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# Patterns of Religious Change in the Roman Empire

*Jörg Rüpke*

It is common to describe the religious history of the later Roman Empire as a history of rivalling religions and their increasing or decreasing impact and share in the population, finally all overshadowed by Christianity. The prior religious history of the ancient Mediterranean, however, seems to have been stable despite the spread of new religions and the falling into oblivion of others. The approach favoured here is not to look for the new features of new religions, but for changing features within the complex religious system most frequently described as polytheism.[1]

## *1. Polytheism*

»Polytheism« refers to symbol systems that assume the existence of several superhuman beings who are conceptualized by the culture itself as belonging to a class of »gods«. Yet the characteristics could be formulated more fully, as Burkhard Gladigow did in his analysis of structural problems of polytheistic religions: »›Polytheism‹ denotes a form of religion that assumes a plurality of person-like gods as acting. This acting is conceptualized as interaction among the gods and as acting upon the ›world‹ and concerning mankind.«[2] This definition stipulates that these gods are not only objects of cult but subjects and factors of the universe. In polytheistic systems the gods' impact on human life – the fact that their acting could be experienced in human life – cannot be reduced to only one global and ultimate principle: Instead, the model of explanation available for human experience of contingency is the activity of not totally transparent, not totally fixed divine people, who – in certain circumstances – could even be in conflict with each other.

Polytheism thus defined seems to offer a model of *pluralism*, in which even conflict at the level of ultimate reasons does not break the cohesion of the system. What happens, however, if in the same society monotheistic religions arise that deny the existence of other personal gods more or less strongly? The term »polytheism« itself is a polemical term right from its be-

1. An earlier version of this paper has been published under the title of »Polytheism and Pluralism« in A. Gotzmann et al., *Pluralismus in der europäischen Religionsgeschichte: Religionswissenschaftliche Antrittsvorlesungen* (Marburg: Diagonal, 2001), 17-34.
2. Burkhard Gladigow, »Strukturprobleme polytheistischer Religionen«, *Saeculum* 34 (1983): 294.

ginning. It was coined by the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria in the first century C.E. to describe non-Jewish religions, from the point of view of a systematizer of a one-god-religion, of a monotheistic system.[3]

The polytheism criticized by Philo is the usual form of ancient religions in Europe. Whenever in the following centuries, in medieval or modern Europe, polytheisms do appear, they are mostly a consequence of reception processes of ancient polytheisms, or of new non-European (e.g. Asian) imports. In each ancient city we can discern a core of important gods,[4] surrounded by either a few or hundreds of other goddesses and gods who are also worshipped, together probably ten thousand in the whole Mediterranean area, as long as one does not want to follow too quickly the attempts of ancient philosophers or some modern historians of religion at identification. The obvious criteria for differentiation of gods are functions and »territories of control«. In Rome, in a governmental crisis, Jupiter Optimus Maximus (»the best and greatest«) would be at their disposal. For some problems of women it would be Venus, Mars for war and Dea Tertiana for the three-days'-fever.[5] Even in Rome itself, half a dozen different Junones are present, occupying their own temples: Juno Lucina, Juno Lanuvina (or Sospina), Juno Curritis, Juno Populona, Juno Regina worshipped at three places, and finally Juno Moneta.[6] The deities that could be worshipped need not have had ancient local traditions, though: For those interested in the exotic, there was the cult of Isis or the horse goddess Epona from Gaul, or fasting on the day of the Sabbath (the latter is a common interpretation for the Jewish non-operating of kitchens on this day). Finally, the city of Rome, certainly exceptional as the most important centre of an empire surrounding the whole Mediterranean, is seen as the »blend of the known world«. Into the (Italic) Tiber the Syrian Orontes would flow: a metaphor for the massive import of new cults.[7]

Yet, what is the heritage of this ancient world? It is Christianity – the dominance of a monotheistic religion that had developed from Jewish roots, which, finally, in the law books of late antiquity enforced adherence to a particular religion and a ban on leaving it – the prohibition of apostasy. This astonishing historical development is not a new topic of research – far from it. There is hardly any other topic of the ancient history of religion that has been dealt with as often as the reasons for the »victory of Christianity« or –

3. Gladigow, »Strukturprobleme«, 292 f.
4. Gladigow, »Strukturprobleme«, 295 surmises that 10 to 20 gods offer an optimum of complexity and comprehensibility.
5. For the deities of fever, Tertiana and Quartana, see Georg Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer* (Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft 5,4; München: Beck, 2nd ed. 1912), 246.
6. See Wissowa, *Religion*, 181-191 for details.
7. Thus Juvenal in *Satire* 3,62.

more romantically and with a friendlier look at the losing party – for the »decline of paganism«.[8] Yet there is no agreement on the answers to be given: the need for salvation, increasing individuality, mental sterility of the traditional cults, organizational superiority of the Christian church, or the convincing power of the martyrs. I do not doubt the validity of the single factors offered as answers. I suggest, however, changing the focus of attention. How did a pluralistic situation change in such a way that coexistence turned into competition, in such a way that the existence of a winner implied the degradation, if not annihilation of the loser?

