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Urban religion beyond the city: theory and practice of a specific constellation of religious geography-making

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ABSTRACT

The concept of urban religion demands us to start operationally with analyzing characteristics of urban environments and their impact on religious forms of communication. Yet this notion was not necessarily designed to apply only to the city and related phenomena exclusively observed in city spaces. Practices, beliefs, even institutions developing as urban religion spread out beyond the city. Thus, the geography of lived urban religion and of agents of urbanity is different from what the same people imagine and geographically locate as city space. This article intends to develop the conceptual tools for analyzing this blurring of boundaries produced by religious semantics, discourses and practices interacting with implicit and explicit border-constructions linked to practices of 'urbanity'. The highly debated 'urban' or 'anti-urban' character of ancient Christianities serves as our point of departure for developing comparative tools.

KEYWORDS

City lens; urbanity; rural Christians; Montanism; late Antiquity; ancient religion; urbanization; regionalization

Introduction: urbanity instead of city

Religion in the city, and in particular in the contemporary metropolis, has become a major focus of recent research in geography and the social sciences.¹ The dynamics of religious change, the demise of religious monopolies and established religious institutions, the bottom-up developments involved in inventing or transferring religious practices into seemingly secular space, the negotiation of religious plurality in densely nucleated environments, and the globalization and de-localization of religious practices and beliefs have taken centre stage in this research (e.g., Orsi 1999; van der Veer, 2015; Day and Edwards 2021). For more than two decades now, the concept of 'urban religion' has been used as a summarizing descriptive term for these contemporary phenomena (Orsi 1999; Lanz 2014, 2018; Garbin and Strhan 2017). Recently, however, the concept has been recast to serve as a heuristic and analytical tool for the observation of the long-term processes involved in the mutual formation of religion and urbanization in

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general, and of religion and urbanity in particular (Urciuoli and Rüpke 2018; Rüpke 2020; Rau and Rüpke 2020).

This more recent approach sets out from a methodological reflection on the location of religion and religious change. Scholars commonly assume phenomena-deemed-religious as being urban simply due to the fact that they take place (or they are seen occurring) in what is addressed as town or city in everyday language. Our perspective, instead, invites to treat cities as the result of historical actors, including religious actors, intentionally differentiating and hierarchizing different types of settlements by ascribing ‘urbanity’ to settlements that are thereby constituted as cities. Thus, the usual viewpoint is turned on its head. Instead of scrutinizing cities as spaces of observation for human behaviors, including religious behaviors, that are taken as being as urban due to their location, attention now centers on actions (discourses and practices) characterized by urbanity on the part of the historical actors themselves. In this article, we will further elaborate this approach by testing its implications. In doing so, we will go as far as to explore whether one can speak meaningfully about ‘urban religion’ outside of urban spaces, including spaces regarded as ‘rural’, that is, a landscape seen as also offering – unlike the even more distant realm of ‘wilderness’ – locations for settlements.

Despite often being an unbordered spatial entity, the cultural construct of the ‘town’ or ‘city’² is instrumental in generating ‘plots for narratives with regard to borders’ (von Bendemann 2021, 58). Since its historical beginnings in the phenomenon of ancient Near Eastern cities and the concept of Sumerian (Akkadian) *uru/erī*, the city has been a physical entity *and* a concept loaded with civilizational overtones that has been set against a postulated counterpart which is characterized by its lack of these properties, or rather its lack of urbanity. Urbanity is understood as a normative concept in the tradition of, for example, Greek *asteiotês* or Latin *urbanitas*, and thus not as a synonym of the descriptive term ‘urbanization’ as referring to the spread and growth of settlements classified as cities by planners, administrators or academics (Rau 2020). Such urbanity is a spatiotemporally variable, and at least partly inter-subjectively shared, style of meaning – and geography-making (Werlen 2021). In fact, people may acknowledge a range of cities above their own small town (too big to live in) or deride smaller towns (too uneventful to be inhabited) but people can be also found in agreement about a diffuse baseline separating settlements characterized by urbanity from rural ones lacking it (‘villages’). This type of classificatory, even discriminatory geography-making is couched in both discourses and practices. It is felt, negotiated, and performed via a discriminating set of (economical, ethical, aesthetical, educational, corporeal and symbolic) resources and competences – from wealth through academic grades to attire). It can solidify into material artifacts (e.g., objects, architectures, infrastructures – from walls through quarter blocks to trams), be typified as institutions (e.g., hegemonic symbolizations, binding guidelines, self-regulating associations – from citizenship through ethos to clubs), and be translated into life-structuring temporal forms (e.g., rhythms, routines, events taken as characteristic of

²We do not include any conceptual difference here for the purpose of this article. The differentiation between ‘city’ and ‘town’ according to size is above all a consequence of nineteenth-century language and part of the attempt of the large industrial cities that were experiencing explosive growth to distinguish themselves from less rapidly developing places. Accordingly, we will disregard it in the following.

‘city life’). During all this, it remains always open to the possibility of subjective manipulation and revision.

As we will show, studying urbanity by confining it to the relatively larger and more concentrated type of settlement (colloquially ‘town’, ‘city’, *Stadt*, *nāgara*) is methodologically inappropriate for at least two reasons.

First, performing urbanity semiotically includes what is outside-of-the-city, the ‘rural’ or even ‘wilderness’. In fact, it implies mobilizing and manipulating assumptions about the essence of the city in relation to the non-city. Urbanities are corporeally, verbally, graphically, constructionally, and technologically enacted styles of meaning-making and geography-making that always entail the construction of the non-urban as situationally shifting semiotic counterpart, for which – as we will see – rural and rurality are the most popular candidates with regard to permanently inhabited areas. They operate (either perfunctorily or thoughtfully) by defining life in a specific form of settlement as ‘urban’, that is, as different from other ways of thinking and living, and, at the same time, it performs this difference (cf. Dymitrow and Brauer 2017).

Second, urbanity tends to transcend the city border, to trespass, to migrate. As a feeling and a value judgment, urbanity has the potential to become place-unbound. It can be felt and expressed on a lonely island (and, some would say, even better). In fact, we argue that the more value-laden urbanity is taken to be by its performers, the less it is attached to place and restrained by the geographical limits of the place deemed different from other settlements by its urbanity. After all, people can display and perform urbanity without feeling at ease in what they would describe as their own ‘city’ or without sympathizing with it. This is true when they are more comfortable in their extra-urban villa than in the urban traffic jam, or when they dream of living in an exciting foreign metropolis rather than strolling along the pavement of their familiar and uneventful neighborhood. Thus, agents occasionally envisage even rural-based monasteries or palaces as better places to practice what they would feel and term as the essence of urbanity, thus neatly distinguishing place and way of life. Parochialism, understood as a narrow-minded sentimental connection to the hometown, would then stand in contrast to urbanity.

Urban religion, as we conceptualize it, is a religion marked by urbanity. Therefore, urban religion, like urbanity itself, also demands that the researcher start by analyzing the characteristics of environments seen as urban in their historical contexts and those environments’ impact on religious forms of communication (see Urciuoli 2020a; Rüpke 2020, 47–60). At the same time, the notion of urban religion is not designed to be confined only to the what is being defined as city and to phenomena exclusively observed in such city-spaces. Practices, beliefs, even institutions that develop as urban religion go on to travel out, radiate, or settle in the hinterland. They may even stand up and polemicize against the closest or biggest city of a regional urban network as will be shown below. The geography of lived urban religion,³ as well as its practitioners, testimonies, and specialists, are, then, different from what the same people imagine, perceive, and geographically locate as city-space.

