Stepping Back and Looking Ahead: Twelve Years of Studying Religious Contact at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg Bochum

EDITED BY

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Dynamics in the History of Religions

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Abstract

This chapter aims to familiarize the reader with general conceptual and theoretical considerations that have driven the Käte Hamburger Kolleg 'Dynamics in the History of Religion' over the 12 years of its existence between 2008 and 2020. First, we outline the KHK's general understanding of the key term 'religion'. Second, we sketch how we understand religious studies as a multidisciplinary field that brings together numerous scholars from different backgrounds in terms of theoretical and methodological orientation, including historical, cultural and philological expertise. Third, we describe how we aim to study 'contact' as a central driving force in the dynamics of religious history via the methodological approach of comparison.

Keywords

religion – religious studies – theory – methodology – religious contact – religious history – comparison

1   Introduction

After twelve years of research on *Dynamics in the History of Religions Between Asia and Europe*, the Bochum Käte Hamburger Kolleg (KHK) called for its final conference to be held in March 2020. The idea was, first, to look back at these twelve years, reconsider the central programmatic idea of the KHK – its focus on religious contacts – and take stock of how this approach has benefited researchers in their studies on religious phenomena past and present. Second, the idea of this conference was to discuss the KHK's work in light of other relevant and influential approaches in the field. How does the KHK's legacy – if such a wording is allowed – fit into the field at large? What place does it have in research on religion of the next decades?

It was only a couple of days before the conference when events of this scale and international traveling were restricted or downright prohibited due to the

COVID-19 pandemic. As can be imagined, the organizing committee members vividly remember these times of doubt, anxiety, and, most importantly, a severe concern for the health and well-being of the planned conference participants. In the end, the conference was postponed to a later date. Back in 2020, not many would have thought that the conference would take place 15 months later – in June 2021 – yet still, the pandemic required us to host an online event with researchers taking part from their homes and offices across the globe.

In a sense, this turn of events stands in stark contrast to the work of the KHK itself, which, for the twelve years of its existence, was proud to host more than 150 international research fellows directly in Bochum. Working together in the same place for a considerable time period – most fellows stayed in Bochum for twelve months – provided excellent possibilities for intensive scholarly exchanges, in and beyond the weekly plenary sessions.

This large-scale fellow program was the heart of the Käte Hamburger funding line, having come into being in 2007 under the auspices of then German Minister of Education and Research, Annette Schavan. Unlike many other national and international funding lines, the KHKs were explicitly designed for research in the humanities and social sciences and tailored to these disciplines' specific requirements and challenges. Expressly, first, the KHKs were set up to provide "Freiraum für Geisteswissenschaften," i.e., free space for scholars in the humanities to concentrate on research rather than teaching and administrative work. Second, the KHKs were meant as an instrument to internationalize the humanities in Germany through the said fellow program. In turn, a total of ten KHKs was founded between 2008 and 2012, with the KHK in Bochum as one of the first to pick up its work on 1 April, 2008.

In this introduction, we will first sketch theoretical considerations of how the Center for Religious Studies in Bochum (CERES) conceives religion. This is important because the endeavor of the KHK program 'Dynamics in the history of religion' is inspired by such a theoretical framework. Second, we outline how we understand religious studies as a multidisciplinary field of study and how this understanding enables the inclusion of numerous scholars from different backgrounds in terms of theoretical and methodological orientation and different fields of historical, cultural and philological expertise. After all, the KHK as a whole was constructed on this idea of bringing a maximum of expertise into the study of religion. Third, we describe how we aim to study 'contact' as a central driving force in the dynamics of religious history via the methodological approach of comparison.

2   A Short Introduction to the KHK

2.1   *The KHK and Its Understanding of 'Religion'*

The endeavor of the KHK was to investigate contacts between different religious traditions in the past and present. As an interdisciplinary consortium that integrated social scientific, philological, and historical research, it was based on a neutral, academic perspective, which we call a religious studies (*religionswissenschaftliche*) perspective.[1] It aimed to reconstruct and explain religious phenomena in light of an approach that conceives religion, in the Durkheimian sense, as a "fait social," a social fact.[2] We thus abstain from answering inherently religious questions, whether they refer to the existence or non-existence of god(s) or spiritual beings, or the question of which religion is 'true.' These questions are and have been of utmost importance for thousands of people. The diverse answers that have been suggested throughout history are a driving force in the dynamics of the history of religion. But they can only be answered by religion itself. The endeavor of the KHK, in the context of the German tradition of 'Religionswissenschaft,' mainly after the sociological turn, was to arrive at a better understanding of the emergence, stabilization and diffusion of religious traditions.

The religiously 'neutral' position is based on a position of methodological agnosticism. It maintains its scientific perspective without privileging any, not even atheistic, religious positions. Religious questions can never be answered scientifically – this is one of the major insights since the enlightenment philosophies of thinkers such as David Hume and Immanuel Kant. This basic conclusion, with Jürgen Habermas,[3] establishes the foundation of 'postmetaphysical reasoning,' i.e., the distinction between religious reasoning on the one hand and philosophical and scientific reasoning on the other. It states the impossibility of answering metaphysical questions by way of scientific procedures.

A scientific perspective on religion needs to limit itself to analyzing how, and why, religious questions were answered in different times and places in different ways, depending partly (but not entirely) on extra-religious social conditions, and, in the Weberian sense, affecting these vice versa, as religion is a social force and factor in its own right. A religious studies perspective such as ours scrutinizes the discursive practices, confrontations, and religious

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1   There is an ongoing debate regarding a correct term for this perspective. Some scholars prefer terms like 'comparative religion', 'scientific study of religion', or others. In the following, we refer to this as 'religious studies' in the sense of "Religionswissenschaft."

2   Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1912] 2008), 52.

3   Jürgen Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2019).

struggles evolving around the constitution of religious truth claims in the context of the formation of different religious traditions.

Following the systems theoretical perspective of Niklas Luhmann,[4] we claim that the construction of religious meaning is based on the distinction of immanence and transcendence, or similar distinctions such as familiar/unfamiliar, observable/unobservable, revealed/concealed, present/absent, etc. These binary distinctions have in common that the immanent, the familiar, the observable, the revealed, the present side is easily accessible, while its flip side is not.

Before we move on, two qualifications must be made. First, this perspective is built on semiotic constructivism. Distinctions appear (or sometimes do not!) in communicative processes. It is not the task of the scholar to delineate the boundary of what is truly, or essentially, unfamiliar, unobservable, concealed, absent or transcendent. Questions such as what is truly transcendent are raised, answered or negotiated differently in different cultural or social contexts. It is important, however, that these distinctions themselves are results of processes of observation. They may appear as part of a common sense perspective (it is not yet foreseeable whether I will fall sick tomorrow), but under certain conditions, as will be shown further below, they may be transformed into distinguishable acts of religious, or scientific, communication.

Second, the argument that the unobservable or transcendent is not easily accessible does not mean that from an emic perspective, the perspective of believers, an intimate, personal relationship to what is conceived as transcendent entities is not possible. Quite the contrary, from a religious perspective, the existence of transcendent entities may be experienced as much evident as, say, the existence of rocks and stones.[5] However, as will be shown below, evidence of the existence of transcendent, not quite familiar, not directly observable entities are based on a specific observation operation.

These distinctions that constitute religious – and scientific – communication are based on a certain imbalance. What is present, familiar, observable or immanent is usually close at hand and easily accessible. Because of this, the very constitution of these binary distinctions may at times direct the attention to the absent, the unfamiliar, the unobservable and the transcendent, raising the question of what is hidden on the other side, behind the border. Here, we see a major difference between religion and science. A scientific perspective

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4   Niklas Luhmann, *A Systems Theory of Religion* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2013).

5   For a detailed discussion, see Ralf Ingo Reimann, *Der Schamane sieht eine Hexe, der Ethnologe sieht nichts: Menschliche Informationsverarbeitung und ethnologische Forschung* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1998).

disqualifies assertions and propositions about the unobservable and transcendent as speculation (in the sense the term has been used since the critique of pure reason by Immanuel Kant).[6] What is unobservable, i.e., inaccessible with scientific procedures, is beyond the scope of science. True knowledge that is based on scientific operations can never access the realm of the unobservable or the transcendent. Scientific operations can only shift the border: making, by technological means, observable what formerly was unobservable.

