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Lived Ancient Religion: A Change of Perspective

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Abstract

In a turn against a concept of faith that seems too much influenced by Christianity, ancient religion has been understood in recent decades primarily as part of political identity and political strategies: a system of ritual rules that regulates people's duties to gods and thus at the same time binds them to their city. That has been called civic religion. Juridical conceptions of votives and dedication (rather than speaking of gifts) seemed to confirm this finding even for individual religious action. This article proposes a change of perspective: The use of objects in the communication between people and the divine shows that ancient religious practice was first and foremost "lived religion" that changed again and again.

1 Introduction

The concept of "lived religion" in its application onto religion in the ancient world from the Ancient Near East through second temple Judaism, Hellenestic and Roman religious practices and institutions down to emergent Christian texts and practices has found growing interest and application. This article briefly exposes the basic concept of "lived ancient religion" (abbreviated LAR, like the household god, and thus indicating an important focus) and tries to further develop its semantic

and material ramifications. In difference to its modern application, lived ancient religion is, however, not restricted to a description of private or everyday religion beyond or in the interstices of some "official" religion or organized (church) religion. The concept offers an approach to all phenomena, actors, and evidences of ancient religion. As such, I will steer my argument towards the methodological consequences rather than its theoretical background.

That said, "lived ancient religion" analyses ancient religion not as systems of symbols or beliefs but the approach starts from how people lived religion. Using, but thoroughly modyfing the more recent concept of "lived religion", I have provocatively called this "lived ancient religion." Yet, what is left of this lived religion are dead things. How can we bring the two together? Religious communication is especially dependent on the material. Precisely as communication that is addressed to addressees who are not as easily tangible as humans, namely to ancestors or gods, religious communication regularly requires a medial effort that is made in interpersonal communication only in exceptional cases.

It is these connections that I will explore in more detail in the first part of this article. It advocates an understanding of religion that offers a new perspective on religious practices and their medial forms. This is not to deny that it is precisely the foregrounding of objects and their "entanglement," their interweaving with human practices, developed in Archaeology that have become important for analyses in religious studies and my own modeling of religion. The theorists of the *material turn*, not least Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, but also the notions of *affordance* and *biographies of objects*,[1] help to better understand religious

1 B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Pb. 2007 ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005); C. Gosden, "What Do Objects Want?," *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 12, no. 3 (2005): 193–211; I. Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); R. Raja and L. Weiss, "The Role of Objects: Meaning, Situations and Interaction," *Religion in the Roman Empire* 1, no. 2 (2015): 137–47.

diversity and plurality.[2] One must refrain from asking about the meaning of such things. It is not speechlessness that results from this, but a critical approach to our own terminology.[3]

2 Religious communication and its semiotics

Starting from the perspective of acting individuals, I understand religious action as the situational and not unquestionably plausible inclusion of "special" actors in communication, either as direct addressees or as arguments. Religious action *is* communication. Involvement typically means the attribution of *agency*.[4] These actors can be situationally as well as culturally different: deceased or gods, nature, angels or demons. The rhetorical category of plausibility, of assentability, is important. It points to the cultural embeddedness of such assumptions and attributions. Much depends on the power position of the speaker, who demands and perhaps even receives assent even for implausible religious communication. Even where divine powers or the agency of the deceased are a culturally recognized resource, consent or religious communication remains risky. The phrase "not unquestionable" points this out. Risks might be the claim that this particular deity is helping me in this particular situation and that the law of gravity, social rank or chance does not apply. Situationally, this is not something the bystanders have to accept.

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2 R. Raja and J. Rüpke, "Appropriating Religion: Methodological Issues in Testing the 'Lived Ancient Religion' Approach," ibid., no. 1:11–19; idd., "Archaeology of Religion, Material Religion, and the Ancient World," in *A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World*, ed. R. Raja and J. Rüpke (Malden: Wiley, 2015): 1–25.

3 Detailed J. Rüpke, "Gifts, votives, and sacred things: Strategies, not entities," *Religion in the Roman Empire* 4, no. 2 (2018): 207–36, see also R. Raja and J. Rüpke, "Coming to Terms with Ancient Religion"," ibid.: 157–61.

4 J. Rüpke, "Religious Agency, Identity, and Communication: Reflecting on History and Theory of Religion," *Religion* 45, no. 3 (2015): 344–66; Id., *Religion and Its History: A Critical Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 2021): 10–14.

It is precisely in this risk, which is produced by the communicative transgression, that is, by the transcending of the intersubjectively given situation, that the attractiveness of the resource religion become apparent: If the claim performed in such religious action is successful, it attributes agency to the persons speaking themselves: an *agency* that situationally improves status and situational command or could even be habitualized in the form of religious authority. Or it frees him or her from all responsibility, because the responsibility is seen as lying with the deity. *Agency* and *patiency* can be so close to each other.

