemplations vis-à-vis reflexively thematised religious identity. It is in no way as simple as stating that the Capitol gave rise to a religious Jupiterian – or Roman – identity, while the temple of Mars Ultor inspired a bellicose, Augustan one.

1) The largest part of ritual life and experience takes place within a particular, spatial vicinity. In some cases this might even refer to the broader domestic sphere, to intersections or to analogous neighbourhood locations²⁶. Burial sites, which can be regarded as the most crucial arena of individual religious practice, reveal the extent to which familial identity dominates religious identity.

2) The frequency at which inhabitants of Mediterranean cities participated in centralised rituals and the intensity that drove such participation should not be overestimated. Often this participation was limited to observation and the only functional buildings that featured acoustic structures, which could reach more than a few hundred spectators, were theatres and amphitheatres²⁷. While both these structures can facilitate, or enable, intense experiences, they can equally allow for disinterested participation through mere physical presence. Here, a specific ‘urban religion’ evolved.

3) The cases in which people visited cult sites for the sole purpose of oracle consultations, healings and pilgrimages, were surely limited. Rather, it seems that the supra-regional character of such sites and their easy accessibility accounts for the fact that they were able to give rise to potentially highly religious, but not collective, identities. At the same time these sites would not have been irrelevant for the phenomena I will explore in the next section.

4) Intellectual critiques of cults and sacrifices began to garner support during the period of the Roman Empire. This development can be seen as a de-

²¹ See the critique in Rüpke 2013.

²² Des Bouvrie 2011, p. 171: ‘a programme of performances ... producing a sequence of prescribed sentiments’.

²³ Grimes 1990; Rappaport 1999; Assmann 1999; Brandt, Iddeng 2012; Rüpke 2012a.

²⁴ Schechner 1985; Kranemann, Rüpke 2003; Rüpke 2003.

²⁵ For examples from various contexts see Heesterman 1991; Holm Rasmussen, Rasmussen 2008.

²⁶ On private cults see Bakker 1994; Bassani 2008; Boedecker 2008; Giacobello 2008; Nevett 2010; Bodel, Olyan 2008; on burial cults as family matters see Shaw 1984; Hope 2001; Carroll 2006; Carroll *et al.* 2011.

²⁷ Rüpke 2012a.

cline in the power of the traditional rural elites that controlled the resources necessary for public rituals, such as cattle. Their social position was assumed by intellectuals, who wrote and interpreted texts²⁸. The competition between these two groups became especially pertinent in contexts where communication with, and about, such texts was not reduced to a single element within elaborate ritual settings. However, the range of influence of such textual practices on the formation of specific and distinct identities must be carefully examined.

4. *Motives: Faraway Places and Collective Identities*

4.1. *Observations*

While inquiries regarding the sites where cults produced religious identities have only been partially successful, an examination of the motives that play an important role in reflexions on religious identity has proved more fruitful and interesting. In a paper published in 2007 Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis remarked in her analysis of spatial imaginaries in the Severan period that Judaism, Christianity and the cult of Mithras all share an important trait: in their discourses all three award great significance to a faraway, holy landscape ('sacred landscape') without giving up their universalist claims²⁹. This coincidence does not represent an isolated phenomenon. The Severan architectural programme in Rome and in North Africa, as well the conferment of citizenship through the *Constitutio Antoniniana*, all equally point to 'a re-casting of geographical centres and perspectives, followed by a shift in what constituted local and universal imperial culture'³⁰. By consulting travel diaries and narratives of epiphanies Petsalis-Diomidis looks to explain the aforementioned phenomena by introducing a new manner of seeing and perceiving difference. She argues that these new modalities of perception go hand in hand with a growing individual desire for a personal relationship with the divine³¹.

We have to assume, however, this phenomenon to be more extensive and, hence, to require a correspondingly wider explanation. Jerusalem undoubtedly represents a special case, due to the real political crises, as well as the crises of imagination it faced as a result of its destruction. However, the Egyptian enactments performed by the Cult of Isis of the Early Imperial Period or the Capitol structures that were built in the provinces with reference to Rome in the first and second centuries BC can serve as more innocuous witnesses³².

²⁸ Ullucci 2012.

²⁹ Petsalis-Diomidis 2007, p. 252.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

³² See e.g. Kuhfeldt 1882; Lomas 1997; Lackner 2013. Older interpretations, which claimed that these buildings reflected the status of a city, have been invalidated, as their construction was often only initiated a decade or a century after the change in status.