## 2. *The Polytheism of the Principate*

Ancient polytheism is not a »religion« in the way in which we talk about Judaism, Islam, or Christianity as religions. Ancient polytheism is rather the sum of ritual acts that are performed in single cities, and their underlying beliefs. These cities, of course, have a surrounding countryside that might be integrated into the system. We should at least acknowledge the fact that the polytheism of non-urbanized areas has never been a topic of debate: Is the cultic infrastructure of a household and one village temple comparable to the choices offered by the temples of a larger town? The inability to take account of this is a serious flaw in any argument. Based on urban religion, a simple model for the polytheism of the first and second century C.E. will be used in order to analyze the ensuing changes.

8. For the history of research on the »fall of the Roman Empire« since Gibbon, see Alexander Demandt, *Der Fall Roms: Die Auflösung des römischen Reiches im Urteil der Nachwelt* (München: Beck, 1984). For the history of religion: Ernst von Lasaulx, *Der Untergang des Hellenismus und die Einziehung seiner Tempelgüter durch die christlichen Kaiser: Ein Beitrag zur Philosophie der Geschichte* (München: Cotta, 1854); Gaston Boissier, *La fin du paganisme: Étude sur les dernières lutes religieuses en occident au quatrième siecle*. (2 vols.; Paris: Hachette, 1891; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1987); and Johannes Geffcken, *Der Ausgang des griechisch-römischen Heidentums* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1920) formulated classical positions. Karl Leo Noethlichs, »Die gesetzgeberischen Maßnahmen der christlichen Kaiser des 4. Jh. Gegen Häretiker, Heiden und Juden« (Ph.D. Diss., Köln, 1971) and Noethlichs, »Heidenverfolgung«, *Realenzyklopädie für Antike und Christentum* 13: 1149-1190 opened a new perspective by using the term »Heidenverfolgung« (prosecution of heathens), trying to counter the apologetic concept of »persecution of the Christians«; cf. Pierre Chuvin, *Chronique des derniers païens: La disparaition du paganisme dans l'Empire romain, du règne de Constantin à celui de Justinien* (2nd ed. revised and corrected; Paris: Belles lettres, 1991).

## 2.1. The Lack of a Spatial Hierarchy

The most obvious religious units are constituted by the cities: It is not the cult of a deity throughout the Roman empire – a popular topic of contemporary scholarship –,[9] but the cults of a single city that constituted a subject of discussion by ancient thinkers.[10] With regard to the whole of the Roman Empire, such a view is fragmentizing rather than unifying. As far as references to centres existed – one could think of Rome as a »Capital« –, such references were realized on a local level, for instance with a cult for »the goddess Rome and Augustus«. Such a cult is one particular cult among others. Even the cult of the Roman emperors, one of the very few ubiquitous symbols, has primarily to be interpreted in local terms, as Simon Price has shown.[11] There were cults of regional or even supraregional importance, mostly oracles or healing cults, and, additionally, locations of the great games; whether Olympian, Nemean, or Neapolitan. Reference to these places was a matter of individual choice, though,[12] or of political decision: at best one could speak of polycentralism here, after all an argument against models of polis religion that are too densely knit. Within the single cities, one could point to the placement of »capital shrines« at the central market – or meeting place, but even these cults, although frequently connected with important political functions, do not develop hierarchical relationships to other cults beyond the division of labour characterized by fields of functions. *Capitolia* were popular in localities eager to demonstrate their Romanness.[13] They reproduced an urban Roman pattern as a political signal; yet there are no indications that local Panthea became strongly hierarchized by them.

9. E.g. Peter F. Dorcey, *The Cult of Silvanus: A Study in Roman Folk Religion* (Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition 20; Leiden: Brill, 1992) and many monographs on »oriental« deities (a 19th-century concept) in the series of the *Études préliminaires des religions orientales dans l'empire romain.*
10. E.g. Cicero, *De natura deorum* 3,94.
11. Simon R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
12. I refer to the veneration of Asclepius by Aelius Aristides as presented in his *Hieroi logoi.*
13. See Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 334-336; Andreas Bendlin, »Peripheral Centres – Central Peripheries: Religious Communication in the Roman Empire«, in *Römische Reichsreligion und Provinzialreligion* (ed. Hubert Cancik and Jörg Rüpke; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 46; and Nicole Belayche, »Les formes de religion dans quelques colonies du Proche-Orient«, *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 5 (2003): 175.

