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(Good) People Next Door

Neighbourhoods, Urban Religion, and Early Christ Religion¹

‘On peut essayer de penser une relation éthique au lieu, une topique dans l’éthique’
(L’Heuillet, *Du voisinage*, 2016)

Abstract

Archaeologists agree that the spatial division of cities into residential zones has been a universal feature of urban life from the earliest cities to the present.² However, research into early Christianity has tended to pay little attention to neighbourhoods, and interest in neighbourhood-focused analyses of the communication of Christ religion within imperial cities is a very recent development. To date, households and associations have been the preferred analytical foci and have been treated as if they are able to tell the whole truth about the city life of Jesus followers of early Christ religion. The absence of material evidence, the scantiness of literary hints, and the relatively recent consideration of spatiality among early Christian scholars³ may explain the previous neglect of this dimension of the experience of early Jesus followers. Against this challenging background, the present article sifts through early Christian literature in order to answer the following questions. How and to what extent was Christ religion affected by the need of Christ-believing individuals and groups to coexist prosocially and proactively in densely populated urban districts? How and how far can the focus on neighbourhood life contribute to the methodological reassessment of early Christ religion as urban religion?⁴

Keywords: urban religion, early Christ religion, proximity, neighbouring relationships, neighbourhood-based economy, prosociality, neighbourhood-scale opposition

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- 1 Funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – FOR 2779.
 - 2 Smith 2010, 137. See already Cooley 1909; Mumford 1954, 257–258. The item is missing in the most famous checklist of urban structural features: see Childe 1950.
 - 3 See Stewart 2012.
 - 4 For the historical study of urban religion in Mediterranean antiquity, see Urciuoli and Rüpke 2018.

1 Beyond households and associations: three samples of a neighbourhood-focused analysis of early Christ religion

There is a long-standing scholarly debate concerning which of two possible socio-spatial forms provided the primary social structure from which early Christ religion developed in its initial decades. ‘Partisans’ of the household⁵ model for envisioning social forms of early Christ religion and ‘supporters’ of the voluntary association⁶ model have respectively emphasised familial and non-familial networks as the principal grouping patterns and main routes of recruitment. Moreover, they have at times stressed, respectively, the physical-architectural features and the organisational aspects of the patterning structures as factors that eventually impinged on the self-representations of the groups and potentially set the overarching tone, mood, and *ethos* of their gatherings (family-like brotherhood vs. *collegium*-like morality).⁷

A widening acceptance that, on the one hand, several associations happened to assemble in domestic buildings architecture, and, on the other hand, that small familial subgroups can be found within larger and non-domestic associations, has led to increasingly well-documented efforts to showcase the permeability of the two models⁸ by recognising the practical uselessness of ‘essentialised’, underworked categories in scholarly discourse.⁹ More recently, unilateral perspectives have also become the subject of scholarly critiques.¹⁰ However, what is important for our present purposes is that, by focusing on the interior settings and indoor interactions of the assemblies of Jesus followers, both scholarly models have tended to overlook

5 See, e.g., Filson 1939; Klauck 1981; Meeks 1983, 78–79 (who later slightly changes his mind: see Ascough 2015); Theissen 1982, 145–174; Gehring 2004.

6 See, e.g., Heinrici 1881; Hatch 1881; Judge 1960, 44–47 (who later reversed his earlier assessment: see Ascough 2015); Harland 2003; Kloppenborg 2011. For an overview of the last fifteen years of literature, see Ascough 2015.

7 See, e.g., Lampe 2003 (1989), 98–99, and Batten 2007, respectively.

8 See already Ascough 1998.

9 ‘The category “association” only becomes useful when we add nuance; viz. a “privately organized Zeus association” or “a semi-public Isis association” or “an association of Dionysos devotees” or “an association of Christ followers”, and so forth ... Without this nuance, the category is useless, and thus also is the framing of the question whether Pauline Christ groups were or were not “associations”. Of course they were; their members associated with one another. But this is unhelpful. The really interesting material is the detailed analysis of which we look forward to much more to come’ (Ascough 2015, 236).

10 Against maximalist family-based descriptions, see Adams 2013 (for a critique of Adam’s critique see Bremmer in this volume) and Last 2016. Against the idea that local Christ groups consistently appeared as a variety of the ‘cult-association’, see Eckhardt 2018.

the importance of neighbourhoods and relationships among neighbours. Scholarship on early Christ religion still ‘needs to come to grips’ with the ancient ‘sense of neighbourhood’.¹¹

Over the last decade, a few scholars have begun to explore this alternative heuristic path. I will briefly introduce three articles that have taken this new approach. In each case, their authors have set out to re-imagine recruitment to Christ religion by thinking differently about housing and, thus, by shifting the gaze from the interiors of buildings to the nearby streets. By nesting the former in the latter, the common goal of these scholars is to bring to the fore neighbourhood-based spatial patterns of movements, activities, networks, and life.

1.1 Gregory Snyder’s ‘Above the Bath of Myrtinus’ (2007)

This 2007 article by Harlow Gregory Snyder focuses on the locational aspects of Justin Martyr’s school. It sketches out the neighbourhood working environment of a Greek-speaking Palestinian intellectual who moved to Rome around the mid-second century CE and opened a philosophically oriented Christian school in his living quarters. Snyder builds on the ‘reliable information’¹² about Justin’s lodging above a neighbourhood bath found in two recensions (A and B) of the *Acts of Justin*.¹³ He begins by listing the possible advantages that such a type of housing would have supplied to his dual-natured tenant, an intellectual who needed to read and write in peace and quiet, yet at the same time a ‘freelance’¹⁴ philosophical-and-religious expert seeking out students to attract and safely recruit.¹⁵ After venturing a

11 Last 2016, 413 (quoting Wallace-Hadrill 2003, 18).

12 Of course, scholars who completely reject the reliability of the *Acts* as a source for Justin’s historical life do not take this information into account. See, e.g., Ulrich 2012, 64–65.

13 Rec. A: ‘I have been living above the Bath of Myrtinus (‘Εγὼ ἐπάνω μένω τοῦ Μυρτίνου βαλανείου) for the entire period of my second sojourn in the city of Rome’; Rec. B: ‘I have been living above the bath of a certain Martinos, son of Timiotonos ...’ Rec. C omits mention of the place. Neither versions of the name are attested in the available documentation of Roman bathhouses. Snyder (2007, 350) maintains that the latter resulted from the former. In general, there is no consensus on a precise dating of the extant recensions of the *Acts*; relative datings for Recension A oscillate from very close to Justin’s time to quite far removed.

14 For this category, see Wendt 2016. For further elaboration upon this characterisation of Justin, see van der Lans 2019.