Thus, religious action is about two types of agency. On the one hand, the *divine agency* attributed to the addressees, and on the other hand, the *religious agency* of the human actor thus gained. The latter type might even apply to the wider human audience or is explicitly attributed to it: our God makes us all strong (and me strongest because I have taken the initiative to invoke him).

What sounds like strategic calculation – and can be used as such – is usually embedded in recurrent situations: in constellations of persons, in cultural, social, legal, even power structures. We have to beware of a misunderstanding: agency does not mean a character trait of the actor, but the interaction with and in such structures[5] and with and in the material culture that has resulted from these interactions. However, these structures and their materializations are not unchanging systems of rules or symbols. Just as we experience religions today as something in which only certain actors insist (admittedly often loudly) on immutability, ancient religions were also the result of countless individual religious actions and situational or habitual convictions. In their form, they were always also dependent on the small or large changes that happened consciously or unconsciously in such acts of reproduction, repetition, and actualization. To emphasize this, I use the

5 See M. Emirbayer and A. Mische, "What is Agency?," *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 4 (1998): 962–1023.

term "lived ancient religion" to also imply the notion of religion-in-the-making.[6]

Lived religion refers to the repertoire and performances of action by individuals. It refers to their experiences of religious communication, their implicit conceptions of the divine in such acts and their previous or posterior reflections on such acting. Such experiences and ideas are appropriated, expressed and shared with others in different social spaces.[7] Groups and traditions are thus not simply given, but a particular perspective on processes of group formation and tradition building. Indeed, they appear to us as fixed when we focus on the outcome or even ideal of such formation processes. From the perspective of lived ancient religion, the drawing of boundaries and the formation and negotiation of identities come into view instead of ready-made boundaries and identities. Conceptually, hence, ready-made "religions" are replaced by religion-in-the-making and formation of religions as forms of strategic action and aggregated processes.

So far I have deliberately avoided talking about communication media and the use of signs. In the modeling implied so far, the body of the speaker(s) and their language represent the simplest form of what can be understood as symbolic communication. I have done so even though I realize that historically ritual action may precede language development; perhaps only stereotyped reference gestures have enabled the development of semantic precisions that can be called language.[8]

Already my initial dyad of human actor and superhuman addressee exhibits a triadic structure, which according to Charles S. Peirce's semiotic terminology consists of the sign itself *(representamen)*, the interpretant, and the represented

6 See J. Albrecht et al., "Religion in the Making: The Lived Ancient Religion Approach," *Religion* 48, no. 4 (2018): 568–93.

7 See J. Rüpke, "Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning 'Cults' and 'Polis Religion'," *Mythos* ns 5 (2011) (2012): 191–204.

8 See R. N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2011), 134–5.

object.[9] The interpreter here is not simply the religious actor speaking, but his or her conception of the sign. This conception, in Peirce's pragmatic turn, includes all possible practical effects of the sign. Thus, what is at stake in the use of the sign is its possible effect on the addressee as well as any audience. However, the production of a chain of signs containing meaning does not stop here. The process of interpretation continues, for the interpretation is an interpretation for an audience, which in turn is now engaged in interpreting the semiotic context set out before this audience's eyes and ears.

The attribution of meaning made in these interpretations as well as the imagination of possible effects do not come out of nowhere. They are fed by previous experiences, by shared meanings and imaginations, and by common interpretive strategies.[10] Although in principle infinite, the actual range of interpretations available to be brought to bear on the situation is thereby limited. This does not preclude creativity, does not preclude innovation.[11] This is especially important for religious communication.

Religious communication is communication with divine actors whose relevance in the respective situation is not simply already and indisputably established. It is only through the communication itself that relevance is ascribed to the divine actor and its existence is affirmed. That this is pragmatically effective and plausible

9 See C. S. Peirce, *Semiotische Schriften*, trans. C. J. W. Kloesel, 3 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986); *Peirce on signs: Writings on semiotic* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1991). I am grateful to Anders Klostergaard Petersen for referring me to Peirce on multiple occasions. For the following, I draw on J. Rüpke, "Ritual Objects and Strategies of Sacralization within Religious Communication," in *Ritual Objects in Ritual Contexts*, ed. M. Stürzebecher and C. D. Bergmann, Erfurter Schriften zur jüdischen Geschichte (Jena: Bussert & Stadeler, 2020): 236.

10 For the latter see S. E. Fish, *Professional correctness: Literary studies and political change* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

11 H. Joas, *Die Kreativität des Handelns* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1992): 106–112.

as an action is emphasized by the communicator for herself or himself as well as for the audience. He or she does this by making an unusually high media effort. Precisely through this – whether through a material gift or a representation, an "idol," as it was classically called – the invisible addressee becomes present and is strengthened in his or her (divinities, too, are typically gendered) ontological existence.[12] This seems to be an important reason why in archaeological findings religious communication is overrepresented in many spaces and periods.