## 2.2 The Lack of Temporal Hierarchies

We do not know much about the working and mental presence of calendars in ancient urban societies; graphical representations of time in a form that we would term »calendar« were only developed in Rome.[14] It is obvious that monthly or weekly rhythms existed, market days for example, but they did not produce a tangible hierarchy, e. g. by mere repetition or intensification as a weekly cult of a central deity could do. Apart from the Christians I do not know any Roman association that used the *nundiae* or the like as a temporal structure for meetings. Any collection of fees more frequent than once a month was even forbidden by law.[15] The reconstruction of complex sequences and patterns of festivals had been one of the most fancied activities of historians of religion in the 20th century, but none of them could be proven to have been realized by the ancients. Temporal structures as complicated as the later Christian Easter cycle did not exist.[16] Even more, wherever festivities of a certain deity took place, one fails to notice any significant impact of such dates on the private cult; this is testified by the choice of time for dedications.[17]

## 2.3 The Lack of a Hierarchized Worldview

One of the dominant physics of the early Principate argues an atomistic universe, which in the hail of atoms[18] not only presumes a plurality of deities, but also a plurality of worlds.[19] That is the Epicurean variety. Contrary to this, the Stoa formulates a kind of physics of four elements, in which one of them, fire, clearly is privileged: It is in fiery *pneuma* that one can find the sensible soul, which is flowing through everything. Into fire everything is dissolving in the final conflagration. A comparison with Zeus or Jupiter is attested for several philosophers. For the other gods, identified with the pla-

14. See Jörg Rüpke, *Kalender und Öffentlichkeit: Die Geschichte der Repräsentation und religiösen Qualifikation von Zeit in Rom* (RGVV 40; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995).
15. See Wendy Cotter, »The Collegia and Roman Law: State Restrictions on Voluntary Associations, 64 BCE – 200 CE«, in *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (ed. John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson; London: Routledge, 1996), 74-89.
16. E. g. George Dumézil, *Fêtes romaines d'été et d'automne suivi de Dix questions romaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); Mario Torelli, *Lavinio e Roma: Riti iniziatici e matrimonio tra archeologia e storia* (Roma: Quasar, 1984).
17. Peter Herz, »Untersuchungen zum Festkalender der römischen Kaiserzeit nach datierten Weih- und Ehreninschriften« (2 vols.; Ph.D. Diss., Mainz, 1975).
18. For the problem of the collision of parallel courses, see Trevor Saunders, »Free Will and the Atomic Swerve in Lucretius«, *Symbolae Osloenses* 59 (1984): 37-59.
19. See Jaap Mansfeld, »Aspects of Epicurean Theology«, *Mnemosyne* 46 (1993): 172-210.

nets, no ranking is carried out,[20] and they also become victims of the periodical end of the world: For the latter, a special problem of Stoic philosophy, no consensus about the identity of the series of worlds resulting is reached; at least they differ with regard to their place in the series.[21]

There are less systematized ways of thinking, too. For the Panthea of this world's cities the Greek model of a leading group of twelve gods is rather exceptional,[22] only infrequently attested and without overwhelming structuring force. The religions of the cities produce open systems that at best make selective decisions about internal and external cults with regard to property in plots for building purposes. Even genealogical orders of the gods are not fixed. Instead, genealogies offer a flexible language that helps to formulate connecting lines according to actual demands, such as alliances of cities.[23] Exclusivist demands of certain deities are part of the pragmatics of some cults and do not go beyond the interior of a cult's social space.

## 2.4 The Lack of Communicative Hierarchies

Religious communication cannot be reduced to communicating with gods, because the affiliated meta-communication, communication about communication with gods – about ritual acting – is an important part of religion.[24] Otherwise, theology as well as religious organization would have to be excluded from consideration. The polytheisms of Greek and Roman cities are characterized by great openness on every level of communication. The Greek concept of *theologia poetarum,* the »theology of the poets« demonstrates the legitimacy of nearly unrestricted thinking, even if, in general, poetic representations of deities are remarkably close to popular thinking. Within ritual, access to the gods in communication is hardly limited. In

20. Cf. M. L. West, »Towards Monotheism«, in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (ed. Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede; Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 40 for such discrepancies.
21. See Mansfeld, »Providence and the Destruction of the Universe in Early Stoic Thought: With Some Remarks on the ›Mysteries of Philosophy‹«, in *Studies in Hellenistic Religions* (ed. M. J. Vermaseren; EPRO 78; Leiden: Brill, 1979), 129-188; A. A. Long, »The Stoics on World-Conflagration and Everlasting Recurrence«, SJPsup 23 (1985): 13-37.
22. For such groups of deities, see Charlotte R. Long, *The Twelve Gods of Greece and Rome* (EPRO 107; Leiden: Brill, 1987).
23. Tanja Susanne Scheer, *Mythische Vorväter: Zur Bedeutung griechischer Heroenmythen im Selbstverständnis kleinasiatischer Städte* (Münchener Arbeiten zur Alten Geschichte 7; München: Maris, 1993).
24. On the idea of religious communication and its communication theoretical basis, see Rüpke, »Antike Religion als Kommunikation«, in *Gebet und Fluch, Zeichen und Traum: Aspekte religiöser Kommunikation in der Antike* (ed. Kai Brodersen; Antike Kultur und Geschichte 1; Münster: LIT, 2001), 13-30.

temples, permanent cult activities and a temple economy on the scale of Near Eastern city-states remain an exception; Egypt would offer the notorious example. Hence, the upper class priesthoods often can be understood as positions of prestige or associations of the nobility rather than mediators or negotiators.[25] Thus an individual cult is performed by the people, using their own facilities or turning to altars or temples open or opened on individual demand.