15 ‘Relatively plentiful amounts of light, availability of important services, the status and convenience of being located near a local landmark, a generous amount of quiet, relative to other possible locations’ (Snyder 2007, 349). For the discussion of each aspect, see Snyder 2007, 346–349.

precise location for the bathhouse (i.e., the Baths of Mamertinus, outside the Porta Capena on the south-eastern side of the Antonine Baths), Snyder goes on to look for textual evidence in Justin's work that might support such an identification, while at the same time seeking to show that everyday conditions of lodging and patterns of movement influenced parts of Justin's work.¹⁶

Snyder is faced by a special difficulty in pursuing this task. His article aims to measure the effects that a close-up inner-city space had on the production of a Christian philosopher with a migration background whose systematic effort, once settled in the capital of the empire, was focused on speaking on behalf of a universal and geographically disembodied Christianity. Furthermore, given the long chain of unprovable, albeit perceptive, assumptions on which his arguments build,¹⁷ Snyder's conclusions are far from secure. Nevertheless, his article points the way forward for future projects that are interested in uncovering the role played by neighbourhoods in the private and public life of early Christian writers, as well as in the shaping of literary texts centred on the figure of Christ.

1.2 Bradly S. Billings' 'From House Church to Tenement Church' (2011)

In his 2011 article 'From House Church to Tenement Church', Bradly S. Billings draws on the housing landscape of Ostia Antica in particular to challenge the idea that single-level houses could have been representative of the spaces where early Jesus followers actually met. Overshadowed by this false prototype of a *domus*,¹⁸ the potential of multi-story, multifunctional, and multiple-resident *insulae* to function as physical loci of the community,¹⁹

¹⁶ The list is given at Snyder 2007, 357–361.

¹⁷ Especially: a) the shift from Myrtilinus to Mamertinus is attributed to an explainable scribal error occurring when the Latin copy of trial proceedings was translated into Greek; b) the location of the Bath of Mamertinus somewhere off the southeast corner of the Antonine Baths depends on a hypothetically reconstructed mapping of the sites referenced in a list/description of architectural and topographical highlights of region I of the Augustean city plan of Rome. This description is called *Curiosum* and was drafted in the fourth century CE (Snyder 2007, 353–355).

¹⁸ Besides the archaeological obstruction of socio-spatial imagination, Billings does not elaborate on additional internal reasons for this tendency among New Testament scholars. On this see Last 2016, 402–407.

¹⁹ Billings puts a systematic emphasis on the internal cohesion of Christ groups as 'highly bonded communities' (Billings 2011, *passim*). In general, his argument rests on a functional, although highly questionable, 'groupist' approach to the group styles of Greco-Roman associations as formations recurrently showing 'a highly pronounced sense of shared iden-

so Billings claims, has received ‘inadequate attention.’²⁰ However, Billings’ re-descriptive shift ‘from the house church to the tenement church’ implies more than a change of domestic setting from low- to high-density housing. Rather, while foregrounding the fluidity and density of the urban population, he aims to reassess the socio-spatial circumstances that account for the formation, consolidation, and expansion of Christ groups. A two-step pattern is proposed: (1) the divisibility/adaptability of the inner spaces and the transient nature of the rental market in the ever-changing urban environment first allowed individuals and groups to establish themselves in particular *insulae*; 2) from there, over time, they began to network and recruit by using the city block and the neighbourhood as a basis for consolidation and expansion.²¹ Coalescing around a person or nucleus of believers as ‘primary social anchor’, familial linkages and neighbouring relations – that is, both ‘strong’ and ‘weak ties’²² – intertwined on a spatial basis. Yet, apart from the already discussed reference in the *Acts of Justin* to the location of Justin’s dwelling above a neighbourhood bathhouse,²³ no concrete example from the literary evidence is provided to substantiate this intriguing pattern. The argument ultimately draws on non-Christian material evidence and general sociological observations in order to integrate a tiny Christian dataset that consists of rather late archaeological findings and textual references that lack specificity.

1.3 Richard Last’s ‘The Neighborhood (*vicus*) of the Corinthian *ekklēsia*’ (2016)

In the most recent of the three articles surveyed here, Richard Last directly questions the centuries-old Christian ‘cultural matrix’ of the house-based description of the earliest *ekklēsiai* (the so-called ‘*oikos* model’),²⁴ proposing instead a neighbourhood-based interpretation of the Christ believers’ networks in Corinth at Paul’s time. According to Last’s reconstruction, the house occupancy pattern of the ‘houseful’²⁵ (i.e., a single, high-density domestic building made of individual portions, some of which were house-

tity’ (Billings 2011, 555). Related to this is the assumption of a more socially homogeneous and ‘egalitarian’ character of ‘tenement churches’ in comparison to ‘house churches’. See already Jewett 1993, 26. For a critique, see Bremmer’s contribution to this volume.

²⁰ Billings 2011, 559. Exceptions are, at least, Balch 2004 and Oakes 2009, 94–95.

²¹ Billings 2011, 562 and 564.

²² See Granovetter 1973.

²³ *Acts of Justin* 3.2; recensions A and B. See previous discussion.

²⁴ Last 2016, 404–406.

²⁵ Wallace-Hadrill 2003, 4.

holds in themselves) plays a twofold interpretative role. On the one hand, the formula of the ‘whole house’ (ἡ ὅλη οἰκία), which is used numerous times in first-century Egyptian papyri to designate a single domestic building divided into individual portions, is taken as a figurative model for Paul’s normative label of the Corinthian network of Jesus followers as ‘the whole *ekklēsia*’ (ἡ ἐκκλησία ὅλη): that is, as a larger group made up of structurally connected but distinct sub-groups. According to Last, when conveying this image in *First Corinthians* 14.23 (see also *Romans* 16.23), Paul is not describing a city-wide network entirely composed of smaller house-based familial sub-groups – a variety of domestic ‘mini-churches’ identically organised and practicing the same activities as the general assembly. Rather, he is providing an environmentally recognisable housing analogy, which fully contrasts with the single-family dwelling unit, in order better to advertise the idea of a religious organisation that is both unified and divided (or better: unified despite being divided).²⁶

On the other hand, as is the case in Billings’ model, the multi-family house is assumed to function as a ‘convenient base’ for a ‘*vicus* model of recruitment’ that expanded beyond nuclear family linkages. In this case, the hypothesis that the network anchor group of the Jesus movement in Corinth was settled in a single neighbourhood is less founded on Paul’s unspatialised references to the recruited members²⁷ than on the more fragile conjecture that recruitment initiatives venturing outside the initial city blocks were hardly sustainable for the earliest Corinthian believers. Information on travel expectations in support of this hypothesis is taken, once again, from first-century Egyptian papyri that concern village associations and show that absenteeism among those living further afield would have been very likely.²⁸

26 Last 2016, 407–413. Yet Last hypothesises in a footnote that the label might also suggest something more concrete than a metaphorical house: ‘if Christ-believers in Corinth were located within a single neighbourhood (*vicus*) of Corinth, the phrase ἡ ἐκκλησία ὅλη might even be the name of the specific residence in that neighbourhood where the Christ group originated and assembled’ (Last 2016, 412 n. 23).

27 See *First Corinthians* 1.14 and 16; 7.12–14; 16.15–18; *Acts* 18.1–7. Luke is slightly more precise in sketching out a neighbourhood network: see *Acts* 18.1–7.

28 Last 2016, 416–419. The bylaw documents of three village associations from Tebtynis show that associations were preoccupied with curtailing the practice of skipping meetings that took place further away from their neighbourhood/village and responded by increasing fines for absenteeism (Last 2016, 417–418).