³For the concept of lived religion, we also draw on its historical and phenomenological enlargement (Gasparini et al. 2020; Rüpke 2021a, 66–83) beyond contemporary non-institutionalized religious practices (Orsi 1997; McGuire 2008).

The present article ultimately aims to defend the analytical usefulness of this conceptualization of urban religion for the history of religion since the rise of urbanity, and hence cities, in different regions from roughly the fourth millennium BCE onwards. We will eventually show that the typical critique of the concept of urban religion emerges from the simplistic restriction of the urban to urban space, i.e., cities. We will start by developing a more nuanced notion of urbanity and hence of urban religion as a technical concept built on the former. Without doubt, important elements of urbanity draw on the correlation between technical, social, aesthetic, and other forms of cultural innovations, on the one hand, and a specific form and scale of human sociation, the city, on the other. Admittedly, some inventions and techniques like the use of record keeping including writing or high division of labour, are stereotypically associated with large settlements. However – and this is what the body of this article aims to stress – this is not only going along with the production of a binary framework of spatial distinctions (which we will discuss under the term of ‘city lens’) but also with the blurring of borders, as the very word *urbanitas* can illustrate. Religion is crucial for both dynamics. The highly debated ‘urban’ or ‘rural’ character of early Christ religion serves as a case study to further argue our point and to demonstrate its comparative usefulness.

Urbanity: a practice-centred approach

An everyday practice of establishing ties to the world

In order to avoid any urban – non urban dichotomy right from the start it is useful to put urbanity into the wider perspective of geography-making. German geographer Benno Werlen has proposed the analytical differentiation of space-related action into three types: (a) instrumentally rational practices, (b) norm-oriented practices, and (c) meaning-oriented practices, each of which corresponds to specific means of the ‘appropriation of spatially expansive physical objects’ (Werlen 2017, 40, 42; 2010). These three different orientations of practices towards calculation-exchange (in the case of a), prescription-legitimation (b), and signification-communication (c) constitute what Werlen calls ‘everyday regionalizations’. These he understands as ‘acts of geography-making’, denoting an ‘everyday practice of establishing ties to the world’, also called ‘world incorporation’ (Werlen 2017, 43). These practices can be associated with three forms of self-world relationships – productive-consumptive (a), normative-political (b), and significative-informative types of world incorporation (c) – through which everyday geographies of production and consumption, normative appropriation and political control, and information and symbolic appropriation are produced (Werlen 2017, 45).

The analytical grid that results from distinguishing these everyday regionalizations is serviceable beyond the discipline of social geography. Indeed, if we interpret the city as a specific scale of geography-making and regionalization, then practices of urbanization are far from being the prerogative of just a few empowered individuals and groups, like royal founders busy with building strongholds for an empire or a place-bound aristocracy engaged in a process of closure. Rather, they come to include very different types of agents and idiosyncratically relevant actions, all more or less intentionally aiming at constituting ‘cities’ as socio-spatial forms (see Werlen 2021). At the same time, these

agents and actions differ profoundly in their understanding of this level of regionalization and in their *modi operandi*, that is, in the ‘sets of rules governing the ways in which the available means, tools, and media can (or cannot) be used by actors’ (Werlen 2017, 50). These practices of everyday urbanization all constitute the ‘city’ as a specific *place* (as distinct from other named places) as well as a multidimensional *space* liable to different strategies of distance management, i.e., ‘metrics’ (depending on whether it is understood as something to be traversed, controlled, or acted upon; Lévy 2013a, 2013b, 2013c; Lévy and Lussault 2013), or even as a *network* (of like-minded people or professional colleagues) instead of a built-up territory. But they can also extend their reach or differentiate their scope to include consciously ruralized locations like extra urban hobby farms, retreat centres like the Monte Verità or a pilgrim destination even in wilderness. Moreover, each type of space related action involved in urbanization is liable to simultaneously interacting with the other two types,⁴ as well as with other scales of regionalization. Ultimately, not only the residents of a settlement or its immediate surroundings participate in such processes. From the outside, the same settlement can be seen as an ideal place of aggregated living (and possibly a destination of migration), as a simple member of a class of ‘cities’, as a discrete point in a landscape in the far-reaching regionalizations of travelers, or as a symbol of domination and an instrument of national or imperial rule.

Such a model is congruent with the historical fact that we do not encounter isolated cities but urban networks. In all its historical paths and phases, urbanization is a relational-*cum*-reflexive process. It takes the form of networks between settlers and settlements, produces settlement groups and hierarchies (of, say, ‘hamlets’, ‘villages’, ‘markets’, and ‘cities’), and underwrites them representationally – or better, ideologically – by placing some at the top (see Oberste 2012 for the concept of metropolity), others at the lower end of the spectrum of ‘urbanity’, and many smaller places simply outside of it. In other words, just as urbanity is not just being urban, but being urbane – a matter of ‘distinction’ in both senses of the word – urbanization is always a matter of neighboring and competing nucleated forms of human habitation.

The salient meaning of urbanity within particular discourses that construe life (and in particular one’s own life) as urban is only occasionally explicit and thus able to confirm our interpretation of constitutive everyday practices. Normative scripts or other texts legislating these meanings, entertaining such characterizations, or pondering over such connotations are correspondingly rare and have historically taken very different generic forms (Urciuoli 2021). Literary communication beyond administrative, juridical, economic, or religious prescriptions and necessities (e.g., Lafi 2022) is a promising field of enquiry, wherever it reflects the ‘urban condition’ of life, love, or even of religious communication. Such reflections are documented in cuneiform texts like the Gilgamesh epic (Gerhards 2013), the story of Babel in the Hebrew bible (Lévy 2022), and even in Latin love elegy (Rüpke 2020).

What are typical contents of urbanity? V. Gordon Childe’s famous ten criteria for distinguishing ‘the earliest cities from any older or contemporary village’ (Childe 1950, 9) offer a useful summary. They include: (1) bigger size and higher density ‘than any

⁴For example, the continuum of production and consumption in an urbanized landscape intersects with political classifications aiming at an exclusive or inclusive entitlement to the ‘right to the city’, and/or interlace with the charging and branding of a particular city atmosphere with specific qualities, capabilities, and emotions.

previous settlements’, (2) specialisation beyond peasants supported by agricultural surplus, (3) centralised redistribution of surplus, (4) monumental buildings, (5) central planning in a division of labour, (6) writing and (7) sciences, (8) ‘artistic expression’, (9) foreign trade, (10) settled craftsmen as full citizens (*ibid.*, 9–16). This academic version of urbanity illustrates Werlen’s (a) productive-consumptive, (b) normative-political, and (c) significant-informative types of world incorporation ascribed to the city. Explicit circum-Mediterranean and European urbanity discourses of the preceding millennia foregrounded elements from (4) onwards, that is, focusing on size and aesthetics of buildings, size and diversity of markets, intellectual achievements and not least the refinement of manners in dealing with many and diverse people, equanimity, wit, and humor (Ramage 1973: on republican and imperial Roman *urbanitas*; Bernard 2013: on Byzantine *asteiotes*). We cannot postulate that these were all added up as assets of life regarded as urban. Indeed, the advantages of some might also offset the disadvantages of the other: for instance, technical achievements benefitting the population might offset the costs of time-intensive participation of the citizens in administration (as shown by Ober 2008 for Athens). Hardly as strongly causally related to (1) as it has been claimed (Norenzayan 2013), religion is involved in any of the criteria between (3) and (9), if not even (10), as craftspeople frequently operated in relation and/or proximity to temples. Evidently, these were qualities of urban space and of living *in* urban space as well as indicators betraying origin *from* urban space on display *outside* of it.

