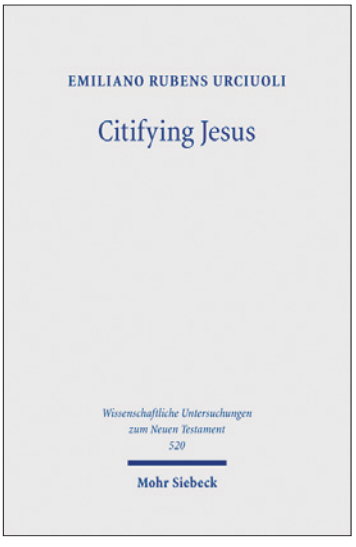
Citifying Jesus



URCIUOLI, EMILIANO R. (2024). *Citifying Jesus. The Making of an Urban Religion in the Roman Empire.* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. X, 309 pp., 139,00 € [ISBN 978-3-16-162371-4]

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This excellent, thought-provoking book is a revision of Urciuoli's habilitation thesis composed under the aegis of the University of Erfurt's Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies / Kolleg-Forschungsgruppe and its five-year project, "Religion and Urbanity. Reciprocal Formations" (2018-2022). The book's nine chapters emerged from various colloquia and have already been published in a range of peer-reviewed venues separately; one or two have been reworked. The book's intellectual orientation also reflects Urciuoli's years as a post-doctoral fellow with the Max Weber Kolleg's "Lived Ancient Religion" (LAR) project, also based at the University of Erfurt (2012-2017) under the leadership of Jörg Rüpke. Throughout,

this book reveals the unmistakable hallmarks of LAR, along with a deep engagement with LAR's international cohort of colleagues. On the topic of urban religion, Urciuoli published an earlier book (2021) in Italian; this is his first monograph in English. It is an impressive accomplishment.

Urciuoli is a vividly creative, brilliant, and experimental thinker, more comfortable with abstractions and theory than with history, particularly specific historical instances. And for good reason: recovering ancient history is an infamously fraught endeavor. Urciuoli engages the historical past primarily through ancient Christian literature. Fully aware of the many shortcomings of this method for reconstructing antiquity, he does his best to avoid the pitfalls of a simplistic reading of text while working to get to the level of lived experience of individual Christians as textual producers or self-authorized intellectuals. Still, Urciuoli's unique focus is not on lived religion nor everyday experience, but of the entanglement of urbanity and religion and its products.

That early Christianity (what Urciuoli calls "Christ religion") was largely an urban phenomenon has been a standard position for decades, expressed in volumes such as Wayne Meeks' *First Urban Christians* (1983) or even Rodney Stark's infamously provocative *The Rise of Christianity* (1996). This scholarship, while moving beyond textual, historical-critical, and theological approaches to understanding early Christianity through its texts, draws in archaeology, sociology, and other disciplines to investigate Christianity's urban development. But the point of the "Religion and Urbanity. Reciprocal Formations" project was to move beyond a phenomenological approach ("this is what urban Christianity looks like") to a discursive, dialectical, and analytical presentation of how the city made Christianity, and vice versa.

In his lengthy introduction, Urciuoli takes the time to lay out the conceptual ground of his work, defining urbanity, citification, and religion. Readers are to take heed here; while definitions of "urbanity" and "citification" are standard and uncontroversial within contemporary studies, Urciuoli adopts Rüpke's unique definition of religion as "the temporary and situational enlargement of the environment – judged as relevant by one or several of the actors – beyond the unquestionably plausible social environment inhabited by co-existing humans who are in communication (and hence observable)" (p. 3).[1] I am not entirely sure this definition makes complete sense in English, and it is sure to confuse, even flummox, many readers. Still, the intentional broadness of such a definition allows for more pliability or

1. Citing Rüpke, 2021, p. 19.

applicability in Urciuoli's analyses of "religion" in the city. "This book", Urciuoli begins, "sets out from the assumption that religion and urban life, that is, 'living with distant invisible forces and living with oppressively close people' are two of the most successful and long-lived cross-cultural strategies of handling, enhancing, and capitalizing on human sociability" (p. 2).

Since the point of this book is to explore the deep entanglement of religion and urbanity from the inception of cities, Urciuoli decides to start well before the Roman Empire and the rise of "Christ religion", with the examples of our earliest human settlements in the West: Göbekli Tepe and Çatalhöyük. Çatalhöyük, for example, had no temple sites, but "interdigitation with the everyday life is only one major aspect of how religion worked in the 'house society' of Neolithic Çatalhöyük" (p. 9). Thus, from the earliest city in the west, Urciuoli seeks to demonstrate that religion and the social structure were already mutually entangled (p. 10).

