

### **Sharpening the Knife: Making Religion Effective in Everyday Life**

**Veranstalter:** Jörg Rüpke / Rubina Raja / Marlis Arnhold / Valentino Gasparini, ERC research project „Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning ‘cults’ and ‘polis religion’“

**Datum, Ort:** 11.06.2013-14.06.2013, Erfurt

**Bericht von:** Marlis Arnhold, Erfurt/Bonn

The international conference „Sharpening the Knife: Making Religion Effective in Everyday Life“ took place at Erfurt, Germany, 11th-14th June 2013. With it, the project „Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning ‘cults’ and ‘polis religion’“, funded by the European Union within the 7th Framework Programme (no. 295555) and directed by Jörg Rüpke (Erfurt, Germany) and Rubina Raja (Aarhus, Denmark) at the Max-Weber-Center of the University of Erfurt, was publicly opened.<sup>1</sup> Thus a series of consultations of experts was started.

The conference pursued a twofold aim focusing both on the introduction to the project and its various aspects as well as methodological issues. In order to „sharpen the knife“ in regard to methodology, scholars from three continents, representing a wide range of subjects such as archaeology, ancient history, philology, religious studies, and theology, came together to contribute presentations from the perspective of their specific fields and to discuss their methodological approaches.

The conference started on 11th June with a ceremonial opening at the Thuringia State Chancellery which was attended by approximately 70 participants. They were welcomed by the conference patron, MARION WALSMANN, Thuringia Minister for European Affairs and Head of the State Chancellery. JÖRG RÜPKE (Erfurt) outlined the aims of the project before RUBINA RAJA (Aarhus) presented first insights with her public lecture titled „Look at me! My Father was Famous: Priestly Self-Representations in the Roman Near East as Media Creating Meaning in Situations“.

The conference continued June 12 through 14 at the Augustinerkloster, Erfurt. The first session on Wednesday focused on „The Role of Objects“ and was first addressed by

LUCINDA DIRVEN (Amsterdam). In her presentation „Imagining Religion in Mithraic Cults. The Case of Dura-Europos“ she particularly stressed the issue of cult attendees staging rituals and myths and thus shed new light on the diversity of a cult that is generally perceived as rather uniform. The objects of this presentation can be found depicted on the walls of the Dura Europos-mithraeum itself. LARA WEISS (Erfurt), herself member of the ERC-project at Erfurt, spoke about „Conceptualizing the Creation of the Sacred: Mass Production vs. Handmade Figurines“. Showing examples from her investigations at Karanis in Egypt she discussed what different kinds of meaning the same object could have for different persons in different situations. A toy from the perspective of a child could very well have been a figurine for religious purposes from the standpoint of its parents. The session continued with the contribution of MICHAEL SATLOW (Providence, RI). Speaking about „Searching for Jewish Votive Objects in Roman Palestine“, Satlow dealt with the question of under which conditions objects received a sacred meaning and were perceived as sacred by the authors of various Jewish texts. Particularly interesting was the temporal shift from referring to an object as „sacred“ to „put into higher service“ which Satlow noted. The papers of this session thus discussed new methods, illustrated by case studies and pointing to the variety of experiences and memories stimulated.

The second session was dedicated to the issue „Group Styles“ and likewise comprised three presentations. MARKUS VINZENT (London) contributed a critical view of the topic from the perspective of his studies on Marcion, titled „Practical and Cognitive Dissonance: Jewish Liturgical Traditions, Innovations and Counter-Rites in Marcion’s Roman Community“. MARLIS ARNHOLD (Erfurt) raised the questions of the lack of visibility and limited visual accesses as well as the consequences of these for the understanding of cult-groups. She analysed the archaeological, epigraphic and literary evidence of

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, please visit: <<http://www.uni-erfurt.de/max-weber-kolleg/projekte/kooperationsprojekte/lived-ancient-religion/>> (19.08.2013).