Performing urbanity: *urbanitas* as a case in point

The Latin term of *urbanitas* is a case in point of the complex relation of space-bound and space-transcending elements. Latin *urbs* was a generic word frequently used in the Latin comedies of the second century BCE in order to denote substantial nucleated settlements. Plautus invents the word *urbicapus*, ‘one who captures cities’, as a form of address used to praise a soldier (Plaut., *Mil.* 1055). The adjective *urbanus* is derivative and typically used in contrast with *rus* and *rusticus*. In the mid-second century, Cato the Elder employs (and seems to presuppose) the concept of the *villa urbana*. This is a type of accommodation built on a farm in the countryside but in accordance with urban standards of comfort, which make it a good prototypical materialization of the place-unbound character of urbanity. Note that it is only the rich farmer who is able to afford such an estate and that such a rich farmer was supposed by Cato to live seasonally in the city – for, historically, ‘the city defied winter’ (Tuan 1978, 7). The urban luxury in the extra-urban place of production will entice the owner to stay for longer periods (‘localism’), to participate in and directly supervise country ways and activities (‘countryism’; Bell 1992, 74), and thus to become even more successful (Cato, *Agr.* 4; Cf. Varro, *Rust.* 3.1.10, 3.2.10, and 1.16.3; briefly, De Martino 1985, 117). The countryside, these suggestions imply, has its own merits in the form of more quiet enjoyment of and direct connection with agricultural production. As is underlined by Roman comedy or the stories told about Cincinnatus, elevated to the highest of duties directly from his plough, not every supposedly urban figure is superior to a countryperson (see Livy 3.26.6–12; Plautus, *Most.* 15). Ultimately, Cato operates within an urban/rural dichotomy but he negotiates and deploys it in such a way that ascriptions of value differ at different levels (Rich and Wallace-Hadrill 1991, 247–253).

It was against this background that Cicero remodelled the term *urbanus* in numerous instances and in front of many different audiences (from pupils of rhetoric to juridical and political publics). He also probably invented the substantivized form *urbanitas*, as well as the adverbial usage *urbane*, striking a chord with many of his contemporaries who quickly picked up his strategic coinage. As Emma Dench has shown, the new usage combined two contrasting semantic aspects. In the mid-first century BCE, on the one hand, *urbs* qualified Rome alone, in that the military, political, and cultural capital of Italy could assert itself as the only true *urbs* within the ‘rustic’ Italy. On the other hand, the very characteristics associated with *urbanus*, and abstracted in the concept of *urbanitas*, were qualities of people that did not depend on their geographical origins. These could well be performed outside Rome (Dench 2005, 114–5, 334–7). Consequently, the term can either be made into a claim of inclusion and high status despite the extra-Roman and even extra-urban origins or spaces of action of the referent, or can be undercut by the same means when locality weighs in on its meaning and Romano-centric views curb the referential reach. In the rapid, partial and elite-centred unification of first-century BCE Italy, the whole concept could also be questioned by reference to the notion of true rustic simplicity (*rusticitas*) as an alternative to urban depravity and luxury, or to the pride that comes from having one’s origins in, or living in, other (ancient) towns (*municipia*) (Dench 2005, 337–342; see Kronenberg 2009).

All the actors and actions engaging in urbanity pursued – more or less reflexively and, accordingly, in a more or less textually tangible way – very different regionalization strategies and therefore produced and performed very different urbanities. Variety is also to be found in the balance between agent – and space-specific qualities involved in any act of geography-making. As is evident from the Roman case invoked by the inquiry into *urbanitas*, moving across and staying within the city-space as symbolically marked out by walls or a ring of cemeteries, corroborated by legal rules, and bolstered by a further range of practices, is just one facet of the lifestyle of social elites deriving their wealth mostly from agricultural production, land ownership and control of their rustic staff or tenants (see Zuiderhoek 2017 for antiquity more generally). The same holds true for farmers living in the city but walking daily to their fields or for peasants who regularly sell their products in urban markets (Robinson 2017, 66–69, 75–76). However, for members of the elite in the late Republic and the early Empire, cities (*urbes*, *municipia*, *coloniae*), and above all the city of Rome (*urbs*), was clearly *the* place to display wealth, acquire luxury goods, interact with peers, and perform power. Moreover, some spots within the city-space were particularly convenient as visible platforms for showy display and posturing (the *atrium*, the main street, the forum, the arena).⁵

Urbanity itself was part of those performances and thus used as a means of individualization and as an instrument of distinction in terms of wealth, taste, or knowledge. The normative value of urbanity in that discourse was focused on the personal qualities as well as the ability of the individual resident to consume the exceptional cultural production of *that specific city*, that is, on the comportment and values adequate for a member of *that particular city-based* (but also highly moveable) social class. Social mobility in ancient Rome often peaked with the geographical relocation of the provincials to

⁵See e.g. Tibullus, *Elegies* 2.3.49–66. Yet some were risky too. For the street as a place ‘where the powerful were susceptible to very public attacks’, see Hartnett 2017, 98–103.

the capital, that is, with a person's ability to transfer and reproduce their status and power into a different space. In general, to be urbane was a normative requirement for upward social mobility in places that had to keep up their urbanity (above all in the long Hellenized and urbanized eastern parts of the Mediterranean) or had to become cities according to 'Roman' or 'Latin' law in order to function as mediators of Empire and effective regional centres. In this way, individual performances of urbanity as enacted for example in financing theatres or amphitheatres went hand in hand with the collective local rooting of urbanity, the transformation of a pre-existing or newly founded settlement into a city that provided urban, narratives and facilitated individual practices of urbanity.

Inherently 'beyond': urban religion

Parts of these and other urbanities were also religious actions and concepts.⁶ In our view, the entanglement between religion and urbanity is twofold and operates on two levels, methodological and historical. Methodologically, the subject – and practice-centred theoretical perspective used to analyze urbanity is consistent with, and proves beneficial to, a homologous perspective on religion. Like urbanity, religion, too, is something that is not to be viewed primarily from the perspective of stable systems of symbols and meanings but rather by focusing on the variability of lived religion (Rüpke 2016; Gasparini et al. 2020). Historically, religion is not just a nice add-on, some paraphernalia that come along with urbanization – whether taken as a long-term geographically grounded process or a short-term discursive strategy. Rather, it is a core element of the social practice of producing not just settlements, even large ones, but self-conscious 'cities'.

Since the start of urbanization, first in large settlements and soon beyond, religion features as a critical aspect of urbanity just as urbanity is a critical aspect of religion (Rau, Rüpke 2020). The *ritualization* of certain practices – such as coming together, building walls, securing networks of exchange or complex systems of division of labour – is one of the strategies by which a collection of huts is made special, namely urban. This process typically involves certain special agents as referents of religious communication, generally ancestors or gods, in the act of crediting a special status to extraordinary or recurring activities (Rüpke 2021a). Strategies of making something 'special' and in particular, 'sacralized', and performing this extraordinary status in different fields, thus reinforce each other. Closely related to ritualization is *monumentalization*, since monumentality is typically (and, in most cases, necessarily) a combination of upscaled practices and upscaled material assemblages.⁷ The people and resources concentrated in a city offered the material basis for practicing and building monumentally as a means to express the new social quality of such a large settlement. The same conditions allow for its regular application for religious purposes, notably for attracting the gods' attention and heightening their status. The formation of explicit systems of linear authority and hierarchical ranking of political power in order to rule complex societies often implies or provokes the rise of alternative sources and counterpoising agencies of religious

⁶The plural 'parts' is used here to indicate that such elements need not have been conceptualised as a coherent whole, 'religion', by the agents themselves and their audiences.