In Chapter 1, "Jumping Among the Temples. Against the Polytheists' 'Spatial Fix'", Urciuoli borrows British geographer David Harvey's notion of the "spatial fix": the "long-term strategy of tying footloose and flowing entities to fixed space", to investigate shifting concepts of polytheist-built cult space. "Large-scale urbanizing societies", he argues, "also needed to create the fixity of temples and shrines allowing the dissemination of religious production (beliefs, practices, experiences, narratives, etc.,) beyond previous socio-spatial limitations" (p. 47). Through this concept of the "spatial fix", Urciuoli draws on Tertullian and Augustine's critiques of polytheist cult sites and the manner in which the chronological distance between these two Christ followers reveals a shift in the materialization and increased spatialization of Christ religion.

Chapter 2 ("An Archetypal Blasé? Justin Martyr, the Metropolitan Man, and the Segmentation of Urban Life") works to take a granular "lived religion" approach to Justin Martyr's situatedness in the city, engaging H. Gregory Snyder's 2007 creative attempt to locate precisely where in Rome Justin Martyr lived, how that urban location shaped not only Justin's Christianness but also his mental disposition, what Urciuoli calls his "metropolity" (p. 65). To guide his analysis of Justin's disposition, Urciuoli also draws on the work of sociologist Georg Simmel. Simmel's work focused on the metropolis as the product of modernity. By "plunging Simmel into the Mediterranean world", Urciuoli investigates "whether and how, despite the low regime of technological pageantry, inner mobility, and life acceleration compared to Simmel's modern Berlin, specific behavioral attitudes and psychological traits can be mapped onto the distinctive socio-spatial features and conditionings of an ancient metropolis like Rome" (pp. 65-66). Simmel held that the modern

metropolis pressed individuals into coping behaviors that resulted in psychological attachment, something he called *Blasiertheit*, a "blasé attitude" (p. 80). Urciuoli plays with this idea: that perhaps *Blasiertheit* can transcend the limits of modernity and profitably describe Justin Martyr's mental disposition, but with the paucity of Justin's own thoughts on the matter in his extant writings, the chapter ends with an open question, "I let the reader decide" (p. 81).

Chapter 3, "(Good) People Next Door. Christ Religion in the Neighborhood", originally published in *Religion in the Roman Empire*, seeks to investigate "neighborhood" as particular social grouping which, unlike "*collegium*", "*domus*", or "*domus ecclesia*", has been largely ignored in sociologically-oriented scholarship. Acknowledging the thinness of the dataset, Urciuoli draws on urban studies, sociology, and philosophy. "How and to what extent", he wonders, has "the aspiration, demand, and need to proactively coexist in densely populated urban neighborhoods affected Christ religion?" (p. 89). Here, however, Urciuoli's use of martyrdom narratives as models of neighborhood interaction does not help his case, since conflict on the level of *neighborhood* interactions of Christ-followers versus non-Christ-followers appears only in "standardized depictions of crowd hostility" (p. 106). Yet Urciuoli ends this chapter with language reminiscent of Foucault: "(…) the making of Christ religion as an urban religion was a daily navigation between neighbors' indifference and watchfulness, discretion and whispering" (p. 106).

The next chapter ("The Poverty Plateau. The Space of the Urban Street Poor") moves from the previous chapter's focus on neighborhoods to an even more specific focus on the urban street. Here, the analytical frame involves co-spatiality and the delightfully-phrased "urban mille-feuille". Urciuoli surveys two centuries of Christian literature – from the *Book of Revelation*, *Acts* 3:1-10, to the *Letter of James* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* – to determine the extent to which the "literary emergence of, and engagement with, the urban destitute relate to the awareness and the crossing of the spatial thickness of the urban street" (p. 112). He discovers a disconnect between the way that early Christian texts speak about poverty and the lack of true engagement with urban poor: poverty is idealized, but the actual poor are "spaceless" and undetermined.

Chapter 5 ("Urban/e Distances. Secrecy, Discretion, and a Religious Guide to Urbanity") once again takes up the work of Simmel, which Urciuoli applies to his reading of an oft-neglected Christian text, the undated, anonymous *Letter to Diognetus*. This elusive writing offers guidance on how to be a Christ-follower in the context of the city, what Urciuoli nicely calls "a small guide to Christian urbanity" (p. 152). While he points out that many (if not most) Christian writings offer a model of resis-

tance in the form of martyrdom, this letter insists that the true "imitator of God" is "less the martyr (…) than the (relatively well-off) performer of neighborly love practicing a 'philanthropic form of generosity' patterned after a supreme model of benefaction" (p. 135). This chapter is perhaps the most successful in the book, in that it deftly combines social theory with a neglected but significant early Christian writing that sets up a plausible, non-theological model for Christian growth in the context of a metropolis.