Whereas science limits itself to the one side of these distinctions, religion does not. Religion makes propositions about the transcendent, the concealed, the unfamiliar, the absent, the unobservable. Where science fears to tread, religion moves on. How is this possible? It has often been remarked that the depictions of transcendence are always based on immanent means. Hell, for instance, is a place where people are tortured pretty much like in certain prisons. The systems theoretical approach is more precise here and describes the operation of a religious observation as a specific kind of a re-entry. Re-entries, in the definition of George Spencer Brown,[7] are the coupling of a binary distinction within itself. A re-entry appears when one and the same distinction appears again, on either the one or the other side of the binary distinction. Luhmann contests that this is precisely what happens in religious observations: "In the case of religion, the distinction between observable and unobservable reenters the observable realm."[8] Religion semantically reveals something about absolute transcendence through immanent signs. In practices of divination, for instance, the unobservable future can be seen by hints in the liver of a sacrificed animal, by the flight of birds, or by tarot cards. Religions of revelation assert that the transcendent appears in the immanent, that God descended from heaven to earth and appeared as a human being in Jesus Christ, or that God appeared in a burning bush, or that his message was transmitted by an angel. Science does not permit this crossing of the boundary. The progress of science is based rather on the shifting of the boundary, by the constant extension of what is observable and familiar (for example, by the construction of better microscopes or telescopes). Because religion is constituted by the crossing, rather than the mere shifting, of the boundary between the immanent and the transcendent, it is able to 'see' more than science.

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6 Kant states: "A theoretical cognition is speculative if it pertains to an object or concepts of an object to which one cannot attain in any experience. It is opposed to the cognition of nature, which pertains to no objects, or their predicates, except those that can be given in a possible experience." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 585.

7 George Spencer-Brown, *Laws of Form* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969).

8 Luhmann, *Systems Theory of Religion*, 23.

But this 'advantage' of religion over science has a price. For one, from a scientific point of view, any religious assertion is but pure speculation. Science cannot prove whether religious assertions are right or wrong, but it can cast doubt on their truth claims. For another, religious truth claims are not only challenged by science, but also by other religions, since any assertion regarding the unobservable, the transcendent, is based on a lack of empirical evidence. This point refers back to the re-entry between observable and unobservable. A burning bush may be conceived as a 'hard' empirical fact. And for some, it may be just that, a burning bush whose fire can be explained by 'natural' causes. Or does it signify the presence of God? And which one? Is it a sign, is it a prophecy? Against this backdrop, the formation of relatively stable religious traditions cannot be taken for granted. Rather, we see the need to investigate basic operations of religious truth games as they evolve, crystalize, stabilize, and dissolve in the course of history.

Thus, religion as a scholarly concept can be understood by outlining how it differs from science. Two more aspects are central to our understanding of religion: First, religion emerges in communicative processes. It does not 'fall from the sky,' neither is it 'invented' by some influential social actors to reach their (political, societal, economic, etc.) goals. Understanding society in general, and religion in particular, as fundamentally communicative processes allows us to disconnect it from both supernatural beings and the intentions of (human) actors. And as soon as these communicative processes treat the immanence-transcendence distinction (as outlined above), we can identify them as potentially religious. It is important to add here that communication is based on different kinds of media, including, but not limited to, written and spoken language, images, rituals, gestures and bodily movements, clothing, food, and architecture.

Second, the distinction of immanence and transcendence is at work in many social processes. For instance, every time we talk to someone else, imagining the other and his/her opinions is an act of transcending the immanent position of the self. Every time we plan ahead or think back, we are transcending the here and now. What makes transcendence specifically religious is dealing with *ultimate* contingency ("letztinstanzliche Kontingenz"). Even contingency, the fact that everything is what it is without necessarily having to be this way and potentially could be different without having to be different, is dealt with in many ways, not all of them religious (think of insurance companies, for instance). Only when communicative systems claim to deal with topics such as the ultimate questions of life (its beginning, its end, its meaning and purpose), the fundamental nature of the world and of human societies, or the cosmos in general, can this be regarded as treating ultimate contingency.

As such, we arrive at a working definition of the concept "religion" that assumes religion as a communicative system that is based on the immanence-transcendence distinction and deals with ultimate contingency.[9]

These general theoretical positions include two further conclusions. On the one hand, with a rather clear distinction between science and religion, we see ourselves in the tradition of theories of social differentiation. Religion is a social fact, certainly, but it is not the only fait social. There are other social areas, 'spheres of value' in the terminology of Max Weber, 'fields' with Pierre Bourdieu, 'functional subsystems' in the social systems theory of Niklas Luhmann.[10] This does not mean that religion is entirely set apart. As a social fact it is deeply intertwined with other fields, such as the economy, law, politics, education, art, eroticism, etc. But in contrast to the postmodern critique of theories of differentiation, or claims that postmodernity is an age of de-differentiation,[11] we argue that these spheres/fields are analytically distinguishable – historically and up until today. Science, economy, politics, etc. are clearly not one and the same; each follows its own internal logic ('Eigenrationalität'), and the transformations in each may have an impact on any other field. For instance, the dependency of religious institutions on financial income is a well-known fact. A 'church' is a religious institution, but it cannot survive without money. This creates tensions between the logics of the religious and the economic spheres: A religious institution is always exposed to its dogmatic theological reasonings, but it is also confronted with the plain fact that it can only survive with a stable economic base. And, as Max Weber argued in his 'Zwischenbetrachtungen',[12] such tension between 'spheres of value' may be a driving force in the history of religions.

Second, dynamics in the history of religions are not only caused by the exposure of the religious field to non-religious factors (a potential shortcoming

9   Volkhard Krech, *Die Evolution der Religion: Ein soziologischer Grundriss* (Bielefeld: Transkript, 2021), 24. This definition has, over the years, been developed by KHK founding director Volkhard Krech who also published extensively about it. We present only a very brief sketch here.

10   Max Weber uses the term 'spheres of value' in his 'Zwischenbetrachtungen'. See Max Weber, *Religion und Gesellschaft: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins, 2010). On Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the religious field, see Pierre Bourdieu, "Legitimation and Structured Interest in Weber's Theory of Religion," in *Max Weber: Rationality and Modernity*, ed. S. Whimster and S. Lash (London: Routledge, 1987), 119–136. For Luhmann's systems theoretical approach to religion, see again Luhmann, *A Systems Theory of Religion*.

11   E.g., Hans Joas, *Die Macht des Heiligen: Eine Alternative zur Geschichte der Entzauberung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017).

12   Weber, *Religion und Gesellschaft*.

of Marxist approaches that are based on a clear-cut distinction between a dynamic 'base' and a rather passive 'superstructure'). Religion also inspires itself. Religious communication inspires further religious communication, and each act of communication is based on evolutionary processes of variation, selection, and stabilization.[13] As has been outlined above, religion faces the problem of stabilization. Religious constructions of reality, which are based on the observation of transcendent realms, always include an element of speculation, and are thus continually under threat of being called into question and being challenged by diverging constructions of reality. There is a certain irony often overlooked in constructivist theories of religion, as developed, e.g., by Emile Durkheim or Peter L. Berger.[14] Both argue that society itself, and any construction of reality, is contingent. Any social structure is thus threatened by anomy, as Durkheim pointed out, which is why social structures need a defense mechanism. Both Durkheim and Berger were certain that religion constitutes this defense mechanism: With the help of a 'sacred canopy', the contingency of social structures can be overcome by relating the status quo to a fixed, stable, cosmological order. The sacred is a safeguard to maintain the stability of society, to prevent it from collapse. However, the speculative nature of religious constructions of reality as outlined above proves that religion itself is not free of contingency. The social problem of contingency is thus solved by contingent means, and in a way, religion is thus a threat to itself. The religious construction of meaning is always challenged by diverging constructions. This seems to be another driving force in the history of religion, and this is what the KHK has focused on over the past twelve years. How did religious constructions of meaning emerge, compete against existing ones, stabilize, and turn into 'traditions'? What were defense mechanisms against other religious traditions?

