

# A taxonomic model for religions and cults in mobility<sup>i</sup>

## Abstract

The taxonomy and the distinction of the cults during the Late Antiquity were based on the characteristics of Gods, the theological teachings, the rituals or the ethnic tradition. The first goal of this paper is to present a different taxonomy for depicting the religious development of Roman Empire. I'm going to categorize the cults of this era according to:

- a. The expansion of the religious community;
- b. The methods of promotion and establishment in several areas of the Roman Empire;
- c. How a cult or a religious tradition is depended on a topos (place);

Especially, the topic/utopic depiction of the world (ecumene) can give us a lot of answers about the formation and mobility of these new cults. Those theoretical characteristics can help us form a new taxonomy for the cults of this particular era based not only on the factor of mobility but also on how people adapt and act after they have settled down on a new place. The second goal is to show how this new model of taxonomy can be used nowadays for the religious mobility in an analogous way. It is important to show that we can create a new taxonomy for religion that it is not necessary depended on theological argument but on social and cultural effect.

**Keywords:** religion, late antiquity, local/utopic, diasporas, taxonomy

Volume 3 Issue 1 - 2019

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**Received:** December 19, 2018 | **Published:** January 18, 2019

## Introduction

The taxonomy and the distinction of the cults during the Late Antiquity were based mostly by the Theological Schools on the characteristics of Gods, the theological teachings, the rituals or the ethnic tradition (Price, 2012). Those elements weren't always helpful in order to understand the development and the institution of the several religious traditions in the provinces and the social groups of the Roman Empire. We can find a lot of studies about the cult of Isis, Mithras, the Christianity and Judaism that are completely isolated by the social and religious context and as a result of this the researchers' conclusions are generalities. So, I'm going to present a different taxonomy for depicting the religious development of Roman Empire by categorizing the cults of this era according to a) the expansion of the religious community, b) the methods of promotion and establishment in several areas of the Roman Empire, and c) how a cult or a religious tradition is depended on a topos (religious place). A topos can be a family altar, a particular religious or ethnic center, several shrines or the whole ecumene (world).<sup>1</sup> The second goal of the paper is to show how this model of taxonomy could be used nowadays for the religious mobility in an analogous way. It is important to show that we can create taxonomy for religion that it is not necessary depended only on theological argument but also on social and cultural effect.

## Topography/Mapping

The subject of the topography of the religions of the Mediterranean during the Late Antiquity is really interesting, as it is the era that are conducted massive changes to the world because of the constant wars,

the transitions in power and the insecurity in the economy. So, the study of the historical course of the religions of the Mediterranean makes certain those religions and cults were developed far away from their center and evolved their content, teaching and format during their mobility to provinces away from their metropolis. As a matter of fact, there were religions that had ethnic and Diasporas centers.<sup>2-5</sup> Actually, this development meant changes in the way of thinking and the perception of the world, resulting the meeting of local and utopic elements for those religious traditions.<sup>1,6-8</sup> The local elements were about the maintenance of the security of the cultic place, the trust, the inclusion and the participation of the religious community, but also the faith to the ethnic king who was the center with the divine reality. However, the development of the history of the Mediterranean showed that firstly the rise of the Hellenistic Kingdoms and secondly the dominance of the Roman Empire drove to the break of the ties with the ethnic centers and the loss of the ethnic king. Those religious traditions had to explain themselves again under new perspectives by borrowing and innovating elements from other cultic traditions. The ethnic center was just a remembrance and nostalgia.<sup>9</sup> So, the mobility of the people broke the borders of the cities and there was no need of keeping the safety from the rest of the world since people were now members of the new world. The safety wasn't guaranteed if you were inside the borders of a city, but if you were initiated into a religious cult. The loss of the ethnic king turned the hopes of the people to a god or a goddess that would make a safe passage away from the limits of this world. We can realize the evolvement in the perception of the world by the people since the local elements of the religious traditions were replaced by the utopic elements, which seek an escape from the topos. It is clear that the local and utopic dimension have a connection, as the utopic tradition was enrichment and an expansion of the local. Through the utopic dimension there was a protest to

<sup>i</sup>Paper that was addressed in the 15th EASA Biennial conference "Staying, Moving, Settling" (14/8-17/8/2018) in Stockholm University [Panel 102: Divine mobilities: how gods and spirits move through the world].

the local topographical model of the world and life, because people wanted to escape and find salvation away from the constraints of this world.<sup>2,10</sup>

Overall, the local model is related to the congruence of the mapping of the world, the worldview and every activity that takes place in a region. The goal of the local model is the congruence of the worldview with the topos that the religious cults were taken place and developed the religious ideologies. In contrast, the utopic model tried to turn over every attempt of mapping the world and its inclusion into a microcosm or a certain place, as the local model proposed. So, the proposition of the local or utopic mapping of the world removes the interest of the study of religion from the research of taxonomy about the genre of the Gods or the teachings and directs to the examination of the relation between the worldview and the human experiences and activities.<sup>8,10</sup>

## Religious traditions

Howsoever, the separation and the taxonomy of religious traditions based on the above topographical elements isn't an easy and safe project, because there are a lot of cases that can be placed between more than one category. Anyhow, this particular typology is really useful and helpful for our goal. My taxonomy of the cults of the Late Antiquity contains four categories:

- a. Local/ethnic cults;
- b. Diasporas cults;
- c. Religious traditions in new centers;
- d. Ecumenical/utopic cults.

### Local/Ethnic cults

The local/ethnic cults are related to the religion of public cult and state. It is depended on *ethnoi* (nations), on the constitution of rituals and public cult of particular gods that protect the state or the empire from external threats like demonic powers and enemies. This particular genre of religion expresses the constitution of rules, laws and hierarchies that are connected with the position of each member of society in the altar, besides the king and in the public life generally. Those rules create political, religious and cultic relations among the citizens of a nation, the priests, the king or any political leader.<sup>1</sup> Before I proceed with a further explanation of the local/ethnic cults, it is important to clarify what I mean with the term *ethnos* (nation). This term means a group of people that realizes that its members share particular cultural characteristics that are related with a specific geographical area or a patrilineal land. This kind of separation is usually described by the people who share a common history or a genealogy. It is a common ground that an ethnic group is characterized by an imaginative relation, which is almost interpreted as original or inherent.<sup>11</sup> The existence of an ethnic group is preserved through the construction of "ethnic boundaries" between this group and the other ones. The ethnic identities are depended on the everyday relationships between those groups of people and create actually the concept of "us" and "others".<sup>12</sup>

The interesting factor that we need to focus about those cult, which step-by-step were transformed into Diasporas cults, is how they represented themselves in relation to their cultic center and the Roman Empire. It is characteristic that cults of Isis in Egypt, Mithras in Persia, Greek or Roman Gods, or the Judaism continued to name their land of origin after their expansion and movement to several

places of the Roman Empire.<sup>13</sup> Those cults had shaped their rituals, sacrifices and prayers for the cultivation of the land and the king's wellbeing. However, the radical change in the geopolitical scene affected the system that those cults had shaped. These cults were transformed to Diasporas cults and they continued to mention with nostalgia their ethnic center, but now they sacrificed for the wellbeing of the Roman Emperor and his Empire. Furthermore, as I'm going to mention later, the possibility that they were given to move to the whole Mediterranean region and the biggest civic centers of the Empire helped them to create a utopic worldview and alter their way of thinking about the everyday life of the people.<sup>6,14</sup>

### Diasporas cults

I had mentioned above that the geopolitical changes had as a consequence the end of many ethnic centers and the coercive in many situation movements of people to several places of the Empire. Apart of the movement of people there was also a movement of cults and Gods. New cultic centers were created in a new cultural environment. An adjustment was necessary for these cults to adapt their teachings and rituals into the new environment. The result was that many of the local/ethnic cults immigrated to new centers and transformed to Diasporas cults.<sup>2</sup> We might also include in this category the cult of the gods of the Roman pantheon, because in certain occasions there were built altars dedicated to the Capitol triad (Jupiter, Juno, Minerva) in the new colonies that the Roman bureaucracy was instated as to remind Rome and the superiority of the Roman dominance.<sup>13</sup> A particular subject of study is the adaptation of these groups of diaspora/immigration<sup>15</sup> in their new land and way of life, because it is really interesting to see how they have changed their mentality and what relation kept with the patrilineal land.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, another useful terminology about these groups is the concept of "cultural minorities".<sup>16-18</sup> This term is more general from the term "ethnic group" and refers to a group that lives in a particular environment and is a minority inside its ethnic group, because preserves cultural customs that are completely different from the customs of its ethnic group.<sup>19</sup>

The most representative example of a cultural minority of the Late Antiquity was the communities of Hellenistic Jews in Minor Asia, Alexandria, Rome and elsewhere that lived according to the Greek way of life and thinking. In Rome, there were at least ten synagogues and the Jewish community numbered thousands of people.<sup>20</sup> The Jewish communities that were founded during the Hellenistic Era were influenced by the Greek and Eastern way of thinking as it is proved by the use of language and the archeological findings. So, the Greek language was used in the 75% percent of the Jewish catacombs. Undoubtedly, the reason of the foundation of those communities and their social power was different, because they were in different areas of the Hellenistic and Roman world. During the reign of the Hellenistic Kingdoms, the Jewish communities were founded in the Eastern regions clearly for mercantile reasons. On the other hand, the Roman Jewish communities were founded because of the occupation of Judea and later the destruction of Jerusalem. Although, we can't erase the possibility that merchant was a factor for this particular movement. According to Philo Judaeus, the most part of the Jewish population in Rome during the reign of Augustus was free men, who were transferred as prisoners of war and finally were free without any obligation of changing their faith.<sup>21</sup> We have also to mention that the repression of the Jewish revolutions from 70 C.E. to 135 C.E. led tens of thousands of people to slavery, many of which were moved to the Western provinces.<sup>22</sup> Overall, it should be noted that the reasons of movement and migration were several. The most reasons were

economical because of the presence of the Roman army or of slavery. However, it is necessary to underline that the movement of religions and cults was depended on the sociopolitical context.<sup>13</sup>

### Religious traditions in new centers

Another category of religions in mobility during the Late Antiquity is the religious traditions that either had been founded or they have started their course from the beginning of 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E., they weren't identified necessary with any ethnic group and they expanded in new centers through the Empire by people that had to move constantly. Syncretism was one of the consequences of this era as Greek, Egyptian and Eastern element were coexisted in several Eastern Gods giving them new meaning.<sup>23-28</sup> Of course, the cult of Isis distinguishes in this category, because this goddess concentrated characteristics from other Gods in favor of her (enotheismus), since she was presented as a powerful goddess.<sup>24-34</sup> Furthermore, a common obligation of these traditions was that they had to create new cultic groups in their new settlements, because their members weren't only people that had already been initiated, but also people who stayed permanently in these settlements and had the opportunity to choose a new religious tradition.<sup>13</sup> As we can imagine, people who travelled they decided to move their cults to new places, building new altars. According to the archeological findings, an interesting case was the cult of Mithras as there was found relics of Mithraic cultic centers beside an area that weren't near a military location. As we know, the Mithraic centers were usually beside a military location, especially in the northwestern provinces. An example of this occasion was Tienen in Belgium, where the archaeological research found a bushel shrine that could host a feast of hundred people. Someone could hypothesize that the Roman army was in this area to rest and some military men created a mithraic altar and invited some people of the area to be a part of the feast.<sup>13</sup> Similar with the case of Mithraism, there are other cases of people who travel and transfer their cults, organizing new cultic centers. Some of these cases were Christians, Jews and followers of Isis.<sup>35,36</sup>

However, the central theme of this category is how these new religious traditions developed completely with priests in new cultic centers and managed to approach new followers. It is important to mention that these cults didn't have the option of public rituals; as we know Mithraism and Christianity performed their rituals under the public eye. Moreover, we can't approach the religious pluralism of this period with the concept of the "open market" as anyone could check on the teachings of each religion and choose the one that completed his inner needs.<sup>37</sup> The concept that religions are a market, where people can "buy" a religion or cult is totally anachronistic, since the cults that we study in this category are depended on groups of people that produce religious ideas and messages and need the maximum participation of their members. So, the best option is to study these cults in their social context and to take in mind the personal network that was developed between their members that was used for the diffusion and establishment in new settlements.<sup>38</sup>

There is an amount of valuable information that confirms the suggestion of the recruiting of new members of these new religious traditions in different regions.<sup>39</sup> It is characteristic that the Younger Pliny as a Governor of a Roman province commented with a negative way the expansion of Christianity in Minor Asia by saying that is transmitted as an infection (*miasma*).<sup>40</sup> This negative characterization for the development of new cults shows a linear way of diffusion and expansion that moves through the continental or marine roads of the Empire and influences every place. This way of diffusion shows

the value of the interpersonal relation and interaction. Namely, the expansion of cults and the recruitment of new members weren't about people that were related, but people that haven't met and didn't contradict before in labor, economical or social level.<sup>41,42</sup> The success of the expansion and development was depended on persons that were able to transmit the new message to people that could meet every day and could also give the necessary answers to matters that concerned any person. For example, the management of the problem of death and its resolution was a theme that was exploited in a different manner by these cults and could recruit new members.<sup>13</sup>

### Ecumenical/Utopic cults

This specific category of ecumenical/utopic cults is related completely to the utopic characteristics that we mentioned above and to the centrifugal dynamic.<sup>43</sup> which caused the break of the borders of city-state, as it was no longer the center of the events, while people conquered illimitable areas that weren't known before. This geopolitical change differentiated the religious structures as it is instituted a mediate communication between the world and the sky. Furthermore, there is a diffusion of ideas from several groups and people (magicians) that promote a mystical framework, which was developed independently from any religious tradition, and any land (topos) and performed unusual rituals. Actually, it was an era with a new geography, cosmography and political situation that the borders and the older religious customs were disrupted. Overall, those religious traditions had none local restriction, as we saw with the local/civic cults, since they corresponded to the whole ecumene and beyond.<sup>1</sup> For instance, the Mithraic utopic world couldn't be mapped and contained the whole world from the west to the east inside an astrological template.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the teaching of Christianity wasn't limited in a place, as presented a message that was for all people around the world. It is characteristic the way that Eusebios of Caesarea presented the expansion of Christianity in his Ecclesiastic History. The distribution of the evangelical message and the expansion of Christianity to the ecumene were promoted by Eusebios as an event under the protection of God. He also mentioned that the Christian message was distributed to provinces which weren't conquered by Rome, as Parthia and Scythia. So, this work presented Christianity as a universal religion.<sup>13</sup> Another interesting case with ecumenical prospects is Manichaeism, which was founded by Mani around the mid-third century C.E. in Mesopotamia outside the borders of the Roman Empire. The quick expansion of this cult in India, Egypt, Syria and Rome was reported in several Manichean works, while this huge development concerned even Emperor Diocletian. Also, there were created new communities with really faithful followers, who used their own special Manichean terminology. The goal of the followers was the diffusion of Manichaeism around the world via all languages, while its founder promoted the superiority of his religion by publishing ten advantages of Manichaeism in contrast to the first communities of Christianity.<sup>45-47</sup> In conclusion, this category contained cults that their teachings and symbolism weren't constrained in the narrow mapping limits of the Empire, but they overcame them by giving a utopic character away of this world.