⁷On different aspects, Osborne 2014; Brysbaert 2018; Buccellati 2019; Hageneuer and van der Heyden 2019; Thomas 2020; Wunderlich 2020; Rüpke 2022.

power in so-called *heterarchical* processes (Crumley 1995; see Urciuoli 2022). Complex priesthoods are a result of urban religion rather than a natural ingredient from pre-urban religious practices. Extensive record keeping, including writing, is another innovation associated with the self-conceptualization of cities. *Scripturalization* not only renders the city ‘legible’ for purposes of administration (Law 2015) but also allows the formation of a religious discourse about religious practices and new types of religious claims (Rüpke 2018, 327–363).

We have redefined the social science concept of ‘urban religion’ as a processual category in order to grasp, bring together, and re-describe such – and other – changes that involve and instantiate the co-production of religion and urbanity. A specific assumption concerning place specificity and reflexivity supports this re-descriptive endeavour: religion follows a logic that is similar to that which we have sketched for urbanity. Presumably differently from other forms of regionalizations, notions and practices of urbanity oscillate between an orientation towards similarity, standardization, peer-recognition, and (thus) attachment to place, on the one hand, and diversity, complexity, long-distance connections, and (thus) downplaying of one’s physical attachment and emotional belonging to the city-space, on the other. Religion, by contrast, is subject to a different kind of the same ambivalence, namely the tension between ‘locative’ and ‘utopian’ (Smith 2003) orientations, ‘dwelling’ and ‘crossing’ (Tweed 2006), the politically effective immanence or transcendence of the divine addressees (see Strathern 2019) – again, to historically and locally very different extents. Put simply, if gods are visibly located and ritually enclosed in the city temples (or churches), if they are architecturally fixed and iconographically differentiated, then they can also be conceptualized as forces and entities that defy and deny the caging effect and fixing strategies of this emplacement and immobilization (Urciuoli 2020b).

To sum up this section, an impulse to go ‘beyond the city’ is thus intrinsic to urbanity, of religion, and (probably to a higher degree) of urban religion. Both urbanity and religion might be performed well beyond the city space, perhaps in the desert, in the wilderness, or on the mountains. Nevertheless, the biographical and institutional stabilization of such free-floating urbanity and religion may require material and physical anchors such as: the huge number of huts of the hermits, the architectural and social complexity of a rural university campus, the robustness of a coenobitic monastery deliberately placed apart from the cities, as in the case of Cistercian or Servitian orders (see Renna 1983), or the splendour of a rustic villa in the shape of a palace. Urbanity and religion cross and blur the boundaries they create and negate at the same time. We will investigate further and in greater depth processes akin to these when we turn to the formative period of what was later to be conceptualized as ‘Christianity’. First, however, we need to flesh out some epistemological and methodological issues related to the dichotomous spatial distinction typical for urbanity by turning to the constitutive *alter*, to the prototypically non-urban, to ‘rurality’.

Turning down the ‘city lens’: rurality as a serviceable heuristic term

The rural is neither the non-urbanized ‘rest’ nor just one of the regionalizations beyond the urban. Rather, in many urban imaginaries it is the other end of the dichotomous construction of the urban as social space. Sociologist Hillary Angelo has drawn attention to

the ‘city lens’ as a widespread perceptual and hermeneutical phenomenon in both academic and non-academic discourses on urbanity: ‘There is a hegemonic way of seeing urban environments (what I call the ‘city lens’) that was developed in the context of the 19th century industrial metropolis, and which continues to strongly influence how we interpret urban life’, a ‘naturalised epistemological “lens”’ resulting from the ‘reification of a historical experience of the city turned into an interpretive frame, which people use to make sense of a variety of situations in the world today’ (Angelo 2017, 160, 164). At the core of this lens is a set of transhistorical, transposable, and normative relational opposites, a list headed by the urban-rural divide in its many shades (city versus countryside/wilderness/not-yet-city/etc.) and followed up by descriptive binaries like nature – society, agrarian – industrial, community – anonymity, easily verging into the normative binaries of good community-bad anomie and educated versus barbarian or civilized versus savage. Such binaries are evidently not any longer bound to specific forms of settlements. Instead of allowing for a more precise analysis of differences, through the city lens these connotatively powerful polarities are seen as redundantly correlated: the identification of one is followed by attribution of all the others (2017, 164-166, building on Berger 2008).

To break this spell, the city lens needs to be demystified, which is to say that it must be thoroughly historicized. Angelo’s suggestion that we should ‘study *urban imaginaries* in addition to *imaginaries of the urban*’ implies two analytical moves. First, reconstructing the epistemological processes through which a specific set of social categories have resulted from historical processes. Second, looking away from the city and towards ‘things other than the city’ that are nevertheless perceived and understood through it (Angelo 2017, 172, 173).

This programme is in accordance with the concept of urbanity as developed above. The dichotomous thinking structures what we have called urbanity, meaning that rurality, too, is part of urbanity. Against Angelo, we would like to stress, however, that the urban lens is not a contingent outcome of capitalist urbanization, that is, of the rise of ‘the industrial metropolis at the turn of the last century’ (Angelo 2017, 162). It is as old as urbanization *tout court*, although we are certainly dealing with a historically variable relation. For instance, in the Roman imperial period, a highly developed normative concept of *urbanitas* circulated in a society where (proto-) industrial production was located in the countryside at least as much as it was in towns. Clearly, the urban – rural binary did not overlap with any agrarian – industrial dichotomy. Urbanity is a necessary conceptual component of urbanization *as such*, integral to the spread or survival of towns and urban spaces.

Besides this genealogy, we also want to engage with Angelo’s reflections on another issue: the outline of an alternative approach. In her view, ‘hybridity’, that is, the dissolution of the binaries into ranges of variants and combinations (like ‘rurban’, ‘socio-nature’, ‘urban peasant’), is an inadequate solution. The ‘ubiquity of the city lens’, she persuasively argues, eventually annihilates the effects of any analytic hybridization of details, and the vast normative implications strengthen rather than soften the opposition if the rural is detected in the city ‘as signs of the not-city in the wrong places’ (Angelo 2017, 170, 171). Yet we would like to challenge the assumption that these second-order scholarly hybridizations, created in order to blur clear-cut dichotomies and ‘increasingly illogical systems of spatial classification’ (159), are expected to address

exclusively contemporary phenomena. Hybridization has been part of urbanization from early on. Long before the Garden City and the Sustainable City, non-built spaces were included in many walled-in areas and agglomerated settlements in general (from the Iron Age Europe: Moore and Fernández Götz 2022). These were not attempts at romanizing ‘nature’ but rather the result of concepts like ‘security’ – i.e., the maintenance of pastoral spaces or intra-city horticulture in case of sieges. They were the consequence of the provision of urban amenities like water or orchards or flowers, or were instantiations of ideals of religious communication with the gods via trees and uncovered earth (e.g., Baker 2009). The different situational logics produced hybridization of the basic distinctions already on the level of the phenomena. On a different note, as we have seen in the case of ancient Rome, the lack of co-extensivity between the display, lifestyle, and the normative apparatus of mobile elites, on the one hand, and the urban space as a focus of luxury consumption and ostentation, exchange and performance of power, on the other, produced ambivalences *within* the very concept of urbanity.