In summary, the dynamics in the history of religions can be pinned down, on the one hand, to extra-religious factors, such as the stimulation of religious reasoning in the context of economic, political, scientific, or other social structural processes of transformation. Religion continuously needs to adapt to its social environment in order to be meaningful. On the other hand, religion constantly inspires and irritates itself. Religious reasoning and religious practice give rise to continuous, or reformed, or revised 'acts of faith.' This process happens even in a 'closed' religious setting, such as the former 'ideal' cultural anthropological model of isolated tribal communities. But it happens more so in the context of contact and communication beyond 'closed' settings. This is

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13   Volkhard Krech, *Die Evolution der Religion*.

14   Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*; Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Harmondsworth: Anchor, 1967).

why the KHK has given special attention to the dimension of contact. Under the condition of the formation of religious traditions, this dimension of contact can either be intra-religious to include struggles and debates within religious traditions, e.g., about the 'true' Christian, or Muslim, or Buddhist faith; or it can be inter-religious, occurring between religious traditions, and contribute the construction of religious communities and boundaries.

2.2 'Religionswissenschaft' as an Interdisciplinary Endeavor at the KHK

As elaborated above, the KHK operates within a framework that is informed by approaches from the study of religion ('Religionswissenschaft'). But at the same time, it is not confined to the discipline. This is due to practical as well as conceptual reasons: The breadth of expertise that is required to carry out collaborative research on the scale of the KHK, covering a wide range of case studies from Eurasia and various historical periods, is hardly found in a single religious studies department. But an endeavour like this can also gain much conceptually by drawing from a wide range of disciplinary, theoretical, methodological, and empirical backgrounds.

In a way, the KHK is a practical implementation of an idea that Volkhard Krech sketched out in his 2006 article "Wohin mit der Religionswissenschaft?" (Where to go with Religious Studies?).[15] In this article, Krech suggests that the study of religion should not be thought of as a single discipline, but as an integral forum for the interdisciplinary study of its research topic. This, however, poses a challenge for the collaborative work that was carried out in the KHK: While 'religion' is not an exclusive subject of study of any discipline, the field of religious studies does constitute a discursive community. This does not entail consensus with regard to methodological or theoretical approaches, but it brings with it a certain awareness of a range of debates that have shaped the field. Of course, other disciplines also study religion, be it as a central topic from another angle (as is the case in theology), or as an inevitable part of the empirical reality under study (as it is often the case in history or philology). But bringing together scholars with very different academic backgrounds to not only compile a series of case studies but to create a surplus in the form of systematic insight into historical processes requires a series of instruments that foster integrative scholarship.

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15   Volkhard Krech, "Wohin mit der Religionswissenschaft? Skizze zur Lage der Religionsforschung und zu Möglichkeiten ihrer Entwicklung," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 58, no. 2 (2006): 97–113, https://doi.org/10.1163/157007306776562062. The title is not easily translated, as it plays with the double meaning of "Where to put Religious Studies?" and "Where to go with Religious Studies?"

The KHK had three basic points of orientation that framed its work: Situations of religious contact as the *empirical* point of orientation, the act of comparison as the *methodological* point of orientation, and an approach based on the sociology of knowledge (laid out in the paragraph above) as the *theoretical* point of orientation. This latter point does not presume that all researchers in the KHK engage with sociological theory. But it posits, in a very basic sense, the interplay between religious semantics and social structures – 'ideas' and 'interests' in the distinction of Max Weber – as the focal point of comparative research.[16] While understanding religion as a social fact, this emphasis on knowledge (or belief systems, or basically culture) respects a certain degree of autonomy of (religious) thought which is not simply a cloak for interests or power structures. Maintaining this focus and at times re-centering the work of the KHK along these three aspects required continuous effort. But overall, this approach created a framework within which all researchers could at the same time bring their own disciplinary approaches forward and engage with the broader questions guiding the KHK as a whole.

2.3   *The KHK Approach in a Nutshell*

In essence, the approach of our KHK in Bochum, as developed by KHK founding director Volkhard Krech, is very simple. To understand it, it is useful to consider the name that is sometimes given to our discipline: comparative religion. How, then, do we compare religions? Or better: According to what do we compare them? The KHK thus started with a thorough reappraisal of comparison as a basic operation in religious studies, which had hardly been done systematically in the field for a long time.[17]

As is the case with any comparison, the comparison must be in relation to something. When we compare two people, we can compare them with respect to height, place of residence, gender, and a million other things. It is the same with religions. We compare them with respect to their number of adherents, their region of origin, their conceptualizations of life after death, and so forth. For these points of comparison, the KHK has used the Latin term *tertia comparationis*.[18] These *tertia comparationis* can be relatively straightforward – as is the case with the number of adherents, for example. But more often, these *tertia* tend to be more complex and, not infrequently, contested among scholars.

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16   Krech, "Wohin mit der Religionswissenschaft?," 105.

17   Oliver Freiberger's book-length study *Considering Comparison. A Method for Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) is a notable and welcome exception. As a KHK-fellow in 2015–16, Freiberger has contributed significantly to the continuing discussions on comparison in our consortium.

18   See Freiberger, *Considering Comparison*, 94.

This is typically the case when a scholar feels that a particular *tertium* should not be deployed with regard to a particular religious tradition. This *tertium*, the scholar might argue, may be relevant in another religious tradition, but to the religion or culture in question, it is entirely alien. Similarly, the scholar might argue that a particular *tertium* is too generic, something that may seem like a useful point of comparison in the abstract, but lacks a firm basis in the empirical material.

At the KHK, it has often been noted that such skepticism towards generalizations is particularly prominent in Sinology. For example, in the introduction to the volume *China's Early Empires. A Re-Appraisal*, editors Michael Loewe and Michael Nylan report that "contributors to the volume have been asked to sidestep a number of [...] conventional categories ('art,' 'correlative thinking,' 'philosophy,' and 'Buddhism' being but four). Believing that good history aims to be as precise as the sources allow (but not one whit more), we have all tried to step back from generalities and abstractions, however comforting such pablum may be."[19] Quite possibly, the most prominent example of a generic concept hotly debated and often dismissed in Sinology and elsewhere is the concept of 'transcendence'.[20] As summarized in Knut Stünkel's forthcoming book *Key Concepts in the Study of Religion in Contact*,[21] while we need to avoid the usage of 'transcendence' in a specific, Christian sense when we talk about other cultures, it can be useful when understood in a formal sense. In this sense of 'moving beyond' one's own immanent standpoint, as Heiner Roetz has argued, the concept can actually be employed to explain the development of thought in Ancient China.[22]

In a way, such struggles mirror the history of religious studies as a discipline: In classical phenomenology, comparisons were often based on broad, generic concepts that were assumed to be shared between religious traditions and that often lead to rather simplistic – or downright false – understandings of particular religious traditions. A popular idea in phenomenology was that all religions share basic experiences and that only the expressions of these experiences

19   Michael Loewe and Michael Nylan, "Introduction," in *China's Early Empires. A Re-Appraisal*, ed. Michael Loewe and Michael Nylan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4.

20   For a critical standpoint, see Rogert T. Ames, "Getting Past Transcendence: Determinacy, Indeterminacy, and Emergence in Chinese Natural Cosmology," in *Transcendence, Immanence, and Intercultural Philosophy*, ed. Nahum Brown und William Franke (Cham, s.l.: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 3–34.

21   See Knut Martin Stünkel, *Key Concepts in the Study of Religion in Contact* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

22   See Heiner Roetz, "Tradition, Universality, and the Time Paradigm of Zhou Philosophy," *The Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36, no. 3 (2009), 359–375, 363.

differ.[23] Later, and at the other end of the spectrum, studies inspired by post-modern and postcolonial approaches criticized the idea "that religion has an autonomous essence"[24] that distinguishes it from science or politics while positing something immutable that allows comparisons across time and place. From another angle, that of traditional philology, one can observe another form of skepticism towards systematic comparison: A religious phenomenon is described in minute and accurate detail – often by using the object-language of the adherents themselves. But in so doing, such studies tend to lose their comparative potency. We may learn a lot about one phenomenon from such studies, but the more focus we put on the intricacies of individual cases, the less we are able to consider similarities and differences *between* cases.