2 Neighbouring Christians and Christian neighbouring: imagining a way forward

The spatially informed analyses of these three articles share a sound focus on networks and recruiting strategies. Although Snyder's paper includes the more ambitious goal of pinpointing the 'neighbourhood-effects' on literary materials, they ultimately cohere in seeking to understand recruitment to the Jesus movement by foregrounding a hitherto overlooked socio-spatial unit and pattern of expansion: the neighbourhood. Despite this commendable agenda, the quite meagre outcome in terms of evidence-based arguments and fully testable hypotheses might suggest that it is best to forsake the neighbourhood-focused analysis as a heuristic cul-de-sac. Yet the purposes of this volume, the potential gains from this socio-spatial level of investigation and interpretation for an Urban Religion approach, and the desire for methodological challenges provide encouragements to persist and to look for further possible, and more promising, research tracks. In order to sharpen my gaze, I will address the issue of proximity and neighbourhood life by tapping into a number of different disciplinary perspectives (urban studies, sociology, philosophy).

I start from a simple semantic observation. No matter how well we know our neighbours and how much we like them, the English adjective 'neighbourly' conveys the compound idea enshrined in the verb 'to neighbour',²⁹ namely that the range of friendliness is conditioned by spatial proximity. The degree of sociability, to put it another way, is enhanced by eye contact, social acquaintance, shared mental maps and memories, and common rhythms.³⁰ Therefore, even socially alienated, non-empathic urbanites like Simmel's metropolitan 'blasé'³¹ might be expected to be neighbourly within their neighbourhoods: that is, where the outer pressure of the city, 'which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of inner and outer stimuli',³² tolerably decreases, contacts become more predictable, and interactions less impersonal. Whether this is true or not, or whether it became less true precisely with the rise of metropolises and subsequent peri-urbanisations,³³

²⁹ Carmon 2001, 10490.

³⁰ Apparently, already in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English towns, the term 'neighbourhood' was used to refer both to a geographical area and a quality of social relations. See Besse et al. 2018, 16.

³¹ Simmel 1950 (1903), 413–414.

³² Simmel 1950 (1903), 410.

³³ Simmel, in fact, seems rather sceptical about this possibility: 'As a result of this reserve we frequently do not even know by sight those who have been our neighbors for years' (Simmel 1950 [1903], 415). See also Wirth 1938, 17: 'Overwhelmingly the city-dweller is

a question arises as to how and to what extent the aspiration, demand, and need to proactively coexist in densely populated urban districts affected early Christ religion. By the same token, it is possible to reconsider the time-honoured issue about the general urban perception of Christ believers by narrowing it down and focusing on the feelings, expectations, and attitudes towards them on the part of their non-Christian neighbours. More generally, if neighbours ‘are like the cardinal points of sociability’,³⁴ then we can expect that further advancements in the study of the social relations that come about through near proximity will be critical to our orientation in the domain of the urban socialisation of early Jesus followers.

2.1 ‘Who is my neighbour?’ The advantages of having a neighbouring *ekklēsia*

Since the term ‘neighbour’ remains vague and its moral charge has not vanished in Western secularised societies, social historians of cities (too) fleetingly assume that ‘neighbours have always been at the heart of Christian morality, as those to whom one had a primary duty of charity and concern.’³⁵ To put it simply, we shall attend to our neighbour by starting with those living next-door. French philosopher and psychoanalyst Hélène L’Heuillet has recently questioned this view by pointing out that the ‘éthique du voisin’ differs from ‘l’éthique du prochain’ insofar as the former does without transcendently based ‘magniloquent maxims’: ‘when he is thanked for his help, the neighbour is usually surprised and says that “this is normal”’.³⁶

Buying into this difference, which the English language makes almost invisible,³⁷ one can better see why we are generally prone to interpreting the biblical imperative that Jesus of Nazareth *de facto* copyrighted – ‘You shall love your neighbour (τὸν πλησίον σου) as yourself’³⁸ – as referring to an extended collectivity rather than to a narrow spatial unit. It would be too trivial for a religious genius and celebrated reformer of transcendentalism

not a home-owner, and since a transitory habitat does not generate binding traditions and sentiments, only rarely he is truly a neighbor’. One of the main connotations nowadays revealed by simply googling the word ‘neighbour/hood’ is ‘nuisance’. See Besse et al. 2018. For reflections and literature on the ‘crisis of contemporary neighbouring relationships’ in the time of the ‘global neighbourhood’, see L’Heuillet 2016, 8–9.

34 L’Heuillet 2016, 21. Sociability, I assume, must be taken here in the Simmelian sense of *Geselligkeit* as the ‘pure’ and ‘play form of association (*Spielform der Vergesellschaftung*)’, which is ‘related to the content-determined concreteness of association as art is related to reality’ (Simmel 1997 [1910], 122).

35 Garrioch and Peel 2006, 670.

36 L’Heuillet 2016, 16; transl. mine.

37 For a historical-linguistic reconstruction of this semantic fact, see Tadmor 2005.

38 Mark 12.31 (par.) quoting *Leviticus* 19.18. Emphasis mine.

to simply magnify what are the daily rules of courtesy of many: it is the out-cast figure of the Good Samaritan, portrayed by *Luke* alone as a hortatory illustration of the love command, that exemplifies ‘your neighbour’,³⁹ not the fellow next door. By the same token, it is also easier to understand why, in a time of mass migrations fuelling a growing immunitarian impulse, racist takes on Christianity may manifest themselves in a willingness to territorially restrict the ‘greatest commandment’ of solidarity and empathy-based morality. *Luke* must have been wrong: calling the Samaritan a ‘neighbour’ is a misnomer and acting like him is a betrayal. Recovering the original ethnic restriction of the scope of love,⁴⁰ right-wing populism urges us to only love our neighbours on this side of the border and, together with them, prevent the Other from coming to live nearby.⁴¹ The ‘*éthique du proche*’ does not square with the ‘*éthique du voisinage*’ in its exclusivist interpretation either.

Not all of the earliest Christian writers stressed the centrality of the love command. Nor did they all subscribe to its most inclusivist sense: thorough surveys of the use and place of the command in early Christian literature conclude that ‘more and more’ neighbourly love ‘is applied as a community regulation’ and primarily restricted to the members of the Christ-groups.⁴² At the same time, these mostly city-based authors imagined their love-bound communities to be beyond mutual knowledge and face-to-face encounters and thus were prone to commit to the idea(l) of a spatially unconcerned neighbourliness. In a passage of his *Apology* (Carthage, end of the second century CE), Tertullian states that, when it comes to ‘benevolence’ and ‘good actions’, ‘we Christians are the same to the Emperors as we are to our neighbours (*Idem sumus imperatoribus qui et vicinis nostris*)’:

The piety, the religious attitude, the loyalty owed to emperors does not consist of such observances as hostility may perform to cloak its intentions; but in that type of character which God truly requires of us to show our right feeling towards the emperor *as He requires it in the case of all men (circa omnes)*. For it is not to Emperors alone that we owe these works of a good heart. *No exception of persons is allowed in any good action we discharge (Nullum bonum sub exceptione personarum administramus)*; for we do it for ourselves – not that we plan to get any return in praise or recompense from man, but

39 *Luke* 10.29–37.

40 See Milgrom’s standard reading of *rēʾākā* in *Leviticus* 19.18 as ‘your fellow Israelite’ (Milgrom 1991, 1654). The Septuagint already renders this *rēʾā* with *πλησίον*.

41 The former Italian Minister for Family and Disability, the hardline Catholic Lorenzo Fontana, recently stated that the neighbour of Jesus’ precept refers first and foremost to ‘those in territorial proximity’ and thus must preliminarily exclude migrants in need. See <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2019/02/24/prima-gli-italiani-per-il-ministro-fontana-e-basato-sulla-bibbia-ama-il-prossimo-tuo-cioe-quello-in-tua-prossimita/4994072/>

42 Furnish 1972, 192. The book provides a nuanced overview of the reception, interpretation, and application of the love command from the Synoptics to Ignatius of Antioch.

from God, who requires and rewards a *benevolence that makes no distinction between persons (indifferentis benignitatis)*. We are the same to the Emperors as we are to our neighbours. For to wish evil, to do evil, to speak evil, to think evil of any – are all equally forbidden to us. What we may not do to the Emperor, we may not *do to any man (in quemquam)*. What we may do to no man, so much the more, I take it, must we not do to him, who through God is so great.⁴³

Like Jesus' *πλησίον* and *proximus* (Vulgate) in the canonised gospels, Tertullian's *vicinus* seems to be a shorthand for the non-genetically related human being, that is, for the member of a much wider class of people than those living next door. The sudden shift to the negative formulation ('What we may not do to the Emperor, we may not *do to any man*') probably invites the reader not to quibble over the identity of the *vicini*, the actual extent of this active benevolence, and the opacity of its content.⁴⁴ By sifting through early Christian literature, however, one can conclude that the good deeds Christians claimed to perform *circa omnes* cover a wide range of courtesies, from providing the individual with a safe salvation pathway to most strikingly keeping the human race together in a cosmic order.⁴⁵ Their stated or more tacitly delivered services to the emperors are also well known: taxpaying, military enlistment, prayers, sometimes sacrifices.⁴⁶ Yet what can we know, or reasonably guess, about what Jesus followers did for their physical neighbours, i.e., those whom the canonised gospels, in a few plural occurrences of much less moral resonance, call *γείτονας*?⁴⁷ Despite the lack of a transcendentally rooted and scripturally based early Christian 'neighbourhood ethics',⁴⁸ it is worth surveying and reassessing some prosocial implications of the nearby presence and habitation of Christians in ancient Mediterranean cities.

43 Tertullian, *Apology* 36.2–4; transl. Glover 1977. Emphases mine.

44 For the use of the Golden Rule as a 'good commentary on the love command's ambiguity' in the Western Christian tradition, see Stanglin 2006.

45 For this latter 'function' (τάξις), see *To Diognetus* 6.

46 See, e.g., Justin, *First Apology* 17.1–2; Tatian, *Discourse to the Greeks* 4.1; Tertullian, *Apology* 42.9 (taxpaying); Tertullian, *Apology* 5.6 (= *To Scapula* 4.6); 37.4; 42.3 (military enlistment); *1 Timothy* 2.2; Tertullian, *Apology* 30.4; 31.3; 32.2; 39.2; Origen, *Against Celsus* 8.73 (prayers for emperors' safety). Sacrifice as an act of loyalty to the emperor is strictly forbidden by the extant sources but, when commanded, practiced by most Christ believers. See, e.g., Rebillard 2012, 34–60.

47 Three times in *Luke* (14.12; 15.6 and 9) and once in *John* (9.8: οἱ γείτονας). In the first three occurrences, physical neighbours are mentioned along with friends and relatives as the people usually gathered together for rejoicing; in the latter they appear as the first witnesses of an urban miracle. The term, which the Vulgate always translates with *vicinus/a*, does not occur elsewhere in the New Testament.

48 Jenkins 2009, 539.

Probably the only scene of the conversion of a neighbour in the extant early Christian literature belongs to the *Acts of Paul* (Asia Minor, end of the second century CE). The elegant story is set in Iconium and corresponds to the fabled description of the young virgin Thecla being enchanted by hearing Paul's words coming from the house of Onesiphorus, his host and the patron of the Christian assembly. Like a watchful eye stirred by curiosity, the window plays a critical role here, although we are not properly dealing with the classic window view onto the street and hearing is thus more valuable than sight:⁴⁹ Thecla listened to Paul's preaching 'sitting at a window close by (καθεσθεῖσα ἐπὶ τῆς σύνεγγυς θυρίδος τοῦ οἴκου)' and not turning away from it for three days and three nights. She is depicted as 'clinging to the window like a spider'. In the following days, her shocked fiancé 'went into the street, and watched all who went in to Paul and came out'. He did not enter but collected rumours from outside that eventually convinced him to return the day after and break in with 'rulers, officers, and a great crowd with batons'.⁵⁰

What this novelistic plot helps visualise is that Christians opened up a brand-new type of 'group setting'⁵¹ for people living in the neighbourhood catchment area. With differences depending on variables such as the social station of the participant and the religious density of the quarter, the 'opening' of an *ekklēsia* could be perceived either as an additional option or as an unprecedented opportunity, especially for those with few arenas of social intercourse beyond their kin and household. Advantages beyond the realm of spiritual welfare included new social relations, new possible job contacts, new hubs for local welfare and proximity services, new authority-making structures, new possibilities for both confirmation and improvement of status, and, no less importantly, new motives and chances for snooping around, poking into other people's lives, and gossiping.⁵² When they did not own and/or personally set up shops and small businesses – workplaces where 'ideas could be discussed all over the potter's wheel or the

49 L'Heuillet 2016, 25–26 ('the eye is attracted by the neighbour across the street'). See the discussion of the possible location of this window according to diverse housing solutions in Barrier 2009, 81–82.

50 *Acts of Paul* 3.7–15; transl. Elliott 1993.

51 Lichterman 2012.

52 It should be clear that the adjective 'new', as used here, does not carry any qualitative implication. It simply refers to the fact that Christ believers *added* another nexus of ideas, discourses, social practices, and physical spaces involving communication centered on another superhuman being (Jesus/Christ) to the already existing ones.

taylor's table or the cobbler's bench⁵³ – enterprising Christ believers might have switched the religious allegiance of an existing workers' association by tapping into the vocabulary of group *ethos* and without modifying the organisational characteristics of the association.⁵⁴ They sometimes offered free or cheap classes⁵⁵ and provided religiously oriented instruction that complemented the state-funded education system. Their assemblies could have made uneducated people feel smarter⁵⁶ and given hard-pressed people regular opportunities for a little breathing space away from the regular pressures of their lives.⁵⁷ They presumably enabled new couple relationships and/or supplied (mostly temporary) ways out from domestic oppressions and unfortunate marriages.⁵⁸

Such examples of 'good actions' serving the catchment area of a neighbourhood clearly do not require that we conclude that spatially proximate neighbours were 'at the heart of Christian morality'. Rather, they show how the nearby presence of Christ-believing individuals and groups could have been *serviceable* for neighbourhood life. I will now try to further develop this research trajectory by looking at the opposite poles of a neighbourhood-based economy of solidarity: altruism and the market trade.