If historically urbanization is the process introducing a difference that remained important, even if frequently hybridized, at least until the advent of 20th-century ‘planetary urbanization’ (Brenner and Schmid 2015, but cf. critiques in Walker 2015; Ruddick 2018; also Kress 2016), we also need to examine the *non-city lens*. Better, we must inquire as to what the vast majority of humankind during the past six thousand years thought of their own condition, and ask what categories they used in the framing of such thoughts. Despite originating in a specific mode of distinction produced by urbanity, ‘rurality’ might usefully serve as a heuristic term for this complex endeavour.⁸ Rurality, indeed, needs not take the form of the occasional radical anti-urbanism of urbanites from ancient eremites to 20th century prophets of *Lebensreform* (see Conn 2014). Given that urban historians tend to prefer researching individual cities as well as ‘the connections between them, or between cities and the wider world’ (thus Harris 2021, 51), there has been little systematic historical research into whether, in which form, and how critically a self-conscious rurality has developed as a lens through which the village inhabitants or elites look at the world. Compared with the results achieved in rural geography and sociology in terms of rectification of categories and refinement of discourse analysis (e.g., Halfacree 1993, 1995), the lack, or at least scarcity, of such major forms of communication and techniques as those known from urban contexts – extensive writing or monumental inscriptions, for instance – hinders historical research into rurality. Moreover, recalling the earlier self-reflexive move, and thus bearing in mind the danger of academically reinforcing an urban bias rather than neutrally observing and documenting a non-urban point of view (see Dymitrow and Brauer 2017), one must be very careful in reviewing the available evidence.⁹

⁸For the purpose of this paper we do not follow further important non-city lenses like ‘nation’ or ‘empire’.

⁹As an initial step, one needs to start from a rejection of the (urban) supposition and implications of a unity of the non-urban (Decker and Trummer 2020, 10–12), that is, one must begin by considering very different ruralities on different scales. The following step, indicated by the concept of regionalizations as introduced above, would be to produce generalizations that either stay below the level of the non-urban (e.g., villages, areas of dispersed populations, uninhabited areas) or include the urban in a co-constitutive relation (as, for instance, in the concept of the ‘rurban assemblages’ of Schmidt-Lauber and Wolfmayr 2020). To give just one example from a very different field: historical linguistics gives rise to some generalizable observations, and these do not confirm ‘the idea of rural language being static and urban language being innovative’ (Vandekerckhove 2010, 326). Of course, cities as centres of exchange and (not least, cultural) production are credited with a prestige that furthers the diffusion of urban innovations. They produce exportable innovations due to the peculiarities of urban populations while, at the same time, trying to retain differences that

To summarize, in looking for imaginaries and practices of urbanity – including urban religious imaginaries and practices – beyond the city, one must not only highlight the difference between urbanity and the city but also acknowledge and value the existence and relevance of other forms of geography-making that are not informed by a city lens or uniquely triggered and mediated by urban aspirations. Our final set of examples, taken from recent historiography on the early Christians, attempts to demonstrate how a perspective focused on urban religion might be advantageous for the analysis of the different types of regionalizations encapsulated in the concepts of urbanity and rurality. In doing so, the last section of the article will also showcase that urban religion *is not* synonymous with a ‘city lens’ approach.

Rural and urban christians: a false problem for urban religion

Imagine a cross-disciplinary conference during which some hard-line Lefebvrian geographers gather with the most radical opponents of the ‘urban thesis’¹⁰ on early Christ religion. They would probably conclude that the city as we (think we) know it, that is, as a socio-spatial formation clearly distinguishable from a rural environment, never existed – other than, perhaps, for a relatively short period stretching from the Middle Ages to the Industrial Revolution. On the one hand, the Lefebvrians would claim that, slowly but inexorably since the beginning of the last century, the city as such has stopped existing. Once the rural Other has been fully internalized by the urban, the latter no longer qualifies a settlement as a nucleated locality. It is the defining totalizing characteristic of contemporary society (e.g., Brenner and Schmid 2015; see Lefebvre 2003 (1970)). On the other hand, the scholars of early Christian religion who oppose the ‘urban thesis’ would maintain that the rural-urban divide is a modern conceptual dichotomy illegitimately projected back onto the symbiotic ecological landscape of the ancient Mediterranean. In the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, when Christ religion first began to spread, cities and countryside blended into

safeguard their prestigious status. Yet city dialects, often produced by a large working class, might be negatively evaluated by people in the countryside, thus generating a tendency towards ‘contrahierarchical diffusion’. Increased rates and ranges of mobility typically endanger the stability of sharp intradialectal differences between rural localities, but such levelling of local idiolects might generate wider ‘regiolects’ and thus produce a ‘koineization’ at the level of the region rather than a linguistic orientation towards the next major city (Vandekerckhove 2010, 327–328). Strong regional networks might replace the very local ties and, in doing so, easily overcome town–country asymmetries. In this context, religious networks might exert particularly strong influences (see Daxelmüller 2012). Certain contemporary development policies offer another interesting perspective from which to consider the potentialities of the rural. Non-urban settlements – villages – might also benefit from their specific legal status. The clear-cut urban-rural divide in contemporary Chinese policies of economic development and urbanization offers significant examples, even though religious components are rarely present in the published evidence (e.g., Murphey 1972; Tan and Ding 2008; Ren 2021). The possibility of achieving rapid agreement in the village ‘community’ (whatever this implies in terms of power hierarchies and range of participation) on plans for land development and industrialization projects, rather than requiring the navigation of the complex processes instituted by administrative structures in cities, has produced a wide range of counter-intuitive ‘urban villages’ and a whole gamut of forms of settlements along a scale from village to city (Wang, Cheong, and Li 2019, 31–39). At the same time, many forms of architecture or practices associated with the urban have been ignored or even consciously rejected by villagers (Wilson and Zhang 2019). Finally, even when they are aware of a possible urban origin for certain ascriptions, villagers might appropriate the semantics and values of the ‘rural idyll’ (Short 1991) as part of their rural imaginaries.

¹⁰The formula of the ‘urban thesis’ has recently been used to refer polemically to a largely hegemonic narrative on early Christians and cities that features more or less prominently in historical studies sharing a set of research foci, epistemic and (sometimes) extra-epistemic interests, logical-mathematical flaws, and heuristic-analytical blind spots (Robinson 2017, 14–20). The formula can be applied to all recent scholars arguing, admitting, or simply assuming and repeating that early Christ religion was an urban religion/phenomenon/movement in the sense of an essentially city-based and city-focused religion/phenomenon/movement.

one another to the point that, in many aspects of people's everyday life – including religion – the distinction between urban and rural simply lost all meaning (e.g., Robinson 2017).

This imagined conference would tell us that we are now living in an age of planetary urbanization without cities, whereas the early Christians inhabited a rural empire dotted with cities and increasingly replete with Roman citizens but lacking in urbanity, or at least in self-aware and reflexive urbanity. Both statements are questionable, but we will limit ourselves to discussing the implications of the latter for religion. More precisely, we will review some recent scholarship on early Christ religion to contest the idea that the *position* of the religious actors among established spatial relations, their own knowledge of and *reflection* on this position, as well as the *recasting* thereof through their everyday geography-making, are of no importance for our understanding of their religious practices and identities.