This, then, was the KHK's starting point. We needed to find a way to avoid broad and simplistic generalizations on the one hand, and mere paraphrases of religious phenomena on the other. Neither did we wish to lose analytical power, nor were we willing to give up a firm basis in the empirical material. In other words: We needed *tertia comparationis* that were suitable to the material. What better way, then, but to look for these tertia in the material itself? If we want to find appropriate terms with which to compare religions as scholars, we need to consider the ways in which religions compare themselves.

To find such comparisons – and this really is the KHK in a nutshell – we need to look at situations of religious contact. A person that is 6.5 ft is not tall per se. In fact, he or she (probably he) will not ever ponder on the concept of height until he meets someone shorter or taller. Similarly, in historical sources, we are much more likely to find conceptual thinking on the part of a religious tradition when it finds itself in contact with another tradition. It is in these situations that practices, convictions, narratives, and entire belief systems that were long taken for granted and needed no thematization suddenly become a topic of deliberation and discourse. In turn, the object-linguistic concepts employed by the religions themselves in a contact situation can be the basis for further conceptualization in the study of religion and be transformed into meta-language.

It is important to note that we employed a broad understanding of the term contact at the KHK. Contact thus neither refers only to actual physical encounters between religious groups nor to amicable meetings. Rather,

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23   See, e.g., Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Einführung in die Phänomenologie der Religion*, Christentum und Fremdreligionen 1 (München: Ernst Reinhardt, 1925), 7.

24   Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," in *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, ed. Michael Lambek, Blackwell Anthologies in Social and Cultural Anthropology 2 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 114–32, 115.

religious contact refers to all occasions that trigger religious reflection. This can be a military struggle with a rival religious group, or a friendly cooperation, a polemical pamphlet, or a cordial letter. Religious contact can occur under synchronous physical conditions, e.g., when one religious group migrates into a region dominated by another. We called this "synchronic contact" at the KHK. Religious reflection can, however, also be triggered when a religious tradition is, for one reason or another, confronted with historical circumstances, e.g., when a rising charismatic leader preaches going back to the 'old ways'. Like synchronic contact, such "diachronic contact" can be in reference to what is considered one's own tradition (intra-religious contact) or in reference to what is considered a different tradition (inter-religious contact). Both contrastive pairs, synchronic/diachronic and intra-religious/inter-religious, are not to be essentialized, but indicate the endpoints of a theoretical spectrum. Understood in this way, they have proved highly useful for the KHK discussions.

Thinking our approach further, it is easy to see that in a relational perspective, no religious entity can be seen in isolation and none can be taken for granted. Religious traditions are thus not there per se, but they form and develop in relation to one another. It thus makes little sense to speak of Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, but rather of a relational network in which these terms do not signify fixed entities but dynamic and ever-changing points of contestation.

3   About the Present Volume

When we started the KHK in 2008, our hope and intention was to sustainably establish the approach outlined above – particularly our focus on religious contacts – in the highly diverse research field that is religious studies. This has been successful – to a certain degree. If you were to ask someone at a religious studies conference somewhere in the world what they think of our KHK's approach, chances are that they might not immediately know what you are talking about. In part, such shortcomings are connected to the specificities of the funding format, most notably the fact that it is very challenging to establish a continuous work program with annually changing research fellows.[25]

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25   We have discussed these and other challenges connected to our experience with the funding line in a White Paper published in *Entangled Religions* (Tim Karis and Volkhard Krech, "White Paper: The Käte Hamburger Kolleg (KHK) in Bochum as an Institute of Advanced Studies in the Humanities," *Entangled Religions* 13, no. 1 (2022)). https://doi.org/10.46586/er.13.2022.9603.

On the other hand, these same guest researchers as well as our KHK core colleagues have demonstrated in hundreds of publications that working with the KHK approach can be very fruitful. Moreover, our online journal *Entangled Religions*, with 120+ articles published in the last 8 years, has become a highly respected place to publish research on religious contact. In fact, the sheer number of studies devoted to religious contact situations that were published over the lifetime of (and very often inspired by) the KHK is impossible to count. In an attempt to get an overview of this extensive work nonetheless, KHK members are committed to reviewing a large number of such studies and discussing them in light of our ever-developing typology in a separate volume, "Studying Religion through Religious Contacts: Conceptual Framework, Typological Sketches, and Bibliography" (working title), to be published in the present book series. The book will be edited by Volkhard Krech and Kianoosh Rezania as past KHK directors as well as long-time KHK members Tim Karis and Knut Martin Stünkel.

The present volume is thus neither a comprehensive review of past studies, nor does it engage with the experience of our everyday work at the KHK. Likewise, regarding the final conference, we decided not to invite only 'friends and family', i.e., former fellows and other KHK partners who are familiar with our work and eager to engage with it. Instead, we also invited colleagues less familiar with our work or even those that might have heard about it for the first time and held differing or opposing views.

The present volume thus has a twofold aim: The first is to reflect on the theoretical paradigms and methodological approaches that have informed the KHK's work and demonstrate its usability in research practice. The second is to consider how the KHK's approaches and paradigms resonate with the study of religion and related disciplines more generally. What is the place of the KHK in a diverse field of scholarly approaches? As such, the volume casts a look both backwards to the work within the KHK and forward to the future of the field, bringing together contributions by scholars formerly involved in the KHK as well as scholars joining the discussion with "fresh" perspectives.

4   Contents of This Volume

4.1   *Part 1: Religious Contacts: Theoretical Framework and Selected Case Studies (Chapters 1 and 2)*

In his contribution, **Volkhard Krech** demonstrates how the KHK approach can be developed further in light of larger debates revolving around topics such as the distinction between semantics and social structure or the emergence of a

global religious field. Krech also explains in more detail the concept of the four dimensions of religion, which have proved highly fruitful for the KHK discussions and serve as the basic structure of this volume (see below).

In his analysis of Chinese Buddhist travelogues on their journey to India, former KHK fellow **Max Deeg** provides empirical research on how the distinction between immanence and transcendence, outlined above, is constructed spatially in religious object language. He points out a decisive paradox when it comes to 'sacred spaces': The spatial proximity (a sacred space can be 'visited', the spatial distance is reduced by the act of pilgrimage, for example) needs to be balanced by an often temporal distancing: the sacred space is holy because it is here that primordial – or at least temporally remote events – have occurred. Applying Knut Stünkel's distinction[26] between basic, formal, and specifically religious transcendence, Deeg's contribution displays the fruits of the collaboration between philological and historical research on religion on the one hand and theoretical approaches on the other in the framework of the KHK.

4.2   *Part II: Future Perspectives in the Study of Religion* (*Chapters 3–13*)

As mentioned above, the second part of the present volume follows the conference's goal to look beyond the KHK itself and consider other relevant approaches in the field. It includes 11 chapters offering diverse perspectives on the study of religion, including religious experience, digital religion, cognitive historiography, ritual approaches, and the materiality of religion.

To structure these diverse contributions, we have decided to revert to the concept of the four dimensions of religion, which was developed in the KHK context and structured much of the KHK day-to-day activities. The four dimensions are (A) knowledge, (B) experience, (C) action, and (D) materiality. Put simply, in the dimension of knowledge, we refer to religion as something people believe in: An idea, a dogma, a narrative, a worldview. In the dimension of experience, we refer to religion as something that people feel: the presence of a deity, ecstasy, an epiphany. In the dimension of action, we look at religion as something that people do: worship, pray, dance, go on a pilgrimage, or conduct their whole life in a religious way. Finally, in the dimension of materiality, we look at religion as something we can touch: A building, a relic, a book, an altar, the human body.