3 Sacralization

I will now introduce a further term, namely sacralization. I propose to speak of sacralization as of actions and processes that incorporate into religious communication elements of the situation itself – objects, space, time – and attribute relevance or even agency to them.[13] Sunrise or the full moon day are thus asserted as particularly effective. A hot spring or a hilltop or a tomb are claimed to be more effective sites of successful religious communication. These are all claims that are plausibilized by the performance itself. A torch, an animal killed, precious

12 See J. Rüpke, "Religion medial," in *Religion und Medien: Vom Kultbild zum Internetritual,* ed. J. Malik, J. Rüpke, and T. Wobbe, Vorlesungen des Interdisziplinären Forums Religion der Universität Erfurt (Münster: Aschendorff, 2007), 19–28.

13 Cf. for a shifted emphasis, V. Krech, "Beobachtungen zu Sakralisierungsprozessen in der Moderne – mit einem Seitenblick auf die Kunstreligion," in *Metamorphosen des Heiligen: Struktur und Dynamik von Sakralisierung am Beispiel der Kunstreligion*, ed. H. Deuser, M. Kleinert, and M. Schlette, Religion und Aufklärung (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 411–25; *Die Evolution der Religion: Ein soziologischer Grundriss* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2021); my own conceptualization is more oriented to the notion of "ritualization" as strongly put forward by Catherine Bell (C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992)), see Rüpke, *Religion and Its History: A Critical Inquiry*.

clothing, a vertical object, a stele or an altar, supported the formulation and successful transmission of the message. In this way, the initiators make their speech intention more relevant, more important for the addressees. At the same time, they render the entire act of communication more relevant to any audience. They are witnessed by the powers addressed as much as by the bystanders.[14]

Sacralization is spelled out in time and space. A place is used for religious communication and subjected to a specific interpretation, perhaps even to certain rules of behavior for the duration of the communication. This might be a marketplace for a prayer performance or a street for a procession. Typically, such a temporary sacralization would leave no permanent mark unless someone later came up with the idea of placing, say, a bronze plaque commemorating the appearance of a saint, guru, or pope. Consequently, such a place would not qualify as "religious" even during an act that later took place there. At least not as long as no great effort would be made to reactivate this earlier temporary attribution. This could be done by a memory of one's own earlier presence or even an outright re-enactment.

Such sacralization can focus on individual objects, even small ones, that happen to be available or brought in specifically for the purpose, or even made in the situation. "Gifts" or "tokens" that mark the participants or relate to the content of communication are common. Clothes or signs close to the body such as wreaths, jewelry or colors are widely used – each with different permanence beyond the situation.

The process of interpretation, as I addressed it earlier in Peircean terminology, is extended in time, too. Sacralized objects (and, of course, times and places) already create conditions for the processes of interpretation that are associated with the communicative action itself. The reuse of old objects or the marked addition of

14 I refer here to the relevance theory of Sperber and Wilson, fundamentally D. Wilson and D. Sperber, "Outline of Relevance Theory," *Links & Letters* 1 (1994): 85–106; *Meaning and Relevance* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012).

new ones in the process of framing the situation[15] can clearly mark and intensify the specifically religious character. Sacralization is a matter of quantity and magnitude.

Convincing performance and innovative claims compete with institutionalized sacrality in many ways. Instead of gaining reputation, one can be accused of fraud, heresy, or simply unworthiness. This depends as much on the immediate audience as later observers and their respective relationship to the primary religious actor. The degree of publicity increases the opportunities as well as the risks. The materialized side of communication participates in these dynamics; it formulates claims, contributes to their enforcement – and at the same time opens up surfaces of attack. It can serve as a memorial as well as an object of denigration, name-dropping or exemplary destruction – from removal as booty to book-burning or the damaging and blowing up of statues. All this is as much prehistory as contemporary history.

4 Lived ancient religion

I try to capture the described dynamics in the concept of lived ancient religion. The concept of lived religion asks about the religious experiences, ideas and practices of individuals. Against the background of semiotic considerations, I understand these no longer as the more or less complete reproduction of, so to speak, prefabricated sets of religious behavior and religious assumptions. Hence, we need to be skeptical about routinely speaking of "Roman," "Athenian," "Isis-religion," Judaism or Manichaeism (or, in the extreme case, of the complete rejection of

15 E. Goffman, *Interaktionsrituale: über Verhalten in direkter Kommunikation*, 2nd ed., (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991); *Rahmen-Analyse: ein Versuch über die Organisation von Alltagserfahrungen*, 3rd ed., (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993); see also G. A. Fine, "Sociology of the Local: Action and its Publics," *Sociological Theory* 28, no. 4 (2010): 355–76.

such normative religion). Rather, the starting point is individual religious acts. At its simplest, these are everyday acts, short prayers, a kiss on the hand in front of a statue. Unfortunately, such religious acts or communications produced sources that have been preserved for us only in exceptional cases.