2.2 From passive (neighbourhood) to active (neighbourship) proximity: the spatial circumstances of Christians' prosociality

There is little doubt that, as social beings able to maintain a limited number of stable interactions, we especially relate to people who are in our immediate proximity. Moreover, since proximity continuously generates opportunities to be kind, and sometimes even heroic, many people do not hesitate to help their neighbours when they find them in pain and distress. As is the case in an episode that was secondarily added in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* in which Jesus the *Wunderkind* rushes to resurrect a baby from the same

53 Thus, e.g., Ehrman 2000, 279 on Paul's Thessalonian Christ group. The use by Christians of shops for attiring adherents is also maliciously mentioned by Celsus. See Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.55.

54 Thus Ascough 2000 on Paul's Thessalonian Christ group.

55 See Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 2.3; 58.1; 82.3–4; Tatian, *Oratio* 32.2. See Lampe 2003 (1989), 278–279.

56 Thus Lampe on 'ordinary people' among the Valentinian circles. See Lampe 2003 (1989), 314.

57 Thus Maier on the effects produced by *First Clement's* spatial imaginaries and vivid rhetorical commonplaces on the gathered audience. See Maier 2017.

58 See the story of a marital breakdown told by Justin in *Apology II* 2, as well as the violent reactions of several stereotypically bossy husbands in many *Apocryphal Acts*. On this latter issue, see Perkins 2002.

While excluding the rich neighbour, philanthropy according to the 'éthique du prochain' no doubt applies to the poor neighbour, the marginalised disabled neighbour, the neighbouring individual in need in general, who, like *any* destitute person, cannot reciprocate the favour but whose proximity eases the way for the benefactor. Therefore, scholars dealing with altruism-related issues such as the everyday charity of Christ believers and/or their caring attitudes during catastrophic events like epidemics would be expected to factor in and stress the aspect of propinquity.

Two decades ago, sociologist Rodney Stark dedicated to these topics a whole chapter of his important book on *The Rise of Christianity* (title: 'Epidemics, Networks, and Conversion').⁶⁵ Stark blends Rational Choice Theory with Social Control Theory in a theoretically powerful explanatory model whereby religious groups/movements, which display both diverse rates of social conformity and different 'patterns of responses' to people's needs and pains, compete with each other in the maintenance or the creation of social bonds that exhibit different rates of survival. Stark collected an assorted and chronologically disparate body of Christian and non-Christian sources to demonstrate that, with regard to both ordinary and extraordinary adversities, 'pagan communities did not match Christian levels of benevolence'.⁶⁶ In general, living in an empire whose institutions show no 'evidence of structured poverty relief as *such*',⁶⁷ affluent pagans ordinarily gave out patronage, not benefaction.⁶⁸ More specifically, in the midst of appalling circumstances, such as plagues sweeping the empire and decimating its inhabitants, pagans preferred to shun contact with the sick, all the more so since no god had urged them on by combining a love ethics with a self-sacrificial theology. Sustained by better explanatory capacities to help them cope with the disaster,⁶⁹ Christians took the opposite approach:

⁶⁵ Stark 1996, 73–94.

⁶⁶ Stark 1996, 84. See examples in 83–88. Neglected by Stark, as Bremmer points out, Jews were already considered 'exceptional' for their intragroup charity. See, e.g., Juvenal, *Satires* 3.269; Artemidorus, *Interpretation of Dreams* 3.52; Julian, *Letter* 84.

⁶⁷ Holman 2001, 42, who thoroughly explains why the Roman grain dole (*annona* and *alimenta*) was not in itself a poverty-relief program.

⁶⁸ See, famously, Veyne 1976. Yet for evidence of associations providing for economically disadvantaged members, see Downs 2008, 73–119. For daily practices of 'pagan almsgiving' occasionally developed outside of the euergetic-patronal system and supported by different moral principles – e.g., the stoic thematisation of charity as a virtue – see also Parkin 2006. For a recent overview of charity and care for the poor in the ancient world, see van der Horst 2016.

⁶⁹ Stark 1996, 77–82.

they faced death and ministered to everyone.⁷⁰ This outstanding altruism could hardly have escaped notice and thus, concludes Stark, new bonds were formed in favour of the Jesus followers.

A first observation is that, while it is implied by the explanatory centrality of networks, the element of physical proximity in dense city-spaces is not very prominent in this account. Stark includes only a passing reference to vicinity when assuming that the rescuers of the pagan sick were their Christian neighbours.⁷¹ After all, his main testimony, a letter of the bishop Dionysius of Alexandria, speaks of Christians ‘drawing upon themselves the sickness of neighbours (ἀπὸ τῶν πλησίων)’ in an evangelical un-spatialised sense and seems more interested in advertising the mutual support among fellow-Christians than in showing that their neighbourly care reached towards nearby outgroups.⁷²

Stark’s engagement with the topic leads to a second observation. While other scholars tend to agree with him that during epidemic crises Jesus followers ‘nursed not only their fellow members but also others’, they also assume that in the more uneven realm of the everyday,⁷³ a benevolent Christian ‘would not go out and look after the non-Christian poor’.⁷⁴ More specifically, as far as the first three centuries of the Christian era are concerned, we are rarely informed of Jesus followers practicing the ‘love-your-neighbour’ precept by financially assisting or temporarily hosting non-Christian acquaintances and neighbours in need. Nor do we see them helping their ‘neighbours by default’,⁷⁵ as L’Heuillet would call the non-Christian destitute begging down the street. No doubt, the promotion of the static collective ideal of the ‘gospel poor’ could do perfectly well without detailed moral-psychological and socio-spatial treatments of individual poverties in early Christian texts.⁷⁶ Additionally, the door-to-door or street-level assis-

70 Building on a single Christian source (Dionysius of Alexandria, in Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.22.7–10), Stark ventures that such conscientious nursing and superior coping strategies ‘resulted in substantially higher rates of survival’ (Stark 1996, 74; for arguments on differential mortality, see 88–91). For the poor performance of a competing healing divinity, Bona Dea, during the ‘Antonine Plague’, see Ambasciano 2016.

71 Stark 1996, 90.

72 Dionysius of Alexandria, in Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.22.7–10.

73 For plagues as one of the ‘great levelers’ of economic inequality in human history, see Scheidel 2017.

74 Bremmer 2017, 17. The only testimony cited by Stark (1996, 84) is a famous letter of the emperor Julian (dated 362 CE) in which he complains that ‘the impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us’ (Julian, *Letter* 22.430 C–D).