The few texts that seem to offer systematizations strengthen my interpretation. The Roman calendars, the *fasti*, do not name every Roman god, but date temple foundations;[26] lists of priests are restricted to single colleges and are classified chronologically; sacrificial calendars regulate the cult in financial terms. All these cases concern the media of communication with the divine, media primarily of the competing members of the ruling class who support the infrastructure and the so-called public cult. Such listings do stress the engagement of individuals and hence confer prestige; at the same time they reintegrate these activities into a pattern common to the local nobilities. Within an augural succession list, even Caesar's augurate is but an instance of senatorial piety.

## 2.5 Pluralism and Plurality

The system could be described as »internal pluralism«. The multitude of cults within one territory is realized by the contemporaries and this multiplicity demands a choice. It seems natural for a consul to address Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the 1st of January; the *processus consularis* is no matter of choice. Yet, for an ordinary Roman, even the Capitoline Jupiter is an elective cult. Of course, the selection is ruled by traditions. No risk of a wrong choice seems to exist. Possible success or failures are explained by divine arbitrariness or by the wrong moment in time,[27] not by the hierarchical position or functional non-responsibility of the addressed deity. This is suggested by the rules of augural law as well as by the broad functional spectres of the deities invoked in dedicatory inscriptions. Certainty is achieved by an appropriate (re-)specification of the deity with a corre-

25. Rüpke, »Collegia sacerdotum – religiöse Vereine in der Oberschicht«, in *Religiöse Vereine in der römischen Antike: Untersuchungen zu Organisation, Ritual und Raumordnung* (ed. Ulrike Egelhaaf-Gaiser and Alfred Schäfer; Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 13; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 41-67.
26. Rüpke, *Kalender*, 346-351.
27. See Jerzy Linderski, »The Augural Law«, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II.16, 3 (1986): 2146-2312.

sponding epithet,[28] or by addition: it is possible to ask *three* gods for *one* purpose. Such mixtures might be imitated and could establish a tradition of their own (as the series of dedicatory inscriptions of the Roman *equites singulares* shows) that are quite singular in their complex lists of divine addressees.[29]

The system *has* its boundaries. Border cults could be something in common with a neighbouring state – like the rural cult of Terminus –, but on reaching the walls of a foreign city we are beyond the boundaries. The cults to be found there are without any interest, unless the observer is on the move and intends to settle down as a foreigner. Internally, the drawing of border lines is (modernistically formulated) a police action; nocturnal rites, a frightening mass of disciples of both sexes, high attraction for lower classes, the calling in question of central values – these were the criteria that – at Rome – led to criminal prosecution, often banishment: Jews, astrologers, supporters of Isis, and philosophers shared this destiny again and again.[30] The semantics of exclusion do not refer to »one's own« or »foreign religion«, but rather to awkward practices and rituals. Thus, the range of internal differentiation is restricted *post factum*. Typically, one's own religion is set apart from far-away religions of other ethnic or rather political units; Gallic druids, barbarian Germans. Again the negative qualification is realized by the claim of repulsive practices offending central norms: human sacrifices, for example, are regularly mentioned in such discourses of separation.[31]

The internal pluralism increases by intentionally new imports or simply new temple buildings. In the first case, memorizing the geographical references is typical: This Venus comes from the Sicilian Eryx, Mater Magna from Mount Ida of Asia Minor; in this way, whole geographical areas can get specific religious connotations. The best example might be Thessalia, the witches' country.

28. Gladigow, »Götternamen und Name Gottes: Allgemeine religionswissenschaftliche Aspekte«, in *Der Name Gottes* (ed. Heinrich von Stietencron; Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1975), 13-32.
29. The annual altars of the garrison in Maryport, northern England: Rüpke, *Domi militiae: Die religiöse Konstruktion des Krieges in Rom* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1990), 182f.; and the annual dedications of the *Equites singulares Augusti* (*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 6, 31139-49) furnish excellent examples.
30. See Fredrick H. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society 37; Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1954) for astrologers. The earliest documented case is the prosecution of the Bacchanalia in 186 B.C.E.: Jean-Marie Pailler, *Bacchanalia: La répression de 186 av. J.-C. à Rome et en italie: vestiges, images, tradition* (Bibliothèque des écoles françaises d'Athène et de Rome 270; Rome: École Française, 1988).
31. Stressed by J. Rives, »Human Sacrifice Among Pagans and Christians«, *Journal of Roman Studies* 85 (1995): 65-85. Cf. Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 6, 16 on Celtic religion.

