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Keynote Speaker of the 2018 EASR Conference, Bern

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# Interview with Jörg Rüpke

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Interview conducted by Michaela Wisler, Rebecca Farner, and Ilona Ryser

Edited by Anja Kirsch

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Jörg Rüpke is professor of comparative religion at the University of Erfurt and codirector of the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies. He also codirects the research group Religious Individualization from a Historical Perspective. His research interests predominantly focus on religion in the Roman world. Professor Rüpke's keynote lecture at the EASR conference was entitled »Urbanity and Multiple Religious Identities in Antiquity«. This interview was conducted after his presentation.

- 1 *Professor Rüpke, thank you very much for agreeing to this interview. In your keynote lecture, you addressed religious changes due to processes of urbanization in Roman antiquity. We would like to start with a more general question: How could the concept of multiple religious identities be relevant to your field of research?*
- 2 I like this concept in contrast to concepts like religious pluralism, which is often used in the sense of a plurality of neatly separated religions being present in the same space or maybe even interacting or fighting each other. *Multiple religious identities* seems to go deeper and also to account for situations like divided loyalties and picking from religious offerings. My field is the Mediterranean, antiquity, Rome, Italy, and beyond. In antiquity, there were religious institutions comparable to present-day Christian

churches, and there were a variety of religious practices and pluralism. You could address certain problems to one god and other problems to another god. Further questions arise regarding the mechanisms people used for making decisions: »How do I decide to address this god and not another? Is this just the nearest place for doing so? Do I know a good friend who has successfully asked for healing or for a baby? Is this what my family does?« It is a very interesting field, but there is little available data. *Religious identity* goes one step further because it prompts questions about self-reflection and communication in situations where I not only do something but also say something to somebody: »I am a regular or frequent or infrequent venerator of this god or the other gods.« Here *multiple religious identities* not only describes something but also raises interesting questions.

3 *Do you see any theoretical problems with the concept of multiple religious identities since the term religion was not used in antiquity? And if so, how do you use this term in your studies?*

4 People in antiquity did not have a concept of religion comparable to ours. They didn't have comparable terms for many things. Their ideas of health, economics, politics, and the military were all very different from ours. We use these modern concepts as theoretical tools in order to understand something in the distant past. My interest in different cultures and periods is initially defined by such terms. I am interested in religion; now let us see what the Romans did.

Of course, it is necessary to question my conceptual assumptions. What do I classify as religion? Then I have to start to think about the borders and limits of my terms. What would I like to include? What would I like to exclude? When translating modern concepts, it is very important that I make clear to myself, my audience, and my colleagues what the Romans understood as a coherent semantic field and what they would not have understood to be coherent—even if our current understanding might suggest a connection. Furthermore, we cannot assume that all people shared one generic conceptual understanding. Some people just had implicit knowledge and no concept of anything like *religio* while others did. Still, it is quite interesting to see how ancient concepts are related to our concepts. Differences are telling in both directions. We learn something about ancient people, but we also learn something about ourselves and our conceptions. Consider this example concerning our current use of a certain term: scholars of religion refer to something people do, regardless of their religious and confessional affiliation, as popular religion. So if we see that something doesn't belong to a correct form of Protestantism, Catholicism, or Islam, we put *popular* in front of the concept to separate it from the field of proper religion.

5 *Speaking of concepts, if you use the term identity in your field of research, do you use it differently than we use it today? How were identities constructed in the Roman world?*

6 *Identity is based on the ancient Latin term idem, meaning »the same«. On the etymological level, there is not much of a difference between antiquity and today. The real difference is between identity and identities. Even though idem means »the same«, I probably do not have problems using the plural and happily take up different identities in everyday communication and processes of self-reflection. People understand identities as defining qualities either in the sense of biographical continuities or in the sense of characteristics that belong to some group or just fit some category. But we should be careful about differences between what is called object language (how people I investigate use a concept or its equivalent) and metalanguage (how we should use identity as a theoretical concept). In many everyday situations where we talk about*

identity, we expect ourselves and others to be defined by a single identity. For example, if you have dual citizenship and cross the border into Switzerland, you would definitely just present your Swiss passport and not your American, Iranian, or French passport. Identity talk is about artificially glossing over ambiguities to construe clear definitions. To give another example, many people are Christian and pagan. They hold a mixture of different beliefs. But whenever they talk about identity, they do not admit this and instead create a unified identity. So sometimes identities are artificially created, but what is more interesting for me is that in antiquity there were very few situations where anybody felt obliged to talk about identities. Citizenship was about *civis romanus sum*.<sup>1</sup>

7 *Even though the concept is problematic, do you think that religion somehow shaped people's identities in the Roman Empire?*

8 Religion certainly shaped a sort of complex personal identity from very early on in life. Particularly important were ancestors, which I would classify as religion but are excluded from many but not all modern definitions of religion. In antiquity, ancestors were divine beings, and people addressed many of their problems—from crop failures to epidemics—to them. But such divine figures were not equally accessible to everybody. It was very important to make claims about ancestry, for example: »My grandfather is buried there, and I live close to there.« Of course, not all these claims had to be factually true; if you were lucky, nobody knew your grandfather. What I am trying to say is that ancestors were not simply obscure figures, implored for one issue or the other. Ancestral claims were important for building your identity in an individual and a collective sense.