It is easy to see that religious phenomena can rarely be described as belonging, as it were, to only one of these four dimensions. So, while a book is a material object (dimension D), it is likely to contain narratives and dogmas (dimension A). People might read from it in a ritual (dimension C), and hearing what is

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26   Knut Martin Stünkel, *Key Concepts*.

considered the word of God can evoke religious feelings (dimension B). Thus, the four dimensions are not intended to introduce artificial boundaries into the discussion. Rather, they function, first, as a heuristic device to structure a discussion. At the KHK, we had meetings devoted to each one of these dimensions in turn, allowing us to focus on particular generic aspects of given cases with more rigor. Second, and quite to the contrary, the dimensions are a constant reminder that the exclusive focus on just one dimension of religion leads to incomplete pictures of what we wish to analyze. It is striking to see that large parts of the disciplinary history can be seen as shifts in focus from one dimension of religion to another (see Krech in this volume).

In a nutshell, thus, the dimensions signify which aspect of the diverse and complex phenomenon that is religion is especially put into focus in a scholarly endeavor. The following 8 chapters are thus organized according to these four dimensions, while the final three chapters focus on methodological questions in religious studies.

4.3   *Dimension A: Knowledge*

James L. Cox draws attention to the history and potential of the phenomenology of religion as a research perspective in religious studies. He calls back into the academic conversation some of the basic goals of phenomenological approaches, specifically the ideal to prepare and conduct comparative analyses. He also emphasizes the potential of this approach to promote tolerance and inter-religious cooperation. Being very aware of decades of critical debates in the phenomenology of religion, Cox nonetheless urges the scientific community to reconsider its skepticism. Particularly when it comes to the communal property of knowledge, he argues, a modern and updated phenomenological approach could help researchers understand that 'their' academic knowledge is in fact jointly owned by the communities which are the subjects of study and religious studies researchers.

In a very different vein, **Darlene M. Juschka** compares space aliens with cosmic deities to make the critical point that religious studies, as a discipline, tends to accept only the latter as legitimate objects of study, while not taking seriously the potential of the former as offering fruitful insight into parallel "systems of beliefs and practices." She focuses on the topic of alien abduction to bolster her argument, drawing primarily from abduction narratives in fiction (film and television) and non-fiction (news media) and comparing the discursive representations therein with those of deities in terms of imagined space, figuring, capacity, benefits and harms, forms of contact and relationships between human, alien and divine entities, and perceived complications in these relationships. In this sense, the contribution is a valuable reflection on

how religious studies draws the boundaries of its field, thereby (perhaps too) narrowly defining the range of phenomena that may be considered as 'religion' or 'religious'.

4.4   Dimension B: Experience

In his contribution, former speaker of the KHK advisory board **Jens Schlieter** deals with the question of religious experience. In a genealogical reconstruction, Schlieter highlights the semantic shifts between 1500 and 1900 in order to show how this concept became meaningful in religious object language within a Protestant framework and would finally evolve into a scholarly concept in the academic study of religion. Second, in a systematic way, Schlieter asks how religious experiences may be recognized as such. This is not only, or even primarily, a question of a distant scholar, but a question that needs to be answered by individuals themselves. How does an individual 'know' that they have had a 'religious experience'? Schlieter's thesis is that the 'recognition' of what individuals or converts conceive as such an experience depends on their former life experiences. This is why, as Schlieter argues, in the analysis of autobiographies, more attention should be given to similar events in their former life.

Ophira Gamliel, another former KHK fellow, approaches the issue of religious experience on two levels: On the theoretical level, she starts with a critical discussion of William James' account of religious experience. Drawing on recent debates on the suitability of the category of experience in the study of religions, she suggests a critical approach to so-called 'mystical experiences' that is aware of the pitfalls of the Jamesian concept while still taking the dimension of experience seriously. On the methodological level, she asks how one can study this dimension in a historical and comparative manner. Approaches to religious experience, like that of Ann Taves, are often rooted in a psychological paradigm and use synchronic methods. Gamliel argues that phenomena related to perceptions of the self and the body can also be analyzed in historical sources. Taking the genre of self-praise hymns, in which speakers speak of themselves *as* otherworldly entities, she explores central shared characteristics of these accounts across multiple religious traditions.

4.5   Dimension C: Action

Heidi A. Campbell, herself a prominent figure in the field, provides an overview of research in digital religion studies. As she points out, since the rise of Internet communication, individuals and groups have integrated new technologies into their religious conduct of life in diverse ways. This has triggered multiple waves of research on the subject and led to the development

of influential paradigms, such as the differentiation between 'religion online' and 'online religion' or a new focus of hybrid forms of online and offline religiosities. As an emergent scholarly field examining a phenomenon that is itself developing quickly, digital religious studies is sure to form an even more important part of religious studies going forward.

In his contribution, former KHK fellow **Tim Weitzel** asks how religious object language reflects the question of how communication not about, but with God, or transcendent beings in a broader sense, is possible. Beyond the thesis of Niklas Luhmann, which holds that (from a systems theoretical perspective) religion with God is impossible, he addresses an issue that is taken for granted in many religions, even if this is not achieved easily. Most religions claim that communication with transcendent beings is not as 'fluid' as with other human beings. How can one be sure that God listens to one's plea, and how do we receive – and interpret – his (or her) reply? What are the risks in the communication with transcendent beings? Weitzel's focus is on medieval texts, prayer books, and manuals that reflect upon these questions within a Christian framework, and he asks how to methodologically approach the primary sources for a larger research framework on this basic question.

4.6   *Dimension D: Materiality*

Birgit Meyer, renowned for her contribution to what is called the 'material turn' in the study of religion, opens a new perspective on the debate on religion and materiality by focusing on Feuerbach's idea about the stomach as a basis for his materialist but non-reductive philosophy. She also focuses on the notion of "fetish," using the example of legba figures from the Ewe in Ghana and Togo, now stored in the anthropological Übersee-Museum in Bremen, Germany. She assumes that food is an entry point into the debate about physical and corporeal dimensions of religion. Thus, she opens a new path for the future of studying religion. She also contributes to current debates about religion and colonialism as well as to how the colonial history of some of the collections in European museums are entangled with the history of the study of religions and some of its central concepts (such as "fetish" or "idol"). Her take on "religious matters," i.e., any concrete physical forms such as buildings, images, or food, and as matters of political and societal concern, offers new methodological and conceptual possibilities.

In parallel to other contributions in this volume, **Ruth Tsuria** focuses on the future of digital religion, but she particularly highlights the tension between the immaterial, abstract nature of the Internet and the very real – material – results that online engagement has on the lives of people by breaking the opposition down to six separate analytical layers. Studying online discourses of religious or religiously inspired practice, she argues, offers glimpses of "representational

lived religion" because digital media is used by a broad swath of the population and digital content is archived and continually accessible. These discourses, and more specifically the users who participate in them, thus contribute to shaping normative understandings of religious practice. She draws from the example of the religious policing of the female body, particularly in Orthodox Judaism, to show how the issues of female masturbation and motherhood are negotiated online and what material, i.e., bodily, and social consequences these discourses bring with them.

4.7   *Methodological Outlook*

Katrine Frøkjær Baunvig dares an outlook into the (near) future of methodological developments in the study of religions. Not only the study of digital religion as a contemporary phenomenon, but also the historical study of religions is confronted with new forms (and volume) of data. Baunvig expects a methodological shift that follows the change in data. The emergence of digital (or: computational) humanities will, in the long run, transform the humanities as a whole, she assumes. But in the medium term, some areas will observe this shift earlier. On the one hand, text-based studies are the focus of current methodological innovations like text mining, and within them – given the amount of data required for large-scale text analysis – especially the study of religion in the nineteenth century will benefit from these. On the other hand, computational analyses in the humanities require a careful evaluation of both data and analysis outputs, leading to an increasing demand of qualifications that support, as Baunvig coins it, the "return of the philologists." As illustrations of these methodological developments, Baunvig draws on her own studies of the work of Danish writer, pastor, and politician N.F.S. Grundtvig.

Eviatar Shulman takes off from the KHK's terminology and approaches, identifying situations of contact and patterns of interaction between and within religious traditions. His focus in this contribution is the position and positionality of researchers, who are not uninfluenced by the realities they study. As such, he urges his readers to ask how the ideas and social practices of the communities they study relate to themselves as human individuals. Seeking to undermine the we-they distinction, he points out that religious communities (past and present) may not easily fall into pre-made categories. He also re-opens the question of religious truth, arguing that scholars should enter this discussion of religious truth seriously in order to arrive at more accurate representations of historical and contemporary religions because it lets scholars see the world in the same way as religious people see it.