Research is helped here, as I argued above, by the fact that precisely the goal of gaining the attention of the divine actors, who are not simply present, of emphasizing the relevance of one's own communication, often leads to non-ordinary, ritualistic, elaborate communication that leaves material or textual traces.[16] One problem remains. The most elaborate and long-lasting media in particular are often created on the part of those who institutionalized and normed and created these media precisely for this purpose. Historically, this has led to the situation in scholarship that we have essentially pursued a history of religion of norms and exemplary ritual performances, which are meant as models, instead of a history of widespread practice.[17] But this does not mean that something like this is doomed to failure.

Of course, attempts at such standardization were also part of the relevant cultural context. In Mediterranean antiquity, for example, these were codes of conduct in sacred spaces, so-called "leges sacrae." They were antiquarians' commentaries on rituals. They were exegeses of Vergil or the Bible. Attempts at standardization are found in philosophical treatises, in ritualia or homilies. Above all, they are found in material form as instruments determining contents or movements, as images of gods to which one must look up, as steps or walls or

16 J. Rüpke, "Representation or presence? Picturing the divine in ancient Rome," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 12 (2010): 183–96.

17 See my detailed critique of such an interpretation of the highly partial juridical speech „On his house," by M. Tullius Cicero, "Roman Gods and Private Property: The Invention of a State Religion in Cicero's Speech on His House," *Religion in the Roman Empire* 5, no. 2 (2019): 292–315.

buildings that determined movements and directions of gaze, postures and group sizes. Of course, all these attempts were part of the relevant cultural environment. But they were just a part besides biographical-social or situational factors. The reciprocal relationship of structure and individual action, which constitute each other, thus form the basis of an access in which neither an asocial individual nor institutions are understood as preceding the other.[18]

In such a perspective, it is not the statistics of gods' names in inscriptions that provides information about a religious "system" but the design of the individual object. This can consist in a modification of forms, in the emphasis of individual elements. Religious competence of individuals is shown in the combination of names of gods on a particular dedicatory inscription. It also shows itself in the precise reproduction of a template, that is, in the decision against visible alternatives. This, however, is difficult to distinguish from unreflective traditionality. Methodologically, it is often more necessary to search for a pregnant individual source, for objects that reveal their biography, for narratives that relate experiences

18 M. S. Archer, *Culture and Agency: The place of culture in social theory*, Orig. 1988 ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996); C. Campbell, "Distinguishing the Power of Agency from Agentic Power: A Note on Weber and the 'Black Box' of Personal Agency," *Sociological Theory* 27, no. 4 (2009): 407–18; F. Dépelteau, "Relational Thinking: A Critique of Co-Deterministic Theories of Structure and Agency," ibid. 26, no. 1 (2008): 51–73; Emirbayer and Mische, "What Is Agency?." 962–1023; A. Moore, "The Eventfulness of Social Reprodcution," *Sociological Theory* 29, no. 4 (2011): 294–314; J. Rüpke, "Religious Agency, Identity, and Communication"; D. Silver, "The Moodines of Action," *Sociological Theory* 29, no. 3 (2011): 199–222; Y. Wang, "Agency: The Internal Split of Structure " *Sociological Forum* 23, no. 3 (2008): 481–502; M. Fuchs, "Processes of Religious Individualization: Stocktaking and Issues for the Future," *Religion* 45, no. 3 (2015): 330–43; M. Fuchs and J. Rüpke, "Religion: Versuch einer Begriffsbestimmung," in *Religionen übersetzen: Klischees und Vorurteile im Religionsdiskurs*, ed. C. Bultmann and A. Linkenbach, Vorlesungen des Interdisziplinären Forums Religion der Universität Erfurt (Münster: Aschendorff, 2015), 17–22.

and practices to one another.[19] Only in the sounding out of bandwidths, typical modifications and changes in "regimes"[20] do again meaningful generalizations, generalizations of practices, not repetitions of norms, emerge.

5 Examples

I would now like to try to show by means of a few examples how the switch from an institutional to an individual perspective of appropriation can generate new questions and hypotheses.[21]

5.1 Votives

I do not start my series of examples with small bronze figurines with human form or even life-size terracotta figurines in ritual places, pits or shafts, which served the communication with the "not undoubtedly plausible actors." I am concerned with cheaper religious communication.

Since the end of the fifth century BC, clay heads gained great popularity in sanctuaries in central Italy. Potters were able to meet the new demand with a new technique that had probably been available in Italy since the end of the sixth century: the mass production of sculptures through the use of a single or double

19 See for example Raja and Rüpke, "Appropriating Religion"; Raja and Weiss, "The Role of Objects;" J. Rüpke and C. Degelmann, "Narratives as a lens into lived ancient religion, individual agency and collective identity," ibid., no. 3: 289–96.

20 J. Rüpke, "Religiöse Identität: Topographische und soziale Komponenten " in *Kultort und Identität: Prozesse jüdischer und christlicher Identitätsbildung im Rahmen der Antike*, ed. M. Böhm, Biblisch-theologische Studien (Neukirchen: Neukirchener theologischer Verlag, 2016), 19–43.

21 In doing so, I take the material from my attempt to build an ancient history of religion on such a basis, *Pantheon: A New History of Roman Religion* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2018).

die.[22] Throughout central Italy, people now found, especially at larger places of worship, a supply of heads or - certainly cheaper - semi-sculptural head reliefs that they could use for their religious communication. The objects themselves suggested to them how to deal with them: The heads often had stand rings with which they could be placed well on podiums, benches, in boxes or showcases, or even on the floor. The half-reliefs, on the other hand, had devices for hanging.[23]

The quality of these objects was often poor. They remained unpainted, almost always also unlabeled: meager means of acquisition were probably accompanied by a lack of knowledge of writing. Some of them modeled the head themselves, others had it made like a portrait. Despite all the differences, however, their installation sent out a similar message to gods and men: With all the splendor of the architecture and terracotta decoration, as was visible in the cult buildings of this era, with all the knowledge about the builders and their position as members of economic, political and now also religious elites, it said: We are also still here!

Where religious action enabled some to represent themselves through architectural splendor and thus at the same time represented an attempt to steer religious practices in certain directions, it allowed others, especially the less well-off, to precisely appropriate these spaces in modification of elitist practices, such as life-size figures, and to demand recognition of their concerns. The veiling of the back of the head, which was often implied in the clay heads, obviously indicated,

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22 M. R. Hofter, "Etruskische und italische Votivplastik aus Ton," in *Etrusker in Berlin - Etrsukische Kunst in der Berliner Antikensammlung - Eine Einführung*, ed. V. Kästner (Berlin: Schnell Steiner, 2010), 69–76, 70. Hand-shaped heads and portraits: 72 f.

23 S. Steingräber, "Zum Phänomen der etruskisch-itallischen Votovköpfe," in *Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts römische Abteilung* (Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1980), 215 – 53. On visibility and invisibility: G. Bagnasco Gianni, "Sui 'contenitori' arcaici di ex-voto nei santuari etruschi," in *Depositi votivi e culti dell'Italia antica dall'età arcaica a quella tardo-repubblicana: Atti del Convegno di Studi, Perugia, 1–4 giugno 2000*, ed. A. Comella and S. Mele (Bari: Edipuglia, 2005), 351–58.

especially in Rome and Latium, a fact that was thus put on the scale by the actors. It was a matter here of a specific, of religious communication.[24] Clay heads and buildings thus mutually enhanced each other until the end of the second century BC. Broad social strata and elites entered into an indirect interplay in central Italy; precisely the mass presence of objects from the most diverse hands was not only appropriation, but also affirmation of the religious infrastructure, contributed decisively to the sacralization of the buildings and areas.[25]

This suggests many a question about the relationship between object and installation space. For example, the question whether a plate used for a long time in one's own household, with which memories of feasts, periods of hunger or the laborious mending could be connected, or such an object was freshly bought before the cult place. It seems to me important now not to sacrifice this materiality hastily to a culturalist classification, namely to call it an *exvoto*, a votive gift. In telegram style this signifies, I have a problem. I make a promise to a god. The problem is solved. The promise is kept. But a closer look teaches that this was only a possible and perhaps not even dominant interpretation: on ancient inscriptions we find (if anything at all) *donum*, gift, present. And this points us to the strategic use of terms and their problematic for their use as meta-linguistic terms by us.

I do not want to repeat here an argumentation, which is presented in more detail elsewhere. The idea that one is "condemned" (as some sources say) to redeem a

24 To the point M. Söderlind, "Heads with velum and the etrusco-latial-campanian type of votive deposit," ibid., 359–66, 362; Annamaria Commella, *ThesCRA 1* (2004), 337, see also 333 on the also widespread representation of covered heads on statues in the Latin area.

25 On the concept of sacralization instead of "sanctuary," J. Rüpke, "Was ist ein Heiligtum? Pluralität als Gegenstand der Religionswissenschaft," in *Alternative Voices: A Plurality Approach for Religious Studies. Essays in Honor of Ulrich Berner*, ed. A. Adogame, M. Echtler, and O. Freiberger, Critical Studies in Religion/Religionswissenschaft 4 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 211–25.

promised gift to a god by the occurrence of the requested outcome belongs only to the third century BC and, with its legal specification of the facts, confronted a problem that arose only where the space of dialogue between individual people and deities was transgressed: in the case of obligations from public coffers.[26] Whereas request and thanksgiving had actually been embedded in a more comprehensive and at least a long-lasting communication, they became punctual events in the context of the institution "vow." The asymmetry of the relationship was terminated by the resolution of the commitment made.

The *votum* was therefore not the epitome of Roman *do-ut-des*-piety. Rather, it was a special form of tying up extensive resources in religious communication that were subject to communal disposal. Even if the *votum* created individual new problems and could give rise to ridicule, it quickly became popular - this should not and cannot be disputed here.

5.2 Lived religion instead of house cult

I turn from religious practices in publicly accessible places to the domestic sphere during the imperial period. Here, too, one does better justice to the findings in their differentiation - the variations as well as the complete absence - if one sees the handling of objects from the point of view of the actors and their interests in successful communication such as the creation of a special atmosphere and not in the fulfillment of norms of some pre-established "house cult" reduced to representing public religion.

In the large cities and especially the metropoleis of the imperial era, the street rather than a house consisting of different rooms, formed the primary living space for many. But even the houses were actively designed only by a few of

26 J. Scheid, "Le délit religieux dans la Rome tardo-républicaine," in *Le délit religieux dans la cité antique* (Rome: Ecole française, 1981), 117–71 masterfully described the elaboration of the resulting situation for the city of Rome.

their inhabitants in their architectural structures and furnishings. Lighting played a major role in this. This applied not only to the question of which room was illuminated and used, but also which of its components, whether wall decorations or furniture, were thus brought into the light. The lamps themselves were instruments of religious communication of the first order. If plastic ornaments were arranged around the wick, for example in bronze lamps, but also in clay lamps, corresponding shadows were produced.[27] But the lamp also illuminated itself, for example, moved figures of gods facing the burning aperture into bright light, made them appear, as Ruth Bielfeldt has shown.[28] Like the alternatives - circus scenes, erotic motifs – these images of gods were real eye-catchers. They stimulated seeing and, as shining eyes, conveyed the feeling of being seen by them themselves. In the restless glow, the figures themselves were moving. Here, options were present and experiences were made on a daily basis.

Another central religious instrument, the ubiquitous altar, an unmistakable sign of communication with those who were not present without question, be they gods or ancestors, also challenged activation. With a minimum of effort, such as setting up a lamp and a minimum of speech or song, it became a focus of ritual performance.

Strategies practiced in the home (or on the street) were also used in institutionalized spaces of religious communication, in temple precincts and temples, for example. If graffiti were welcome in the home as an emphatic response from invited guests, this minimalized but durable form of linguistic communication may also have played a role in temple precincts. Attested is such a use of graffiti in Dura-Europos in the east of the Imperium Romanum. In the temples and

27 R. Bielfeldt, "Lichtblicke-Sehstrahlen: Zur Präsenz römischer Figuren- und Bildlampen," in *Ding und Mensch in der Antike: Gegenwart und Vergegenwärtigung*, ed. R. Bielfeldt, Akademie Konferenzen (Heidelberg: Winter, 2014), 195–238; 350–66, 202.

28 Ibid., 221. On the ancient idea of seeing by actively emitting light: 213 f.

meeting buildings of Jews, worshippers of Christ or Mithras, users tried to immortalize themselves as far as possible in the focal points of religious communication, close to the cult image, on murals or in passageways with the request for "remembrance" or "salvation."[29] Thus they also appropriated the great signs of religious communication of others, their two- or three-dimensional endowments. And, of course, altars and increasingly lamps continued to play a major role as gifts in the imperial period.[30]

6 Methodological options

The example presented exemplify the methodological approach presented here, which understands religion as an intersubjective communication event. This becomes accessible by examining, as a rule, individual utterances not for their culturally established content, but for their situation, their historical, social and material context, and precisely the modification and selection of culturally available terms and semantics.[31] In the domestic or familial spaces of primary sociality,

29 K. B. Stern, "Inscription as Religious Competition in Third-Century Syria," in *Religious competition in the Third Century CE. Jews, Christians, and the Greco-Roman world*, ed. J. D. Rosenblum, L. C. Vuong, and N. P. DesRosiers, Journal of Ancient Judaism: Supplements (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 141–52, esp. 146. In houses: V. Scheibelreiter-Gail, "Inscriptions in the Late Antique Private House: Some Thoughts about their Function and Distribution," in *Patrons and Viewers in Late Antiquity*, ed. S. Birk and B. Poulsen (Aarhus: Aarhus Univ. Press, 2012), 135–65, 161 with evidence from the 1st century BC to the 4th century AD.

30 Exemplary: M. G. Scapaticci, "Vetralla: Un santuario a "Macchia delle Valli"," in *Archeologia nella Tuscia: Atti dell'Incontro di Studio (Viterbo, 2 marzo 2007*), ed. P. A. Gianfrotta and A. M. Moretti, DAIDALOS - Studi e ricerche del Dipartimento di Scienze del Mondo Antico (Tuscia: Viterbo, 2010), 101–36, esp. 107.

31 See R. Gordon, "Showing the Gods the Way: Curse-tablets as Deictic Persuasion," *RRE* 1, no. 2 (2015): 148–80; I. Patera, "Objects as Substitutes in Ancient Greek Ritual," *Religion in the Roman Empire* 1, no. 2 (2015): 181–200; L. Weiss, "The Consump-

in face-to-face groups of secondary sociality, in the generally accessible spaces often shaped by the materialities of imagined communities, and finally in those imagined spaces of communication opened up by secondary media such as scrolls or codices, the conditions of religious experience, of bodily appropriation, and of material and action forms and meanings developed in concrete interaction present themselves very differently. Religious authority is accordingly very differently constituted in the exchange with and recognition or rejection of religious specialists.

At the same time, three important methodological decisions clearly distinguish the analysis and description of lived ancient religion on the basis of individual actions, which are spatially-materially, temporally, and biographically-socially located, from classical reconstructions of ancient religions and will now be briefly characterized in conclusion:

1) Instead of symbols, experiences come to the fore. Not concepts encoded in material signs up to architectural spaces or texts are the object, but the experience, the handling, the appropriation of such materialities and discourses. It is about the handling of instruments, the seeing of images, the use of domestic or open space, of times of day or seasons.[32] This has consequences especially for the study of the

tion of Religion in Roman Karanis," ibid., no. 1: 71–94; H. G. Meredith, "Engaging Mourners and Maintaining Unity: Third and Fourth Century Gold-Glass Roundels from Roman Catacombs," ibid., no. 2: 219–41; D. Wilburn, "Inscribed Ostrich Eggs at Berenike and Materiality in Ritual Performance," ibid.: 263–85; G. Petridou, "Emplotting the Divine: Epiphanic Narratives as Means of Enhancing Agency," ibid., no. 3: 321–42; A. Cooley, "Multiple Meanings in the Sanctuary of the Magna Mater at Ostia," ibid., no. 2: 242–62.

32 For example V. Gasparini, "Staging Religion: Cultic Performances in (and Around) the Temple of Isis in Pompeii," in *Memory and Religious Experience in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. N. Cusamano, et al., Potsdamer altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 45 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2013), 185–212; J. Rüpke, "On Religious Experiences that should not Happen in Sanctuaries," ibid., 137–44; M. Arnhold, "Group Settings and Religious Experiences," ibid., 65; B. Meyer, "Media and the senses in the making of

material, of things, as Rubina Raja and I, together with a number of colleagues, made clear in a "Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World," which seeks to realize the concept of an archaeology of religious experience.[33] Ascriptions of meaning made by others are not disregarded, but concrete objects may prompt very different actions or have been given very different meanings by different actors – and ultimately may simply be overlooked.[34]

2) Instead of rituals, the body comes to the fore. The individual actors act out of, with and in view of their bodies. The situation is spatially related to this body and especially the religious communication aiming beyond the situation

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religious experience: an introduction," *Material Religion* 4 (2008): 124–35; J. Rüpke, "Heiliger und öffentlicher Raum: Römische Perspektiven auf private Religion," in *Salutationes - Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte und ihrer Diskussion: Festschrift für Peter Herz zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. B. Edelmann-Singer and H. Konen, Region im Umbruch 9 (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2013), 159–68. On the concept of religious experience in general, A. Taves, *Religious experience reconsidered: A building block approach to the study of religion and other special things* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009); J. Carrette, *Religion and Critical Psychology: Religious Experience in the Knowledge Economy* (London: Routledge, 2007); A. Bieler, "Embodied Knowing – Understanding Religious Experience in Ritual," in *Religion: Immediate Experience and the Mediacy of Research – Interdisciplinary Studies in the Objectives, Concepts and Methodology of Empirical Research in Religion*, ed. H.-G. Heimbrock and C. P. Scholtz (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), S. 39–59; M. Jung, "Making life explicit – The Symbolic Pregnance of Religious Experience," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* volume „Ernst Cassirer" (2006): 16–23; W. Proudfoot, *Religious experience* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1985).

33 R. Raja and J. Rüpke, eds., *A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World* (Boston: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015).

34 The starting point here are the considerations of Latour, and I. Hodder, "Human-thing entanglement: towards an integrated archaeological perspective," *The journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17, no. 1 (2011): 154–77; *Entangled: An archaeology of the relationships between humans and things* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

refers to this body in a special way and adds to it another dimension of the world relation, a vertical or situation-transcending one, so to speak.[35] Via this body and, if necessary, other bodies present, the situation is connected with the history of the actor or the actress – gender is especially important here. The body becomes a medium of communication, which through clothing or movement attracts attention and promises relevance[36] or must be extended or even replaced by further objects or other persons. Beyond the short-term action, the performance, dispositions are also created here and experiences are articulated and stored. It is precisely the inaccessibility of one's own body that offers it as a specific space for action for actors who are not undoubtedly plausible and thus also as a space for religious experience, its immediate accessibility at the same time as an object of knowledge and an object of practices up to the self-dissolution of this body. But body-relatedness also means taking seriously those techniques that replace co-presence through spatially and temporally displaced communication, above all with media of writing – letters, codices, scrolls, inscriptions – and images – on coins, as illustrations, as statues.[37] This form of communication requires materiality for transportation as well as for production and reception, each in its own situation. And yet it allows for the imagination of direct communication, even if it cannot be directed or controlled by the usual regulatory circuits and framings. Especially in the enormous geographical expansion of world relations and imagined sociality in the Imperium Romanum, these techniques played an important role.