4.2. Explanations

Two explanations in particular present themselves. Greg Woolf outlined the first explanation, which has a comparative outlook and builds on the key concept of 'the diaspora'³³. In summary he states the following. The extensive uprooting and resettling processes that took place due to military developments, as well as the economically triggered and socially facilitated mobility among both the elite and the poor (like the Severan dynasty from Africa), gave rise to large-scale diaspora settings and formed people who began to define their identity through a broad territorial association.

While these diasporic movements undoubtedly constitute an important factor, due to the ultimately limited scope and the historical timing of many such waves of mobility, they cannot alone serve as sufficient explanations. Thus, the question must be investigated on a more fundamental level citing observations made by Clifford Ando and additional remarks put forward by Greg Woolf.

Arguably the most crucial factor is the very process of empire creation. This idea of empire creation does not refer to the formation of a territorial state. Rather it denotes the systematic co-optation of local and regional political elites for the purpose of involving them in a loosely coordinated administrative structure, developing a single market system (despite the fact that local taxation remained in place) and the bundling of military forces. More precisely, the goal was to establish centralised authority over such matters across a vast area³⁴. However, while new possibilities of action arose for local elites and enabled them to gain high prestige, the creation of the empire, nonetheless, implied a loss of their earlier monopoly on power: the emperor and provincial governors now became mediating authorities whose new, broadened influence was visible through coin minting, statues, buildings and charity work and even became strongly felt on the local level.

When a religious tradition lives through actors in particular, who stand apart from individual and social regulation, while simultaneously being referenced in these contexts, religious practices have to respond to the complex layers of social and political identities. These practices may focus on social formations on the lowest level, like families and neighbourhoods. In fact, this seems to have been precisely the main process that took place in the Chinese Empire³⁵. Religion was given the space and opportunity to colonize the upper social strata of the Empire and could hence establish a monopoly and become the official faith of the empire. To some extent this was also the Byzantine-Islamic model³⁶. Alternatively, religious practices can strategically take over intermediary spaces to build and expand their own structures and networks. This model seems to have dominated during the time of the Roman Empire.

³³ See below and Woolf 2009.

³⁴ Cf. Woolf 2012, pp. 26-27; Ando 2012, pp. 186-200.

³⁵ See Schmidt-Glitzner 1997. Greg Woolf deepened and consolidated his comparative approach in March 2013 at a conference in Cambridge devoted to the second century CE.

³⁶ See Fowden 1993, 2013.

It is important to note that the ultimate dominance of the empirical administration was never questioned in this process and any potential for competition between religious formations and empirical politics was immediately suppressed or quietly marginalised. Particularly apt examples of this approach are the monastic tradition or the formation of Jewish and Zoroastrian states outside the borders of the *Imperium Romanum*.

The comparatively high level of mobility in these areas managed to accomplish one other thing – and it is at this point that the diasporic dimension becomes significant once again: on the one hand immigrants brought along with them a new religious plurality, which began to crystalize increasingly in personal experience³⁷. On the other hand immigrants rarely tended to act according to nostalgic attachments to childhood cults but instead demanded a certain recognisability of previously encountered symbolic systems. Iconographic schemes, pattern books and other widely circulated texts created the kind of recognisability, which tempts our contemporaries to speak of homogenized ‘cults’³⁸. Religious practices, or even religious imaginaries, first and foremost remain local but must necessarily lay claim to something trans-local that implies uniformity and relevance in faraway centres.

Under the conditions of multi-layeredness and, thus ambiguity, of political identities that arose as part of the imperial project, the Roman Empire became a crucial instrument for the creation of collective identities and networks on a local level. The sooner religious symbols and practices are able to replace the comprehensive access to the world that had previously been provided by local political identities and institutions, the more victorious and successful they will emerge. The sooner reflective exercises and community formation can be integrated into these practices and symbols, the more likely they will be to survive.

4.3. Religion in the Global Order

It is here that trans-regional linkages, or in other words the allusion to a site of worship for one’s deity that lies beyond the boundaries of the everyday world, becomes significant. This place has the power to secure the ‘globality’ (according to the imperial scale) of a deity that is of course also expected to remain effective on the local level. Whereas this claim may seem self-evident for henotheistic or monotheistic deities like Isis, Mithras, or the nameless *ho theos*, it can also be detected in appeals to the Nemesis of Smyrna or to the Victoriae of the Balkan Provinces in other areas. All these processes require a comprehensive rhetoric and visual didactics.

The template for this may be the emperor, whose claim to uniqueness and universal power was instilled into people with incredible intensity through a variety of media, ranging from coins to the penal code, from busts to calendars. He represented the widely recognized god of the *Imperium Romanum*,

³⁷ Rüpke 2001, 2009.

