

Ordinary Religion in the Late Roman Empire: Principles of a New Approach

Drawing convulsive gasps that wracked her tiny body, little Julia Florentina lay limp in her father's arms. It did not matter what precisely had sickened her—there was neither time nor need in this world for medical diagnoses. The only thing that mattered was whether she would live or die, and as the daylight grew thin, the ominous answer became stealthily clearer. The child's mother reached for a small container kept high up in a recessed wall shrine next to the small bronze images of the family gods, the *lares*; the box's precious contents were safe there, far from hungry mice. Time was short, and the mother needed to take matters in her own hands, for her daughter's salvation was at stake. She placed a small piece of dry bread in her child's parched mouth, already open in the O-shape that signaled that death was near. A moment of confusion, hesitation: the toddler had, somehow, swallowed the bread. Julia Florentina the elder took this as a hopeful sign; her child could swallow, and breathe...and now, having received the fullness of the Lord's body into her tiny, distended belly, her child was in any event a Christian. Four more agonizing hours passed, the child gently cradled by different people, a house of hushed voices and sighs. Her breaths grew more irregular, and then, suddenly quiet. Everyone in the room stood poised, unsure. Finally, Julia's mother put her fingers gently, tenderly, into the baby's mouth...finding it empty again, she put in the last morsel of consecrated bread, and just as tenderly, smoothed the mouth closed and kissed her child for the last time.

Julia Florentina's parents had carefully engraved, on the stone that would cover her tiny, shrouded body, what they believed were the most important

things to know about her: her name was Julia Florentina. She was born a pagan but received the rites of the Church during the eighth hour of the night and became a Christian. When she lived for four more hours, she was given those rites again. She was 18 months old.¹

The scene of Julia Florentina's death is my imaginative reconstruction: what some might call "creative nonfiction." But she herself is not imaginary, nor was the ineluctable desperation and sorrow of her parents. Her epitaph—which still exists—continues, "While her parents bewailed her death at every moment, the voice of [God's] majesty was heard at night, forbidding them to lament for the dead child." One among countless thousands of documents from Late Antiquity that speak with remarkable clarity and power, this epitaph and the worldview of ordinary people's grief and faith that it reveals is nonetheless absent from most historical accounts of the period. The other details of praxis which I have filled out—for instance, the common practice of retaining eucharistic bread in a house to be safe from mice, or the practice of placing the Eucharist in the mouth of a corpse—are likewise available to researchers, but often passed over as inconsequential, trivial, superstitious, unorthodox, common.

For many years now, I have been drawn to investigating instances of "lived religion" in Late Antiquity such as that which we find so poignantly expressed in Julia Florentina's epitaph. There are many names for these instances which draw me, but most can be characterized by a specific set of qualities: they are performances of religious activities that are quotidian, unspectacular, sometimes improvised, and above all, ordinary. They are moments and instances that had been dismissed by earlier generations of scholars by the words I have used above: inconsequential, trivial, superstitious, unorthodox, common. My work is to take them seriously. In this endeavor, I follow in a fairly long trajectory—or more precisely, school of ancient history—that has flourished in the past twenty or so years. This particular direction of scholarship emerged from the French *Annales* school and their development of a history *tout court*, which encompassed both microhistorical approaches and the study of "private life," and was methodologically sharpened by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel De Certeau's "practice theory," and Michel Foucault's analysis of the

1. Ernst Diehl, *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres*, 4 vols (Berlin: Weidmann, 1961), I.1549. The inscription is on display in the Mediterranean room in the Louvre.

hegemonic power of the State in a dialectical relationship with an individual's cultivation of the self.²

On this continent and in my generation, most of our inspiration can be traced back to historian Peter Brown, who developed a creative synergy with Foucault during their time at Berkeley.³ Those of us working in Late Antiquity began to explore, collectively, how we might adapt the micro-historical approach of the *Annalistes* to our own field. In 2010, Virginia Burrus participated in a relatively early effort to develop a “people’s history,” editing a significant volume on Late Antiquity with thoughtful contributions from eleven prominent historians, which itself follows the ambitious *History of Private Life* volumes edited by *Annalistes* Philippe Ariès, Georges Duby, and Paul Veyne.⁴ Burrus’s book aimed to turn our focus from the history of elites to a more bottom-up social and cultural history. Certainly, the tide was turned, with various contributions following in the same vein from a wide range of Late Antiquity scholars in a range of different fields.

The study of late antique religion and religious behavior presented yet another subfield of specialization within the general field of social or cultural history’s “private life” approaches. A driver of this new international focus on lived religion in Antiquity has been the Max Weber Center

2. The bibliography here even for the productive “third wave” of *Annales* historians is immense, needless to say. For seminal microhistorical approaches, the work of Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), and *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), as well as Emmanuel La Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294–1324* (London: Scolar, 1978), has inspired countless scholars. For practice theory, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977); Foucault, *Les aveux de la chair*, vol. 4 of *Histoire de la sexualité* (Paris: Editions Kimé, 2016).

3. See especially Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 13, 28, for his dismissal of a “two-tiered” model of historical analysis developed by Hume and promulgated by Gibbon, as well as Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (1988), itself shaped by an engagement with Foucault’s *Histoire de la sexualité*.

4. Virginia Burrus, ed., *Late Ancient Christianity, A People’s History of Christianity*, ed. Denis R. Janz vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2010). See, in particular, the opening essay by V. Burrus and R. Lyman, “Shifting the Focus of History”: “What would it mean to conceive of the history of Christianity not as a *history of the church*, but rather as a *history of Christians?*,” 1. See also the outstanding volume, Philippe Ariès, ed., *A History of Private Life*, vol. 1: *From Pagan Rome to Byzantium* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies (Max-Weber-Kolleg) at the University of Erfurt under the directorship of Jörg Rüpke. Running from 2012 to 2017, the Center’s “Lived Religion in Antiquity” (LAR) project brought to the field a new, international group of scholars working collaboratively. The strength of the LAR project was not just an admirable emphasis on material culture, but also an openness to “lived religion” approaches in contemporary contexts such as the work of Robert Orsi, Catherine Bell, or Meredith McGuire, and the way in which these might be adapted to help us to think differently about the ancient world.⁵ They also adhere closely to the work of contemporary sociologists and anthropologists, making for a diverse set of lenses by which to re-examine Late Antiquity.

Despite a wave of admirable new studies of late antique lived religion, certain academic paradigms and prejudices remain difficult to dislodge. For example, although “domestic religion” is a recognized category for traditional Roman religious practices, “domestic Christianity” in the first few centuries has only fairly recently been given much attention at all; here, the work of Kim Bowes, Kate Cooper, and Kristina Sessa is worthy of note.⁶ In a similar vein, scholars of Judaism such as Daniel Boyarin, Michael Satlow, Rebecca Scharbach, and Karen Stern have encouraged us to look outside the rabbinic or Talmudic forms of Judaism in Late Antiquity which have long attracted our gaze. Scharbach, for example, engaged in a fruitful research project in 2016 on non-biblical Judaisms in Late Antiquity that revealed ancient Jews who considered themselves fully Jewish without necessarily placing the scriptures at the heart of their belief or praxis.⁷ Karen Stern, an archaeologist, has written extensively on Jewish tomb inscriptions in North Africa and, more recently, tombstone graffiti in the Levant, an “ordinary” or “lived” practice by religious non-specialists who express a variety of beliefs and sentiments that often do not “track” with older models of late antique Judaism. One

5. See, for example, Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Meredith MacGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

6. Kim Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Kate Cooper, *Band of Angels: The Forgotten World of Early Christian Women* (London: Harry Abrams, 2013) (written for a non-specialists audience); Kristina Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy: Roman Bishops and the Domestic Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

7. Rebecca Scharbach Wollenberg, “Beyond the Book: Rethinking Biblical Religion,” Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, University of Michigan, 2016.

consequence of these studies is to realize quickly the uselessness of long-defined monolithic categories, namely, “Christianity” and “Judaism”—a point articulated some time ago by Boyarin and Satlow. At the level of lived experience and quotidian practice, it quickly becomes clear to the researcher that individuals in antiquity were less attentive to these boundaries than modern scholars of religion.

Without recourse to monolithic religious categories, we are left with “lived religion” in antiquity, a term with vexing opacity. There have been terminological difficulties as we work to parse the different nuances we mean between “lived religion,” “private religion,” “domestic religion,” “popular religion,” “individual religion,” and “vernacular religion,” each of which may draw on a slightly different theoretical foundation and/or a different core data set. A key point, I believe, is that we have here a methodological and even semantic richness which can be our strength; we do not all have to have the same key approach to be doing important work.

