

Extended Synopsis ©Laura Feldt

Radical Habits of the Heart

Radical religion scholarship has not yet responded satisfactorily to the question of how and why individual members of radical religious groups become and stay strongly committed, why they remain members despite societal animosity, severed family and social ties, inward-facing violence, and emotional strain. Instead, the emphasis in research has been on push factors, such as marginalisation and radicalisation, on radical beliefs and the outward-facing performance of violence (Juergensmeyer 2020, 2013; Dawson 2018a, 2018b; Kühle 2018; Assmann 2016; Kaplan 2015; Aslan 2013; Sedgwick 2010), rather than on pull factors, persistence, and staying-in (Feldt 2023a). There is much to suggest that it is worthwhile to examine the breadth and depth of commitment in radical religion in a more fundamental way to understand its persistence. RADHEART asks: *what is the role of emotions and embodiment in strong, individual religious commitment in the ancient world?*

I propose to analyse and theorise strong religious commitment in the ancient world in an innovative way by focusing on the emotions, embodied experience, and the self. The aim is to move research away from an overly belief-oriented and conceptual focus and towards taking the embodied self seriously. The idea is to investigate strong, religious commitment in ancient forms of Judaism and Christianity to track its historical emergence and how it evolved in the first religious traditions in which radical religious formations appeared. The aims are 1) to analyse the role of the emotions, embodied experience, and the self in emic models of strong religious commitment and 2) to devise a novel approach to strong commitment in religion that also can contribute to radical religion research in a broader perspective, 3) to theorise radical ancient religion (**RAR**) in a new way in terms of *radical habits of the heart*.

Instead of focusing on ancient conceptual reflections, terminology for religion, or on beliefs, the project will focus on habits of the heart (Bellah 1985), understood as emic models of the felt experience of religious commitment, involving the emotions and embodied self of the individual. Using a perspective that combines the aesthetics of religion (an approach that addresses the role of the body, the senses, and emotions in religion) and experience-oriented anthropology, RADHEART focuses on how emotionally intense, strong religious commitments (*radical* habits of the heart) are expressed and cultivated in Jewish and Christian formative traditions. The project analyses religious, ideal models of commitment (*habits*) that, in the ancient world, predominantly use the language of interior organs or body parts like hearts, kidneys, or the throat (habits of the *heart*). RADHEART works simultaneously on three axes:

- a) *textuality* – radical habits of the heart as expressed in ancient, written media,
- b) *mediality* – how media formats cultivate ancient audiences' embodied experience poetically and narratively,
- 3) *practice* – their usage in religious social life.

By working comparatively and by means of a wide scope and timeframe, RADHEART has the potential to transform research on RAR. It is time to move away from the focus on terminology, conceptual reflections, and perceptions about an all-encompassing collectivity in ancient religions as if they were made of cement and consistently the same all the way through, as if all individuals were equally religious all the time. Instead, RADHEART addresses expressions and models of strong, individual religious commitment. It is crucial to understand better the corporeal and experiential aspects of strong religious commitment in individuals if we are to understand the persistence of radical religion. Strong, religious commitment fundamentally shapes any form of radical religion, but it has not yet been studied historically and comparatively across the ancient world's most influential traditions.

Why? First, the role of individual commitment in radical religion is arguably decisive for understanding the persistence of radical religion, and any longer-term survival of radical religious formations. One of the most significant traits of radical religion is a strong and enduring emotional commitment on the part of individuals. Religious media (including texts) express and cultivate strong commitment in different ways, from fulfilling meticulously every instruction, to being consumed by zeal, loving God in total devotion, or

remaining calm in the face of torture and death. Yet the often extremely evocative models of an individual's strong commitment, as we find them in ancient texts about martyrs, ascetics, strict law-abiders, or religious warriors, and especially the role that emotionality and embodiment play in them, have not received much research at all, and hardly any in the field of ancient religions (notwithstanding good studies of individual types). Radical religion in the ancient world has not been studied much comparatively and we still know much too little about the factors that cultivate individual commitment in radical religion. Now, contemporary experience-oriented anthropology has shown convincingly the decisive impact of emic religious *models* in the cultural kindling of religious actors' experience and commitment (Luhmann 2020; Luhmann and Weisman et al. 2021; Luhmann and Weisman 2022).

Second, scholarship on ancient religions habitually relies on terminology-focused, conceptual approaches to ancient religion, fixating on reflections that were a prerogative of elites. Another consistent focus has been the collectivity of ancient religions and religion's embedded nature, leading to implicit assumptions that ancient people were equally religious all the time and to a lack of focus on local actors (for criticism of these trends, Harkins 2023, 10; Rüpke 2021; for etic concepts: Petersen 2017). The fundamental significance of embodiment, emotions, and media effects have not been paid enough attention in RAR, nor have ancient models of commitment. The pervasive presence of innards and body parts in expressions of commitment have not been taken into account in theorising about RAR. The skewed over-emphasis on concepts, terms, and collectivity leaves crucial aspects inadequately understood, and we hardly know anything about the historical emergence and continually evolving forms of strong, religious commitment. Drawing on recent leaps forward in research on individualisation in ancient religions (Fuchs et al. 2020; Rüpke 2020) and on the embodied self (Najman 2021; Lasater 2021; Lilly 2021; Rosen-Zvi 2021), RADHEART zooms in on the strongly committed religious self in ancient Jewish and Christian traditions. Combining the above two areas of contribution – *contemporary radical religion research* and *ancient religions research* – the project's research questions are:

- 1) How can the study of strong individual commitment in terms of emotions and embodiment change our understanding of radical ancient religion?
- 2) How is individual strong religious commitment expressed in ancient forms of Judaism and Christianity in poetry and narrative? How do the expressions evolve over time until the end of Late Antiquity? How are emotions and the body's organs and parts used to express an individual's commitment?
- 3) How do ancient religious media cultivate strong commitment in their contexts of practice?

Key Hypotheses. The most central hypothesis is that in ancient Judaism and Christianity, radical habits of the heart are indeed habits of the *heart*, i.e. the body and its parts, the interior organs, as the seat of emotions and the self. The ancient evidence that speaks of strong, religious commitment does not use conceptual meta-terms or belief-oriented statements, but instead comes in the form of expressions targeting the interior organs or body parts of the self: the heart, the liver, throat, the kidneys, the eyes or blood, like Mattathias who, in 1 Maccabees 2:24, *became zealous, his kidneys trembled, and he let his wrath go... he slaughtered the man on the pagan altar*, like the command to Israel, via Moses, in Deut. 6:5: *You must love the Lord with all your heart, with all your throat [trad. translated "soul"], and with all your strength*, like Perpetua, the female Christian martyr from early 3rd cent. Carthage, who, on the way into the arena, *went along with shining countenance and calm step, as the beloved of God, the wife of Christ, putting down everyone's stare with her own intense gaze* (The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas, ch. 13), or Antony, the ancient world's most famous hermit who advocates *a heart of knowledge and a spirit of discernment* (Antony, ep. 6.27-29, 49) and sees weakness in commitment revealed through the body (e.g., Antony, ep. 1.35-41, 42-45). RADHEART analyses how ancient models of strong commitment (i.e., radical habits of the heart) use emotionality and embodiment in promoting the individual and how they affect the embodied selves of the audience. The aim is to kickstart a watershed transformation that puts emotionality and embodiment at the centre of research on RAR and to contribute with these foci to the field of radical religion in general, still studied too little even in

contemporary formations. To do this, RADHEART analyses the role of emotions and the embodied, experiencing individual or self in strong commitment in RAR. The core hypotheses are, further, that –

- Radical habits of the heart can be cultivated in individuals via expressed ideals of the self's strong, religious commitment; aesthetic media promoting strong religious commitment both express and cultivate religious commitment in audiences via emotionality and experientiality.
- Radical habits of the heart evolve over time in ancient forms of Judaism and Christianity; we can trace their emergence and follow how they evolve historically; and, following from this,
- An emotions-and-embodiment-based theoretical perspective on RAR as radical habits of the heart can contribute innovatively to research on radicalism and the role of the individual in RAR, as well as to contemporary research on radical religion and extremism.

Theoretical framework and scientific methods

RADHEART devises an innovative and ambitious theoretical frame combining 1) **the aesthetics of religion** focusing on embodied, sensory and material mediation in religions (Johannsen et al. 2020; Grieser and Johnston 2017; Meyer 2014), only very rarely applied to ancient religions (Feldt 2023a-b; 2020; 2017); 2) **the anthropology of experience and textual experientiality research** (Luhmann 2020, Luhmann and Weis et al. 2021; Luhmann and Weisman 2022; Gallagher et al. 2018; Carraciolo 2014; Troscianko 2014), and 3) **a historically grounded study of ancient emotions** (Cairns 2023; Chaniotis 2021, 2014, 2012; Feldt 2023a, 2023b, 2020; Mermelstein 2021; Lasater 2019; Mirguet 2019). We combine this framework with attention to 4) **ancient reading practices and dynamic philological methods** that highlight the fluidity and material media contexts of religious traditions and the role of paratexts, notations, prologues and epilogues at the time of the final writing and editing of religious traditions, in order to work on their forward-oriented formativity and vitality, instead of approaching them as historical sources with attention to their “background” (Najman 2018; Lundhaug and Lied 2017).

The strategy of analysis focuses on two main genres: *religious poetry* (WP I) and *religious narrative* (WP II) –and works on three axes: **1) Textuality**: –RADHEART analyses the use of native terms for emotions and embodiment, i.e. interior organs and body parts, hearts, livers, kidneys, etc. in expressions of an individual's strong commitment, unfolding the evolving ideals in poetry and narrative and tracing their changes across time. In the second axis, **2) Mediality**, RADHEART analyses the forward-oriented formativity in the religious media that promote strong commitment; in other words, the analysis tackles how they engage and affect the embodied selves of the audience via imagery, emotionality, and narrativity, and via paratexts, prologues and epilogues, where emic ideas about how they are supposed to engage, enact, and mobilise their audiences are likely expressed (i.e., their forward-orientated formativity). Finally, along the third axis, **3) Practice**, RADHEART investigates traces of concrete usage in- and outside of the texts, other media used in combination with texts, music, song, or material media like churches, monastic settings, or material paraphernalia, thus providing an analysis of the contexts of usage for the two other axes, and tracing the available historical evidence for how radical habits of the heart were cultivated across ancient forms of Judaism and Christianity. This theoretical frame and strategy of analysis is used to examine the textuality, mediality, and practice of evolving radical habits of the heart to provide new answers to the questions of the role of emotions and embodiment in the strong commitment of the individual.