The example of setting up new cults demonstrates how widely spread religious competence is in this open system: Analyzing the definitions of new deities by the victorious generals of republican Rome, one will find situationally-related plausibilities, but not rules.[32] Senatorial control takes place in terms of financing or property rights and in a formal way. Spatially and temporally the new gods should be clearly determinable. Nobody gets angry if instead of a new Venus or a new Jupiter cult a temple is built for the new gods »Virtue« and »Honour«, but it must have – this is asserted by the Pontifices in the senate – two single cells for the cult images in order to have a clear indication, if lightning strikes, which god was angry.[33] The pattern of choice underlying this example illustrates that polytheism is not only a special way of interpreting reality. It is also a medium of communication that is more familiar to the power of neologism than to the repetition of well-known phrases. Thereby the visibility of religious acts contemporarily (as in the long run) gains prestige. Difference is thus supported.

### *3. Changes in the Religious History of the Third and Fourth Century*

The system described so far would cover the situation at many places through the second century. By the end of the third century it had grossly changed. By the fifth century it had been replaced by another. Narratives of the victorious ascendancy of Christianity, of the emperors' conversions and of the administrative destruction of cults that already had become spiritually empty, have been offered frequently; their rise itself has been historicized.[34] Comparing the many attempts at explaining the »making of late antiquity« in terms of the history of religion, much could be learnt from Peter Brown's stress on the basic continuity in the shift between imperial times and late antiquity. Changes are not due to the appearance of new elements but due to the restructuring of elements that had been present for a long time.[35] It is the general outline of this approach that I would like to copy, not its many details.

32. See Rüpke, *Domi*, 261 f.
33. Livy 27, 25, 6-10 (208 B.C.E.).
34. E.g. Peter Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3-26; Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990).
35. Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978), 39.

Aristocratic societies are societies of competition.[36] Such a society depends on its ability to discipline, to minimize the differences between its members. For a long period, Rome and the cities of the empire managed to keep the precarious equilibrium. By the end of the second century C.E., it was destroyed by a sharpening of the competition[37] that took hold in all but a few ancient and powerful cities.[38] Commonwealth, the »common thing« of the *res publica* – these old regulating ideas were repressed. The sphere that could be called »public« in a specific sense was replaced by privatization. That was true for the public space of the towns as well as the media of communication. The importance of public rituals displaying the ordered structure of the local society and the importance of public speech in the political arena decreased. Local elites turned their interest to extralocal villas[39] and new forms of public representation.[40]

At the same time, the demand for symbolic communication increased.[41] As a consequence of the numerous military conflicts and the increasingly deep penetration of foreign groups into the empire, the external borders of the *Imperium Romanum* had become unstable and were in need of support. New emperors and changing dynasties needed legitimization beyond the assent or lack of resistance of their direct surroundings. Even the mythological themes of private wall-paintings demonstrate the necessity felt to represent one's own rank.[42] The political needs furthered a more intensive and more direct central administration, which crippled local authorities and their hierarchical orders. At the same time, new positions of power were created that depended on the favour of the emperors. It is not before the fifth century that both processes melted in a sort of feudalizing, that is to say that locally pre-eminent persons monopolized these administrative positions.[43] Until then, the primary consequence of growing competition

36. J. E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).
37. Brown, *Making*, 77.
38. Brown, *Making*, 84f.
39. Bendlin, »Peripheral«, 56-61 for the consequences in religious communication.
40. Barbara Borg and Christian Witschel, »Veränderungen im Repräsentationsverhalten der römischen Eliten während des 3. Jhs. n. Chr.«, in: *Inschriftliche Denkmäler als Medien der Selbstdarstellung in der römischen Welt* (ed. Géza Alföldy and Silvio Panciera; HABES 36; Stuttgart: Steiner, 2001), 47-120.
41. For the concept of symbolic interactionism see e.g. Melford E. Spiro, »Symbolism and Functionalism in the Anthropological Study of Religion«, in *Science of Religion: Studies in Methodology* (ed. Lauri Honko; Religion and Reason 13; Den Haag: Mouton, 1979).
42. Susanne Muth, *Erleben von Raum-Leben im Raum: Zur Funktion mythologischer Mosaikbilder in der römisch-kaiserzeitlichen Wohnarchitektur* (Archäologie und Geschichte 10; Heidelberg: Archäologie und Geschichte, 1998).
43. Demandt, *Die Spätantike: Römische Geschichte von Diocletian bis Justinian 284-565 n. Chr.* (Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft 3,6; München: Beck, 1989), 253.

was the increase in social mobility that furthered central power: *divide et impera* could have been the imperial *motto*.[44] Within the local framework, the loss in political self-control changed the forms of power and changed the modes of legitimizing power.

Which were the consequences or at least parallels within the realm of religious practice? I try to focus on the same aspects that had served to characterize the polytheism of the Principate.

### 3.1 Loss of Spatial Structures

The loss of public-political space had effects on the mental map. Increasingly, non-central places, the sepulchres of martyrs for example, offered foci for orientation.[45] Even the urban Roman priesthoods of the Epulones, who cared for some ritual dinners for Jupiter, took the trouble to set up a common dedication to Mater Magna Deum Idaea and a slightly modified Capitoline triad – but not in Rome. The dedication was placed close to the upper part of the Anio in an area of sources for important Roman aqueducts – a hardly accessible place.[46] Images of cities that were primarily imagined (Rome, Jerusalem) gained in importance as places of reference.[47] At the same time, animal sacrifice lost importance, that is, the central civic ritual financed by contributions of members of the local elite or cared for by the public budget.