In his methodological contribution to a recent collected volume partly aimed to review the urban thesis (Tiwald and Zangenberg 2021), Frits Gerard Naerebout challenges the assumption that 'Christianity was from the days of its formation a primarily urban phenomenon' with unquestionable energy, clarity, and consistency (2021, 21). His critical comments contain all the indispensable ingredients for dismantling the established paradigm: demographic (i.e., the claim that Christ-believing urbanites could not outnumber the rural believers), contextual-*cum*-ecological (i.e., the view that town and countryside are to be considered as complementary rather than opposed to each other), and aetiological (i.e., the assertion that the differences between and the specificities among local 'Christianities' are not contingent upon the urban or rural character of the 'communities'). With this latter argument, Naerebout targets the *causal* dimension of the relationship between urbanity and religion by directly questioning the urban as a distinct factor of religious change. He also engages with our research on 'Religion and Urbanity' by extending his criticism to the very notion of urban religion:

Religion will have been a *creative force* from well before the rise of urban living, and was such a *force* subsequently, in urban and non-urban *contexts*. It can be studied as such *in the context* of town life in the ancient world, but I do not think that this *context* – as town life is part of city life which also embraces the rural – turned it into a phenomenon *sui generis*: urban religion. (2021, 30–31; our emphasis)

While religion is said to be a 'force', the city is reduced to a contextual signifier, i.e., to an inoperative container. Religion generates things while the city contains stuff. A shorthand for the resources managed and the strategies pursued by religious specialists and practitioners, religion acts and propels changes, whereas the city merely houses and records them. If anything, the city *symbolizes* these changes. In a footnote, Naerebout explicitly criticizes the understanding of the city as an 'agent of change' rather than a 'symbol' thereof (Naerebout 2021, 32). It is always striking to see how, for scholars of religion, a personified type of agency is admitted for religion only. Religion is unquestionably assumed to operate as a 'creative force', while for some reason other kinds of panhuman phenomena, like the city, do not have the same prerogative.¹¹

¹¹Can a socio-natural assemblage like the city act agentially as human beings do? For the crucial theoretical distinction between causal relationships (i.e., making things happening) and enabling relationships (i.e., making things possible), and thus for the assumption that the city as a spatial formation entails the latter but not the former, see Abend 2022.

This issue aside, Naerebout's line of argument would be more effective if the volume containing his essay did not also include a remarkable article by Heidrun Mader on Montanism as a 'rural [type of] Christianity' which plainly contradicts the former's view. In fact, if one were able to find a rural-based variant of early Christ religion showing traits influenced by its hinterland conditions, then the 'sui generis' quality of urban religion might be indirectly substantiated. Montanism – 'The Phrygian Sect', as its rivals preferred to call it, or 'The Prophecy' or 'The New Prophecy' as it was known to its adherents (Trevett 1996; Tabbernee 2007; Dell'Isola 2020) – will be used here as a case-control.

What the phrygian christians tell us about urban religion

Mader's summarizing remarks are so useful for our purpose that it is worth quoting them *in extenso*:

The prophetic movement in Phrygia is one of our first examples of rural Christianity evidenced not only by epigraphic but also literary sources. We saw how the Phrygian Christians could practice their religion with more interreligious outgoingness and more freedom *due to hinterland conditions*. Compared to urban settings they were farther away from strict imperial observation. Besides the inscriptions and the iconography on their doorstelae, the content of their oracles, composed by both women and men, displayed their religious self-consciousness, so did the ecstatic form of uttering them and writing them down, thereby producing religious literature. *While profiting from the freedom the hinterland offered*, these rural Christians also *suffered from the lack of protection provided by city walls and imperial control* over collectors of illegal dues. Montanus' oracles show how the Phrygian Christians compensated for their tribulations theologically. Their tenacious belief in an ideal celestial Jerusalem city coming down onto their own settlements illustrates in a lively way how these rural Christians dreamed of urban advantages cleansed from the urban disadvantages that would have curtailed their religious freedom. (2021, 333; our emphasis)

Naerebout's call for a 'more comparative analysis of urban and rural religious phenomena' (2021, 32) that tests the different impacts of the related ecologies on religion could not be more persuasively satisfied. In her insightful essay, Mader deploys a model of urbanity/rurality that focuses on a very limited (and controllable) set of oppositions, and does so without any distorting city lens producing dichotomous stereotypes. She observes an outburst of ecstatic outgoingness and epigraphic self-confidence in early 3rd-century Phrygian Christ religion – including its Montanist version (Lampe 2016). She further outlines a contrast between a greater interreligious openness and the possibility of evading Roman control in sparsely populated hinterlands, on the one hand, and a more cautionary approach to those who were publicly Christian in denser and more pervasively monitored urban environments, on the other (Lampe and Tabbernee 2008, 145). Finally, she argues that the rural Phrygian Montanists' epigraphic habits and styles of prophetic utterances are likely to reflect this difference.

Mader comfortably speaks of the Phrygian Montanists as exponents of a 'rural Christianity' and in contrast to Naerebout, *does* claim that rurality significantly shapes the Montanists' religious identification strategies, group styles, and even literary expressions. At the same time, she does not argue that Montanism is a rural product that is only possible under rural conditions. Nor does she assume that urban Montanists are something akin to a contradiction in terms. On the contrary, the spread of the movement, the

recruitment of new adherents, and the rise of ever more enemies were largely dependent on travelling texts, human mobility, and information exchange that took place via intra – and inter-urban networks. To mention just one example, the Christian African writer Tertullian is known to have adhered to the New Prophecy in the midst of one of the biggest and most cosmopolitan cities of the empire, Carthage, where Montanism was possibly introduced from the capital of the empire (e.g., Tabbernee 2007, 61; *contra* Trevett 1996, 71–72).

Likewise, Mader *does not* claim that coming out as Christian was impossible in cities, or that rural freedom was unconditional, generalized, and limitlessly creative. In our view, Mader's essay finely shows that Montanism, taken as the neutral or derogatory appellation of an empirical phenomenon, is not per se a rural religion. Rather, rural religion as an intellectual construct can help explain some particular aspects of the original Montanism and, at the same time, is likely to alter or use up its explanatory power when the New Prophecy works its way into cities as different and distant as Antioch, Rome, Lyons, Carthage, and later even Constantinople. If the available documents allowed it, the potentialities and limits of the 'citification' (Urciuoli 2020a) of the New Prophecy would certainly be a topic worth exploring – as worth exploring as the potentialities and limits of the 'rurification' (Gasparini 2021) of an originally urban religious constellation/movement/tradition.

Equally interesting for our purpose are Mader's final reflections on the urban character of the compensatory imagination of the Montanists. Inscriptional evidence shows that, at the time, rural Phrygian agricultural population was suffering under high fiscal pressure (Lampe and Tabbernee 2008, 52 and 57–58). It seems that the tax collectors combing the country on behalf of the imperial procurators were fiscally bullying the tenant farmers working on the vast imperial estates that stretched all over the birthplace of the prophetic movement. In 3rd-century Phrygia, *Stadtluft macht(et) frei*, at least when it came to extra dues and unlawful exactions. Ever since the inception of urbanism, walled-in urban populations are caged and protected at once.