In the final contribution to this volume, **Luther H. Martin** explores the question of what a "scientific" study of religion and its future perspectives might be from the perspective of cognitive sciences, network theory, and quantitative

approaches. He understands the scientific study of religion as based on the methods of the natural sciences, particularly evolutionary psychology's vast and growing research on the human brain. This cognition-based approach, he argues, allows researchers to examine issues such as attributing mental states to others, particularly intentionality to superhuman agents or the effects of mind-altering practices such as meditation or group arousal, from a critical, empirically based, rigorously tested and intersubjectively assessed perspective. He also touches upon behavioral economics and cognitive historiography in his sketch of the future of the scientific study of religion.

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Religious Contacts: Theoretical Framework and Selected Case Studies

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Relational Religion: Insights and Challenges after 12 Years of the *Käte Hamburger Kolleg* "Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe"

Volkhard Krech

Abstract

First, the paper recalls some of the main tools that have been used in the work of the KHK. These include the concept of contact, which helps avoid essentialization and reification; a comparative approach, which is not simply applied by scholars, but which religious traditions themselves perform when they encounter each other; and correspondences between object and metalanguage. Second, the paper deals with the distinction between semantics and social structures. Third, the paper summarizes again the four dimensions that underpinned the KHK's work program, namely knowledge, experience, action, and materiality. Reflections on the emergence of a global religious field conclude the contribution.

Keywords

religious contact – comparison – semantics and social structure – dimensions of religion – global religious field

1   Introduction

Everything in this world has an end, and so does the *Käte Hamburger Kolleg* "Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe" (in short: KHK) at the *Center for Religious Studies* (in short: CERES). The expiration of the KHK – at least in the shape we are used to – is an adequate time to step back and reflect on the work we have done in the KHK and to look beyond to further directions the study of religion might take.

　　Since the KHK started in 2008, religious contact has been at the center of its work. We applied a broad concept of contact, be it explicit or implicit, be it inter-religious or intra-religious, be it in the shape of a dialogue or referring to

other religions in one way or another. Focusing on religious contact is based on the following methodological considerations:

First, taking religious contact into account helps *to avoid essentialism and reification* of a single religious tradition. Instead, religious traditions are seen in relation to other religious traditions. Thus, research on religious contact follows a relational approach. It is also part of the concept of entangled history because this historiographical concept is based on the assumption that every historical entity is the product of interaction with others.[1] With this approach, entities are not simply given, but they are considered as constituting and developing via contact. Identity and difference, as well as the self and the other, must be analytically distinguished but cannot be separated. They are two sides of the same coin. With Michel Serres, we rhetorically asked: "Could separate elements join together more easily than inseparable ones?"[2] In other words: Things are related, but relations are based on distinctions. Relations and distinctions are two sides of the same coin. In religious contacts, participants recognize each other as religious (including family resemblances in the sense of Ludwig Wittgenstein),[3] and this recognition leads to generic concepts of religion. In turn, these object-linguistic generic concepts can be the basis for further conceptualization in the study of religion. At the same time, they help to avoid essentialism and the reification of single religious traditions.

Second, research on religious contact is a particular kind of *comparative approach*. Usually, "to compare is to bring two or more things together (physically or in contemplation) and to examine them systematically, identifying similarities and differences among them. *Comparison* has a different meaning within each framework of research. Any exploration of the similarities or differences of two or more units is a comparison. [...] In such comparative studies,

1 With regard to the relation between the study of religion and transcultural studies, see, with the example of Pentecostalism, Esther Berg and Katja Rakow. "Religious Studies and Transcultural Studies: Revealing a Cosmos Not Known Before?" *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (2016): 180–203.

2 Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (*1*). Translated by Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London, New York: Continuum, 2008 [orig. 1985]).

3 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Understanding and Meaning: Part 1: Essays*, ed. Gordon P. Baker and Peter M.S. Hacker. An Analytical Commentary on the 'Philosophical investigations' 1.1 (Malden, MA, Oxford, Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell, 2005; 2., extensively revised edition). With regard to applying this concept to the study on religion see Benson Saler, "Family Resemblance and the Definition of Religion," in *Understanding Religion: Selected Essays*, pp. 159–71. Religion and Reason 48 (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2009), and Christoph Kleine. "Wozu außereuropäische Religionsgeschichte? Überlegungen zu ihrem Nutzen für die religionswissenschaftliche Theorie- und Identitätsbildung." *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 18, no. 1 (2010): 3–38.

one of the main choices is whether to give greater emphasis to the similarities or the differences among the cases."[4] However, in situations of religious contact, it is not the scholar who compares two or more religious traditions. Instead, those religious traditions which participate in a religious contact compare themselves in a particular situation and regarding specific aspects of the contact situation as a *tertium comparationis*. Thus, if we investigate religious contact, comparison is not (at least not only) an academic endeavor, but it is (also) part of the empirical material itself.

To organize collaborative research among the fellows and the members of the KHK and to be able to analyze forms of religious contact instead of only paraphrasing them, we had to operationalize the investigation of religious contact. We had to think about the ways comparison works and what a *tertium comparationis* of a concrete comparison might consist of; we had to differentiate between various conditions, modes, and consequences of religious contact and so forth.

To scientifically compare different religious traditions, which are in contact and thus compare themselves, we considered different kinds of *tertia comparationis*. In other words: We tracked an oscillation between empirical object language and scientific metalanguage.

Metalanguage can best correspond with religious-historical material and avoid sterile scientism when it links in with the reflection successively identified as religious, in which an object-linguistic awareness of the religious arises and is actively promoted. The inner-religious reflection is typically fostered when

a) condensed or condensing religious networks of traditions come into contact with others (this is synchronically stimulated religious reflection), or

b) stimulated by religious contact, handed-down traditions become thematic, thus compiled, reformed, or rejected (this is diachronically stimulated religious reflection).

We tested several approaches and distinctions, maybe too many.[5] The benchmark for an appropriate number of approaches and distinctions was set by the advisory board of the KHK. Whenever its members lost us and did not understand what we were testing, we realized that we had to curb our desire for distinctions and ever more conceptual work. The distinctions that proved most

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4 Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

5 On a selection of the most important concepts that functioned as a tertium comparationis see Knut-Martin Stünkel, *Key Concepts in the Study of Religion in Contact*. Dynamics in the History of Religions (Leiden, Boston: Brill, forthcoming).

useful over the entire work of the KHK were, first, the distinction between semantics and social structures, and second, the distinction between fundamental dimensions of religion that are at work in religious contact. Third, these distinctions helped us to reconstruct the emergence of regional religious fields and successively a global religious field.

2   The Distinction between Semantics and Social Structures

The difference between religious semantics and social structures is among the most important epistemological distinctions. Something is always said by someone. He or she claims *something*, and at the same time, the claim is part of *self-assertion*. This also holds true for religious communication. On the one hand, religious ideas and notions are neither metaphysically given nor do they just float around in the air. Religion is not "ein unableitbares Urphänomen"[6] (an underivable primary phenomenon), as van der Leeuw understands it, but it is socio-culturally produced and reproduced; it is an entity sui generis only in this respect. On the other hand, social institutions do not exist without any meaning, but they are – figuratively speaking – clothed by semantics that provide social structures with meaning.

What for Max Weber was the interplay between ideas and interests,[7] has been established in the course of the 20th century as a 'sociology of knowledge' approach (German: *Wissenssoziologie*).[8] With the approaches of Karl Mannheim, Ludwik Fleck, Robert Merton, Thomas Luckmann, Niklas Luhmann, and others, we have tools at our disposal to analyze the mutual dependency between social structures and semantics. In its most general form, the sociology of knowledge approach states that semantics (ideas, concepts, topoi) and the socio-cultural situations of what "carries" them (including interests and passion) are in a relationship of interdependence.[9] Semantics,

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6   Günter Lanczkowski, *Einführung in Die Religionswissenschaft*. Die Theologie (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980).