This brings me to another facet of religious identities. Collective identity is defined by belonging to some group. There is an interesting development in the imperial period from the first century onward to the fourth and fifth centuries. You were no longer just a member of a family, tribe, or city. You belonged to a group. Legal regulations became necessary. In his presentation »Homo sum: Alone or a Member of a Group?« Alessandro Saggiaro<sup>2</sup> quoted from the codex Theodosian, a fifth-century Roman book codifying laws. There you find regulations that say you cannot be a magistrate elected to a higher political administrative position if you are not baptized.

It is interesting too look at the terminology in these texts. For example, the Catholic sect or *secta* is from *sequi*, meaning »to follow somebody«. If you are a follower, you are usually not following Christ (as we might frame it), but Peter the Apostle, Fabianus the important bishop of Rome, or Peter the bishop of Alexandria. People were sort of very precise in framing this, not so much in a legal sense or as a kind of membership, but more with regard to dogmatic decisions. These are the people who celebrate Easter on the first Sunday after the full moon in spring and not on March 25. These are the people who think Jesus and Christ are not two persons but one, a divine and human person in one body. You are suddenly very precise, and you even develop the idea of something like internal religious jurisdiction.

There is the idea that determining what beliefs were right or wrong was left to bishops. But this is only a suitable strategy if the bishop thinks he is responsible for you and if you think the bishop should be the one to judge for you. What I would like to stress here is that such constructions of religious authority did not spring into existence with Christianity but were part of a general development of the first century, long before there was a clear-cut difference between Jews and Christians. I think the rise of religious authorities was a strategy that started in the Roman Empire due to the

conditions of living in the empire. For example, you were not only a citizen of Bern but also a Swiss citizen or a European citizen in the sense of the *Imperium Romanum*. If the mayor of Bern said, »This is forbidden!« you could say: »No, I'll go to the emperor.« There was a sort of delegitimization of local authorities, and it was also no longer sufficient to be a citizen of Bern. It was nice to have, and you might have been proud of it in certain situations, but you needed something more. I think, this is where religion comes in. In ancient societies, people did not know how to create an independent public sphere. A public sphere was only created when people came together to sacrifice, to see games, and so on. Basically, these were all religious events, so religion provided the language for creating a public sphere.

- 9 *In your keynote abstract, you mention an »easily shifting piety«, how people who moved changed their religions or their beliefs. Was this just an outward change, a change of institution, or a change in personal belief?*
- 10 *If you look at Jewish inscriptions in the city of Rome, you first of all see that hardly any of them are in Hebrew. Instead, they are in Greek. A surprisingly large number are even in Latin. When they use time indications, they never use what we would think of as common time indications in Judaism, such as when is the Sabbath and when is Purim. All of these festivals are regulated by the Jewish calendar, but these people didn't have a Jewish calendar; they had the Roman calendar, and they certainly tried to fit into it. This is often what people did. They mix in many occasions, even religious ones, with other local people, regardless of their religious affiliation. Up to the fourth century, Easter was on 25 March. Imagine there is a religious ritual on the Bundesplatz. Even if you are not related to the organizer, you probably won't have any problem going there, having a look, and remaining at a distance or going closer if you are curious. If you join the crowd, others probably won't be able to tell you apart from the »true believers« there. If you are new to Bern, entering a church, which is a rather closed building, is of course a much higher threshold. You don't go to a church just because you are a citizen of Bern but because you'll find there like-minded people, who are citizens of Bern at the same time. This was my argument. You join a religious group or you join a choir or a sports club. It is about integrating into the city, and it is nice to be part of the city and its inhabitants. However, there is a backside to this. These groups might put pressure on you. Do you know this song by heart? Do you know when to sit and when to kneel? Another church does it in a different manner, and so they can tell you are a foreigner. But the probability that they are welcoming to you is still more likely than in some other settings.*
- 11 *Does this shift in piety begin more as a shift in relevance and only then maybe become a shift in belief?*
- 12 *In many instances it is about socializing, even today. According to studies in the United States, the most important factor for somebody to shift their religious affiliation is a significant other like a girlfriend, boyfriend, sister, or father. These are the people who make you not only interested in a different group but drive you to join one. I think in many instances, religion accompanied your profession. For example, tonight there is party for Jupiter Dolichenus.<sup>3</sup> Why not join in? If it is nice, we'll organize another. When does your neighbor classify you as one of those Jupiter Dolichenus venerators? These are the interesting processes.*
- 13 *How would you describe pluralism in the Roman Empire?*

