Authors:	Rebillard, Éric / Rüpke, Jörg
Title:	“Introduction: Groups, Individuals, and Religious Identity“
Published in:	Group identity and religious individuality in late antiquity. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press
Year:	2015
Pages:	3 – 12
ISBN:	978-0-8132-2743-6

Éric Rebillard and Jörg Rüpke

Introduction

Groups, Individuals, and Religious Identity

Is religious individualism a feature unique to modernity? This is the larger research question that was addressed by an international research group, based at the Max Weber Centre of the University of Erfurt, Germany, under the heading "Religious Individualization in Historical Perspective." Obviously anachronistic when viewed against the backdrop of the conclusions adduced by modernization theory, the heuristic use of "religious individualization" has, nevertheless, directed our attention to important historical phenomena that do not fit with the fundamentally collective character usually ascribed to religion. It is, however, not "individuality" *per se* which is interesting. In a banal sense, individuality is a general trait of living beings, even those that are genetically identical; it is as much a truism as the social character of the individual and its "self."[1] Hence, it is much more interesting to focus on processes of waxing (or waning) degrees of individuality and processes of emphasizing or resisting individualism—contingent periods of, as we have called it, individualization or deindividualization. With this focus on changes in forms of individuality comes the study of the intentions and functions of such forms. This holds particularly true for religion, frequently seen as a bundle of cultural practices and discourses communicating and guaranteeing social cohesion,

1. A fundamental text for this subject area is George Herbert Mead, *The Individual and the Social Self: Unpublished Work of George Herbert Mead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

but, at other times, opening up space for individual distinction—distinction for members of an aristocracy, for women, intellectuals, or entrepreneurs.[2]

The instrument of "individualization" can fruitfully approach, in particular, the interplay of time-honored practices, institutions, and collective values on the one hand and, on the other hand, the individual's behavior, experiences, expressions, reflections, and actions. This holds true for modern and medieval Europe as well as for Mediterranean antiquity.[3] The focus might be on individual religious practices and self-reflections in texts.[4] It might also, however, be on the formation of religious groups, which has been recently described as a development toward profession and proclamation of one's beliefs or as "religionification."[5] Probably correlated with the dwindling of local political identities within the new political and power structures of the Roman Empire, a dialectical process accelerated in the imperial period: religious groups offered new options for identity and thus helped stabilize religious individuality. At the same time, some religious groupings were coalescing into more dense institutions, stressing their boundaries and enforcing homogeneity through concepts of membership and focus on normative behavior. Analysis and examination of these developments for the period of late antiquity was the challenge placed before the instrument of "individualization."

A number of publications in the last twenty years have promoted the study of the interactions of pagans, Jews, and Christians, with very positive re-

2. See, e.g., for ancient religions Jörg Rüpke, *Fasti sacerdotum. A Prosopography of Pagan, Jewish, and Christian Religious Officials in the City of Rome, 300 B.C. to A.D. 499* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Jörg Rüpke, "Organisationsmuster religiöser Spezialisten im kultischen Spektrum Roms," in *Religions orientales—culti misterici: Neue Perspektiven—nouvelle perspectives—prospettive nuove*, ed. Corinne Bonnet, Jörg Rüpke, and Paolo Scarpi, Potsdamer altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 16 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2006), 13–26.

3. Hermann Deuser and Saskia Wendel, eds., *Dialektik der Freiheit: Religiöse Individualisierung und theologische Dogmatik*, Religion in Philosophy and Theology 63 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012); Dietmar Mieth and Britta Müller-Schauenburg, eds., *Mystik, Recht und Freiheit: Religiöse Erfahrung und kirchliche Institutionen im Spätmittelalter* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2012); Jörg Rüpke, *Aberglauben oder Individualität? Religiöse Abweichung im römischen Reich* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

4. Jörg Rüpke and Wolfgang Spickermann, eds., *Reflections on Religious Individuality: Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian Texts and Practices*, Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 62 (New York: de Gruyter, 2012).