7   M. Rainer Lepsius, "Interests and Ideas: Max Weber's Allocation Problem," in *Max Weber and Institutional Theory*, ed. Claus Wendt, pp. 23–34 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017).

8   As an overview, see Peter Hamilton, *Knowledge and Social Structure: An Introduction to the Classical Argument in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Routledge Library Editions: Social Theory 37 (London, New York: Routledge, 2014 [orig. 1974]).

9   This correlation is based on the analyses of Max Weber; see Max Weber, "Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie: Bd. 1*, pp. 237–573 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1920) (MWG I/19, p. 101): "Interessen (materielle und ideelle) nicht: Ideen beherrschen unmittelbar das Handeln der Menschen. Aber: die

on the one hand, and their carrier strata (such as elites, farmers, craftsmen, bourgeois, the working class, and so on) as well as social forms (such as groups, currents, and organizations), on the other hand, are in a connected relationship. Semantics are not free-floating but require an institutional framework to become established and to be passed on. Conversely, social structures need to be equipped with semantics to be given meaning. This analytical distinction allows us to understand dynamics in the history of religions in general and religious contact in particular: It is in the process of the social and societal structuration that religious semantics are institutionally condensed and constrained. In turn, established institutional settings are constantly reshaped and, from time to time, dissolved by circulating religious semantics. In sociology, the question of the chronological sequence of semantic and societal-structural developments is currently a topic of discussion.[10] This debate is, as it were, the continuation of the dispute over the alternative between idealistic and materialistic perspectives. However, as the phrase "mutual influence" indicates (Weber speaks of *Wahlverwandtschaften*), this theoretical question seems to be futile; it is, after all, akin to the famous question of whether the chicken or the egg came first. As always, what matters is in-depth empirical studies.

As I noted above, whenever someone speaks, he or she always asserts something and her- or himself at the same time. However, that someone does not always have to be a single person. Collective agents also can speak, albeit represented through individuals. Institutions speak, and even texts have something to say. It may therefore be more appropriate to speak of actants that are constituted by and act in social structures while communicatively referring to them as agents.[11] It is a matter of communicative structures whether someone or something acts and, if so, who or what acts. The meta-linguistic concept of *agency* points to the fact that actants are not the starting point for

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'Weltbilder', welche durch 'Ideen' geschaffen werden, haben sehr oft als Weichensteller die Bahnen bestimmt, in denen die Dynamik der Interessen das Handeln fortbewegte. Nach dem Weltbild richtete es sich ja: 'wovon' und 'wozu' man 'erlöst' sein wollte und – nicht zu vergessen: – konnte." (Not interests [material and ideal] but ideas directly dominate the actions of humans. But the 'world views' which are created by 'ideas' have, very often, as moving forces, defined the channels in which the dynamics of the interests pushed forward action. According to the world view it was directed: 'from what' and 'for what' one wanted to be 'redeemed' and – not to forget: – could be.)

10   Cf. Urs Stäheli. "Die Nachträglichkeit der Semantik – Zum Verhältnis von Sozialstruktur und Semantik." *Soziale Systeme* 4, no. 2 (1998): 315–40.

11   The concept of actants has been introduced by Algirdas Julien Greimas; see Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

events but a communicative product.[12] In this sense, the connection between actants builds the time and space of the socio-cultural domain, as stressed by the Actor-Network-Theory: "Gods, angels, spheres, doves, plants, steam engines, are not in space and do not age in time. On the contrary, spaces and times are traced by reversible or irreversible displacements of many types of mobiles. They are generated by the movements of mobiles, they do not frame these movements."[13]

3   Religious Contact in Four Dimensions

Next to the distinction between semantics and social structures, another helpful analytical distinction during the work of the KHK has been between four dimensions of religion: knowledge, experience, action, and materiality. To use a metaphor of Scott Atran: the four dimensions are "different mountain bridges" that form "a mountain-valley landscape" of mental and social processes.[14] "This landscape functions everywhere to canalize, but not determine" mental and social development.[15] The four dimensions are at work in religious processes in general.[16] In the course of the work of the KHK, it turned out that considering the four dimensions helps analyze religious contact. All four dimensions are inter-related, but in individual case studies one or the other dimension might be analytically highlighted.

Scholars in the study of religion have each focussed on only one of these dimensions:

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12   Cf., however, in a more action-theoretical orientation, Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische. "What Is Agency?" *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 4 (1998): 962–1023. Alfred Gell extends the concept of agency to physical objects and speaks of art objects as 'agents'; see Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), and Chris Gosden. "What Do Objects Want?" *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 12, no. 3 (2005): 193–211. From here, we can also speak of the 'agency of objects,' for instance in Latour's sense; see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

13   Bruno Latour. "A Relativist Account of Einstein's Relativity." *Social Studies of Science* 18 (1998): 3–44.

14   Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion*. Evolution and Cognition (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

15   Atran, *Gods*, 11.

16   Volkhard Krech, "Dimensionen des Religiösen," in *Handbuch Religionssoziologie*, ed. Detlef Pollack et al., 51–94. Veröffentlichungen der Sektion Religionssoziologie der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2018).

Regarding the dimension of *knowledge*, scholars of religion in Victorian England (such as Friedrich Max Müller and James Frazer) defined and investigated religion above all or even exclusively as an intellectual matter, as an early form of knowledge.[17] Although they unacceptably reduced religion to just one of its aspects, they were right to assume that religion does provide mental and social orientation with a specific kind of knowledge. In this respect, the philologically oriented study of religion investigates religious concepts. In general, the guiding question in this regard is: How does religion relate to cognition and patterns of knowledge and transforms them into religious meaning?

Considering the dimension of *experience* is also grounded in the history of the study of religion: Philosophers and theorists of religion such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Otto, and William James understand religion as a matter of perception, emotion, feeling, and experience[18] – in Schleiermacher's words: as "neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling."[19] This conceptualization is also one-sided, but it is right in that religion does always have something to do with perception and experience. Perceptions activate or generate feelings and thought patterns that are stored and shared as experiences, i.e., explicit patterns of perceptions and emotions. In turn, perceptions are linguistically predisposed, while language is generated and activated via social communication. Approaches such as the aesthetics of religion,[20] cognitive science of religion,[21] and the history of religious experience focus on this dimension.[22] In general, the guiding question in this regard is: How does

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17   Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*. Sir D. Owen Evans Lectures 1962 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).

18   Todd DuBose, "Homo Religiosus," in *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, ed. David A. Leeming, Kathryn Madden, and Stanton Marlan, 407–10. Springer Reference (New York: Springer, 2010).

19   Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. Translated, with introduction by John Oman (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1893 [orig. 1799]).

20   Alexandra K. Grieser and Jay Johnston, "What Is an Aesthetics of Religion? From the Senses to Meaning – And Back Again," in *Aesthetics of Religion: A Connective Concept*, ed. Alexandra K. Grieser and Jay Johnston, 1–50. Religion and Reason 58 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017).

21   Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe, eds., *Religion Explained? The Cognitive Science of Religion After Twenty-Five Years*. Scientific Studies of Religion (London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

22   See, e. g., Gavin D. Flood, *The Truth Within: A History of Inwardness in Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism* (Oxford, UK, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013); Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Chris A.M. Hermans. "Towards a Theory of Spiritual and Religious Experiences." *Archive for the Psychology of*

religion relate to sense-perception and emotions and transform them into religious experience?