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the Bona Dea cult at Ostia for her presentation „The Last One Shuts the Door: Cult-Groups Communicating Through (In)Visibility“. The final topic of the session was JOHN NORTH's (London) investigation of the „Funeral Rituals and the Significance of the Nenia“ which focused on ritual lamentations at the end of Roman funerals as presented by various authors. The contributions to this session all shared a critical view of the term „group“ and underlined, that collective identities often were construed and became visible in certain situations and for fixed periods of time only. This session led to controversial discussions at the conclusion of the conference. The topic is highly important, as the modern notion of the term „group“ still persists in scholarship and the questions of what makes a group a group require much discussion.

Session III comprised four presentations on the topic „Meaning in Situations“ and started with ANTON BIERL (Basel) and his contribution on „Lived Religion and Construction of Meaning in Greek Literary Texts and Contexts“. He focused on the situational construction of new meanings by various Greek authors, using, among others, mythical stories problematising the notion the literary texts as „sources“. ERIC REBILLARD (Ithaca, NY) spoke about „Everyday Christianity in Third-Century Carthage“. In reference to „everyday nationhood“ he proposed a theoretical framework that could be used to analyse sites „where Christianness might, but need not, be at work“. In the third contribution to the session, VERED NOAM (Tel Aviv) addressed the Jewish views of what was perceived as ritual impurity in various situations – and what not in others – in her presentation „Ritual Impurity and Human Intention“. CHRISTOPHER SMITH (Rome) raised the question of what role prayers and other ritualised speech acts played in Roman religion drawing attention to the ideas of Eduard Norden's oeuvre „Aus altrömischen Priesterbüchern“. The title of this book also served as the title of his contribution. The session's contributions hence explored „meaning“ in situational constructs and examined the effectiveness of religious instruments as employed in order to create, change, and enhance meanings.

It was followed by a poster session of ten

doctoral and postdoctoral researchers who had been invited to attend the conference.

The afternoon continued with the fourth session on „Appropriation“ which drew attention to the individual behind the actions that led to the construction of rituals and buildings as well as the production of meanings in difference to established traditions. KAREN KING (Harvard) started with her contribution „Religion(s) of the Book“/„Textual Communities“ asking which of the lived practices actually had the potential to make it into a 'book religion' and what authority the written word had in terms of illiteracy. MICHAL BAR-ASHER SIEGAL (Beer Sheva) continued with a presentation on „The Transmission and Collections of Traditions in Anthologies“ which revealed her passion for the issue of how traditions from anthologies were later on loaded with authority by religious communities. Under the title „Just Like the Emperor and his Family: Appropriating the Emperors' Religion in the Roman Empire“ ZSUZSA VARHELYI (Boston) drew attention of what can be termed „(implicit) religious trend-setting“ through the emperors and their families. Independent of their specific topics, all of the contributions from this session explore the processual character of religious practice and underline the fact that every agent is provider and appropriator at the same time, stressing the complexity of religious change. This also counts for the last presentation of the session, given by ANGELA STANDHARTINGER (Marburg) on „The Beginning of the Eucharist or Constructing the Lord's Supper“. It centered on the „words of institution“ (1 Cor 11:22-25/Mk 14,22-24 par.) and their meaning and function in the context of the Eucharist, proposing an origin in the context of ritual lamentation at funerals.

The last session held on Friday morning dealt with „Learning and Memory“ from the perspective of lived religion. Contributions addressed the questions of how individual religious practice depends upon the intellectual as well as an embodied availability and the situational salience of „traditions“, that is complex belief systems or simple sequences of ritual action. The terms „learning“ and „memory“ here referred to processes of ac-

quiring knowledge by formal training or constant repetition and to instances of recalling emotions, complex patterns, cognitive or bodily knowledge. Asking for „The Implicit Reader of Antiquarian Literature: Questions in Ovid’s *Libri fastorum*“, JÖRG RÜPKE (Erfurt) shed new light on an extensively studied literary text from the Augustan era. KATHARINA WALDNER (Erfurt) analysed the rituals described and explained in the text of the *Derveni Papyrus*. Under the title „Reading, Knowledge and Religious Practice: The *Derveni Papyrus* and its Context“, she discussed the content of the texts in view of its find context, that is burial, which reveal highly individualized burial practices, as well as in relation to pre-Socratic philosophy.