75 L’Heuillet 2016, 77.

76 See Holman 2001, 48–50.

tance of the 'undeserving' poor was probably not the kind of behavioural model that our extant sources were keen to sponsor. In a treatise dedicated to *The Salvation of the Rich*, Clement of Alexandria's call for the assistance of the 'unworthy' and 'wretched poor', 'destitute of God', stands out for his exceptionally nuanced take on the subject.⁷⁷

Putting these two observations together, we find that a puzzling picture appears: when non-members are in potentially deadly trouble, Christians are ready to risk and give away their lives. Yet, when it comes to helping with money and material resources, the assistance offered by Christians becomes more discriminating and falls within the ecclesiastical borders of the 'divine market' (θεία ἀγορά).⁷⁸ This sectorial altruism towards non-members, which prioritises extreme self-sacrifice over less costly prosocial acts, is implausible as a behavioural pattern that reflects everyday lived reality. I think it is more reasonable to assume – although there seems to be no way to prove it – that the social acquaintances created by neighbouring relationships elicited more realistic and viable manners of running and regulating cooperative practices than whatever guidelines drawing the boundaries of religious groups and providing them with frameworks and codes to live by. However, beyond the realms of unreciprocated charity and the gift economy, there was another way to benefit one's own neighbours other than supplying them with cures, money, and hospitality: namely, by furnishing them with products and services at market rates.

If cities can be defined as 'places where adding new work to older proceeds vigorously',⁷⁹ neighbourhoods are the inner-urban areas where the 'sustainability' of our social life more tangibly takes the form of the division of labour. In cities, past and present, occupationally homogenous neighbourhoods are a 'rare occurrence':⁸⁰ the average heterogeneity of craft and trade specialisations organised at the level of quarters could hardly escape the eye of both the unadventurous resident absorbed in her routines and the city-stroller specialised in the worm's-eye view.⁸¹ It would, thus, be

77 Clement of Alexandria, *The Salvation of the Rich*, 33 and 17. This is a moral category that clearly includes the non-Christian 'destitute', 'beggars', and 'poor dispersed on the street' (11). For an analysis of Clement's arguments for their inclusion in the 'divine market', see Holman 2001, 51–54.

78 Clement of Alexandria, *The Salvation of the Rich* 32.1. On this, see Urciuoli 2017.

79 Jacobs 1969, 50.

80 Smith 2010, 150.

81 A particularly famous representative of the latter, the American urban writer and activist Jane Jacobs, argued that, in order to keep a city alive, mixed-use zoning and occupational diversity at the level of neighbourhood should not simply be preserved but must thrive. Neighbourhoods 'must serve more than one primary function', so that the presence of

interesting to investigate the relation between the urban presence of Christian individuals and groups and the production of more differentiated services at a neighbourhood level. Apart from piggybacking on local trade and industry, to what extent was the establishment of Christian worship in a residential area able to generate new side-work branched off from an existing activity, as well as a brand new form of work standing as an activity in its own right?

New types of self-styled religious expertise and additional branches of self-authorised intellectual labour can be persuasively related to, respectively, the leaders of Christ groups and Christian teachers with philosophical pretensions.⁸² When it comes to material/manual labour instead, apologetic statements that Jesus followers were as laborious and *profitable* to business as everybody else counterbalance the concern of outsiders about the *negative* impact of the spread of Christ religion on occupational diversity. However, both forms of information should be assessed carefully. On the one hand, the same Christian writer can at once advertise the eagerness of Christians for businesses in an apologetic work⁸³ and draw a maximalist list of inappropriate jobs and disreputable occupations for Christ believers in a text composed for a more internal (intended) audience.⁸⁴ On the other hand, the fact that the diffusion of Christ religion among urban sub-areas might have endangered 'idolatrous' businesses, and thus caused furious vengeful reactions on the part of those occupying that market niche, appears to be more a narrative device and a badge of honour for Christian authors⁸⁵ than a pressing source of preoccupation for tradesmen, municipal priests, and local authorities in general.⁸⁶ At the end of the day, both the positive and

people out of doors 'on different schedules and for different purposes' (Jacobs 1961, 152) can generate the exuberant diversity, clustering, and proximity of cooperative skills that regularly end up sparking innovations by making new forms of work arise out of existing ones.

⁸² See Wendt 2016.

⁸³ See Tertullian, *Apology* 42.1–3. An indirect confirmation of the full involvement of Christians in the main socio-economic activities comes from Celsus in Origen, *Against Celsus* 8.55.

⁸⁴ See Tertullian, *On Idolatry*. The unknown author/compiler of *Apostolic Tradition* 16 engages in the analogous task of listing forbidden jobs.

⁸⁵ See *Acts* 16.16–24 (the incident of Paul and Sila with the owners of the fortune-telling slave-girl in Philippi); 19.23–41 (Paul's incident with the silversmith and the artisans who made business with the temple of Artemis in Ephesus). Tertullian's general statement that 'the revenues for the temples are breaking down daily' (*Apology* 42.8) cannot be connected directly to a neighbourhood-based economy.

⁸⁶ Over the first three centuries CE, this preoccupation was only voiced by the scrupulous governor of Bithynia and Pontus, Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96.8. Pliny's concern regarded the purchase of sacrificial animals, the demand for which had shrunk for some

negative externalities of the urban emplacement of Christ religion on some sectors of the neighbourhood-based economy are very difficult to pinpoint and evaluate. While I doubt whether any Christ group ever produced substantial effects on the labour market, let alone on the vitality of local entrepreneurship, business rivalries and competitions were likely to play a role in sparking local opposition to Christ-believing neighbours within the city quarters.

2.3 A hand-to-hand combat: the neighbourhood-scale opposition to Christians

A minimalist interpretation of the ‘love-your-neighbour’ precept would urge neighbours not to rob, harm, or kill each other. Abstention from intimidation and violence can be successfully fostered by informal social control on the part of watchful residents.⁸⁷ Yet, although safety in neighbourhood life is surely a cooperative task, it is simply common sense that any mutual effort to keep in check rapacious and murderous instincts is often not sufficient to gain an appreciable degree of security in neighbourhood streets, squares, and parks. Settlement units wider than neighbourhoods and political actors more powerful than grassroots movements play a far bigger role in the culture-contingent security game.⁸⁸

In ancient cities, too, safe pathways were something beyond the reach of ordinary neighbouring players. We have no hard data and probably too many modern preconceptions to sensibly compare past and present crime rates but enough good sense to avoid putting the blame only on the cruelty and indifference of neighbours – especially in a world where ‘official’ street policing was minimal. Like several other urban phenomena bundled together at the neighbourhood level and experienced on a neighbourhood scale (facilities, institutional resources, etc.), security, too, was produced and

time. For an overview of the discussion about the commercial interests of the plaintiffs, see Engberg 2007, 180–182.

87 Glaeser 2011, 107, who refers to Mumbay’s slums and the Greenwich Village (New York City) described in Jacobs’ 1961 masterpiece *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. For the shortcomings of ‘such soft surveillance’ in Roman times, see Toner 2019, 63–64.