DETERMINING TERMS AND PARAMETERS

My own work in late ancient “lived religion” has followed along the path of my predecessors and colleagues, particularly the LAR project. However, my own approach is most clearly indebted to American historian of religion Robert Orsi, whose scholarship demonstrates extraordinary sensitivity, thoughtfulness, and good humor. In the remainder of this essay, I will outline the principles of approach that I find helpful as I do my work, inspired in part by Orsi’s work and the insights of the last decade of researchers.

Let me begin by stating my own parameters terminologically and methodologically. I work primarily (although not exclusively) within Christian traditions. Nevertheless, I have no illusions that there existed in antiquity a single, enduring “orthodox” or “proto-orthodox” Christianity. The Christians I use as the focal points of my studies considered themselves to be Christian, and it is not my job or my right to judge whether they were “good” or “bad” or “straight-thinking” Christians. I am extremely wary of the term “Christianity,” which I find functionally meaningless in antiquity, although it is hard to avoid. I also dislike “Christian” used adjectivally—as in, for instance, describing an action or motive as “Christian.” For reasons I have already stated and to which I will return, in Antiquity and into Late Antiquity, the adjective “Christian” is also functionally meaningless. I am far more interested in what happens if we, as scholars, actively try to suppress our

training and tendency to assign religious categories to people and their behaviors.

I prefer the term “ordinary religion” to the term “private religion,” since “private” often enough means “elite” in antiquity. My hope is to highlight the practices and sensibilities of sub-elites and non-elites, some of whom were performing their religions in the private—that is to say, domestic—sphere, but some of whom were doing so publicly. Their Christian-ness was “ordinary” in the sense that it flew in the face of what elites were doing. It was also “ordinary” in the sense of being “quotidian,” or performed outside of the logic of the sacred/profane *limes* that the Church often attempted, with greater or lesser degrees of success, to impose on the varied expressions of piety. “Ordinary” can mean, therefore, “sacred” acts performed under “profane” conditions (for example, the Eucharist consumed at home, without being administered by an authorizing clergy, before an ordinary meal), or “profane” acts performed under “sacred” conditions (a bone snatched from a corpse in an authorized grave by a ritually pure practitioner of magic, or a drunken libation poured on a saint’s altar). Still, the instability and insufficiency of the sacred/profane binary becomes clear as we move our analytical stethoscope across the deep recesses of the Christian body politic. Binaries are unyielding and unhelpful; they cause us to inflict methodological violence on our subject. What is called for, in thinking about ordinary religion, is a conceptualization that takes into full account what Orsi calls the “protean nature of religious creativity.”⁸

I hope that the adjective “ordinary” will help us to place religious actions into a different frame that does not necessarily privilege “the sacred,” a term that often remains analytically unpacked. In this way, “ordinary religion” holds within it a potential paradoxical tension: many would hold that whatever religion is and does, it cannot be “ordinary” but is always “extraordinary” since religion assumes a set of behaviors and beliefs where humans relate to divine being(s). My work as a scholar is to dive deeply into this tension, allowing us to consider what lines we draw around both the terms “ordinary” and “religion.”

I also draw a terminological distinction between what I call “ordinary” religion and what many historians have called “popular,” “low,” or “folk” religion—the ostensible “religion of the masses.” To conceptualize

8. Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion,” in *Lived Religion in America: Toward A History of Practice*, ed. David Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 11.

a distinction between the “high” religion of supposedly enlightened elites and the “low” religion of mindless superstition and guilelessness of non-elites is the height of privilege. One of the greatest contributions of Arnaldo Momigliano and Peter Brown was to considerably muddy the waters between a “high” and “low” late ancient Christianity.⁹ Their work has made abundantly clear that such distinctions are unwarranted; in truth, “ordinary Christians” were no more credulous about the radioactive sacred power of a saint’s relic than a member of the elite; the elite merely had more resources by which to express their devotion.