The conference brought up many aspects, methodological issues, and perspectives related to „Lived Ancient Religion“, which provide a fruitful basis for both further investigations by the various participants as well as the general approach of the ERC-project. With the knife thus sharpened, connection points between the topics of the various sessions, and the complexity of the issue under investigation have become much more visible.

#### **Conference Overview:**

##### *Welcome Addresses*

Marion Walsmann, Thuringen Minister for European Affairs and Head of the State Chancellery of Thuringia

Patrick Rössler, Vice President for Research and Young Researchers of the University of Erfurt

Wolfgang Spickermann, Dean of the Max-Weber-Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies of the University of Erfurt

Jörg Rüpke, Director of the ERC-Project „Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning ‘Cults’ and ‘Polis Religion’“ and Introduction to the Project

##### *Public Lecture*

Rubina Raja: „Look at me! My Father was Famous: Priestly Self-Representations in the Roman Near East as Media Creating Meaning in Situations“

##### *I The Role of Objects*

Chair: Rubina Raja

Lucinda Dirven (Amsterdam): Imagining Religion in Mithraic Cults. The Case of Dura-Europos

Lara Weiss (Erfurt): Conceptualizing the Creation of the Sacred: Mass Production Vs. Handmade Figurines

Ulrike Egelhaaf-Gaiser (Göttingen): *Semper odoratis spirabunt floribus arae*: Sacrificed Poems in the Third Book of Statius’ *Silvae* - cancelled

Michael Satlow (Providence, RI): Searching for Jewish Votive Objects in Roman Palestine

##### *Guided tour through the medieval city*

##### *II Group Styles*

Chair: Richard Gordon

Markus Vinzent (London): Practical and Cognitive Dissonance: Jewish Liturgical Traditions, Innovations and Counter-Rites in Marcion’s Roman Community

Marlis Arnhold (Erfurt): The Last One Shuts the Door: Cult-Groups Communicating Through (In)Visibility

John North (London): Funeral Rituals and the Significance of the *Nenia*

##### *III Meaning in Situations*

Chair: Marlis Arnhold

Anton Bierl (Basel): Lived Religion and Construction of Meaning in Greek Literary Texts and Contexts. Genre, Situation, Occasion, Intention

Eric Rebillard (Ithaca, NY): Everyday Christianity in Third-Century Carthage

Vered Noam (Tel Aviv): Ritual Impurity and Human Intention

Christopher Smith (Rome): „Aus altrömischen Priesterbüchern“

##### *Poster session*

##### *IV Appropriation*

Chair: Jörg Rüpke

Karen King (Harvard): „Religion(s) of the

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Book“ / „Textual Communities“.

Michal Bar-Asher Siegal (Beer Sheva): The Transmission and Collections of Traditions in Anthologies

Zsuzsa Varhelyi (Boston): Just Like the Emperor and his Family: Appropriating the Emperors' Religion in the Roman Empire

Angela Standhartinger (Marburg): The Beginning of the Eucharist or Constructing the Lord's Supper

*V Learning and Memory*

Chair: Harry Maier

Jörg Rüpke (Erfurt): The Implicit Reader of Antiquarian Literature: Questions in Ovid's *Libri fastorum*

Katharina Waldner (Erfurt): Reading, Knowledge and Religious Practice: The Derveni Papyrus and its Context

*Final discussion*

Chair: Jörg Rüpke, Rubina Raja

Tagungsbericht *Sharpening the Knife: Making Religion Effective in Everyday Life*. 11.06.2013-14.06.2013, Erfurt, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 09.09.2013.