Chapter 6 ("Smyrnean Detours. The Martyrdom of Polycarp as Urban Religious Event") is revised from an earlier piece published in the journal *Mortality* and co-authored with fellow Erfurt colleague Harry O. Maier. Urciuoli sees martyrdom texts as an inherently urban genre that catered to "diverse tightly-knit urban circles of writers, readers, listeners, and advertisers" (p. 156). His theoretical stance for this chapter is drawn from the post-de Certeau Situationists and their concept of the "*détournement*", a hijacking of prior architectural-spatial, semiotic-semantic elements in a city and a re-routing of them to other modes of meaning-making. As an urban religious event, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* performs a *détournement* by re-mapping the location of the martyrdom – Smyrna – onto the gospels' spatial patterning of Jesus's passion.

Chapter 7 ("Leading by Writing. Cyprian's Management of a Heterarchical Crisis") is another provocative chapter. Working with the theme of the Christian bishop as an urban intellectual, this chapter explores the impact of urban Christian textual producers as they operate within and apart from urban heterarchies. A heterarchy is "the relation of elements to one another when they are unranked or when they have the potential for being ranked in a number of different ways, depending on systemic requirements".[2] Following the work of Allen Brent, Urciuoli provocatively argues that Cyprian's attempt to enforce a unified model of Christian doctrine and community as an intellectual textual producer in the wake of the Decian persecutions actually served to break apart existing communities of Christ-followers previously united by their religion.

Chapter 8 ("Time to Build. Christians' 'Right to the City' Between Dura and Tyre") returns to the themes of chapter 3, 4, and 5: the increasing visibility of Christian believers and their new "spatial capital". Urciuoli uses the examples of Dura Europos and Tyre – one with a visible Christian presence before Constantine and one after the Peace of the Church. How did Christ-followers claim architec-

2. Crumley, 1979, p. 144, as cited by Urciuoli, 2024, p. 181.

tural space? What narratives surrounded their visibility? Perhaps predictably, the passage of time and political events led Christ-followers of Tyre to exploit their "spatial capital" by increased visibility of their religion, manifested as the building of a magnificent basilica and the spatial fixation of the Christian God.

In the ninth and final chapter ("A Tale of No Cities. Searching for Urbanity and Urban Religion in Augustine's City of God"), Urciuoli turns, inevitably perhaps, to the only early Christian text with the word "city" in its title, in order to perform a "spatial analysis". As he points out, however, the City of God is "only nominally a book on cities" (p. 221). Augustine is as unconcerned with spatiality, mapping, and geography as he is with the material, political, and social conditions of an actual urban environment. His "City of God", like the Book of Revelation's Heavenly Jerusalem, is purely notional – hence Urciuoli's reference in the title to "no cities". Somehow, this chapter is a fitting end to a book on Religion and the City's entanglement, if only because it underscores how deeply complicated was the relationship between Christ-followers and their urban environment.

At the end of this monograph, Urciuoli offers some insight into what he was attempting to do in this book project. I loved its clarity, his rationale for deep and creative engagements with theory, and his candor regarding his own process of thinking, writing, and sharing this work with others. I offer here only two comments. First, it would be terribly unfair to criticize Urciuoli for looking solely at Christ religion in its urban context(s). This was, after all, his purview, and the tight focus makes for a better, more manageable study. At the same time, the decision to isolate early Christian groups from other "small group religions" in the Empire is to leave unexplored paths for comparison between them. Although there was some of this engagement in Chapter 1, the "spatial fix" chapter, this was not an analysis of polytheism in the city, but primarily Tertullian's critique of polytheist temples and their gods in Carthage. Thus, questions remain: What made urban Christ religion unique beyond our own determination, two thousand years later, to make it so? Indeed – was it unique at all, or did the city and religion entangle itself in similar ways within, say, Mithraic communities? Is it profitable to contrast and compare? Did some small religious groups do more with their cultural capital or urbanity than others?

A second observation: Urciuoli is continually stymied by a lack of primary source data, clearly evident from the ending of a few chapters (particularly chapters 1 and 5) where Urciuoli performs the literary equivalent of throwing up his hands or shrugging his shoulders. This is a problem we interpreters of antiquity all face, of course. While the paucity of ancient data leaves us free to generalize, spin off ideas and theories, and experiment with applying modern social theory to the ancient

Mediterranean world, the best we can do – to use a by-now terribly overused and hackneyed phrase – is "think with" the problem of ancient Christ religion in the city. Urciuoli makes an impassioned (and I think, convincing) case for this at the book's conclusion ("Recaps, Clarifications, Confessions, and Disclaimers. The Religion of Urban Religion"). On the other hand, contained and expressed in this book are compelling ideas – fresh, stimulating, even fun. Urciuoli writes not to prove his own points, but to take provocative ideas to their ultimate end points: where our data fails us. Consequently, some chapters are more intellectually satisfying than others. But neither overgeneralizing (as with the term "Christ religion", which is not one thing but a vast constellation of responses of individuals and groups over a wide geographical area and several centuries) nor drilling down into specific case studies such as Justin Martyr's relationship to other self-authorized Christian intellectuals from his rooms above the baths, can allow us to fully understand Christianity's "rise". This does not, in my view, excuse us from trying – and Urcioli has tried more compellingly and creatively than most.

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