5. John North, "Réflexions autour des communautés religieuses du monde gréco-romain," in *Les communautés religieuses dans le monde gréco-romain: Essais de définition*, ed. Nicole Belayche and Simon C. Mimouni (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003) 337–47; Jörg Rüpke, "Hellenistic and Roman Empires and Euro-Mediterranean Religion," *Journal of Religion in Europe* 3 (2010): 197–214.

sults.[6] For instance, our picture of the degree of integration of Jews in the Roman Empire has changed considerably. Studied in isolation Jews were, unsurprisingly, found to be isolated; as soon as interaction was considered they were found not to live in isolation.[7] Many studies have also emphasized that communities on the ground were less defined by confessional identities than contemporary sources state.[8] However, it is insufficient to adopt a constructivist approach and explain away these (binary) oppositions as rhetorical tools.[9] Too often the result is a discourse that talks about the fluidity of identities while it simultaneously reifies identities by attributing them to groups (along with agency, interests, and will).[10] While historians no longer view groups as sharply differentiated, they do, nevertheless, still tend to treat them as internally homogeneous.

Some recent studies in the field of early Christianity have tried to move beyond this limitation by substituting an emphasis on lay people and their expectations for the traditional focus on bishops and their regulating role.[11] In *The Second Church*, Ramsay MacMullen takes the opposition between bishops and lay people to an extreme when he talks about two irreconcilable churches, the church of the clergy and what he metaphorically and provocatively calls the "second church."[12] The latter appears to be, in fact, a vast array of beliefs

6. It suffices to mention the pioneer volume edited by Judith Lieu, John North, and Tessa Rajak, *The Jews among Pagans and Christians: In the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1992).

7. See, for a good summary and bibliography, Tessa Rajak, *Translation and Survival: The Greek Bible of the Ancient Jewish Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 92–124.

8. See, for instance, Peter Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 27–54.

9. See, for instance, Maijastina Kahlos, *Debate and Dialogue: Christian and Pagan Cultures, c. 360–430*, Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology, and Biblical Studies (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2007).

10. See a criticism of "the unhappy marriage of clichéd constructivism and engrained groupism" in Rogers Brubaker et al., eds., *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 8.

11. See the special issue of the *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 15, no. 2 (2007), "Holy Households: Domestic Space, Property, and Power," with contributions by Kim Bowes, Kate Cooper, and Kristina Sessa; see also Kim Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Kate Cooper, *The Fall of the Roman Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Éric Rebillard, *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009 [original, 2003]); Kevin Uhalde, *Expectations of Justice in the Age of Augustine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

12. Ramsay MacMullen, *The Second Church: Popular Christianity A.D. 200–400*, Society of Biblical Literature Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement Series 1 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009).

and practices that he describes rather vaguely as "popular." In the volume of *A People's History of Christianity* devoted to late ancient Christianity, Virginia Burrus and Rebecca Lyman are more careful in their approach and assert that "the notion of a realm of popular religion that is distinct from or even opposed to the religion of the elite" is "untenable."[13] They emphasize that "when viewed not from above but on the ground, Christian identity emerges as a far messier and more diverse and, also, a far more *flexible* and *creative* phenomenon."[14] They join a more general paradigmatic shift in the sociology and history of religion, promoting the model of "lived religion." According to Meredith B. McGuire, such a model refuses to "conceptualize individuals' religions as little versions of some institutional model."[15] Thus the focus of study becomes individual innovations, variations, manipulations, or deviances.

The studies in the present volume build on some of these insights and attempt to address explicitly the methodological challenges attendant on rescaling analysis to the level of the individual.[16] In particular, they explore the tension between looking for evidence about individuals and taking individuals into account when looking at evidence. Too often the lack of direct evidence about individuals is used as a justification for taking the group as the unit of analysis.[17] However, evidence of group life can be read with individuals as the focal point. What is revealed is the profound complexity of the interactions between group identity and religious individuality.

It was important to start with a clear understanding of the legal framework. Thus Karl Leo Noethlichs provides a survey of the ways Roman emperors from Constantine to Justinian increasingly pressured individuals to conform to a shared imperial religion. Classical law seems scarcely concerned

13. Virginia Burrus and Rebecca Lyman, "Shifting the Focus of Christianity," in *A People's History of Christianity*, vol. 2, *Late Ancient Christianity*, ed. Virginia Burrus (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 14.

14. Ibid., 2.

15. Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 185.

16. These studies were all presented at the conference "A Multitude of Religious Roles: Confronting Group Identity and Religious Individuality in Late Antiquity" in Eisenach, Germany, August 29–September 1, 2011.