³⁸ See e.g. Rüpke 2005.

identified with the faraway, almighty city of Rome³⁹. Of course, within the boundaries of the empire this emperor-deity could no longer facilitate the existence of specific, distinct collective identities that express the social and geographical mobility of particular individuals and groups. Yet, this god truly raised the bar: in case of doubt one would have had to somehow 'outdo' this deity that occupied the symbolic centre by introducing a transcendental, heavenly location and cult site – here I am thinking of the Epistle to the Hebrews⁴⁰. Ultimately, religious sites that inspire identity formation neither have to be real cult locations, nor even real locations. In fact, the aforementioned example of the emperor demonstrates that human beings can themselves serve as a *locus* or *topos*.

Of course the choice of cult sites is not a random one. From the first to the early third century, at the very least, the *Imperium Romanum* had its intellectual and symbolic centre in Rome. It was in Rome that every school of thought and every network sought to be represented in some way. It was to Rome that ideas were transported across vast cultural distances and at fast paces. The boundaries of this grand space of cultural communication were just as porous as those we encounter before and afterwards in Alexandria. This is precisely why Rome invited polemics and attempts at confinement. The *Oracula Sibyllina* condemn Rome. Meanwhile, hermetic texts mobilize the fact that the Syrian Orontes River flows into the Tiber, which Juvenal had already lamented in the first century (even though he did not explicitly refer to religion), to argue that Egypt represents the *templum totius mundi*⁴¹.

Much evidence supports the notion that essential texts that would later partly join the canon of the New Testament, originated in Rome or out of Rome. I am referring to the gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, epistles and tracts like the 'Letter to the Hebrews'. In addition, we find many important Greek priests, such as Plutarch and Appian, as well as influential philosophers like Epictetus, Cornutus or Marcus Aurelius and, finally, community founders like Marcion, Justin, Valerian, Priests of Isis from Alexandria and scholars from Palestine (Mattathias) in Rome. The Roman emperor encouraged the worship of particular gods through games, the building of temples and by giving preferences to particular networks. In this context Jewish lobbyists were just as effective as those representing the Syrian Baal cult.

All of this might have remained an intellectual pastime, had the aforementioned process not had radical consequences on religion as a whole.

- Religion gained increasing importance in many areas and on many levels of everyday life.

- Religion grew much more complex: religious practices, the formation of networks and groups and philosophical reflexions became more prominent and inextricably linked.

- Religions came to occupy an essential place amongst people's collective

³⁹ So forcefully argued by Ando 2008, p. 119.

⁴⁰ Rüpke 2012b.

⁴¹ *Asclepius* 24; *Juv. Sat.* 3.62.

identities: individuals now considered themselves members of a specific religious group much more often than they previously had (even though such self-identification was still relatively rare). Yet, such allegiance neither implied that the selected group had to actually exist in reality, nor that its members' feeling of belonging had to bring along with it any particular consequences.

These observations lead me back to my initial reflections and reintroduce the question: what exactly did such trans-regional cultic reference sites contribute?

5. *What Contributions Do Cultic Reference Sites Make?*

At the outset of this analysis people, not institutions, served as my starting point and I had tied my questions about cultic sites to an exploration of collective identities. What remains to be asked now is what these sites actually accomplish. Since we no longer have the opportunity to conduct empirical investigations, I can only base my conclusions on a few selected texts and plausible inferences from my own everyday life. Starting from the analytical categories set out above, we are presented with the following findings:

1) People's acts of self-classification are strongly simplified by cultic sites: In short, the site allows for a kind of procedural 'mutton jump' (*Hammelsprung*). Considering the rather fuzzy boundaries between different manifestations of Isis or of Sol Invictus, between the various expressions of Jupiter, *ho theos* and *theos Hypsitos*, such simplification can hardly have been a disadvantage. Of course the number of alternatives was reduced under conditions of high selectivity.

2) In most cases we only know little about the ways in which people themselves assessed their own group membership. On the one hand, one could assume that their perception of their own affiliation was a positive one since it was based on voluntary association. On the other hand, it can hardly have escaped people's notice that external perception was potentially coupled with a negative evaluation. The space of ostentatious gestures can be used in drastically different ways: the high visibility of the manner in which Isis and Serapis were worshiped in Egypt stands in stark contrast to the cultural images and spaces of the Sol Invictus Mithras cult. The architecture and rituals of Judaism even remain largely invisible in public.

