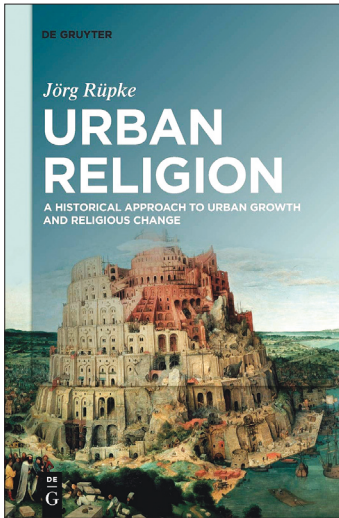


URBAN RELIGION



RÜPKE, JÖRG (2020). *Urban Religion. A Historical Approach to Urban Growth and Religious Change*. Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter, 239 pp., 24,95 € [ISBN: 978-3-1106-2868-5].

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AMONG SCHOLARS OF GREEK AND ROMAN RELIGIONS, Jörg Rüpke stands out for the breadth and seriousness of his engagement with the study of religions as a discipline, together with theology, sociology, and human geography. Over many years he has convened groups of scholars of religions eastern and western, ancient and modern, in productive collaborations – intellectually, and in terms of publications – and these collaborations in turn have enriched his writing. This volume is one of many to emerge from this fertile soil, and, as one might expect, it is learned, far-reaching, and full of stimulating ideas.

Despite drawing on a wide range of source material and modern scholarship, the book wears its learning lightly: it leads with ideas throughout and is very clearly written. Its overarching claims are that religions and cities interact in all times and places and constantly shape and reshape each other, and that some significant changes in religions, cross-culturally, are best understood as a result of their interactions with urban space and ways of living. The first section develops this claim theoretically; the second and third apply it to the ancient world, with a particular focus on the city of Rome.

Chapter 1 begins by defining religion as “a form of communication with special agents (sometimes including objects) that are frequently conceptualised as god or gods, ancestors or demons” (p. 18). Rüpke emphasizes that both sides in the act of communication have agency, and so does the wider audience which witnesses it. He discusses how this communication sacralizes aspects of itself (actions, processes, objects, spaces, time, and more) in varied and fluid ways. In the process it moulds and is moulded by, among other things, urban space.

Chapters 2 and 3 reflect on approaches to Greek and Roman religions from Fustel de Coulanges to the present and, drawing on the theory of “lived ancient religion” which Rüpke has done much to advance, argues against what he sees as the still-popular view that religion is co-extensive with political dominion or elite identity and/or exists to shore up the socio-political order. Rather, Rüpke argues, religion is shaped by the actions and imaginaries of individuals and groups of all sizes and types, at all levels of society, acting in parallel and in competition. This process helps to construct cities, physically and conceptually, on every scale from that of grand public spaces and monumental temples to that of a domestic altar or a mobile dice oracle at a trivium. It enables both urban hierarchy and heterarchy; it may even create “no-place”, the negation of the spatial limits of a place.

Chapter 4 presents Cicero’s *De natura deorum* as a discussion about the complexities of urbanized religion, which takes for granted that the urban environment is a pre-requisite for open religious discourse, and explores how religious practices, ideas, discourses, beliefs, and institutions are affected by their urban context. Among much else, Rüpke argues that Rome’s highly complex religious scene is rationalized and ordered by the city’s architectural spaces, religious practices, and calendar. He concludes that this dialogue offers, chronologically, the first confirmation of his thesis that the urbanization of the Mediterranean world drove the major changes which eventually revolutionized Mediterranean religions.

Chapter 5 argues against the currently popular idea that complex societies depend on the idea of omniscient and moral gods to maintain their social coherence. Drawing on writings by Varro and Vitruvius, Rüpke proposes rather that urban societies need practices that relate people, space, and place, often disrupting continu-

ous space, and selectively appropriating space. Chapter six explores further how the materiality of religion and religious practices appropriate and shape certain spaces, giving them distinctive characters.

Chapter 7 turns to the resilience of both cities and religion through time, noting that if we cannot prove that each contributes to the other's resilience, we can often see their resilience going hand in hand. To be resilient, both religion and cities need to be both structured and flexible, hospitable to both collectivity and individuality. Returning to the calendar, Rüpke shows how Ovid's *Fasti* portrays people keeping the calendar year by individual and group appropriations of civic space: by being in certain places at certain times, doing certain things, seeing and being seen. Chapter 8 looks further at the individual. Taking recent scholarship on the self as a starting-point, Rüpke argues instead for the importance of the idea of the individual, and for the development of the concept of the individual as an urban process. Dense urban interactions, the growth of a religious market in cities, exposure to diversity, and the concepts and semantics of urban and trans-urban discourse create many kinds of groups, including religious groups, and encourage them to draw boundaries around themselves and regulate their members. This process, however, also creates individual religious selves with individual trajectories – which may, for instance, include conversion.

Finally, chapter 9 discusses the concept of “religious identity”. It argues that the idea of religious identity, in something like a modern sense, and the development of a plurality of specifically religious identities, are products of urban environments and the possibility of relatively easy movement between them, which become clearly visible by late antiquity. Taking Judaism as an example, it considers how religious identities are defined and maintained in late antiquity, especially by urban intellectuals in the role of religious specialists. It raises the intriguing question whether religion can not only flourish and evolve, but also come to an end in cities.

The aim of this book is to reach across disciplines and stimulate debate. To that end, its case studies are relatively brief and indicative rather than definitive, and some readers may feel uneasy with some of its bold assertions and wish for closer attention to the evidence. In places, ideas which are not universally familiar (such as that of “no-place”) are invoked without quite enough explanation to be helpful to readers less well informed than the author. In a book about the importance of place and space, one could wish for some readings of particular urban spaces and localities as well as of texts. The copy-editing is not all it might be (citations of chapter headings in the text, for instance, do not always match those in the contents list). But these are minor grumbles. The book does brilliantly what it sets out to do: to be audacious, eye-opening, and thought-provoking. It will be

indispensable reading for students of ancient religions from undergraduate level upwards, and to scholars of both religion and the city across disciplines it offers an invitation to dialogue which deserves the widest response.