I offer the following as a set of guidelines for establishing some methodological parameters for exploring “ordinary religion” in Antiquity and Late Antiquity:

Prioritize the concept of the human as subject

The development of the concept of the subject has been a significant turn in many fields of the humanities. Insofar as this focus has emerged partly from Freudian or neo-Freudian analysis, there has been a general tendency to imagine that there has been a historical evolution of human awareness over a vast historical span; in other words, the development of subjectivity marks, in some ways, a progression from pre-modernity to modernity in Western culture, a move from a childlike unawareness of self to enlightenment. This is evident in the common assumption that, in a figure like Augustine, we have the first historical expression of subjectivity in the West. An emphasis on subjectivity in recent years tends to focus on the literary productions of a small number of exclusively male intellectuals, since they have produced the type of material in which subjectivity is most clearly displayed. Yet it would be foolish to somehow assume that prior to Augustine, no human being seriously considered herself a self-reflective agent in the world, nor saw herself as an active subject. What if we begin our analyses with the assumption that ancient people—all people, regardless of sex, gender, class, education, and other markers of difference—had some sort of self-awareness and inner life? What if we recognize that all ancient individuals engaged in a dynamic relationship to structures of power: households, governments, and religious institutions, to name only three?

9. See the discussion in Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 19, citing Momigliano: “In the fourth and fifth centuries, there were of course plenty of beliefs which we historians of the twentieth century would gladly call ‘popular,’ but the historians of the fourth and fifth centuries never treated any belief as characteristic of the masses and consequently discredited among the elite.”

Give voice and agency to individuals who have been historically marginalized

In the absence of evidence from a large subsection the population, we need to make an effort to look in places where we have never looked before. In addition, it is crucial to suppose that individuals—regardless of social status—were in fact actors and worked to have some sense of agency as participants in what we might classify as religious behaviors or activities. It is also crucial, finally, to acknowledge what factors limited and shaped the behaviors of marginalized individuals in the late Roman Empire, and how that affected (and effected) their religious choices. Would, for instance, a female Jewish slave have had the opportunity to circumcize her son? This sort of question amounts to a thought exercise rather than empirical investigation, but at least in posing it we might examine our own projections concerning what it meant to be “Jewish” in the late Roman Empire. Is it possible to consider someone in Rome Jewish if they were not circumcised? If they were not able to observe the Law fully?¹⁰ Thus a sensitivity to how slaves and other subalterns might have adapted within structures of power might leave us with a more nuanced understanding of “lived religion” that does not privilege elite sources.

Imagine some degree of human emotional continuity

In an ambitious and beautifully written essay, the French *Annales* historian Lucien Febvre made a plea for including within a historian’s purview a history of emotions as well as the history of ideas.¹¹ Some critics, he noted, spoke harshly against applying “intuitive imagination” to reconstructing the past; such a view was resolutely unempirical. But how, he asked, can we understand the past unless we develop a sensitivity to the role of passions, to the inner emotional workings of individuals that were the catalysts for the sorts of broad, historical change that usually occupies the historian? I argue that a sensitivity to the emotional lives of individuals in the past makes our scholarship richer and more textured. Such attention also offers the option of seeing people in the past who might not otherwise have been seen, once we give them back the agency to feel.

Part of the erasure of ordinary people from historical consideration has been the tendency to dehumanize them, and to distance our experience of

10. Nicola Denzey Lewis, “Did Roman Jews Have Ritual?” *Historia religionum* 10 (2018): 27–39.

11. Lucien Febvre, “Sensibility and History: How to Reconstitute the Emotional Life of the Past,” in *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre*, ed. Peter Burke (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1973), 12–26.

being human from theirs. This is a moral failing on our part, and a marker of our own lack of imagination. As Robert Orsi observes:

It is one of the hidden impulses of religious history to make our own experience safer by establishing clear boundaries between people doing religious things in the past and us today, a reflection within historiography of the broader impulse in the study of religion to secure the boundaries between us and them. But just as the otherness of the people that we study is a construction, a disciplinary hedge against the recognition of any similarity between their imaginations, fears, needs, hatreds, and fantasies and ours, so the pastness of the past is a carefully erected and maintained boundary too.¹²

Historians of Rome have had a great resistance to imagining ancient Romans as emotional beings. Were the Romans like us, or not? The late great historian of Rome, Keith Hopkins, raises the question in his memorable essay on death in Rome: “What were their feelings? What is the connection between the experience of feelings and their expression?...Romans had feelings, and it seems reasonable to ask what they were.”¹³ After noting the resistance that historians and sociologists of Rome have had in examining ancient emotions, he muses that Romans “probably had a different sense of rationality than ours,” before concluding, “nobody knows the precise relationship between the enormous cross-cultural variation in the expression of feelings and the ways in which those feelings are experienced.”¹⁴ While this is probably true, it is also true that certain emotions—love, grief, fear, anger—are basic to humans, even though they may be expressed differently within different cultural contexts. I, for my part, believe in continuities: I believe we are more alike than we are different, and that it is time to remove the “disciplinary hedge” that insists upon the “pastness of the past” from our analyses of ancient people.

Consider—even privilege—visual, material, and other sources

Paul Veyne’s essay on Rome in *A History of Private Life* marked a turning point in Roman history through its extensive use of visual images; never

12. Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles,” 17.

13. Keith Hopkins, “Death in Rome,” in *Death and Renewal: Sociological Studies in Roman History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 204.

14. Hopkins, “Death in Rome,” 205.

before had a Roman historian extracted so much data from non-textual sources.¹⁵ While Veyne's focus still tends toward elite male literary sources, the essay's images and their captions reveal to the reader previously unseen worlds. They are remarkable for what they document: a midwife assisting a birth, mothers breastfeeding infants, children playing, shopkeepers doing their business. The images, primarily drawn from funerary stelae, move us into the shadowed corners of Roman private lives, including the experiences of Roman freedwomen, the urban free poor, and enslaved persons.

While I do read standard "canonical" late antique texts, I have a broad, almost promiscuous sense of what constitutes "text." Ancient Rome was a monumental culture—it went big—and the challenge for those of us trained as Roman historians is to ignore the monumental and turn to the small: the "small finds" of excavated *domus* or *castra*, the tomb assemblages, the votive hoards, the bits in museum cases that we too often tend to walk by. In my work, I have also "read" inscriptions, wear patterns in stone and on human bone, amber amulets, knitted socks, graffiti, aerial landscape photos, bronze castration clamps, terracotta anatomical votives, desecrated statues, burial shrouds, footpaths, disease patterns, floodplains, scorch marks, contents of sewers and outhouses. These sources are crucial to reconstructing lived religion.

Absolutely essential, too, is considering the soft culture of late ancient Rome—all the things made of perishable materials, parts of diurnal life that no longer survive—and holding conceptual and imaginative space for it.¹⁶ Our understanding of religious experience would be immeasurably enriched if we could see the way in which perishable culture was employed in ritual performance. This may be a place to engage judiciously in Febvre's "intuitive imagination." The point of such an exercise is not to over-romanticize or over-sentimentalize ancient experience, but

15. Paul Veyne, "From Mother's Womb to Last Will and Testament," in *A History of Private Life*, vol. 1, *From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*, ed. Paul Veyne (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 9–55.

16. For a way forward, see Linda M. Hurcombe, *Perishable Material Culture in Prehistory: Investigating the Missing Majority* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Éric Rebillard, "Material Culture and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity," and Eva Mol and Miguel John Versluys, "Material Culture and Imagined Communities in the Roman World," both in *A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World*, ed. Rubina Raja and Jörg Rüpke (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 427–36 and 451–62.

to recognize that our view of it is impoverished by the vicissitudes of the material.

Prioritize thinking through sensory experiences: haptic, olfactory, aural

The synesthetic experience of late antique religious experience, particularly pilgrimage, has received much attention ever since Peter Brown's wonderfully multidimensional work, particularly *The Cult of the Saints* (1981) and his brief article, "Enjoying the Saints in Late Antiquity" (2000).¹⁷ "Enjoying the Saints" manages to consider the effervescence of religious experience—from joy to awe—through the letters of Augustine without falling into the trope of asserting "folk" beliefs or "low" Christianity. Other scholars think broadly in terms of ancient experience; for instance, rather than focusing on the interior space or dimensions of a Christian basilica, art historian Dale Kinney muses on the experience of a fourth-century inhabitant of Rome walking past the basilica, and emphasizes how light would have shone out of its windows, attracting and making curious any passers-by.¹⁸ Ramsay MacMullen's *The Second Church* likewise focuses on the experiential, helping us to see the cult of the saints in a different key.¹⁹

Fascinating recent work has focused on things like ancient experiences of the senses, including attention to soundscapes or even smellscapes in ancient Rome.²⁰ Smellscapes consider the experience of walking through various parts of the city, or the Roman house, which not only located the participant spatially but also temporally, since the domus or villa smelled different at

17. Peter Brown, "Enjoying the Saints in Late Antiquity," *Early Medieval Europe* 9/1 (2000): 1–24.

18. Dale Kinney, "The Church Basilica," in *Imperial Art as Christian Art—Christian Art as Imperial Art: Expression and Meaning in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Justinian*, ed. Rasmus J. Brandt and Olaf Steen, *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia*, 15, n.s., 1 (Rome: Bardi Editore, 2001), 129.

19. Ramsay MacMullen, *The Second Church: Popular Christianity, A.D. 200–400* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2009).

20. See Mark Bradley, ed., *Smell and the Ancient Senses* (London: Routledge, 2015), with contributions from 12 scholars of antiquity including Deborah Greene on rabbinic literature and Jerry Toner on early Christianity; Eleanor Betts, ed., *Senses of the Empire: Multisensory Approaches to Roman Culture* (London: Routledge, 2017), with contributions from Ray Laurence and Jeffrey Veitch on soundscapes, Miko Flohr and Thomas J. Derrick on smellscapes, and Candace Weddle and Emma-Jayne Graham on haptic experience. For some notable individual studies, see, for instance, Béatrice Caseau, "Tastes of Danger and Pleasure in Early and Late Antique Christianity," in *Taste and the Ancient Senses*, ed. Kelli C. Rudolf (London: Routledge, 2017), 228–43; Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

different points in time. What these studies share is placing ordinary individuals' lived experience in the center of the frame. The result is a richer, deeper engagement with the ancient world.

Recognize that traditional classification and categories are distorting and unhelpful

Just as we have learned, for the most part, to abandon monolithic terms like “Christianity,” to categorize ancient individuals as “Christian,” or “pagan,” or “Jewish” is generally unproductive. The mere use of these terms mask a whole set of normative assumptions concerning what it is that Christians, Jews, or pagans did. The point of the categories is boundary-setting, hedging in specific and distinct behaviors as the domain of one religion and not another. In this bounded model, any overlap is either seen as illicit or aberrant. As Éric Rebillard notes concerning Christians in late antique Rome, “As long as Christians are considered in isolation, it is tempting to conclude that they were living separately and in opposition to surrounding communities.”²¹ Yet a host of evidence does not support this assumption. Rather, Christians in Late Antiquity, like everyone else, were performing religion in what Ramsay MacMullen elegantly termed an “incomplete transition,” living within a “spectrum of religious affiliation.”²²

We also need to be wary of badly-deployed sociological terms such as “group” and “community.”²³ There has long been an assumption in Biblical Studies—thankfully far less prevalent in Classics and History—that a community stands behind any ancient Christian or Jewish text or object.²⁴ A text such as the Gospel of John, for example, is widely presumed to have been produced within and in conversation with a community;²⁵ by contrast,

21. Éric Rebillard, *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity*, trans. Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings and Jeanine Routier-Pucci (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), xi.

22. MacMullen, *Second Church*, 109, 110.

23. For core sociological studies that properly nuance the sense of these words and critique their use, see Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

24. For critiques of this assumption, see Stanley Stowers, “The Concept of ‘Community’ and the History of Early Christianity,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 23 (2011): 238–56; Sarah E. Rollens, “The Anachronism of ‘Early Christian Communities,’” in *Theorizing “Religion” in Antiquity*, ed. Nickolas P. Roubekas (Sheffield: Equinox, 2019), 307–26.

25. See, famously, Raymond Brown’s two-volume *Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), but examples from within biblical studies are manifold, as Rollens, “Anachronism,” points out.

Classicists do not presume a “community” behind, say, Seneca’s letters. To draw on another example from my most recent book, a lamp with a menorah discovered in a catacomb many scholars offer as “proof” that there once existed a robust Jewish community in that city. In reality, it offers no such proof.²⁶ We cannot even say that the lamp was used by a Jewish person at all.²⁷ As for “group,” in a recent article Daniel Ullucci rightly notes that presumed religious groups in the Roman Empire—including Gnostics, Pharisees, Judaizers, and Jewish-Christians—likely did not exist as groups at all, but were conjured into being largely through faulty scholarly assumptions.²⁸

Clearly, when it comes to thinking about religion in the ancient world, we are constrained by our own categories, including the deeply problematic term “religion” itself. How do we talk about religion and religious experience in the Mediterranean basin in Late Antiquity apart from these categories? Considering “lived religion” requires a constant monitoring of our own classifications, interrogating whether they are truly useful and accurate, and ultimately developing a new lexicon “as hybrid and tensile as the realities it seeks to describe,” to quote Robert Orsi.²⁹ We are still some ways off.