3) The attribution of causality to systemic concepts such as habitus, organization or culture is replaced by a focus on the emergence of forms of action and

35 Cf. H. Rosa, *Resonanz: Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2016).

36 On relevance theory see Sperber and Wilson, "Outline of Relevance Theory"; idd., "Relevance Theory," *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics* 13 (2002): 249–87.

37 See D. Morgan, "Mediation or mediatisation: The history of media in the study of religion," *Culture and Religion* 12, no. 2 (2011): 137–52.

thought in interaction. Lived ancient religion cannot be described as a peculiarity or repertoire of isolated individuals, but is co-determined by spaces and social constellations that are appropriated, reproduced, and shaped by the actors in specific situations. "Culture in interaction"[38] thus asks about the emergence and handling of styles of groups that determine their linguistic as well as behavioral repertoire. Actors are not simply members of a group and thus follow group-specific types of action. Rather, beliefs about belonging to a particular group can be activated in specific situations to form alliance, demonstrate difference, or pretend membership.[39] Traditional norms and traditional, socially sanctioned knowledge can be taken up or deliberately replaced by reference to alternative

38 N. Eliasoph and P. Lichterman, "Culture in Interaction," *American Journal of Sociology* 108, no. 4 (2003): 735–94; P. Lichterman, "How religion circulates in America´s local public square " in *The civic life of American religion* ed. Id. and C. B. Potts (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press 2009), 100–22.

39 R. Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004); E. Cairns et al., "The role of in-group identification, religious group membership and intergroup conflict in moderating in-group and out-group affect," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 45 (2006): 701–16; M. Feinberg, R. Willer, and M. Schultz, "Gossip and ostracism promote cooperation in groups," *Psychol Sci* 25, no. 3 (2014): 656–64; P. A. Harland, "Familial Dimension of Group Identity: "Brothers" in Associations of the Greek East," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124/3 (2005) (2005): 491–513; Moore, "The Eventfulness of Social Reprodcution: 294–314 ; S. L. Neuberg et al., "Religion and intergroup conflict: findings from the Global Group Relations Project," *Psychol Sci* 25, no. 1 (2014): 198–206; E. R. Smith and D. M. Mackie, "Intergroup Emotions," in *Handbook of Emotions*, ed. M. Lewis, J. M. Haviland-Jones, and L. F. Barrett (2008), 428–39; H. Tajfel, "Social identity and intergroup behaviour," *Social Science Information* 13, N. 2 (1974): 65–93; L. R. Tropp and L. E. Molina, "Intergroup Processes: From Prejudice to Positive Relations Between Groups," *Oxford Handbooks Online* (2012); J. C. Turner, "Social comparison and social identity: Some prospects for intergroup behaviour," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 5, no. 1 (1975): 5–34; É. Rebillard, *Christians and their many identities in late antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2012).

bodies of knowledge and norms, for instance to offer potential clients alternative repertoires of interpretation and action.

7 Changes in the religious field

In a perspective that examines religion from the point of view of individual actors and takes the risky character of religious communication as its starting point, religion must be seen as a practice that can be highly controversial in itself. In a steeply hierarchical society, there was no lack of attempts to prevent those further down the hierarchy from gaining religious authority, for example, through high legitimacy requirements for religious communication and restrictive standardizations of what should be judged as successful religious communication. Terms such as sacred and profane, pure and impure, public and private were instruments for this in this society – and are correspondingly ill-suited as terms of our metalanguage. On the other hand, this very constellation of large social differences could mean great spaces for innovation, gains of religious authority against social or economic or gender hierarchies.

This depends not least on the space that religion as a whole was granted by those with political, social or economic power – to the extent that such control succeeded at all. Priesthoods occupied by political elites could attempt to enforce such control, but an elite may also have had to co-opt successful religious authorities – or was even expelled from it as Christian bishops in some regions in late antiquity illustrate. Especially under the conditions of societies like the ancient Mediterranean ones, which were extremely differentiated in terms of income and chances of articulation, we have to pay special attention to such actors – and at the same time be careful not to underestimate the strategic character of the boundaries and media they created. In a perspective of lived ancient religion, ready-made "religions" are replaced by "religion formation" as a form of strategic action and, as a consequence, aggregated process – to repeat my earlier claim. Objects, with

their ability to mobilize memories, prompt action, and indicate successful religious communication, played a central role in this.