17. On the assumption shared among specialists in religion in the ancient world that ancient personalities differ from modern personalities with their individualistic tendencies, see, for instance, Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities* (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 7, with a reference to the "dyadic or group-oriented nature of ancient personalities."

with individual religiosity as such and it is thus difficult to determine whether it made little room for it or if it was simply irrelevant. Two factors changed this situation: the invention of an imperial religion, starting with Decius in 250 A.D. and the adoption of Christianity as the religion of the emperor from the reign of Constantine. With these changes the personal sphere of the individual tended to be delimited by increasingly restrictive religious regulations. Thus, while religion did not matter much to the definition of the individual in classical law, by the end of the period, as attested by the Justinian corpus, individuals were primarily defined by their religion. The other papers in the volume explore the consequences of this change in the legal framework.

The chapters in part II examine the complex relationships between (institutional) religions and religious individuals.[18] Jason David BeDuhn considers the conditions of the "reproduction" of religions from individual to individual, a condition for their survival, and, in particular, the level of individual idiosyncrasy that religions must tolerate. He focuses on Faustus of Milevis and Augustine of Hippo, and how these two men defined Christian identity both for themselves and, as leaders of their respective communities, for others. He highlights the idiosyncrasies of their constructions of this identity, looking beyond their conformity to the ritual behaviors and ethical commitments that were expected by their communities. He suggests, in particular, that at the time of his "conversion" to Nicene Christianity and for some time afterwards, Augustine had internalized the principal tenets of its doctrine only to a very limited degree and that, in the process of internalizing them, he transformed them in ways that affected the whole tradition of Nicene Christianity.

Kim Bowes also questions the relationship between institutions and individuals, though with respect to very different material: the building of private chapels and the practice of Eucharistic reservation in the sixth century. Indeed, individual rituals that might, at first glance, be thought to illustrate the divide between bishops and lay people appear, in fact, to engage in a form of mimicry and to appropriate Christian communal ceremony to small spaces and objects. The private chapels are miniaturized versions of local episcopal churches,

18. Isabella Sandwell used insights from cognitive psychology to challenge the assumption that Chrysostom's audiences always heard what their preacher said according to shared communal values and commonplaces. For a similar use of cognitive psychology, see Isabella Sandwell, "How to Teach Genesis 1:1–19: John Chrysostom and Basil of Caesarea on the Creation of the World," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 19, no. 4 (2011): 539–64.

and the reserved Eucharist is clearly detached from the ritual of public churches. Far from contesting the power of the bishops, the families who built these private chapels and asked for reserved Eucharist were able, through miniaturization and fragmentation, to incorporate the bishops' buildings and liturgies into their individual rituals. Thus the relationships between institutional religion and religious individuals were clearly rather intricate.

Dealing with the concept of *theōsis* or deification in Gregory of Nazianzus's fourth-century theology, Susanna Elm addresses what seems to be a radically individual route to salvation. Closer analysis of this concept and its development in Gregory's writings compels us to correct this view. The earlier and more important synonym of *theōsis* is the Stoic concept of *oikeiōsis*, enlarged by the notion of *pros theon*. It considers the self in its relation with the external world. Care for the self lies at its heart, but in characteristically Stoic style, the natural impulse to love oneself is turned outward to the external world, even the cosmos. In Gregory's writing, public engagement of the philosophically minded helps the church as a whole, that is to say, all its members, to approximate the divine. The burden of leadership inherent in this concept betrays its elite character without limiting its benefit to this circle. The religious institution and the religious individual thus enter a relationship as complex as it is fruitful.

The chapters in part III question the possibility of finding evidence on individual religiosity. They do not assume that individuals in late antiquity are defined only by collective identities, but they show that often what might seem to be the result of an individual religiosity in fact follows the script of a group strategy. Tessa Rajak explores the role of the martyr mother in the Maccabean martyrologies and shows how the group here constructs an individual character for its own purpose. Thus she offers an important caveat against looking for evidence about individuals in texts which primarily seek to build group identity. Similarly, Judith Perkins warns against the temptation of reading the *Passion of Perpetua* as a personally revelatory text and invites us to analyze instead the elements of shared discourse in the construction of a Christian identity.[19] Like words in Saussurian linguistics, Perkins reminds us, identities are necessarily defined in relation to other identities. She suggests that Chris-

19. Cf. Kate Cooper, "A Father, a Daughter, and a Procurator: Authority and Resistance in the Prison Memoir of Perpetua of Carthage," *Gender and History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 685–702, presented at the

tian identity can therefore be understood only with reference to what it is not, and even what it explicitly rejects: the identity of the "multiethnic elite managing and benefiting from empire." In the case of the *Passion of Perpetua*, that which stands in the way of individual religiosity is the very nature of the text; the self-writing practiced in the text produces an identity that is public and collective, not private.