### 3.2 Dissociation and Initial Hierarchization of Time

It was ancient Roman practice to add chronological material to calendrical representations of the year. Lists of magistrates or veritable chronicles might be added, relating to the sequence of years.[48] It is the »chronograph of 354«, a luxurious book calendar,[49] that for the first time added a concurring list of

44. Demandt, *Spätantike*, 251; cf. Brown, *Making*, 79.
45. For Rome, the list of the *dies natales* of the codex-calendar of 354 attests a systematization already for the early 4th century.
46. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 14,3469.
47. For Rome e. g. Nicole Méthy, »Réflexions sur le thème de la divinité de Rome: à propos de l'Éloge de Rome d'Aelius Aristide«, *Latomus* 50 (1991); for the (celestial) Jerusalem, Georg Kretschmar, »Festkalender und Memorialstätten Jerusalems in altkirchlicher Zeit«, *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 87/88 (1972): 167-205; Peter W. L. Walker, *Holy City, Holy Places? Christian Attitudes to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in the Fourth Century* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Clarendon, 1990).
48. Rüpke, »Geschichtsschreibung in Listenform: Beamtenlisten unter römischen Kalendern«, *Philologus* 141 (1997): 65-85.
49. Details: Michele Renee Salzman, *On Roman Time: The Codex-Calendar of 354 and the*

annually repeated days; the list of the dates of burial of Christian martyrs, their *»dies natales«*. The incipient legal ruling on the »day of the Sun«, the Sunday, attributed festival qualities to a day that might derogate the religious qualification of those days that fell on Sundays from time to time.[50] Whereas days of festivals had been a local matter before, now, in the fourth century, a small number of Roman festival dates are qualified as permanent legal holidays throughout the Roman Empire. The list of 389 comprises annual remembrance days of the imperial family, Easter, and Christmas.[51]

### 3.3 The Loss of the Philosophical Basis of Polytheism

The most widespread philosophical conceptions of the world in late antiquity are characterized by a basically monotheistic conception of the divine. The multilayered neoplatonic model of being dominated;[52] atomistic positions are hardly visible.[53] With regard to this development, there was no concurrence of systems of orientation. The pragmatic ordering of polytheistic gods according to varying needs and situations had been replaced by a thorough hierarchy that left only subordinated roles to the traditional gods.[54]

Summing up the preceding three developments, they must have caused a heightened sensibility: It was no longer the obvious and everyday structure of the categories of space, time, and being that gave guidance. One had to look for more nuanced differences behind them. This is important for the next change.

*Rhythms of Urban Life in Late Antiquity* (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 17; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

50. See *Codex Theodosianus* 2,8,1; *Codex Iustinianus* 3,12,2 for Constantine's law on Sunday, and Willy Rordorf, *Sabbat und Sonntag in der alten Kirche* (Traditio Christiana 2; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1972) for further sources. The traditional elements of the new regulation are analyzed by Rüpke, *Kalender*, 463-466.
51. *Codex Iustinianus* 3,12,6.
52. Overview: Giovanni Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy 4: The Schools of the Imperial Age* (trans. and ed. John R. Catan; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); for late antiquity, Stephen Gersh and Charles Kannengießer eds., *Platonism in Late Antiquity* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992); for monism, Werner Beierwaltes, *Denken des Einen: Studien zur neuplatonischen Philosophie und ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1985); for the reception of traditional religion, e.g. Sarah Iles Johnston, *Hecate Soteira: A Study of Hecate's Roles in the Chaldean Oracles and Related Literature* (American Classical Studies 21; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990).
53. See Julian, *epist.* 89b.
54. Michael Frede, »Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Later Antiquity«, in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (ed. Polymnia Athanassiadi et al; Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 49.

## 3.4 The Privatization of Religious Communication

The loss of public space is paralleled in dealing with the divine. The local polytheisms had combined a rather clear-cut differentiation between humans and the gods[55] with an unrestricted access to the gods. The latter was realized in public rituals by the annually changing representatives of the society, in group and family rituals, or rituals enacted by single individuals. The rituals could be performed everywhere, even if public temples were preferred places that helped to determine the identity of the goddess addressed by means of a cultic image.[56] Here, change is visible. A general consensus on the borderlines between divine and human is dwindling, although the rules of how to identify special points of contact were shared. Particular people are characterized by more intensive contacts. The »holy men« and »divine men«, *theioi andres*, became decisive instances of the system of religious communication,[57] became bearers of directly imparted divine authority that could claim superiority over the claims to power of other social institutions.[58] This confronted contemporaries with the task of identifying such persons and evaluating their claims – and perhaps refuting them. Mistakes were possible now and a complex demonology[59] helped to account for mis-identifications. Possession, divine frenzy, was no longer an indicator of genuine revelation, but could indicate the contrary. People speaking in tongues were replaced by exorcists.