3) The meaning awarded to group membership can hardly be underestimated. It constitutes a hegemonic, asymmetrical classification or, to put it more simply, a kind of black-and-white portrayal. Others, outside the group, do not only differ from members through one specific attribute, but are generally 'other', in a negative sense. It is evident that this kind of identity construction can acquire particular acrimonious poignancy in settings of imperial disdain and colonial resistance⁴². Being a Roman or a Babylonian constitutes

⁴² Momigliano 1992; Frankfurter 1998; cf. Webster, Cooper 1996; Chakrabarty 2008.

an all-encompassing maker of identity – here I am thinking of the Sybilline Oracle or the Apocalypse of John. In turn, the doctrine of the four kingdoms helped to imbue a particular constellation – as cited for example in the Book of Daniel – with stronger meaning that, hence, came to be perceived as an inevitability. It can hardly be a coincidence that precisely one of the Comments of Daniel is one of the earliest Judeo-Christian texts transmitted from the city of Rome⁴³.

4) An individual's felt emotional connection to, and dependence on, such a collective identity, which could at times lead to an almost complete overlap between his personal identity and his sense of belonging to a group, can scarcely be verified. Unfortunately, specialists demand precisely such evidence at times. In the eleventh book of the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius, we can detect such an overlap in relation to the deity but not in relation to the site. The same is true of Aelius Aristides, who is closely associated with the god Asclepius, and not with a specific space.

5) All of this suggests that the degree of embeddedness into the everyday activities that are implied in a person's membership to a group that is tied to a specific place, remains negligible.

6) The same is likely to be true for the level to which an individual's own behaviour was influenced by his/her place-related membership. In this case the majority of exemplary tales seems concern the apocalyptics – who would be considered extremists in today's world – , and people like martyrs – the term suicide assassins does not seem correct in this context. Such stories were particularly prominent in Christianity in the post-Constantine era.

7) Nonetheless, we encounter a different situation when considering the cognitive dimension of such stories and reflecting on the ideas that shed light on the values, characteristics and history of groups. As non-specific a 'group' may be, as rich are its stories that tie the group to a particular site. In no way do these groups lack a rich mythology, which is perhaps least tied to a unique location in the case of the Mithras cult. In this case, however, we do not have enough textual evidence to allow for a comparison with iconographic findings⁴⁴. Yet, we cannot overlook the fact that location-bound traditions are usually ambivalent. Neither the tradition of Persia, nor those of Alexandria and Egypt evoke consistently positive associations. We only have to think of cities like Pompeii and Carrhae, or of subsequent revolts and the death of Valerian in the battle of Edessa. Even Rome with its civil wars does not appear in an unproblematic light, even in the close Italian environment. Meanwhile, Jerusalem has featured a negative historical and religious tradition since the times of the prophet Amos⁴⁵.

⁴³ See Bracht 2014.

⁴⁴ For information on the iconographic tradition of the Mithras cult see Claus 1990; Gordon 2009, 2012.

⁴⁵ On the image of Jerusalem see Walker 1990; Collins 2000; Friedheim 2010; Capes 2011; Häußel 2011; Jones 2011.

6. Identity Activation Mechanisms

At the beginning of this paper I introduced a three-fold distinction and differentiated three identity regimes, namely a) locations that give rise to experiences of identity formation, b) motives and metaphors that play a role in individual reflexions on identity, and c) the social and communicative settings where identities are debated and represented. The last one of these regimes, which I term 'identity activation mechanisms', I cannot comment on much.

Our main issue is one of source verification. Texts are usually composed by popular opinion leaders whose authority rests on the strength of the very collective identities held by their audience. In turn, texts that validate and strengthen those collective identities most easily and successfully circulate within networks and institutions. Recent enquiries into North African Christianity have highlighted in how differentiated a manner, how mutually unpredictably and selectively these collective identities are mobilized; experts in this area of scholarship, thus, feel compelled to continuously call on such collective identities⁴⁶.

Ultimately, we can only arrive at a more adequate assessment of the place that the concept of 'identity' should occupy in religio-historical descriptions of the transformations that occurred during the time of the Roman Empire if we broaden the scope of our investigations. My contribution can only serve as an impetus for this kind of work.

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⁴⁶ For other perspectives on this matter see Shaw 2011; Rebillard 2003, 2010, 2012, 2013; Rebillard, Sotinel 2010. I am grateful to Valentino Gasparini for his expertise.

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Abstract

This paper explores the notion of collective religious identities in the Roman world and the role that they played in the religion dynamics across the Empire. It puts forward and engages with a concept of collective identity that places the emphasis on belonging, and the strategies through which belonging is attributed. A central part of its brief is to discuss what regimes of identity can be identified and how such identities may be activated. At the core of this study lies the concept of religious action in its various social and spatial settings, as well as the actual and virtual locations that take part in the construction of religious identities.

Key-words: Roman religion - religious identity - cult-places - individualisation - collective identities - religious communication.

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