Kristine Iara extends the problem of identifying individual religiosity to a whole group in her prosopographical study of senatorial aristocrats in fourth- and early fifth-century Rome. Certainly, they shared common concerns about status, prestige, and the maintenance of tradition. Similarly, social norms defined the borders of acceptable, legitimate action. Those forms of public communication that led to the surviving evidence, namely honorary or building inscriptions, again engage in the reproduction of traditional forms of speaking. And yet, on the whole, the diversity of religious roles taken up, and the nuances apparent in the appropriation of these roles, offers valuable, even if scarce, evidence for individual religiosity and its limits.

Epigraphic evidence usually found in the context of initiation or introduction into a priestly function within a cult is studied by Wolfgang Spickermann. Special emphasis is given to the *taurobolium* and the *kernos* ceremony of the Cybele cult, epigraphical evidence for the eviration of a *gallus*, and "initiations" into the rank of *corax* in the cult of Mithras. Rituals and institutional structures that have been interpreted as fixed are shown to offer evidence for quickly changing, localized, and individual cult practices, which in turn produced highly visible individual dedications.

Finally, the chapters in part IV all share an interest in exploring the multiplicity of roles and identities that characterizes every individual. Taking this multiplicity seriously demands that we recognize the ability of individuals to play with their multiple roles and identities and thus to escape the strict boundaries of the role or identity in which each group to which they belong seeks to contain them.

Jörg Rüpke takes a closer look at religious roles in a well-known document, the so-called "chronograph of 354." The subject of the study is not, however, the mixture of festivals classified as "pagan" or "Christian" in the *fasti*-like

conference "A Multitude of Religious Roles: Confronting Group Identity and Religious Individuality in Late Antiquity."

calendar of this codex. Using the concepts of "appropriation" (Michel de Certeau) and "field" (Pierre Bourdieu), the agglomerate structure of the codex is interpreted as mirroring, or rather informing, the multiplicity of roles envisaged for the dedicatee, a young member of the highest echelons of Roman aristocracy. Interests in the codex's construction of history are identified as religious, universal, imperial, and astrological. This paper's final claim concerns the mode of integration of various religious roles, in particular those concerned with traditional and emergent religious practices. The historicization of religion offered a framework for the orientation of a Roman senator's son who was expected to be interested in fulfilling roles that go beyond the vulgar distinctions of, for instance, "paganism" and "Christianity."

Rubina Raja makes a case study of the dedicatory inscription of the church of St. Theodore in Gerasa founded by the local bishop, Aeneas, in 496 A.D. and shows how Aeneas carefully wrote this thirteen-line poem. Even as he claims the victory of Christianity over old paganism, he uses a line of Homer to present himself as a (new) hero of Gerasa and also to assert his social rank and culture. Raja's careful analysis emphasizes the ways in which Aeneas displays his multiple roles in the many groups that constitute the social life of Gerasa, despite the fact that the context of the inscription would seem to demand that priority be given to religious affiliation. This shows that an exclusive focus on religious identity may lead us to attribute to it a prominence that it does not necessarily have or to privilege conflicts when negotiation between roles in multiple groups is also at work.

Following insights of Rogers Brubaker, Éric Rebillard suggests that, instead of taking religious groups as a given, we should ask how individuals form and articulate group categories in understanding their social world. Thus he uses sermons and letters of Augustine to show how late antique North African Christians were aware of the issues associated with handling multiple identities and gave salience to their Christianness only intermittently. From here, he goes on to question the traditional interpretation of episodes that have been construed by scholars as events in a fundamentally religious conflict between clearly defined groups in fourth- and fifth-century North Africa. Indeed, shifting attention from groups to individuals invites us to study the group-making processes. It appears that heated religious polemics had very limited effects and that, in particular, most cases of destruction of pagan statues were

not the work of unleashed Christian mobs, but the result of the concerted action of the bishops.

