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Jörg Rüpke

## The others' god(s)

Neither cultures nor religions are homogenous entities. In fact, in both cases, several inroads have been paved into (mostly implicit) models that conceptualise cultures or religions as 'containers'. Such container models sharply differentiate between inside and outside, own and other, and subject everybody inside to the whole set of rules and beliefs deemed normative and characteristic of the relevant unit. Criticism comes from different perspectives. For decades, the complexity of cultures (or religions) due to social or gender differences, to minorities and counter-cultures has been stressed.<sup>1</sup> Postcolonial theory has formulated a second challenge. The importance and size of hybrid spaces cannot be ignored.<sup>2</sup> Finally, new attention has been paid to the individual and individual appropriation, that is reception and production of culture.<sup>3</sup> For ancient religions the complex history of pantheons has been pointed out and hindered any interpretation as panthea simply mirroring the structure and dominant values of a given society.<sup>4</sup> The very notion of 'pantheon' as an organized body (if not to say council)<sup>5</sup> of gods has been called into question.<sup>6</sup> What is usually called a 'pantheon' is in fact a contingent ensemble of (mostly elite) collective and individual decisions to either introduce, shape, and finance new cults or to care for an existing cult in order to make it more attractive to individuals and families of the general populace.

Against this background the Göttingen research group on 'Images of god(s)' and the Erfurt group on "Religious individualization" considered it useful to address the problem of the 'gods of the other' in the form of a conference, bringing together scholars from England, Denmark, Israel, and Germany in particular.<sup>7</sup> Among the many strategies of creating a specific group identity by religious specialists it is certainly central to create boundaries by defining people and their gods or some gods as 'others'. Thus, it seemed worthwhile to take a closer look at the actual practices and discourses, that is, at the strategies of othering and excluding and thus creating

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I am very grateful to Tessa Rajak, Oxford/Reading, who took a decisive role in the development of the concept of the conference, which is at the basis of this series of articles, in bringing together its participants, and in shaping this introduction.

1 See e. g. Matthes 1993

2 Asad 1973; Malik 1997; Chakrabarty 2008.

3 Certeau 1984 and Füssel 2006; Lüdtke 2009; Rüpke 2011a.

4 See Gladigow 1998.

5 See Seneca's satire *Apocolocyntosis* and Lucian's satire *De concilio deorum*.

6 Rüpke 2003.

7 We are grateful for the funding of the German Science Foundation via the Graduiertenkolleg 896, which also took the burden of organising the conference in November 2012 at Göttingen, in particular Dr. Mareike Blischke, and the contribution of the Kolleg-Forschergruppe 1013 at the Max Weber Centre of the University of Erfurt.

boundaries. At the same time, strategies of positively furthering identity by mirroring traits identified as one's own or of building bridges and forging alliances were inspected. The other god(s), in a legitimate or illegitimate plurality of gods in the heavenly realm, could be demonized or else identified as the very same god(s) simply venerated in another manner. Thus, the others' gods could be a challenge to religious beliefs aiming at universalization.

The four articles that follow address important facets of the topic and throw light onto very different strategies and courses of development. Amelie Kuhrt reviews Persian attitudes towards other gods or the gods of the other on a large scale. The ruling power of an empire faces the double challenge to deal with local gods and their perceived power in a way that enlists their power for short-term military success and secures local cooperation in the long run. Religious considerations claim their own place at the side of political strategies, as can be seen from the dealing of Persian individuals with local gods. Evidently, the specific conditions of an empire, that is its multiple layers of divine agents and religious identities of varying range, are conducive to religious innovation.<sup>8</sup>

Jonathan Kirkpatrick focuses on the specific relationship between a god claiming monopoly according to the religious specialists taking care of him and a god of nearly universal popular appeal, associated with Jahwe and Dionysos. The presence of vine symbolism of the latter in the centralized temple of the former is disquieting—for some contemporary observers as for later interpreters. However, it offered bridges for different agents. On the one hand, it could be presented as fully integrated into traditional Jewish cult. On the other hand it offered the possibility to identify the two gods, thus making Jewish cult look familiar to non-Jews. The balance is delicate, but successful due to the tacit investments made by each side.

The process of translation, which is called *interpretatio* in Latin, is made explicit in John North's analysis and his textual basis, Julius Caesar's Gallic War. In stressing the otherness of a military opponent—soon to be a subject of empire—religion is given a special role. Religious otherness is alterity in kind, not in principle. It might be strange at points, but it is translateable. What is important for Caesar is that there be clear differences between Gauls and the much stranger Germans. What is more important to us is that in these operations Caesar does not adhere to a sharply defined concept of religion. Religion, after all, is also a perspective, not a container.

The final paper focuses again on religious innovation. How could novelty and acceptability be balanced with one another and communicated within a situation that is characterized as much by shared social and political norms as by divergent views on the divine? Eve-Marie Becker offers an analysis of a letter of Paul to the

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<sup>8</sup> See Rüpke 2011b; Rüpke 2011c, summarizing the findings of the research programme 1080 of the German Science Foundation "Roman Imperial and Provincial Religion" (on which see Petzold et al. 2001), see also Cancik and Rüpke 2009 Cancik, Rüpke 2009.; Woolf 2009, 2010

Philippians that interprets the difficult and much disputed text as a negotiation between a new god and the god of the others. The resulting 'translation', however, is a 'foreignizing translation' making distances felt, not eradicated, in the new wording.<sup>9</sup>

Across the different texts and topics 'empire' turns out to be an important factor in creating situations of confrontation and exchange and shaping reactions. Our very words seem to fall back into the language of unified cultures and religions. Such associations are difficult to avoid, but must be strongly resisted. Chronologically spoken, all these texts and the phenomena observed by them are 'post-contact' products, they presuppose a shorter or longer history of multiple personal contacts, economic exchange and mutual observation. The sources used are products of an 'entangled history', and we are ourselves part of this in so far as our conceptions are influenced by the categories produced and popularized by these texts.

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<sup>9</sup> See Rajak 2009

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