The apocalyptic reward imagined by the leaders of this originally rural-based religious movement takes the form of a city. This is not just some random city, however, but a specific city belonging to the Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic discourse: the (Heavenly) Jerusalem, *The City*. Referring to the supposed climax of the Montanists' apocalyptic imagination, Mader writes that 'the heavenly city comes down onto rural poleis and onto imperial farm estates' (2021, 333).¹² The name of these 'rural poleis' – actually a small town and a farming settlement, respectively – are Pepuza and Tymion, which Montanus himself first seems to have identified with no less a place than Jerusalem (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 5:18:3). In Werlen's terms, the meaning-oriented geography-making of the Montanists consists of a symbolic appropriation that apocalyptically blends the motif of the heavenly city with that of the motherland, thus powerfully combining geographical otherness and attachment to place. Overall, we see urbanity outside

¹²Whether the eschatological myth of a Judean celestial city descending into a Phrygian plateau actually belongs to the earliest phases of Montanism or dates some generations later is a matter of debate for specialists but not a diriment impediment to our argument. If Tertullian does not mention it, is it because the fabrication of this oracle is posterior to his adherence to the New Prophecy in the early 3rd-century (thus Trevett 1996, 98–100; Powell 1975, 44)? Or shall we think that Tertullian simply passed over the apocalyptic exaltation of an unknown rural location which was far away from both the political core of the empire and the geographical cradle of Christ religion, and thus largely insignificant to his urban audience in Carthage?

the city coalescing into a powerful ideal. On the one hand, we observe urban aspirations of protection, comfort, and liberation – very different from the above-mentioned rural dimensions of security and freedom – crystallizing as a dream. This dream features a set of urban advantages travelling out of the city, landing on a vast agricultural tableland stretching between two small Phrygian settlements, and transforming countryside and country life for the better while the disadvantages related to practicing Christ religion in an urban environment remain in the urban. On the other hand, urban religion beyond the city appears as a ‘utopian religion’ (Smith 2003), that is, a religious programme capitalizing on the symbolic content of a specific urban referent: Jerusalem, a powerful signifier that is all the more free/empty following the renaming of the real Jerusalem to Aelia Capitolina (thus Tabbernee 2007, 115) and that is as place-unbound as it is transportable and transferable to a host of different localities (Phrygian small towns and rural areas). In a word, we see urbanity reaching beyond its paramount material expression, the city, and being brought to bear on country people’s religious imagery of cosmic upheaval.

The spectacular transplanting of the holy city onto an extensive rural plateau seems not to have put a strain on the prophets. This is not only because, as some scholars have argued, the most recently identified location of Pepouza and Tymion is topographically very appropriate for the hosting of a sudden apocalyptic urbanizing event (Lampe and Tabbernee 2008, 107; Mader 2021, 332). Nor is it because the Phrygian spokespersons and adherents of the New Prophecy perceived there to be no difference between the city and the countryside. The reason is that, in this *very specific* spatiotemporal context and *very specific* domain of apocalyptic imagination, the change of the socio-ecological environment made no difference in the mythmaking association between triumphant urbanity and cosmic victory. Just like urban philosophers such as Philo of Alexandria, urban missionaries like Paul of Tarsus, and anti-urban prophets like John the Seer, the Phrygian farming peasants, too, aspired to live (eternally) in a paradisaical city.

The example of the Phrygian Christians shows that, in contrast to an intuitive apprehension and thus spontaneous misunderstanding of both notions, ‘urban religion’ and ‘rural religion’ do not index distinct religious topographies. Nor do they designate different religious entities or subsequent states of a single religious movement/organization. Rather, they can also refer to the synchronous co-existence, within a specific religious constellation of ideas and practices, of ‘space-forming and space-contingent’ (Soja 1980, 211) assumptions, aspirations, and actions that relate to urbanity (literacy skills, military protection, urban utopias) and rurality (capitalizing on dispersion and freedom from imperial observation), respectively.

To diognetus and its geography-making

However popular, and thus however well-researched, the Heavenly Jerusalems may be, urban religion offers more than just new vista of the transcendentalist and anticipatory myths crafted through ‘cityscaping’, the distinct practice of cutting, pasting, and reassembling culturally distributed semantics, images, and tropes related to generic or specific urban referents (Fuhrer, Mundt, and Stenger 2015). Rather, it also designates a reflexive performance that conceptualizes urbanization as a scale of everyday

regionalization that both presupposes and interacts with other scales and types of geography-making – and is not infrequently prioritized over them.

To give substance to this point, our second example is taken from the central chapters of the so-called *Epistle to Diognetus*, an anonymous Christian script tentatively dated between the second half of the 2nd and the beginning of the 3rd century CE. Naerebout specifically leverages this text to challenge the ‘urban thesis’, as well as to show the deficiency of urban religion as an approach to the study of religion, an approach that Naerebout incorrectly believes takes for granted a conventional rural-urban dichotomy (2021, 35, 31). In our view, the specific geographical reasoning of *To Diognetus* should instead be read as an invitation to test the analytical validity of urban religion as a perspective premised on the opposite assumption, that is, on the necessity of blurring the boundary between the urban and the rural.

Again, we start from the argument and presentation of the text by Naerebout:

In 6:1 f. [of *To Diognetus*] we read: ‘To sum up all in one word – what the soul is in the body, that are the Christians in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body; and Christians dwell in the world, yet are not of the world.’ The Greek word used here is *poleis*. It is correctly translated as ‘cities’ – but both the Greek and its translation are understood to mean ‘town’, the urban core, while in fact it is both the core and the territory. Now the urban nucleus is called *polis* as well, but to translate here ‘town’ goes against the sense of the text. The soul is not located in a specific part of the body, it is dispersed throughout the body. And in the same way the Christians are there, throughout the *kosmos*. If the Christians inhabit the whole *kosmos* in the way the soul is present in all of the body, then the Christians will live in towns and in the countryside – and that is exactly what the word *poleis* can express. In the same way as a body is composed of its members, the *kosmos* is composed of *poleis*: cities which with their territories make up the whole of the Empire – not an Empire consisting of cities (towns) with stretches of ‘nothing’ in between. (2021, 35; original emphasis)

The ‘nothing-in-between’ is, indeed, the myopic and misleading effect of a city lens we refuse to wear. At the same time, we do not seek to replace it with an equally deceptive ‘*polis* lens’, that is, an interpretive framework centered on the *polis* (as an administrative unit consisting of an urban core and its territory) and operating by attaching *polis*-oriented social meanings to other geographical realities. Certainly, while ‘the whole of the empire’ is far from being an urban society, it is not a sum of *poleis* either – a point that is true from ecological, political, and functional-economical perspectives (see de Ligt and Bintliff 2020, 13–14). It seems to us that the option of a diffusion throughout *poleis*, instead of across other institutionally established geographical constructs like countries (*patrides*) or nations (*ethnē*) – in Werlen’s terms we are dealing here with the so-called ‘geographies of normative appropriation and political control’ (2017, 45) – makes clear that the worldwide dissemination of Christ religion is imagined as pivoting around urban centres as political foci, infrastructure hubs, and network nodes. Missionary activities were certainly not restricted to cities and, *therefore*, the anonymous author of the text metonymically trades on urbanization to convey the ubiquitous spread of Christ religion at the global level across territories and within settlements of different administrative rank, functional centrality, and demographic scale.

The centrality of the intended audience of urbanites for *To Diognetus*’ catechetical concerns is manifest in the previous section of the text. In chap. 5, the author focuses

his parenthesis on the construction of a universal Christian identity that is predicated on the entitlement to a heavenly citizenship that does not discriminate in terms of legal rights or geographical provenance. Yet it is *de facto* designed for an urban mode of co-existence in variable and defective conditions of mutual personal knowledge, and eventually boils down to a serviceable urbanity to be performed among a huge majority of non-Christian residents (*Diogn.* 5; Urciuoli 2021). In cases in which rural-based Christ believers – whether permanent tenants, daily commuting farmers, or seasonal renters – wanted to know how to properly and safely behave as Christians, they could not help but adjust these and other analogous urban guidelines to rural-based social relations, or simply do without the former, that is, avoid patterning themselves after the role model of the urban Christian. Due to the lack of sources and the ‘city-’ or ‘urbanitas-bias’ (von Bendemann 2021, 54) of most extant Christian writings, we have no clue as to whether and how these people recast the city lens and the urban imaginaries inherent to the early Christian moralizing discourse.¹³ In fact, we remain in the dark up to the point at which a new urban agenda for performing Christianness declared the city religiously doomed, embraced a radical anti-urbanism of urbanites, and pushed the first ascetical virtuosi into the ‘desert’ (e.g., Rapp 2006).

Revelation: urbanity and its discontents

Of course, anti-urban sentiments did not wait for the first Christian monks in order to appear in Christian writings. The early Christ believers could poach from a time-honoured biblical repertoire (Lévy 2021). Besides, since the first Jesus stories and collections of sayings had started circulating via oral and written media, believers could appreciate the patterns of movement and the missionary agenda of the itinerant village and small-town preacher at the centre of their worship (Destro, Pesce 2012 (2008), 5-10; Tiwald 2021). Better: they could valorize those Jesus traditions that most pointedly showed rural tendencies as the authors later included in the New Testament consciously varied along this parameter (Rüpke 2021c). Yet ‘anti-urban sentiment’ can be a misleading phrase as well. In the same volume in which we find the essays of Naerebout and Mader, Tobias Nicklas discusses the most confrontational voice recorded in the Christian canonized literature, focuses on the most violent sections of this text (*Revelation* 17-18), and raises some reasonable doubts:

To put the issue another way: Is the Seer against ‘Babylon’ because he hates cities and many aspects related to city-life? Or, is the Seer against ‘Babylon’ because of *this city’s* alleged relation to satanic powers? I would say ‘no’ to both questions, and see the answer somewhere in the middle. Even if he clearly alludes to Rome, the Seer’s Babylon is not simply the historical Rome, but rather an ‘image’ of the goddess city and its life-style *per se*. [...]. Should we call this ‘anti-urban sentiment’? I hesitate. If the Seer had clear anti-urban sentiments, I cannot understand why he did not describe the ‘new creation’ as a kind of paradisiacal garden [instead of a heavenly city]. (2021, 258; original emphasis)

If we had equated the urban with the city, we could not but agree with Nicklas. There is no reason why somebody who hates the city must model the world-to-be after a city – especially if other paradisiacal images (e.g., the rural idyll) are culturally available (see Bremmer 2002). At the beginning of *Revelation*, seven Christ groups identified with

¹³For the class-related aspects of Mark’s city lens on the *chōra*, see Boer and Petterson 2017, 160–168.

the respective cities are alternatively warned, praised, chastised, or cursed (*Rev.* 2-3). (Bad) religion is the problem here, while urbanity as a way of life only appears in the context of (negative) associations with the imperial cult and with idolatry in general. When true religion is powerfully established at the end of the book, the city strikes back in full apocalyptic splendour. The fact that *Revelation* ends with the triumphant image of a paradisaical city makes clear that John the Seer is not a city hater. His target is not the city-thing. Nor is he particularly and eminently concerned about urbanity as a distinct way of life. Besides the urban metonymies and allegories of good and evil, what is at stake is rather *the urban* as a scale of regionalization in which different dimensions of social practices (i.e., commercial exchange, legitimation, communication) are produced in connection with those of other scales of geography-making (e.g., the imperial). Following Werlen's suggestion, such dimensions must be unpacked and analyzed within the wider geographical fabric of *Revelation*. It will be useful to survey them briefly.

Commercial exchange

As an area of economic action, the urban trade in luxury goods nests within the long-distance commercial network of the empire and violently rejected en bloc. Even craft specialization is said to be doomed to end (*Rev.* 17.4; 18.3. 11-24).

Legitimation

Normative territorial classifications (empires, kingdoms, cities) and the related technologies of control are equally rejected, and their mundane authorities condemned (6.15; 17-18; 19.18-21). However, walled-in demarcation (21.12-21) and centrality (*Rev.* 22.2-4) as traits that highlight the spatial specificity of ancient urbanism feature positively in the spatial layout of the New Jerusalem and are thus recuperated in the panoptic (Maier 1997) dominion of the Lamb.

Communication

The urban spatiality of information is instrumental in the diffusion of the Seer's message and the inter-urban communication networks are equally critical to the circulation of the written text among the local Christ groups (*Rev.* 2-3 on urban reading practices and networks; 1.11 on inter-urban networks). The Seer capitalizes on bookish culture in general (1.9; 22.7-10) but sees textual manipulation as a problem and a risk inherent to diffused literacy and uncontrolled dissemination (22.18-19). At the same time, the religiously imbued imperial propaganda broadcast in urban environments through diffused mediatization, monumentalization, and eventization is negatively symbolized and fiercely combated (e.g., 13.11-18). To sum up: one cannot even begin to decide whether *Revelation* is an anti-urban religious script unless one looks at the matter through a city lens and dismisses all other types and scales of regionalization deployed throughout and interwoven within the text. Our reading of the text suggests that, in order to assess whether, how, and how far pro-urban and anti-urban sentiments, city utopias, and dystopias affect a religious writer's imaginary, and vice versa, several entangled dimensions and scales of geography-making must be taken into account.

Conclusion

We hope we have convincingly demonstrated that studying urbanity and urban religion by restricting our gaze to the relatively larger and more concentrated type of settlement (colloquially ‘town’, ‘city’, *Stadt*, *nāgara*) is methodologically inappropriate. Equally misleading is the strategy to analyze them through a ‘city lens’ that generates only static value-laden binary categories, obstructs the view of hybrid phenomena, and, most importantly, obfuscates the ambivalences inherent to the very concept of urbanity since its historical appearance as a semiotically powerful marker of distinction. What remains to be explored is the more radical conceptual possibility to do completely without the city as a physical-material entity that as empirical-observational starting point (however blurred its topographical markers) magnetizes our attention when dealing with the urbanity of religious actors. Can the city-ladder be kicked away once reached the urbanity-outpost? Would the erasure of the former be inevitably and rapidly followed by the thinning out and fading away of the latter?

The architect Erwin Anton Gutkind, author in his seventies of the monumental *International History of City Development* (1964-72), argued vehemently for a new form of environmental organization based on decentralization and dispersal that would do away completely with the hierarchical construct of the ‘city’ as a specific type of settlement in a densely connected landscape. The ‘end of the city’ would come, he argues, in a new ‘expanding environment’ (neither urban nor rural) rather than a process of pan-urbanization acting as the ultimate effacement of the city-country divide (Vellinga 2019). Would ‘urbanity’ and, consequently, ‘urban religion’ survive in such a world? We do not argue for or against Gutkind’s normative stance, but we welcome his scenario as a test case for our conceptual proposal. Yes, it might, is our conclusion, and yet, probably, not for long. Since the city is the most ‘prominent historical expression of urbanity’ (Werlen 2021), that is, so to say, its material substrate, the latter cannot long outlive the physical disappearance of the former.

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