88 Serving the state in a Europe-wide capitalist crisis that impacted on public order, Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann cleared out the Parisian slums that had housed and protected the urban rioters in 1848 and ploughed the wide boulevards with which we are now familiar (Harvey 2008, 25–26). A century later, speaking on behalf of the American commoners, Jane Jacobs argued that serially designing high-rise buildings and super-blocks with self-isolating streets ended up generating less watchful residents and more vulnerable pedestrians. See Jacobs 1961, 29–54.

maintained via 'a combination of private and institutional efforts' involving different levels of socio-spatial organization.⁸⁹

According to Rome-centric accounts inspired by aristocratic snobbishness, the bitter vein of satirists, and the storyteller's sense for drama,⁹⁰ streets and boroughs were unsurprisingly replete with gangs and troublemakers, especially at night. Some scholars are thus confident that, 'compared even with the most crime-prone modern cities, ancient cities were overrun with crime',⁹¹ while others more cautiously 'suspect that there was a higher incidence of crime in towns and cities than in the country'.⁹² On the one hand, Rome was an exceptionally tempting setting for criminal acts, if only for the size of its population.⁹³ On the other hand, different bodies of evidence from outside Rome seem to suggest that: (a) in contrast to country roads that were regularly infested with bandits, urban streets and alleys were more unsafe than life-threatening; (b) also at the time, households, family linkages, and, in general, stronger ties than neighbouring acquaintances played a more significant role in harbouring abuses and offenses, especially those accounted for by patriarchal relations and prompted by an array of universal motives (resentment, vengeance, jealousy, envy, greed);⁹⁴ (c) many small-scale crimes against both persons and properties occurred 'in the face-to-face context' of village communities, where competition for the few resources could deter neighbourliness, generate envy, propel rumours, and spur fights.⁹⁵

Four cross-regional generalisations can nevertheless be made. First, due to the negligible rate of social stratification by place, there were no topographically defined urban 'no-go' areas – the lack of territorial relegation of socially segregated people ('discrimination by address')⁹⁶ might have reinforced the elitist complaint, shared by many Roman writers, that the

⁸⁹ Keith 2003, 59.

⁹⁰ Juvenal, *Satirae* 3.278–308; Tibullus 1.2.25–26; Propertius 2.29 and 3.16; Ammianus Marcellinus 28.4.28–31. On Nero's nocturnal escapades, see Tacitus, *Annales* 13.25.1–3; 13.47.2; Suetonius, *Nero* 26. On later emperors, see *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, *Ver.* 4.6 and Ammianus Marcellinus 14.1.9.

⁹¹ Stark 2006, 29.

⁹² Toner 2019, 74.

⁹³ Troops were normally not allowed into the city and police-like forces responsible (also) for crime-fighting (the *vigiles*) underwent continuous, tumultuous, and yet partly traceable changes in duties, organisation, allocation, and numbers of units. These decisions were occasionally connected to institutional rearrangements of the geographical-administrative subdivision of the city. See Echols 1958.

⁹⁴ See literature in Ménard 2000, 65.

⁹⁵ See Toner 2019, *passim* (with many examples from Egyptian papyruses).

⁹⁶ L'Heuillet 2016, 104.

city itself was capable of turning people bad.⁹⁷ Second, priorities based on insecurity and expectations about public order varied according to the social rank: the concern with urban riots⁹⁸ voiced in rhetorical speeches unsurprisingly contrasts with the focus on robberies evidenced by legal papyrus documents, curse tablets, and sections of the *Digest*.⁹⁹ Third, social mixing did not imply equal housing standards: living in cramped, overcrowded, and poor-quality urban conditions did not help soothe violent tendencies, especially when individuals felt that their 'local honor was on the line'¹⁰⁰ and victims were close enough to confront the offenders. Fourth, neighbourhood life has always produced easy targets:

The neighbourhood bond can become extremely violent. [...] In addition to the stupor of being betrayed by those who shared with us the infinitely precious basic menu of everyday life, neighbourhood makes it easier to identify and target. Neighbours know each other. That's the problem. One can hide from the state, not from neighbours.¹⁰¹

As Paul knew well, when he advised the Corinthians not to make 'outsiders or unbelievers' enter and 'think you are out of your minds',¹⁰² neighbours are rumourmongers par excellence. Their treachery can escalate as far as paranoid rivalry or enmity rooted in the logic of suspicion and triggering the mechanism of scapegoating ('No rain: blame the Christians!').¹⁰³ It is not necessary to go as far as L'Heuillet's references to the Rwandan genocide or the Jewish pogroms in Poland in order to envision the effects of topographic proximity on what she calls the 'myth of the wicked neighbour'.¹⁰⁴ Whether genuine or not, familiarity is an aggravating circumstance and no guarantee of protection. If we subscribe to Jacob Engberg's view of the street-level opposition to Christ-religion from 50 to 250 CE, we can conclude that next-door *privati* had several means and motives to resist Tertullian-like claims about neighbourliness as intrinsically characteristic of Christians. Like Thecla's resentful fiancé in the *Acts of Paul*, they could show hos-

97 Toner 2019, 75–76. Here comes the moralising, class-related discourse of *urbanitas* as a set of virtues to be practiced and shared in country villas. See on this Wallace-Hadrill 1991.

98 For an overview, see Ménard 1995.

99 Brélaz 2005, 51 (for papyruses and curse tablets); Toner 2019, 67–68 (for the *Digest*) and 162–163 (for curse tablets).

100 Toner 2019, 34, who questions Cicero's elitist idea that ordinary Romans had a 'less developed sense of honour' than the elite while being still driven by it. See Cicero, *Divisions of Oratory* 91–92. See also L'Heuillet 2016, 42: 'It is among the working classes that people live under the neighbor's watchful eye.'

101 L'Heuillet 2016, 16–17; transl. mine.

102 See *First Corinthians* 14.23.

103 Augustine, *City of God* 2.3. See already Tertullian, *Apology* 40.2.

104 L'Heuillet 2016, 12; transl. mine.

tility to Jesus followers and, especially, to Christian religious specialists as undesired neighbours bringing dishonour to families. If they wanted, they could profit from both the fairly popular dislike and legal vulnerability¹⁰⁵ of Christians and act against them as slanderers, anonymous informers, formal plaintiffs (*delatores*), spectators inciting local or regional authorities, participants in the execution of the verdict, assistants in the search for and arrest of Christians, authors of pamphlets, and writers of petitions to the authorities complaining about Christians.¹⁰⁶ Motivations might have ranged from petty resentment to well-informed intellectual aversion and ill-informed chimerical hostility, filtered by varying prospects for personal gain (competition for religious clientele, commercial interests, career ambitions).

‘How to open or close the door to our neighbours?’ ‘To what extent is it possible to hide our religion, our feasts, and our dietary habits from them?’¹⁰⁷ A quite sibylline text like *To Diognetus* 5¹⁰⁸ has recently been read as a script pondering over these issues and recommending ‘passing’ (for non-Christian) and ‘covering’ (the signs of Christian-ness) as strategies to determine how much to reveal to next-door neighbours.¹⁰⁹ Yet relying on neighbours’ indifference, lack of time, and limited curiosity¹¹⁰ was likely to be a slippery slope implying a great deal of stress and no real guarantee of success. Moreover, as Freud first discovered, likeness among proximate strangers spurs no less hatred than otherness.¹¹¹ All things considered, I would argue that,

105 Candida Moss has rightly stressed this difference. See Moss 2013.

106 Engberg 2007, 324 and 332. A notable achievement of Engberg’s book lies precisely in his accurate survey of early Christian literature, from Paul to Origen, in order to analyse the specificity of, and interplay between, the fourth levels of opposition/hostility: (1) central; (2) regional; (3) local; (4) individual.