### An analogous taxonomy for contemporary religious mobility

The taxonomy that I have just presented was about the religious mobility during the Late Antiquity. It is necessary to underline that we can't transfer the same taxonomic categories for presenting the generic category of religion of a different historic era, because

they can't comply with the social, economic, geopolitical context. However, we can use the same mentality and create analogical taxonomic categories that are related to the way people interpret their mobility and how their relocation affect their religious practices. So, we have to deal with the same issue of how to practice a religion that is intimately connected with a particular place when people have to dislocate and travel to a new place. Another important factor is to say that nowadays people need to move a lot for different reasons, they bring their religions with them, so consequently all religions are equally diasporic,<sup>48</sup> which means that we probably have to change the character of this taxonomic category. Moreover, it is anachronistic to distinct religions to universalistic and particularistic religions.<sup>50</sup> Depended on the percentage of their followers or any other dualistic category, because it doesn't help to realize their actual differences and meaning. Having in mind the above theoretical difficulties, a modern religious taxonomy depended on mobility and the importance of a religious place could contain the following categories:

- a. Local/ethnic religions,
- b. Religious traditions of cultural minorities,
- c. New religious traditions and interpretations,
- d. Universalistic and utopic religions.

The first category of local/ethnic religions concerns religions that were initially more closely connected with a particular people or place, as in the case of Judaism, Hinduism and African-based religions like Vodou. Of course, this tight connection to peoples and places did not impede the movement of these religions and their transformation.<sup>48</sup>

The second category is about the religions that are connected with several Diasporas. Certainly, the term may be anachronistic and has been in common use for centuries. Today's "new" Diasporas are considerably different, depending upon the particular definition and usage, there are likely to be many more of them, and they are scattered about as a result of the global trends that shape the contemporary world. As we know, these new Diasporas have emerged from the world-wide movement of millions of people, which in turn has been caused by global inequalities, modern information and production technologies, powerful multi-national corporations that frequently shift production across the world, as well as reasons of famine and war. As we can see, in the current view "Diasporas" are enthusiastically embraced as arenas for the creative melding of cultures and the formation of new "hybrid" mixed identities. To be part of a diaspora, is, presumably, to be "on the cutting edge" of new cultural and other formations. So, Diasporas communities are increasingly characterized by their striving to obtain multiple identities, national and religious. There a lot of terms that is used to describe the people that format a new diasporic community like "refugees," "assimilated people," "population in transit," or "transnationals".<sup>50</sup> Believe that the term "cultural minorities" that I have used above, depicts better the new diasporic communities that try to settle down to a new environment and organize their life and place again.

So, as voluntary migrants, merchants, refugees, slaves or indentured laborers move, they brought their religions with them to the new places of settlement. Once there, practitioners invariably sought to re-create their religious and cultural lives, carving sacred landscapes through architecture and other embodied practices such as theatre, music and dance. However, this re-creation is not a mere reproduction of practices and institutions in the homeland, but rather it often incorporated cultural and religious dimensions of the host society. In a

way, these cultural minorities created new religious traditions or a new interpretation of the old ones – the third category of our taxonomy. For example, the case of the African diaspora and slavery in the Americas shows, hybridization is always accompanied by power relations, by the attempt to impose orthodoxy and erase past traditions and to resist through heterodoxy and creative redeployment. Furthermore, using as a general instrument the teachings of universalistic religions as Christianity or Buddhism, there were developed new independent and indigenous churches in Africa and Latin America or new Buddhist interpretations and groups in western societies.<sup>48</sup> The fourth category has two dimensions; the first dimension is about religions that promote explicitly universal and translocal horizons. This is the case of Christianity, Buddhism and Islam as their founders asked for an ecumenical expansion and promotion and also achieved a massive acceptance around the world. The second dimension is about a powerful utopian, millenarian and even apocalyptic aspect as these religions/cults imagine a radical, perhaps even violent, inversion of the present, a rectification of all the traumas and a return to a timeless state of grace.<sup>48</sup> It is necessary to underline the role the Internet for the development and the acknowledgement of these cults, which are sometimes combined with "long-distance nationalism".<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we need to point out that no matter what taxonomies we create about cults and religions, it is important to have in my mind that our basic criteria should be how people adapted to the historic era and the environment they lived in and how they changed the religious teachings and their symbolism through the years. In my opinion, people decide how to confront to historic challenges and the changes that have to make for their lives and sometimes to reorganize their place conduces to alteration to the cosmology, teaching and symbolism of their religion. The taxonomies can always be used as a helpful tool for depicting, comparing and describing the changes of religious systems and traditions during an era.

## Acknowledgments

None.

## Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflicts of interest.

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