The consequences were manifold. Some gods by way of their priests claim an attention, the daily cult for instance, that could be fulfilled by specialists only.[60] As the former public spaces dissolved, it became more plausible that a particular closeness to a god could be realized by negating the standard social

55. Neatly illustrated by funerary ritual thematizing changes in status (individual – *di manes*): John Scheid, »Die Parentalien für die verstorbenen Caesaren als Modell für den römischen Totenkult«, *Klio* 75 (1993): 188-201.
56. Gladigow, »Epiphanie, Statuette, Kultbild: Griechische Gottesvorstellungen im Wechsel von Kontext und Medium«, *Visible Religion* 7 (1990): 98-121.
57. The process is illustrated by the loss in authority of oracles organized by local societies in comparison to holy men: Polymnia Athanassiadi, »Philosophers and Oracles: Shifts of Authority in Late Paganism«, *Byzantion* 62 (1992): 45-62.
58. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Haskell Lectures on History of Religions, N.S. 2.; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981); Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Transformation of the Classical Heritage 5; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); cf. Ramsay MacMullen, »Personal Power in the Roman Empire«, *American Journal of Philology* 107 (1986): 512-524 for concepts of personal power.
59. Smith, »Towards Interpreting Demonic Powers in Hellenistic and Roman Antiquity«, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II.16,1 (1978): 425-439.
60. Martin P. Nilsson, »Pagan Divine Service in Late Antiquity«, *Harvard Theological Review* 38 (1945): 63-70; Scott Bradbury, »Julian's Pagan Revival and the Decline of Blood Sacrifice«, Phoenix 49 (1995): 335.

relationships. Starting in Egypt, anachoresis, to withdraw into the desert, made hermits into people of god.[61] To negate the acceptance of one's own corporality was another way to search for intensified closeness to a god: asceticism, especially sexual abstinence, gained more and more acceptance.[62] To discredit asceticism might lead to conflicts, even if the majority of the population did not opt for an ascetic way of life.[63]

If certain people were acknowledged as privileged communicators with the divine, it was necessary to intensify contacts with them or gain membership into the circle around them – or to fight the group, if the claim was refuted. This was a new form of selection and a new source of decisional mistakes. Only now »confessionalization« and the conceptualization of practices and networks as »religions« gained importance.[64] At the same time these religions, or, to be more precise, these memberships could serve as instruments for restructuring systems of patronage.[65]

### 3.5 Power is in Need of New Forms of Legitimization

Since public political interaction had decreased in its role to regulate claims to power, power became precarious. Economic weight was an alternative,

61. For early monasticism, see Brown, *Making*, 115ff.; Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Lectures on the History of Religions N.S. 13; N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1988), 210ff.
62. Brown, *Body*; James A. Francis, *Subversive Virtue: Asceticism and Authority in the Second-Century Pagan World* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995). Hubert Cancik, »Reinheit und Enthaltsamkeit in der römischen Philosophie und Religion«, in *Aspekte frühchristlicher Heiligenverehrung* (Oikonomia: Quellen und Studien zur orthodoxen Theologie 6; Erlangen: Lehrstuhl für Geschichte und Theologie des christlichen Ostens, 1997), 1-15, 126-141 for older traditions offering points of departure.
63. See Francis, *Subversive*, 185. That is not implying that asceticism was practised by a majority (see Peter Habermehl, »1. Peter Brown: The Body and Society ... 1988; 2. Elaine Pagels: Adam, Eve, and the Serpent ... 1988 ...,« *Gnomon* 69 (1997): 657-665. Christian pluralism as regarding styles of life is demonstrated by the *Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii* from late 4th-century Rome (M. A. Claussen, »Pagan Rebellion and Christian Apologetics in Fourth-Century Rome: The Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii«, *JEH* 46 (1995): 589-614.
64. Cf. John North, »The Development of Religious Pluralism«, in *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians: In the Roman Empire* (ed. Judith Lieu, John North, and Tessa Rajak; London: Routledge, 1994), 187: »We should look on paganism quite simply as a religion invented in the course of the second to third centuries AD, in competition and interaction with Christians, Jews and others, who were seeking to convert its members to their own causes.« North thus definitively connects the term »religion« with competition and conversion, thus excluding pluralism and multiple affiliation.
65. Michele Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

but not a legitimate one. Power that could point to divine contact and mission, that is, theologically legitimated power, would be much more plausible. It was exactly this form of legitimization that was ever more used by the emperors;[66] it was this form that determined the semantics of the political discourse.[67] Thus the political field as such, the realm of what a society considered as being subject to its earned consideration and decision, was restricted. The emperor monopolized or dominated certain types of contact with the divine. As a consequence, divination, a classical medium of control, became more and more suspicious. To inquire about the fate and the death of the emperor had been a criminal act since Augustus; by the late fourth century most techniques and technicians had become punishable as they might introduce alternative sources of authority.[68] Thus the emperor acquired new competences that opened up new possibilities in the area of legislation, too. What had been a small area of careful »secular« legislation on staffing priesthoods was enlarged to a large field of religious ruling that would argue in matters sacred and otherwise by pointing to divine mission instead of precedents of the divine Augustus.[69]