107 L’Heuillet 2016, 15; transl. mine.

108 ‘[Christians] show forth the character of their own citizenship in a marvellous and admittedly paradoxical way by following local customs in what they wear and what they eat and in the rest of their lives. They live in their respective countries, but only as resident aliens; they participate in all things as citizens, and they endure all things as foreigners. Every foreign territory is a homeland for them, every homeland foreign territory. They marry like everyone else and have children, but they do not expose them once they are born. They share their meals but not their sexual partners. They are found in the flesh but do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth but participate in the life of heaven throughout all the limbs of the body; Christians are spread throughout the cities of the world’ (*To Diognetus* 5; transl. Ehrman 2003).

109 Boin 2015, 46–47 following Goffman 1961 on ‘passing’ and ‘covering’.

110 Consisting in the ‘blunting of discrimination,’ (Simmel 1950 [1903], 414), the ‘blasé attitude’ can at least prevent intrusiveness in the monitoring of neighbours’ lives. See L’Heuillet 2016, 212.

111 See Freud 1962 [1930], 61. The treatment of ‘narcissism of minor differences’ belongs to Freud’s critique of the love commandment (56–63).

given the fuzziness of the legal framework of prosecutions,¹¹² the way the ‘pedestrian forms of opposition’¹¹³ occasionally interlocked with the other three potential levels of hostility (central, regional, local-municipal) might have generated a psychological situation similar to the so-called ‘pattern of random abuse’.¹¹⁴

Before, but also after, Decius’ edict in 250, opposition to Christians was ‘occasional’ and mostly ‘erratic’.¹¹⁵ In principle, indeed, Christ-believing individuals could not predict abuse. Very few of them could rely on an effective network of informants like the persons who warned Cyprian, the rich and influential bishop of Carthage, that the governor’s police were on the way. Nor did they regularly have, as the bishop did, high-profile friends in a position to offer secure hiding places.¹¹⁶ Most rank-and-file Jesus followers would actually ‘be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among [them] to test [them]’,¹¹⁷ as the author of the *First Letter of Peter* put it. Even at times of more steady opposition, they could hardly foresee if, when, from where, and towards whom offence would start, as well as for what reasons and with what exact consequences. Therefore, it is likely that the level of stress generated in the bodies of the potential addressees of violence was disproportionately higher than the actual rate of arrests, imprisonments, and deaths. To date, neither the debunkers of the ‘myth of persecutions’ nor the advocates of martyrdom as ‘rational action’¹¹⁸ have paid due attention to the psychotropic policies underlying the efforts of both warring parties: on the one hand, the offers of peace and submission made by the power holders and aimed at deference and recantation, and, on the other hand, the salvific economy sponsored by the religious leaders who supported endurance and, eventually, martyrdom. Both should be understood as different ‘teletropic

112 The possibility that ‘the plight of Christians [was] continuous with measures directed against assorted freelance experts’ (Wendt 2015, 199) did not make this pattern of legislative action more ‘official’.

113 Engberg 2007, 276.

114 Smal 2007, 168–169. The formula refers to the pattern of inflicting and suffering unpredictable and random physical assaults, as it was first analysed in primate societies organised through dominance hierarchies. See Goodall 1986; Blaffer Hrdy 1999, 333–334; Sapolsky and Share 2004.

115 The former is by far the most used adjective in Engberg’s book for the description of ‘persecutions’. For the latter, see Engberg 2007, 295.

116 Cyprian, *Letter* 81; Pontius, *Life of Cyprian* 14.3. On this, see Urciuoli 2018, 261–267. See also the people advising Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, to slip out and secretly reach a small suburban estate (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 5).

117 *First Peter* 4.12. See discussion in Engberg 2007, 154–155.

118 See, e.g., Moss 2013 and Stark 1996, 163–190, respectively.

mechanisms¹¹⁹ that worked to alter the mood of the individuals, ease their stress, and lead them to behave according to the plans.

To conclude, I suggest that deeper consideration should be paid to the neighbourhood level of analysis as a crucial spatial arena for examining the production of martyrs and martyrdom discourse. City quarters, with their housing arrangements, shops, facilities and alleys, furnished the locales and enabled the formation of particularly well-suited socio-spatial assemblages not only for pursuing strategies to gain new Christ-believers, but also for spreading gossip about Christian rituals, collecting information, and constructing actions potentially leading to the arrest of Christians. Once again, clear and precise topographical references to this low-level scale of conflict, intermediate between the household and the city, are unfortunately missing. Preferring the various domestic treacheries¹²⁰ that eventually led to public trials and urban mass spectacles, early stories of ancient Christian martyrdoms gloss over neighbourhoods. When they do not correspond to the un-spatialised addressees of the Lord's commandment of love,¹²¹ neighbours are invisible, their feelings already fused together in standardised depictions of crowd hostility. Yet inferences can be drawn from cases of both in-group opposition and hostility towards out-group members that clearly arose amongst people living in the closed proximity of densely populated urban settings. For instance, patterns of movements around neighbourhood landmarks might have brought into contact the Christian philosopher Justin with the contemporary Cynic philosopher Crescens.¹²² The two local intellectuals engaged in a vitriolic dispute touching on both intellectual honesty and personal morality that specialists have described as a 'street-corner or bathhouse debate'.¹²³ As we may read in the so-called *Second Apology*, Justin apparently expected his opponent to scheme against him and eventually denounce him to the authorities:

And so, I expect that I will be plotted against and impaled on a stake by one of those mentioned, at least by Crescens, that lover of noise and of empty praise. For it would not be right to call the man a lover of wisdom since, to gratify and please the erring multi-

119 For teleotopic mechanisms' as devices to create mood changes in other people, see Smail 2007, 170–174.

120 Servants as traitors (often under torture or menace thereof): see *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 6; *Martyrs of Lyon and Vienne*, in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.1.14; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.21 (on the martyrdom of Apollonius). Pagan husband as *delator*: see Justin, *Second Apology* 2.

121 See, e.g., *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 1.2; *Martyrdom of Pionius* 12.10; Eusebius (*Martyrs of Lyon and Vienne*), *Ecclesiastical History* 5.1.9 and 5.2.7.

122 Snyder 2007, 336.

123 Thus Minns and Parvis 2009, 27.

tude, he publicly testifies about things of which he knows nothing, namely that Christians are godless and irreligious. [...] I would have you know that, when I had been asked to solve problems put to me, I in turn asked him certain questions, and so discovered and demonstrated that in truth he knows nothing. And to show that I speak the truth, in the event that these exchanges have not been reported back to you, I am prepared to exchange questions with him again, even in your presence.¹²⁴

A second round of the debate probably never occurred since Justin was arrested, tried, and executed beforehand. A century and a half later, Eusebius of Caesarea would make Crescens, the neighbouring philosopher, fully responsible for Justin's death.¹²⁵

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¹²⁴ Justin of Neapolis, *Second Apology* 8.1–5; transl. Minns and Parvis 2009.

¹²⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.16.1, building on Tatian, *Discourse to the Greeks* 19.

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