Be methodologically promiscuous

Drawing out instances of ordinary religion in Late Antiquity requires not just looking to different primary sources but also reaching around for what sort of critical theory might help unlock potentially fruitful analysis from fields that have been fairly thoroughly plowed. Since I was not given much training in critical theory in my graduate work, I have come by my appreciation of theory rather late in the game; I regularly teach graduate-level method and theory as a way to keep myself relatively current. Theorists help us to develop new critical lenses that help us to bring fresh insights to ancient ground. We should feel free to use whichever methodological or theoretical tools are the most fruitful for our scholarship—curiously, promiscuously, and joyfully.

26. Nicola Denzey Lewis, *The Early Modern Invention of Late Antique Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 281–90.

27. Jaś Elsner, “Archaeologies and Agendas: Reflections on Late Ancient Jewish Art and Early Christian Art,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 93 (2003): 114–28.

28. Daniel Ullucci, “Competition Without Groups,” *Journal of Religious Competition in Antiquity* 1/1 (2019): 7–8.

29. Orsi, “Everyday Miracles,” 11.

Accept that the ordinary is hard to see

Most surviving literary sources are circumspect about the ordinary. They also lie, divert, attempt to convince, explain subjectively, polemicize, distort, exaggerate, downplay, and get things wrong. This is also true of visual, material, epigraphic, or archaeological sources; they do not always reveal truths. We cannot be naïve. There are not enough sources, even taken in their entirety, to really see the past, even when we attempt to patch them together so that one piece of evidence picks up where another leaves off. But if we cast a broad net, we may just find enough pieces to destabilize the fiction that the narratives we do have, or our usual reconstruction of the past, accurately represent ancient realities or moments.

AND, IN THE END...

I began this essay with a brief sketch of a child's final moments on earth. While this is a true story—Julia Florentina did once exist—I have engaged some degree of “intuitive imagination” in bringing her last moments to light. I amplified a story that emerged from material culture, considered the desire of her parents to cope with their child's illness, and thought through the conditions that might have allowed, or disallowed, them certain options as they coped at what Orsi calls the “hot juncture of life and death”—the moment at which ordinary lived religion is made.³⁰ The work I have done here in imagining Julia Florentina's death could well be dismissed as unempirical, sentimental, fictive. But my response is that all reconstructions of the past are necessarily fictive. Conventional approaches have their blind spots and implausibilities too, their own ways of telling the past.

Consider, for example, a sort of counter-example to my story by Augustine of Hippo, contemporary with Julia Florentina's death: in the city of Uzalis, North Africa, a woman's infant became very ill. The mother immediately hurries to the church, but on the way, the child dies in her arms. Believing that his soul was doomed, she hurries to the shrine of St. Stephen and prays that the child might be brought back to life. St. Stephen responded, reanimating the child so that the presbyters could baptize, sanctify, anoint, and lay their hands on him. When they were done, he died once more, so that his mother could bury him knowing that he would lie in the lap of the saint.³¹ Is Augustine's story, told by this “Father of the Church,”

30. Orsi, “Everyday Miracles,” 13.

31. Augustine, *Serm.* 323, 324.

more “true” than my historical reconstruction? In his narrative, the unnamed mother cedes her agency to help her sick child, turning to the intercession of a (male) saint and a group of (male) presbyters. All ritual and action is sanctioned—even Stephen’s miraculous intervention occurs not to save the child’s life but solely to allow men the opportunity to exercise their authority as ritual experts to save the child’s soul. Who tells this story? Why?

I have endeavored in this short piece to offer first an example of what I do, followed by an outline of a theory of practice that reveals how and why I wrote Julia Florentina’s death the way I did, and why I chose such an event and inscription to highlight. I am aware that my theory of practice is idiosyncratic and eclectic, but I hope that it is also useful as well as dynamic: open to revision, critique, and augmentation. I find this work immensely enlivening. It also, for me at least, places me in a new relationship with the world—this world, here and now. Once I relinquish the perspective that the past is about the past and the present is about the present, I find new ways to think about the past, and new value in the present. ■