- 14 It is important to understand that we are talking about a development, not a static situation. Religion, as a sort of organizer of sociality and groups, became more and more important from the first to the fourth centuries. Why? Fundamental to this change was globalism and regionalism, just as they are to today's changes. The more global the world is, the more interest there is in local traditions—glocalization. This is a sort of paradoxical development. It is more about a consumerist use of religious infrastructure. Once you start to accept the membership card from a certain shop, they try to make you return to the shop. Transferred to Roman religion: there is this nice guy who has these nice ideas about the afterlife, and he wants me to come back. The choices or options are stabilized by such people and their interest in group formation. Seen from above, this is a plurality of options, but every single actor is trying to make an exclusive choice, and the more exclusive it is, the stronger institutionalization becomes. It is a sort of split market; not every offer is for every consumer. I would say that for quite a long time, Christianity was above all for people who were more or less in a grey area of Judaism. These exclusive choices, which demand high investments and permanent belonging, are not available on the open market, but there are segments of one-off religious options (or better services) that you can conceive of as a religious market.
- 15 *Sometimes source materials are quite ambiguous, and sometimes they are also just absent. How do you generally deal with such problems?*
- 16 You need sources depending on your questions, and then there are different ways to deal with a lack of sources or problematic sources. For some questions, you can just hope and make an effort to find one revealing source. If you find it, you are done in a way, but you have to be cautious about the claims you base on it because it does not prove anything statistically. You always need a sort of interplay of models and sources. You have to avoid formulating a theoretical model, finding a source that confirms some of it, and then saying »confirmed, confirmed« and everything is fine. It does not work like that. But sometimes that is what you have, and then you can only say, »This is my model, and this is my hypothesis, and that is all I can offer.« Often it is not about finding new sources but about reinterpreting sources we have always had in front of us. Sometimes you try to develop strategies to find a sequence or series of sources, sometimes to track changes. There are situations where I have a mass of material. There are ten thousand dedication inscriptions around, but then the question is: What can you do with them? What do they tell us? Sometimes it is difficult to pose the right questions to the sources, and sometimes you simply have to give up on a question.
- 17 *Are there parts of Roman religion you do not have access to due to the lack of sources?*
- 18 Yes. An example: we have no idea how polytheism functioned in the countryside where there was just one shrine. Was there any choice? Certainly, there were no texts, no »religion of the book«. Basically, no one could write in the countryside because people didn't need to. You spoke to everybody, so why write? Another example is the religion of the common people. What can we know about them? Of all people, 95 percent could not write, and maybe 10–15 percent in cities could read. Our textual evidence was produced by a tiny minority. These are the problems, but sometimes you just have to go back to the sources you have. Some texts do try to address a larger anonymous group. And you have to assume that intellectuals had at least an idea of what life was like for common people. If you read between the lines and are not so much interested in what they wanted to say but what they did say, you get more out of such texts produced by

intellectuals than from some fragmentary inscriptions produced for ordinary people. In the end, historical knowledge is and will always be hypothetical knowledge.

19 *What do you think your study about Roman religion can contribute to social and political discussions outside of your field?*

20 I'll try to keep my answer short. The first point is: I think it is important to study very distant things. The problem is that people mostly do not realize what is important to study. It is ridiculous how much money the European academic system spends on disciplines like German studies compared to studies of other agents in world politics, like Mongolia and Tibet. Politicians only realize the importance of such subjects after it is too late, and then it takes ten years to train an expert in these languages and cultures.

Second, in order to be relevant, we have to do a lot of basic research. You have to do research that is not relevant and cannot be made relevant, but that research is important for others who do research relevant to current problems.

The third point is about how to model religious pluralism and religious tolerance. Religious practices are not confined to or exhausted by membership and organized religions. There is a lot of religion that is shared by people across dividing lines such as »religions« and »confessions«. Furthermore, not everybody is intensively religious; many people are just slightly religious.

But it can be very helpful to look at distant cultures. If I talked to an audience of local politicians and clergy about popular religion today, they would not listen; they would not like what they heard. It is much easier to learn some things about present societies while talking about the past. In a way, this is the whole business of history, of the history of religion, but also of other types of history. People are mostly interested in the past to make a point about the present and future.

21 *Professor Rüpke, thank you very much for taking the time for this interview. It was our pleasure to talk to you and learn about multiple religious identities in antiquity, religious pluralism, and source problems. We wish you all the best with your research!*

22 The pleasure was mine. Thank you very much!

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## NOTES

1. Translation: »I am a Roman citizen.« With this statement, a Roman citizen could demand a Roman court proceeding.

2. This presentation was part of the panel »Multiple Religious Identities in Late Antiquity – with a Focus on the Individual II«, chaired by Mar Marcos.

3. Jupiter Dolichenus was a god who was mostly venerated by soldiers and originated in Doliche.

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