Taking into account the dimension of *action* can also be traced back in the history of the study of religion: Some scholars – for instance Immanuel Kant, Max Weber, and Talcott Parsons – see religion as a form of action or a source of motivation or legitimation for action (including acquiescence or inaction).[23] This perspective is also a wrong reduction. Yet, religion is indeed always related to planning, acting, regulating, and attaining objectives. Whilst action includes the intention and motivation of individuals, regulation is geared more towards social forms such as groups, schools, currents, networks, and organizations. Among the most prominent topics related to this dimension are religious rituals[24] on the one hand and religious ethics, including a religiously lead

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Religion 37, no. 2 (2015): 141–67; Bettina E. Schmidt, ed., *The Study of Religious Experience: Approaches and Methodologies* (Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2016); Alexandra Cuffel, Licia Di Giacinto, and Volkhard Krech. "Senses, Religion, and Religious Encounter: Literature Review and Research Perspectives." *Entangled Religions* 10 (2019): 1–41. However, the differences between the concepts of emotion, feeling, and experiences are not always made clear. Regarding the distinction between emotions and feelings, see Antonio R. Damasio and Gil B. Carvalho. "The Nature of Feelings: Evolutionary and Neurobiological Origins." *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 14, no. 2 (2013): 143–51: Feelings are "[t]he mental experiences that accompany body states. Action programmes (drives and emotions) can elicit feelings. Experiences related to exteroceptive senses (vision, hearing, touch, taste and smell) commonly cause emotions and ensuing feelings but in general are not felt in and of themselves. This definition also excludes the use of 'feeling' in the sense of 'thinking' or 'intuiting'." In turn, experiences are socio-cultural patterns of mental feelings.

23   Cf. Immanuel Kant, "Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason," in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*. With an intruduction by Robert Merrihew Adams, ed. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni, pp. 31–191. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998): "*Religion* is (subjectively considered) the recognition of all our duties as divine commands"; Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* [orig. 1922], ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1978; 2 Volumes): "To define 'religion,' to say what it is, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study. The essence of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social action"; Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*. With a New Preface by Bryan S. Turner. 2nd ed. Routledge Sociology Classics (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1991 [orig. 1951]): The "problem of the *Ausgleich*, the ultimate balancing of the motivational and moral economy, is the core of the significance of religion in a sociological context."

24   Jens Kreinath, Jan A.M. Snoek, and Michael Stausberg, eds., *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*. Numen Book Series 114.1 (Leiden, Boston, MA: Brill, 2006).

conduct of life on the other hand.[25] In general, the guiding question in this respect is: How does religion relate to action and regulation and transform them into religious ones during religious contact?

Last, but not least, taking the dimension of *embodiment* into account is also rooted in the history of the study of religion: Feuerbach, Marx, and other representatives of materialism see religion merely as a symbolic response to material conditions.[26] Once again, this is an overly one-sided view of things, but it is correct to underline that religion is always based on processing and – metaphorically speaking – digesting material. This aspect is stressed by the 'material religion' approach, namely – to use a phrase coined by Peter Bräunlein – "thinking religion through things."[27] This approach has been introduced – among other – by Birgit Meyer and David Morgan.[28] Materiality can be divided into embodiment and corporeality. Whilst corporeality relates to the level of bodies in their physical aspect, embodiment is geared more

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25   One of the most important approaches to religious action in recent times is the theory developed by Martin Riesebrodt: "My adherence to the concept of religion is based on neither theological nor religious but solely pragmatic grounds. Its critics are right in saying that the concept cannot be universalized on the basis of either a theory of discourse or a theory of institutions, but they overlook approaches founded on a theory of action. From my point of view, the concept of religion as action makes sense and is indispensable. Subsuming religious action under other concepts would result in an analytical loss with regard to our ability to understand and explain the specificity of religious phenomena. Given the great significance of religiously motivated action in our time, not to mention in other centuries, an abandonment of the concept of religion would represent a loss for knowledge. I do not assume that religion was implanted in humans through a divine act of creation or provided a priori by nature. In humans' interaction with their environment, religion developed as a relationship to superhuman powers. I will therefore propose a definition and a theory of religion that will make possible a better understanding of religion as a specific type of meaningful social action and, at the same time, account for its universality"; Martin Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Translated by Steven Rendall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

26   See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*. Introduced by Ernest Mandel. Translated by Ben Fowkes. Reprinted in Penguin Classics. Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1990): "The religious reflections of the real world can, in any case, vanish only when the practical relations of everyday life between man and man, and man and nature, generally present themselves to him in a transparent and rational form. The veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, i.e. the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control."

27   Peter J. Bräunlein. "Thinking Religion Through Things." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 28, 4–5 (2016): 365–99.

28   Cf., e.g., Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman, "Introduction: Material Religion – How Things Matter," in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, ed. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, 1–24. The Future of the Religious Past (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

comprehensively towards nature, resources, and material artefacts. The physical and organic matter on which the mental and socio-cultural sphere is addressed by communication and action, but it also has a life of its own in the form of organic and physical constraints and affordances.[29] The assumption of an 'agency of objects' is also concerned with this perspective.[30] This concept claims that not only humans but also objects can act, i.e., behave in a manner that is attributed as meaningful. Since objects are never accessed directly but signified, also "signs 'do' things."[31] In this sense, "[a]gency is not something we confer on objects in a one-way relationship; it emerges reciprocally as humans and nonhumans merge."[32] In addition, if the materiality of particular media is relevant for the information it channels, and if there is some truth in McLuhan's dictum "the medium is the message,"[33] the study of religion must investigate the relationship between religion and media concerning physical aspects, constraints, and affordances. In general, the guiding question in this respect is: How does religion relate to its organic and physical environment, and which impact does the used media have while religious traditions are in contact with each other?

3.1   *The Dimension of Knowledge*

There is no religion without knowledge – not only knowledge about religion but also religious knowledge. Religious knowledge forms and expresses specific concepts to give religious meaning to experiences, behavior, and matter, as well as their relationship to each other. In this way, religion becomes a specific form of meaning. Religious knowledge includes orientation knowledge in myths, narratives, dogmatics, soteriology, tradition histories, etc., as well as practical knowledge. The latter includes knowledge of ritual methods for dealing with superhuman powers, of self-perfection, and of producing and using

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29   James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* [orig. 1979]. Psychology Press Classic Editions (New York, Hove, UK: Psychology Press, 2015).

30   Gosden, "Objects."

31   Robert A. Yelle, "Semiotics," in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, 355–65. Routledge Handbooks (London, New York: Routledge, 2011).

32   Carl Knappett, "Animacy, Agency, and Personhood," in *Thinking Through Material Culture: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Carl Knappett, 11–34. Archaeology, Culture, and Society (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

33   Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. First MIT Press edition (Cambridge, MA, London, UK: MIT Press, 1994 [orig. 1964]).

religious artefacts. Knowledge transmitted by religion is potentially one of the most important forms of cultural memory.[34]

Furthermore, in the lowest common denominator of their respective use today, the terms 'knowledge' and 'religion' appear to both share the characteristic of making the unknown available. While knowledge realizes the potentially available, religion refers to knowledge that is unavailable in principle. Religious knowledge is differentiated from other areas of knowledge through specific semantics that refer to ultimate contingency by means of the distinction between immanence and transcendence. However, differentiation does not mean separation. Thus, religious knowledge intersects with other areas of knowledge. In the dimension of knowledge, religion is always related to other fields such as science, art, medicine, law, economics, and politics. Consequently, research on the emergence of religion must include exploring the processes in which religious and secular knowledge become distinct from each other, the different boundaries drawn historically between these areas and their inner logic, as well as how they overlap.

The dimension of knowledge is always involved in the making of religion. However, this dimension can be stressed in specific cases of religious contact and can be scientifically observed, respectively. Examples of religious contact regarding the dimension of knowledge include the following: The Canaanite god El, the "King" and "the Father" of the Canaanite gods, was later equated with YHWH, the god of the Israelites. Thus, many concepts originally attributed to El were integrated into the notion of YHWH; e.g., the king, the father, and the creator.[35]

3.2   *The Dimension of Experience*

Everything meaningful starts with sensual perception and emotions that are mentally transformed into conscious feelings and socially converted into patterns of experience. This is also where religion starts. It always has an aesthetic and emotional dimension in that it refers to perceptions and generates and

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34   See Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006); Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*. Translated by Simon Lee (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

35   Cf. Georg Fohrer, *History of Israelite Religion* (Nashville, TN, New York: Abingdon Press, 1972); Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Michael David Coogan and Mark S. Smith, "Introduction," in *Stories from Ancient Canaan*, ed. Michael D. Coogan and Mark S. Smith. 2nd ed., 1–30 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012).

processes experiences in the sense of socio-cultural patterns out of them. