



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

**The Manichaeans of Kellis : religion, community, and everyday life**  
Brand, M.

**Citation**

Brand, M. (2019, April 10). *The Manichaeans of Kellis : religion, community, and everyday life*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/71236>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/71236>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/71236> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author:** Brand, M.

**Title:** The Manichaeans of Kellis : religion, community, and everyday life

**Issue Date:** 2019-04-10

# **Part III.**

## **Conclusions**



## Chapter 10. Manichaeans and Everyday Groupness

[Augustine] was a rhetorician, a teacher, a family man, and an amateur astrologer. His bookshelf was lined with volumes of Cicero, Seneca, Virgil, Aristotle, and pseudo-Pythagoras. He also read a little Mani, and took initiation as a Manichaean auditor (Jason BeDuhn).<sup>1</sup>

The last six chapters have brought to the fore several fundamental elements of everyday life in Kellis: family relations, work, death, language use, gift-giving, reading, communal gathering, singing and praying. These practices could be examined up close because of the great body of documents, as well as the connections between personal letters and liturgical texts. They have been examined for traces of Manichaeanness, which I defined as instances of collective solidarity with the imagined Manichaean community. By asking where and when a Manichaean group affiliation mattered, I identified situations in which religion affected everyday life, as well as those instances in which it hardly mattered at all. In result, the foregoing chapters have sketched a wide array of quotidian practices in a specific microhistorical context that demonstrate the untidiness of religion in everyday life.

This chapter will summarize the impact of Manichaeism on four basic categories of everyday action: talking, choosing, performing, and consuming Manichaeanness. As these findings suggest that Manichaeanness was only infrequently activated, the second section will explore the tension between the characterization of Manichaeism as a “secondary” or “utopian” religion and the observed intermittence of Manichaeanness.

### 10.1 Untidy History: Manichaeanness in Everyday Life

Drawing all the threads together, I will summarize my observations in the four categories of action used by Fox and Miller-Idriss to address the role of nationhood in everyday life experience (see Chapter 2). Following their lead, I will describe the everyday activation, or experience, of Manichaeanness in talking, choosing, performing, and consuming. Together, these sections will show the invaluable corrective nature of the Kellis sources. They challenge prevailing assumptions about Manichaean groups and capture the nuance and complexity of religious groupness in daily life.<sup>2</sup>

Previous studies, mostly published before all Coptic documentary texts were published, have frequently interpreted the Kellis finds within existing reconstructions of Manichaeism, using the new finds to reinforce existing conceptualizations rather than to challenge them. I have pointed out that the Manichaeans of Kellis have frequently been described as sectarian and persecuted, but also as engaged in mission work and claiming a

---

<sup>1</sup> BeDuhn, *Augustine's Manichaean Dilemma* 1, 287.

<sup>2</sup> The section title alludes to A. E. Franklin, “Untidy History: Reassessing Communal Boundaries in Light of the Cairo Geniza Documents,” in *Age of Transition: Byzantine Culture in the Islamic World*, ed. H. C. Evans (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015), 54-69.

Christian identity.<sup>3</sup> Most notably, Peter Brown has repeatedly stressed the “intense solidarity” and “spiritual friendship” that would have characterized the Manichaeans of Kellis.<sup>4</sup> Such strong religious interpretations are not without merit, as they corroborate the observation that Manichaeans were among the first to think about themselves and others as distinct communities defined by their religion (as for example set out in their list of ten advantages of the Manichaean church). My examination of all the published Kellis documents, however, has raised serious questions about the validity of these strong religious interpretations. In particular, I have stressed the risk of embracing the “groupism” that is articulated in elite theological sources. These elite perspectives gave rise to the prevailing notion of Late Antiquity as a predominantly religiously defined era in which individuals either belonged to well-defined religious groups, or were involved in the identity formation of nascent religious communities. The everyday letters and business accounts examined in this dissertation only infrequently corroborated this assumption. Although many passages in the Kellis letters can be harmonized with some of the previous interpretations based on religious groupism, I have pleaded for a minimalist interpretation. Rather than thinking about the Manichaeans as a persecuted sect with strong in-group bonds, we have seen how infrequently religion defined everyday life as visible in the papyri.

The result is twofold. On the one hand, I have exposed the weak factual basis of some—in my eyes rather tentative—historical interpretations of the local Manichaean community in Kellis. These interpretations included the looming threat of religious persecution, the mandatory presence of the elect and the daily ritual meal, as well as the existence of a Manichaean monastery in the oasis. On the other hand, I have shown that the observed multiple cross-affiliations or identifications of the individuals in our corpus do not render religious identifications insignificant. Rather, I have highlighted both situations in which Manichaeanness was extremely visible and relevant and occasions in which it remained latent, inactivated, or invisible. I believe that the dynamic between these two modes of religion in everyday life is of fundamental importance to the study of lived ancient religion. I will therefore return to this intermittence of religion in everyday life in the second part of this chapter, after having sketched exactly where and when Manichaeanness mattered in Kellis.

### ***10.1.1 Talking Manichaeanness: Politeness Strategies and Funding the Elect***

The duration and impact of the experience of solidarity with the Manichaean group, what I have called Manichaeanness, varied. It could arise as an occasional event or become a long-lasting affiliation. Whether occasional or dominant, this experience was constructed and maintained discursively through talking and writing. Previous studies have highlighted how religious authorities constructed religious social imaginaries in their theological or polemical accounts. What has received less attention is how routine talk in everyday interaction contributed to the awareness of such social imaginaries in more mundane situations.

---

<sup>3</sup> Gardner, Alcock, Funk, *CDT1*, 72–82.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 159.

I have argued that the authors of the Kellis letters framed situations in their choice of words, formulas, and self-designators. They marked them as group-specific religious events. In doing so, they reappropriated elements from Manichaean texts and theology. They could talk Manichaeanness by approaching their recipients as “children of the living race” or “daughters of the Light Mind.” The most explicit examples of phrases that carried Manichaean connotations came from the fundraising letters of the elect (P.Kell.Copt 31 and 32 stand out), who needed the support of catechumens to live their ascetic lives and fulfill their role in the process of liberating the Living Soul. Additionally, a Manichaean repertoire was employed by other authors as a politeness strategy, stressing a common bond in the introduction of their letters. The primary goal of most ancient letters was not to convey information, but rather to maintain existing social relations and foster new ones. Religiously marked politeness strategies played a large role in defining relations and nourishing group bonds. Specific words, phrases, and self-designators were therefore employed in the introduction of the letter to present the relationship in a favourable light and according to the author’s wishes. Sometimes, this meant incorporating Manichaean formulas, while other situations drew on more conventional repertoires. Modern historians and papyrologists can, therefore, at times detect ancient religious affiliations based on the use of specific phrases and formulas. This has been a blessing for a historical perspective from below, but I have stressed the need to study the language use and linguistic choices primarily as performative actions in specific situations, rather than to use them as one-on-one criteria for establishing religious backgrounds. This is particularly relevant for the large set of marked phrases that were shared by Manichaeans, Christians, and others; the dual usage of words and formulas that were perceived as powerful by people of various ways of life. The prayer formulas, studied in Chapter 4, are a case in point, as their terminology is not exclusively Manichaean. In contrast to the interpretation offered by David Martinez, however, I think that ultimately the closest parallels to these tripartite prayer formulas in the Kellis letters are found in the fragments of Mani’s *Epistles*. Ancient letter recipients familiar with this Manichaean epistolary style would have noticed the similarities, but others may have thought of alternative (i.e., Christian) liturgical parallels, or simply admired it for its display of learned literary skills.

The personal letters displayed different levels of activated Manichaeanness. It was not always necessary to approach the recipients as “children of the living race.” Many of the Kellis letters simply greet the recipients with kinship terminology, or simple designators related to the household or neighborhood. In fact, the previous chapters have sketched a modest picture of daily life, in which Manichaeanness was only occasionally salient as one of the membership categories in a wider array of options. The majority of the identifications show that the Kellites who wrote the papyrus letters did not envision, or represented, themselves as belonging to a secluded, closed-off, or persecuted religious group. Despite occasionally strong religious language, there is no trace of major interreligious group conflicts, nor of any internal tension between religious identifications and the non-Manichaean social obligations and expectations. With some exceptions, the Manichaeans of

Kellis seem to have identified themselves with the village and with their family first, before religious self-designators came into play.

Two situations stand out from this pattern, in which Manichaean group-identification was not only salient, but was made visible in words: fundraising and singing. The fundraising letters of the elect have been mentioned already, as they played a major role in my reconstruction of the Manichaean community at Kellis. These letters contain the most explicit repertoire, including elaborate Manichaean self-designators. Rhetorically, they situated author and recipients in a narrative reality in which alms were frequently given for the sake of releasing the Living Soul. Elect reminded the local community of catechumens of their role in the cosmological battle between Light and Darkness, even though they themselves worked at a distance. I have stressed how the geographical circumstances of the Egyptian desert fundamentally defined the relation between catechumens and elect. In contrast to previous reconstructions, as well as in contrast to the normative theological framework, I have claimed that daily interaction between elect and catechumens was mostly impossible. The elect mainly traveled in the Nile valley and although they may have visited the oasis, the everyday distance between the two classes of the Manichaean community was primarily overcome by travelers carrying letters.

Singing was the second situation in which Manichaeanness was activated in talk—or rather speech acts. The vacuum left by the absence of the elect seems to have been filled with regular gatherings for catechumens, who came together to sing psalms, pray, and listen to scripture readings. The details on the liturgy and frequency of these communal gatherings are sparse. It is tempting to fill the gaps by comparing them to Christian gatherings in the same period, or Manichaean liturgies from other regions. I have avoided this gap-filling strategy by focusing on the extant manuscripts of the psalms and the prayers, as well as by tracing minor papyrological vignettes, like Ision's role as lector and Piene's training to read in every church. Chapter 7 has suggested that these communal gatherings contributed to the formation of a discrete Manichaean group identity and style through certain performative aspects (see below) and the verbal reiteration of the Manichaean cosmological and theological narrative. Participation in these gatherings, as well as the performative function of ritual meals, singing, and the commemoration of the dead, constituted social situations in which Manichaean doctrine mattered to individual Kellites.

Besides these two instances in which the Manichaean church and world view were the topic of conversation, there are passages in which Manichaeanness is hinted at, or implied, in the choice of words. This unintentional use of Manichaean repertoire resembles what Fox and Miller-Idriss have called talking *with* nationhood, in which the nation is not the object of talk but rather a disposition that shines through.<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, the Kellis letters sometimes contain a repertoire of phrases and formulas that connote Manichaeanness, even

---

<sup>5</sup> "[T]he nation not as the object of talk but rather as an unselfconscious disposition about the national order of things that intermittently informs talk. The nation in this sense is a way of seeing, doing, talking and being that posits and sometimes enacts the unproblematic and naturalizing partition of the world into discrete ethnocultural units." Fox and Miller-Idriss, "Everyday Nationhood," 540, citing Brubaker (their italics).



though it is not always explicit or exclusive. It is, of course, difficult to determine, after sixteen hundred years, which terminology would have carried what religious connotations. What we can say, despite the difficulties involved, is that there is ample evidence for phrases in personal letters that were common in Manichaean scripture(s) and unattested or uncommon in the surviving corpus of Greek and Coptic papyrus letters, such as the allusion to the “Father, the God of truth” in the letter cited in the introduction. In Chapters 4 and 5, I have treated this repertoire less as a deliberate marker of a distinct religious identity and more as an in-group language that followed from the socialization in a group style. Presumably, the authors and scribes copied elements from the style of the letters of the elect, from Mani’s *Epistles*, and the speech patterns they picked up during the liturgy. As a result, readers familiar with this group style would pick up on the groupness carried in the linguistic variation or in the choice of Coptic as a literary language. I am less certain about the direct correlation of these elements with the activation of Manichaeanness. Rather, I suggest that the recipients would have picked up a sense of commonality and connectedness that included identifications with the family, village, and a religious community.

Talking Manichaeanness could strengthen group bonds and contribute to the notion of a coherent Manichaean group. In turn, this groupness led to the possibility of institutionally mediated choices, like burials or alms gifts.

### 10.1.2 *Choosing Manichaeanness: Almsgiving and Burial Customs*

Demarcated religious groups in Late Antiquity were not only a matter of talk. Imagined religious communities were real for people in their day-to-day life. They had a profound impact on everyday actions, and not only as repertoires to draw on when writing a letter. I have sketched several situations in which the religious group was implied in the decisions of Kellites, but I have also noted the frequent absence of any institutionally mediated choices. Most remarkable was the limited (but not nonexistent) impact on giving and burial customs.

Giving was an institutionally mediated choice. Manichaean theological texts presented a full ideology of giving in which these social interactions were strongly related to the salvation of the cosmos. Many features from this ideology are attested in the Kellis papyri: the division in catechumens and elect is visible and there are clearly letters with requests for alms. It is therefore not unlikely that some Kellites donated food or other commodities for specifically Manichaean reasons. Since these interactions and transactions blended and intersected with other behavioral expectations, it is not easy to discern the motivation behind gifts. My skeptical reading of some of the previously identified instances of Manichaean almsgiving in the papyri has led to the suggestion that gift exchange in Kellis was less defined by the normative framework (as presented in the *Kephalaia*) and more by the social and geographical circumstances of the village. In this multilayered world, religious ideas and practices were not pre-given constructs acted out or put to use in an alternative domain of everyday life, without conscious reflection, but they belonged to the sphere of daily interactions between individuals.<sup>6</sup> The interaction between various socializations and

---

<sup>6</sup> Modern lived religion studies have highlighted individual variation and the situational nature of religious talk. On the relative absence of explicit religious identification and discussion, see C. Bender, *Heaven’s*

social roles also suggests that it is not likely that the Manichaeans constituted an exclusive community. Against the interpretation of Majella Franzmann, I have argued that it is most likely that the Manichaeans of Kellis continued most of their interactions with their (non-Manichaean) family and neighbors on the basis of their shared village identification. Even though the religious group norms may have led to an exclusive stance, as for example suggested by Augustine, the impact of the other social factors must have led to a continuation of gifts beyond the community's boundaries. It appears, moreover, that catechumens also gave to other catechumens, a type of gift exchange that is hardly discussed in their own religious writings (with the possible exception of 1 Keph. 77). While none of these interactions and gifts directly contradict the institutionally mediated choices or expectations, they attest to a full spectrum of social actions, in religiously motivated gifts had a rather limited place.

Death ritual is the second cluster of actions where the impact of Manichaeanness on individual choices was examined. It included rituals surrounding the deathbed, burial, and commemoration. Manichaeans had elaborate ideas about what happened to the soul after death, just like many of their contemporaries in fourth- and fifth-century Egypt. This is visible in the Kellis papyri, which include a short hymn (or prayer) listing the seven stages of the postmortem journey of the soul. These stages have also been found in various Manichaean psalms, studied by Siegfried Richter. My exploration of the Kellis Psalms has shown that some of these songs were also known in the village. I have followed Richter's identification of this ritual setting as a commemorative event. The Manichaeans supported the ascent of the soul through the performance of commemorative rituals, including singing songs and giving alms. Additionally, I have argued for the existence of another ritual moment at the deathbed, during the precious moment that the soul left the body. Although there is less information available about this ritual practice, the grief expressed in one of the Kellis letters points to the importance of the ritualization of these last moments on earth. Matthaios's grief about the absence of the elect, as well as the entire community of catechumens, at the moment of departure shows that Manichaeanness was sky-high in these instances. Choosing Manichaeanness meant embracing the efficacy of the songs and prayers of the elect as potent powers, capable of affecting the afterlife of the soul.

The activation of Manichaeanness in dealing with death is, however, but one side of the story. What the sources fail to tell us is what Manichaeans thought about burial. Without textual indications of what Manichaean burials looked like, it is impossible to identify Manichaean tombs or interments. Despite some suggestions by archaeologists about the poverty of graves, the orientation of the body, and the absence of burial goods, the archaeological remains of tombs and cemeteries at Kellis remain silent on this issue. Either the specific religious practices left no trace, or Manichaeans followed local customs without religiously marked and tangible variations. With our current set of textual and material

---

*Kitchen. Living Religion at God's Love We Deliver* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 140ff. Methodological reflections on the translation from observations of action in one situation to another situation, see D. Trouille and I. Tavory, "Shadowing: Warrants for Intersituational Variation in Ethnography," *Sociological Methods & Research* (2016): 1-27.

evidence, it is impossible to locate and identify Manichaean graves. I have argued that it is most probable that they followed local burial customs. There is no reason for speculative connections with late Chinese sources on putative Manichaean funeral rituals. In the specific circumstances of the Dakhleh Oasis, Manichaeans participated in the common burial practices that they shared with most of their neighbors, with a relatively poor treatment of the body and a simple grave without tangible religious elements in the material culture or orientation. Whether these decisions were made deliberately, based on specific theological ideas about the value of the body, cannot be determined with certainty, especially since it is unknown what Manichaeans would have said or done at the site of the tomb. With the current state of our sources, choosing Manichaeanness in burial customs remains invisible.

### *10.1.3 Performing Manichaeanness: Communal Gatherings and Psalm Singing*

A close affiliation with the Manichaean group was performed at various occasions: in regular communal gatherings, in the daily prayers, and in offering hospitality to the elect. The performance of these actions involved a redefinition of the communal identity in light of Manichaean notions about voluntary poverty, reciprocal obligations, and the salvation of Light. Manichaean psalms and prayers not only narrated the Manichaean cosmology, thus reiterating important ideas, but were also performed during intense moments of groupness. These songs were sung in unison or antiphonally, presumably accompanied by ritual gestures and acclamations like “Yes and Amen” (1 Keph. 122). The combination of bodily experience, singing, and the perceived efficacy of these acclamations contributed to the activation of Manichaeanness and the socialization of the self within the community. The same holds true for the daily prayers. By prostrating themselves thirty times during the three sets of daily prayers, catechumens acted on their self-identification as Manichaeans, presumably even within communal settings.

I have argued that the participation in these gatherings and the bodily experience of taking part in the singing, praying, and prostrating affected groupness. There are, however, also three reasons for a limited impact of these gatherings. In the first place, it is unclear how regularly these gatherings took place and how many people participated in them. Second, we do not know to what extent all participants understood what was going on. In particular, the use of Syriac could have hampered the audience’s understanding of the liturgy. Comparative studies of Ancient Christian preachers and their audiences suggest that it would be a mistake to consider the audience as eager pupils who would adjust their behavior in response to what was being said.<sup>7</sup> The geographical situation of the oasis, third, led to a lifestyle in which traveling was of fundamental importance, which meant that people like Makarios and Pamour could not frequently attend the communal gatherings in Kellis. Nonattendance, rather than attendance, may have been the norm.

Other opportunities for the performance of Manichaean group identity were connected with the hospitality for the elect and communal traveling. Hospitality may have played a role in the Kellis community, but is never explicitly expressed in the material.

---

<sup>7</sup> Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, 16. See section 7.5.3 above on the pedagogical and didactical function of psalms during the liturgy.

Traveling with members of the elect, on the other hand, is visible. Some of these journeys had specifically religious functions. Piene traveled with the Teacher to learn to read in every church. He may even have been trained as one of the new members of the elect. Matthaios's journeys with Apa Lysimachos and Philammon's association with the elect appear to have been less religiously motivated. They may have traveled together, taken care of the elect, shared in songs, meals, or confession, but at the same time they conducted business at the various markets in the Nile valley. I have stressed that there is no explicit trace of any missionary activity. The postulated connection between mission and the production of books is therefore entirely dictated by hagiographical narratives and reports about the Manichaean tradition. It is never explicitly found in the Kellis letters, even though there are numerous references to scribal activity and the circulation of Manichaean books.

Rather than directly informing us about the missionary practices of Manichaeans in Egypt, the passages concerning the production of texts have been read as revealing that Manichaean catechumens in Kellis were involved in the reproduction of texts that may have belonged to the inner core of books attributed to Mani (*The Gospel*, *Mani's Epistles*, and perhaps the *Psalms and Prayers*). The scribal activity associated with these texts, accordingly, knew moments of intense Manichaeanness when the scribe stepped into the Manichaean authorial tradition to participate in the recounting of Mani's wisdom. Two specific literary situations indexed Manichaeanness. The first situation was the public reading of Manichaean texts by the ecclesiastical reader or lector, which was a major event. Especially remarkable is that one of the Kellis letters suggests that the local community was in touch with a lector who read texts in Syriac. I have listed the various fragments of documents in Kellis that included Syriac writing and concluded that the public performance of reading a Syriac text in a communal gathering would have been a very marked and explicit moment connoting the imagined Manichaean community and its roots in third-century Syria and Mesopotamia. The second situation comprised the production of Manichaean texts and its ritualization through scribal practice. I have suggested that this may have included memorization and chanting, making it in itself a performance of a marked Manichaean groupness.

#### ***10.1.4 Consuming Manichaeanness: Reading and Copying Texts***

In many respects, the Kellis letters have shown the absence of sharp demarcations between a Manichaean group and the outside world. There is hardly any evidence for the consumption of religiously marked products: there is, for example, no trace of specifically Manichaean art or architecture. Economic interactions crossed religious categories, and consumption habits based on the material culture of the houses in Kellis show no visible distinctions from other houses. If Manichaeanness affected what ancient Kellites bought, or ate, it remains invisible in our sources.

The only instance in which we could possibly detect the expression of religious difference through consumption habits is in the local reading habits. We do not know who was responsible for the production of the documents found in Houses 1–5, but the correlation between the wood used for some of the inscribed wooden boards and the acacia wood found among the carpenter tools in House 2 suggests that they were probably locally produced. I have suggested to approach these documents, as well as the papyrological

passages pertaining to scribal activity, as revealing the local reading practices of the Kellites in Houses 1–3. These reading practices conveyed the impression that on the one hand, Manichaean literature was read and copied by these individuals, while on the other hand, they showed that a wider range of texts were read and studied. Some of the documents belonged to Classical literature, such as the work of Homer and the orations of Isocrates. Other texts are best described as biblical or apocryphal texts (the compilation based on the *Acts of John* and the fragments of two NT letters). Likewise, some of the Manichaean letter authors were involved in the production of amulets and spells (mostly without clear indication of the religious background of the client). In many ways, then, the situation at Kellis resembles BeDuhn's characterization of Augustine, cited at the outset of this chapter. Just like Augustine, some of these Kellites read widely, thereby including the consumption of Manichaean texts in a broader spectrum of learning.

The scribal activity performed in Kellis shows that catechumens were deeply involved in the reproduction and study of Manichaean texts. I have argued that Makarios's letters reveal how various Manichaean books could be requested and sent to his son Matthaïos for scribal practice. The documents found in Houses 1–3 also include Manichaean texts on papyrus and wood. Many of these are liturgical texts, mostly psalms for communal singing or texts used as examples in writing exercises. Some papyri, on the other hand, contained doctrinal texts, such as Mani's *Epistles* and a doctrinal text resembling the *Kephalaia*. The most remarkable discovery is the wooden board with a Greek version of the daily Manichaean prayers that are also known in Middle Persian and Arabic versions. The presence of these documents points to the long transregional connections of the Manichaean tradition. The Manichaeans of Kellis were able to draw on the liturgical traditions of the Manichaean Psalmbook as well as the religious traditions behind the *Epistles*. In this respect, the documents show the influence of a marked and group-specific religious tradition, in which books played a major role. They show that even at the fringes of the Roman Empire, in the western desert of Egypt, individuals followed the traditions associated with the Apostle of Light.

### 10.1.5 Summary

This examination of the full corpus of published texts from Kellis has offered an almost mundane image of a Manichaean life *from below*. For most of the letter authors, Manichaeism was one of the affiliations, but it did not pervade everyday life in all aspects.

Rather than providing a full-fledged counternarrative, standing in stark contrast with the institutional regulations of a Manichaean life, this reconstruction of Manichaeanness in everyday life offers a mixture of instances with marked Manichaean language and rituals, and situations without any trace of this repertoire. There is no indication of religious conflict, few hints of boundary maintenance, and little explicit discussion of what went on in religious gatherings. This rather limited role of religious groupness concurs with the observations of Eric Rebillard about the Christians of second-, third- and fourth-century North Africa. Although his corpus of texts required a different type of approach, it has yielded similar conclusions. Christianness, in his analysis, was only intermittently given salience in everyday life, as individuals were also involved in social groups that were not

directly based on Christian texts or institutions. He concludes that “when I looked for contexts in which Christianity was the principle of group formation, I not only found very few, but I also concluded that instances of groupness did not necessarily last.”<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the strongly religious portrayal of everyday life engagements in late antique homilies and other prescriptive texts, “religion and religious affiliation were neither the unique nor even the primary principles of action for Christians.”<sup>9</sup>

The same dichotomy is visible for Manichaeans. Papyrus letters convey a distinctly different picture from most literary sources. Whereas in literary and historical texts religious situations take a central stage, the role of Manichaeanness in the personal letters from Kellis is occasional at best, often embedded in side references without additional or situational information. In this respect, it may be useful to call to mind Brubaker’s warning that if we try “to understand *how* ethnicity matters [...] it is important to bear in mind *how little* it mattered to much of everyday experience.”<sup>10</sup> My historical enquiry into religion and everyday life resembles Brubaker’s analysis of the lived experience of modern ethnicity. Despite the totalizing narrative or views of political and religious leaders, the everyday preoccupations of ordinary people only occasionally show the salience of elite classifications and boundaries. The grand narratives told by political or religious leaders were not without influence, but they cannot be taken as neutral representations of local realities. By focusing, instead, on individuals, I have illustrated where and when they called on these classifications and repertoires, while at the same time they frequently worked with other frames of reference.

As the papyri derive from several generations, these conclusions are in need of quantification. The earliest generation of Manichaeans, presumably those under the patronage of Pausanias (in the 330s and 340s) may have had other experiences than those associated with Makarios and his children (in the 350s and 360s), or those who had to abandon the village in a time of changing environmental and legal conditions (in the 370s and 380s).

My skeptical position concerning groupism has steered this research away from the a priori assumption of a coherent Manichaean tradition with well-demarcated religious groups toward more fluid and situational models of religious identification and behavior. It has revealed that our reconstruction of Late Antiquity as the cradle of “secondary” religion, with its autonomous religious groups, is a rather limited—or selective—image of what went on in the lives and minds of these people. On the one hand, these secondary religious communities are the primary key to understanding late antique Egyptian society, but on the other hand, they are optical illusions, evoked by religious leaders and their textual resources. Underneath the discursive construction of religious groupness existed a variety of individual choices, the intermittence of religious identifications, and the wider array of religious group styles and repertoires that could be called on to bring structure to everyday experiences. In result, this study has shown gaps in the so-called “religious bias” of the study of late antique

---

<sup>8</sup> Rebillard, *Christians and their Many Identities*, 93.

<sup>9</sup> Rebillard, *Christians and their Many Identities*, 93.

<sup>10</sup> Brubaker et al., *Everyday Ethnicity*, 206.

Egypt, as if the period and region were more defined by monasticism, Christological controversies, and theological developments, than other parts of the ancient world.<sup>11</sup>

What we need to capture, therefore, is the “sociological untidiness” of ancient religious communities: the local diversity and individual agency at the level of the everyday practices.<sup>12</sup> Much of everyday life was devoid of group-specific religious inflections, but it could be highly salient in certain situations. Against previous interpretations of the Manichaeans at Kellis as a “sectarian,” “exclusive,” and “persecuted” community, I have stressed that talking, choosing, performing, and consuming Manichaeanness had its place, but simply not as the primary mode of all individual action. Kellites were Kellites, even when they praised Mani on Mondays and prostrated themselves while facing the sun and the moon.

## 10.2 The Late Antique Transformation of Religion

The second aim of this dissertation was to locate and contextualize the transformation(s) of “religion” in a specific historical context. In Chapter 2, I characterized this large-scale transformation as one from a world in which religion was embedded within preexisting social formations to one in which competing religious groups became organized as discrete social units. This latter type is frequently called “secondary” or “utopian” religion, as the organizational differentiation was closely tied to a changing world view. Rather than preserving the status quo, these new group-specific religions developed universal claims, challenging the social order and emphasizing an exclusive concept of truth. This type of religion is exemplified in Manichaeism. Theological texts such as the *Kephalaia* have shown the explicit conceptualization of the Manichaean church as an autonomous, religiously defined group, claiming superiority over all previous religions because of their universal wisdom and organizational strength.

While Manichaeism generally corresponds to many characterizations of “secondary” or “utopian” religion, the story *on the ground* appears to have been different. The microhistorical analysis of the Kellis letters has shown that the authors only intermittently associated with others in Manichaean terms, as well as with the transregional Manichaean tradition. On the one hand, their religion was no longer coterminous with their village or ethnic identity; it was a marked choice against the long village tradition of venerating Tutu. On the other hand, this local community was not crystalized into a coherent and well-demarcated religious group with explicit labels for insiders and outsiders. Building on Lahire’s theoretical work, I have suggested that the regular interactions with neighbors, their business ventures, or legal appeals almost never asked for the activation of religious dispositions. Rather than accepting the totalizing vision of religious groupism, I have highlighted the infrequency and situatedness of religious identifications or group norms. As this conclusion seems to be at odds with the common message conveyed in studies of “secondary religion” and the tendency to focus on processes of religious-identity formation

<sup>11</sup> See the complaints in A. Papaconstantinou, “Egypt,” In *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. S. F. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 197.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Brown has emphasized the “sociological untidiness of the Christian communities of around 400 AD.” Brown, “From Civic Euergetism to Christian Giving,” 29.

in Late Antiquity, the following sections will explore three—potentially related—explanations of this paradoxical situation.

### **10.2.1 Conflict Model: Lived Religion as Resistance**

The first and easiest explanation is to place lived religious practice in a binary opposition with institutional, textual, or elite religion. Some of the studies after the quotidian turn have followed this route by highlighting the manifold instances in which individual practices deviated from institutional norms and models. This has been a necessary redirection of focus, to remind us that the words of religious leaders cannot be taken to represent their entire community. Rather than finding theologically matching practices and ideas, these studies have focused on deviant voices that illustrate the diversity and complexity within religious traditions. Frequently, these deviant voices have been interpreted as a type of resistance against the dominant frame: the voice of single individuals against the current of a powerful institution.<sup>13</sup> The downside of this conflict model is the way it equates lived religious practice with deviance or resistance (see also Chapter 2), while concealing how frequently lived religious practices follow and absorb religious group norms, or how little religious leaders sometimes knew of the so-called elite religious traditions. Rather than following this conflict model, the various chapters of Part II have tried to keep lived religion and institutional group norms together. In doing so, I have complicated the prevailing accounts of Manichaeism, highlighting situations in which religion was highly salient, as well as those instances in which it was invisible or absent. This version of a lived-religion approach, quite consciously called “everyday groupness,” is more than a revival of the binary opposition between the “great tradition” and the “little tradition.” Rather than juxtaposing religion and everyday life in a binary opposition, they belong together in a dialectical relationship, as everyday life is more than a site of “disruption” or resistance. It also includes instances in which institutional models are drawn on extensively.<sup>14</sup> This approach has allowed me to highlight where Manichaeism in Kellis was different from previous reconstructions based on theological and liturgical texts, as well as where it showed the remarkable salience of Manichaeanness. The conflict model is aimed at explaining the individual appropriation of religious ideas and practices in new and local situations, while we need an interpretative framework that can *also* incorporate the striking continuity

---

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Tweed has illustrated this with his description of a lady of Cuban descent who appropriated the site of the shrine of Our Lady of Charity of Cobre at Miami to perform Santería rituals, resisting normative Catholic interpretations of this shrine. T. Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 45–49.

<sup>14</sup> Some studies of everyday Islam have been accused of treating religion as a set of abstract rules that are lived out differently in the realm of the everyday life, as if religion and the everyday stand in a binary opposition. N. Fadil and M. Fernando, “Rediscovering the ‘everyday’ Muslim. Notes on an Anthropological Divide,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, no. 2 (2015): 59–88. At pages 69–70, they accuse Samuli Schielke and others of treating everyday practices as “moments of disruption, of *not conforming* to religious norms.” This characterization of Schielke, in my view, does not do justice to his attempt to rethink the relation between everyday morality and everyday Islam.



between the Greek version of the daily Manichaean prayers at Kellis and the tenth-century Arabic version reported by Ibn al-Nadim.

### 10.2.2 *The Nature of the Sources*

A second potential explanation for some of the patterns in the evidence for local Manichaeanness is the specific documentary nature of the sources. What if Manichaeanness was not highly visible in the Kellis letters because letters are not the proper place for religious bickering? What if Manichaeanness was only intermittently visible because of the documentary nature of the sources? As people say: the absence of evidence is not evidence for absence. Historical information may have disappeared during the abandonment of the village and its subsequent long history of preservation and deterioration. Information regarding religious persecution or regular conflict with Christians could have been lost, destroyed by postdeposition processes, or never recorded in such a way that it could survive the test of times. As shared information between the author and the recipients, it may not have been necessary to identify the religious affiliations of social others, or discuss initiation rituals that set them apart from other villages. Would the documentary nature of these sources not explain the marked difference with the reconstructions of Manichaeism in hagiographical and theological texts?

Earlier papyrological studies have likewise observed how “ecclesiastical writers spill much ink on inner church conflicts and heresiological disputes in this period. But however large the tears such doctrinal disputes created in the intellectual and social fabric of community, they leave few, if any, traces in documentary papyri.”<sup>15</sup> AnneMarie Luijendijk concludes that papyrological evidence for the Ancient Christians of Oxyrhynchus is skewed toward clergy in similar ways as the literary record, since it is only in relation to the nascent institutional church that religiously marked language and titles tend to be used.<sup>16</sup> Many issues remain invisible without this explicit connection to clergy and an institutional church. In a village like Kellis, people must have known about most practices of their neighbors, especially if this included getting up at night to pray toward the moon, or extensive scribal activities. With this background knowledge in mind, there may have been no reason for authors to make explicit statements about religious affiliation, ritual, or conflict, except for the few instances in which religious groupness was discussed specifically.

This explanation for the intermittence of religiously marked language and information in personal letters can be extended with Swidler’s research into the way modern Americans employ multiple, often contradictory, cultural repertoires. She observed that many of her interlocutors did not offer coherent systems of meaning, but rather a “kaleidoscope of common sense” or “a swirling pattern of shifting justifications.”<sup>17</sup> This incoherence of narratives does not bother them, as by keeping their options open, they can

<sup>15</sup> Luijendijk, “On and Beyond Duty,” 104; Cf. Blumell, *Lettered Christians*, 154-5.

<sup>16</sup> A. Luijendijk, “The Dynamics of Religious Identity at Oxyrhynchus,” paper read during the Leiden University conference “Late Antique Religion in Practice: Religious Identification in Late Antique Papyri” (November 2017). I also owe the emphasis on nosy neighbors to her paper. An edited volume based on this conference will be edited by Eline Scheerlinck and me.

<sup>17</sup> Swidler, *Talk of Love*, 182.

strive to limit the uncertainty of social interactions. Just like modern Americans, who can switch between modes of representation, identifications, and different types of logic or narrative when the situation requires alternative approaches, ancient Kellites used “strategies of network diversification” in their letters. Rather than thinking about themselves and others in strictly religious terms, the authors employed a variety of identifications, leading to the typical situation of multiple layered social interactions. They could easily switch between the various frames of reference in their letters, either in relation to the topics discussed or the aim of a section of the letter. Introductory formulas frequently employed phrases and formulas with marked religious language, while the final greeting sections were often limited to a repertoire related to the social network of family and village relations. When read together, these sections of the letter constituted a social strategy of network diversification, addressing the recipients (and bystanders) on multiple levels at the same time. Where the letters of the elect could potentially fail entirely if the recipients did not accept the religious framing as “daughters of the holy church,” most everyday letters must have succeeded in their purposes because they kept multiple cultural meanings on tap. The requested support may have been sent because of the distant kinship relation, the shared village identification, or the affiliation to the Manichaean church. Appealing to more than one frame of reference enabled the letter authors to make the most out of the situation.

### *10.2.3 The Integrated and Segregated Mode of Everyday Religion*

The previous two explanations for the intermittence of Manichaeanness in everyday life can be developed in more depth with Swidler’s theoretical framework of culture in action. What if the absence or presence of Manichaean terminology points to sociopsychological patterns rather than only to epistolary conventions? Swidler’s notion of “settled life” can be used to explain the relatively infrequency of explicit Manichaeanness. In periods of settled life, Swidler states, culture reinforces social action through habitual acts and common sense. For most behavioral choices, individuals simply know from experience how to proceed.<sup>18</sup> Rather than deliberately choosing a course of action, people follow established cultural patterns. Following her lead, we can discern two modes of everyday religious practice: the integrated and segregated mode.

The integrated and segregated mode derive from Swidler’s observations on the marked difference between some of her interlocutors with regard to the way they used cultural repertoires in their daily lives. Even though all of them draw on the same cultural repertoire (she examined the way modern Americans talk about love), some fully integrated culture into their personal experience, while others seemed to keep them segregated. The segregated mode became visible when the interlocutors used elements from a cultural repertoire as “policy statements”: abstract cultural formulas as substitute for personal experiences. In this mode of cultural integration, the repertoire is highly regarded, but almost as a separate domain, only marginally affecting everyday actions and choices. It is a detached but elaborate philosophy that is not engaged in the transformation of the self, but

---

<sup>18</sup> Swidler, “Culture in Action,” 281.

primarily used to defend or express a stable orientation to the world.<sup>19</sup> Other interlocuters worked with a fully integrated mode of culture and everyday life, in which the conventional cultural repertoire was inserted into personal experiences and actively reworked into their understanding of life.<sup>20</sup>

Religious repertoires can be fully integrated in everyday life experiences, as well as kept more segregated from the majority of life's events. The integrated mode is part of unsettled life and requires extensive cultural work by all those involved, especially when the cultural distance between the local situation and the religious or cultural repertoire is substantial, as was the case for some of the Manichaeans in the Egyptian desert. The time and effort involved in this process means that it was primarily the elect who could have developed this integrated mode. The strict Manichaean regulations, moreover, made it imperative for them to reflect on their lifestyle and their daily interactions with others. Most catechumens, on the other hand, were expected to follow less strict ascetic rules. Even when they harmed the Living Soul, something that must have been inevitable to stay alive, they would receive forgiveness in their weekly confession rituals. These confession rituals may have spurred a more reflexive stance, but this is not frequently visible in the letters. For some of the authors, Manichaeism with its group norms was one of their affiliations, not necessarily the highest overarching identification that defined all other behavioral choices. The image that emerges from the Kellis letters is one of settled life, in which there is no urgent need to make religious affiliations explicit.

The segregated mode of religion has frequently been associated with religious behavior in modernity, but the shift toward autonomous religious groups is exactly what facilitated the conceptual segregation of group-specific practices and most everyday behavior. This has also been observed in Isabella Sandwell's comparative study of John Chrysostom, Libanius, and their respective audiences. She highlights the tension between Chrysostom's totalizing ideals and the more flexible attitude of most of his audience, who disagreed with him on the extent to which religion should permeate their lives. Instead, Sandwell argues, it is most likely that these individuals saw their religious affiliation as something that could be kept in a personal or family domain, sometimes even separate from the demands of other aspects of life.<sup>21</sup> Religious groupness was "something that had the minimum impact on how they lived their social lives and [they] would on different occasions position themselves within different forms of social organization *as it suited them*."<sup>22</sup> Rather than thinking about competing groups or conflicting, crosscutting social identities, Mairs's notion of "separation identities" may be closer to the mark, designating how infrequently the identification as Manichaeans affected their affiliation with the village or the family. Lahire's theoretical framework of multiple identifications, matching dispositions with the needs of situations, offers a fruitful perspective on the intermittence of these identifications in

---

<sup>19</sup> Swidler, *Talk of Love*, 53-55.

<sup>20</sup> Swidler, *Talk of Love*, 55-7.

<sup>21</sup> I. Sandwell, "John Chrysostom's Audiences and his Accusations of Religious Laxity," In *Religious Diversity in Late Antiquity*, ed. D. M. Gwynn and S. Bangert (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 540.

<sup>22</sup> Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, 242.

everyday life. Manichaeanness was occasionally salient, but frequently part of settled life in which explicit and distinctive religious behavior was not necessary. Sandwell explains her observations about settled life in Bourdieuan terms. Religious behavior derived from the embodied dispositions that have been turned into a second nature.<sup>23</sup> Bodily routines and mundane practices belonging to the almost boring repetition of everyday life are thus considered field-specific presuppositions that “go without saying,” or belong to a “practical sense,” or “feel for the game” that enables individuals to recognize situations and anticipate successful responses within various social environments and events.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, what would have happened to the Manichaeans when they had to abandon Kellis and move to Aphrodite or other places of the Nile valley? There is, unfortunately, no trace of them in the papyri from the beginning of the fifth century, but we can be sure that they needed new structures and rhythms to adapt to novel social environments. In light of the aforementioned theoretical suggestions, as well as the legal developments of the end of the fourth century, I see three plausible options. Some may have left their Manichaean identification, especially when it became more dangerous for them to perform Manichaeanness and adhere to its group norms. Others may have integrated their religion more fully into their everyday lifestyle, either by working more closely with the Manichaean elect, or by embracing a more detailed social imaginary in which the large cosmological narrative became connected to the situation on the ground. Manichaeanness may have been transformed, from an intermittently salient identification belonging to a cluster of social identifications in the oasis to a more well-defined, totalizing, or highly integrated religious group style that came to define more aspects of daily life. One could even imagine that the compilation of the *Kephalaia* in its final form as found in the Medinet Madi collection stemmed from this end of the fourth-, beginning of the fifth-century movement toward a more explicit conceptualization of the Manichaean group identity. The identification of historical and contemporary religious groups with the forces of Darkness in the Medinet Madi documents corroborates this more explicit conceptualization of Manichaeism in contrast to religious others (1 Keph. 38, and 59 and 122, see also Hom. 15.24–18.26). Future studies will have to examine to what extent these antagonistic conceptualizations went back to pre-fifth century texts and traditions. Unfortunately, little is known about this postulated Manichaeization of everyday life, but parallels are visible in the slow process of Christianization in Egypt.

A final strategy of latter-day Manichaeans was one that kept bishops up at night: crypto-Manichaeism. Some Manichaean ascetics during the fifth century decided to conceal their religious affiliation to avoid persecution. They presented themselves as proper Christian ascetics, living in cenobitic monasteries, while secretly devoting themselves to the teachings of Mani. This latter type of Manichaeism is the zenith of unsettled life, which required a constant vigilance to uphold both repertoires, even when the various obligations

---

<sup>23</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990 ), 66-79; H. Kupari, "Lifelong Minority Religion: Routines and Reflexivity: A Bourdieuan Perspective on the Habitus of Elderly Finnish Orthodox Christian Women," *Religion* 46, no. 2 (2016): 145.

<sup>24</sup> Kupari, *Lifelong Religion as Habitus*, 23; Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 66.

and schemes of expectations led to daily conflict and concealment. The problematic plurality of investments in this setting could not be solved in the same way as the flexible negotiation of roles and identifications in Kellis.<sup>25</sup> Other studies will have to take up the complex relation between imagined threats in narratives of crypto-Manichaeism and real historical processes of secrecy and concealment.<sup>26</sup> The unsettled nature of intentional concealment, however, stands in stark contrast with the intermittence of Manichaeanness in everyday life in Kellis. While stories of crypto-Manichaeism need an explicit, marked, and well-defined religious identity, the Kellis letters convey the impression of settled life, with few conflicts between religious actions and expectations, and the common and communal way of life in a fourth-century Egyptian village.

---

<sup>25</sup> Lahire, "Habitus," 353-4.

<sup>26</sup> Matsangou, "Real and Imagined Manichaeans."