The studies in this volume do not merely offer evidence for individual religious practices and various individual appropriations of religious roles. Rather, a crucial dialectics between group identity and religious individuality has been identified, one which is concerned with the forms, conditions, and consequences of religious change and of "individualization" (and its inverse) in late antiquity. In many instances, the course of events and the forms of our evidence cannot be explained or even sufficiently interpreted on the basis of "groups" being conceptualized as agents. Only occasionally is group identity the decisive factor in understanding individual behavior. On the contrary, in many situations religious institutions struggle to draw and enforce boundaries and to impose identities. Even the most ardent supporters of religious role models conceived of them as being held by individual selves, that is, by individuals making difficult decisions in a complex world. It is other individuals who are offered as models in much of the literary evidence available. At the same time, however, we see individual agents taking into account and internalizing social norms, and conforming to the situational expectations of their religious practices; nonconformists remain *rarae aves*. But that, certainly, is as true for the present as it is for late antiquity.

Works Cited

Bowes, Kim. *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Brown, Peter. *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Brubaker, Rogers, et al., eds. *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Burrus, Virginia, and Rebecca Lyman. "Shifting the Focus of Christianity." In *A People's History of Christianity.* Vol. 2. *Late Ancient Christianity*, edited by Virginia Burrus, 1–23. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.

Cooper, Kate. *The Fall of the Roman Household*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

———. "A Father, a Daughter, and a Procurator: Authority and Resistance in the Prison Memoir of Perpetua of Carthage." *Gender and History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 685–702.

Deuser, Hermann, and Saskia Wendel, eds. *Dialektik der Freiheit: Religiöse Individualisier-*

ung und theologische Dogmatik. Religion in Philosophy and Theology 63. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012.

Harland, Philip A. *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities*. New York: T & T Clark, 2009.

Kahlos, Maijastina. *Debate and Dialogue: Christian and Pagan Cultures, c. 360–430*, Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology, and Biblical Studies. Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2007.

Lieu, Judith, John North, and Tessa Rajak, eds. *The Jews among Pagans and Christians: In the Roman Empire.* London: Routledge, 1992.

MacMullen, Ramsay. *The Second Church: Popular Christianity A.D. 200–400*. Society of Biblical Literature Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement Series 1. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009.

McGuire, Meredith B. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Mead, George Herbert. *The Individual and the Social Self: Unpublished Work of George Herbert Mead*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Mieth, Dietmar, and Britta Müller-Schauenburg, eds. *Mystik, Recht und Freiheit: Religiöse Erfahrung und kirchliche Institutionen im Spätmittelalter*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2012.

North, John. "Réflexions autour des communautés religieuses du monde gréco-romain." In *Les communautés religieuses dans le monde gréco-romain: Essais de définition*, edited by Nicole Belayche and Simon C. Mimouni, 337–47. Turnhout: Brepols, 2003.

Rajak, Tessa. *Translation and Survival: The Greek Bible of the Ancient Jewish Diaspora*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Rebillard, Éric. *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009 [French original, 2003].

Rüpke, Jörg. "Hellenistic and Roman Empires and Euro-Mediterranean Religion" *Journal of Religion in Europe* 3 (2010): 197–214.

Rüpke, Jörg. "Organisationsmuster religiöser Spezialisten im kultischen Spektrum Roms." In *Religions orientales—culti misterici: Neue Perspektiven—nouvelle perspectives—prospettive nuove*, edited by Corinne Bonnet, Jörg Rüpke, and Paolo Scarpi, 13–26. Potsdamer altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 16. Stuttgart: Steiner, 2006.

———. *Fasti sacerdotum. A prosopography of Pagan, Jewish, and Christian Religious officials in the city of Rome, 300 B.C. to A.D. 499*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

———. *Aberglauben oder Individualität? Religiöse Abweichung im römischen Reich*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011.

Rüpke, Jörg, and Wolfgang Spickermann, eds. *Reflections on Religious Individuality: Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian Texts and Practices*. Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 62. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012.

Sandwell, Isabella. "How to Teach Genesis 1.1–19: John Chrysostom and Basil of Caesarea on the Creation of the World." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 19, no. 4 (2011): 539–64.

Uhalde, Kevin. *Expectations of Justice in the Age of Augustine*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.