## *4. Testing the Hypotheses*

New interpretations of two notorious problems attest to the fruitfulness of my approach. The first, in fact, is not a new one, but has been formulated by Karl-Heinz Schwarte some years ago on the basis of chronological arguments. However, his results fit perfectly into my model. Why – that is the

66. For the time until Constantine, see Rufus J. Fears, *Princeps a diis electus: The Divine Election of the Emperor as a Political Concept at Rome* (Papers and Monographs of the American Academy in Rome 26; Rome: American Academy, 1977); for Christianization in Eusebius and Ambrose: Heinz Bellen, »Christianismus Imperator: Zur Christianisierung der Römischen Kaiserideologie von Constantin bis Theodosius«, in *E fontibus haurire: Beiträge zur römischen Geschichte und zu ihren Hilfswissenschaften* (ed. Rosemarie Günther und Stefan Rebenich; Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Altertums, New Series 1,8; Paderborn: Schöningh, 1994), 3-19.
67. This semantic change of political conflict has been demonstrated by Jochen Martin, »Vom Prinzipat zur Hierokratie: Die Kanonisierung von Kommunikations-und Herrschaftsbeziehungen im Römischen Reich«, in *Kanon und Zensur* (ed. Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann; Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation 2; München: Fink, 1987), 190-200 to be characteristic for late antiquity.
68. See Marie Theres Fögen's attempt to date the beginning into Severan times: *Die Enteignung der Wahrsager: Studien zum kaiserlichen Wissensmonopol in der Spätantike* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993).
69. Karl Leo Noethlichs, »›Imperatoria interpretatio‹: Zum Umgang der spätrömischen Kaiser mit Gesetzestexten«, in *Stimuli: Exegese und ihre Hermeneutik in Antike und Christentum: Festschrift für Ernst Dassmann* (ed. Georg Schöllgen and Clemens Scholten; JbAC 23; Münster: Aschendorff, 1996), 226f.

problem – was the persecution of Diocletian staged so late in his era, only in 303, shortly before his resignation in 305 after twenty years of ruling? This course of action should, *pace* Schwarte, be seen as measures to secure a succession that was not dynastically legitimated. Diocletian tried to ensure that a succession entirely based on religious motifs would find a positive reception and should not encounter religious criticism.[70] That would be a neat example for power legitimized by divine communication and a corresponding system of patronage, structured on the same religious lines.

The second case is constituted by the protagonists of the so-called pagan reaction of the end of the fourth century. In reading their inscriptions we can witness an accumulation of diverse priesthoods that had not been paralleled since Augustus himself. Publius Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, for example, officiated as augur, pontifex of Vesta (the classical pontificate), pontifex of the Sun, *quindecimvir sacris faciundis*, curial of Hercules, hierophant in Eleusis, and temple guardian, presumably in the Isis-cult of Sarapis. At the end of the list of his priestly functions is the *pater patrum*, »father of fathers« in the cult of Mithras, stressed by the formulation »father of fathers in the true *res publica*«.[71] This is not the syncretism of a late antique pagan aristocracy, small in numbers,[72] but it is the attempt of a Roman aristocrat to regain his religious authority (that is no longer guaranteed by his career as magistrate) by intensifying his religious activities. As such he is part of a process that could already be assigned to the beginnings of the century.

## *5. Conclusion*

Religious changes in the polytheism of the Roman Empire could not be described by the quantity of religious traditions present. Due to the growing geographical mobility we can assume that religious diversity grew throughout the period analyzed. Nor could the change witnessed be attributed to massive innovation within the religious practices. It is rather the place and role of religious practices in society that shifted, paralleling (often following) a restructuring of the social fabric.

70. Karl-Heinz Schwarte, »Diokletians Christengesetz,« in *E Fontibus haurire: Beiträge zur römischen Geschichte und zu ihren Hilfswissenschaften* (ed. Rosmarie Günther and Stefan Rebenich; Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Altertums, New Series 1,8; Paderborn: Schöningh, 1994), 203-240.
71. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 6,1778 f.
72. Still the usual interpretation, cf. e.g. Peter Thrams, *Christianisierung des Römerreiches und heidnischer Widerstand* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1992), 53-56, 140; Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 43.

Three observations should be stressed. A connection existed between the forms of legitimizing power and criteria of religious truth. Second, the concept of religion itself changed during the time analyzed. Third, a particular connection between monotheism and pluralism could be observed. The terms of the competitive religious pluralism that I tried to sketch for the later Roman Empire were shaped by monistic concepts, but not by the number of divine beings, whether singular or plural.[73]

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73. Cf. Gladigow, »Polytheismus«, *HrwG* 4 (1998): 327 for the observation that complex polytheistic systems are able to accommodate »insular monotheisms«.

*ity.* Lectures on the History of Religions, New Series 13. N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1988.
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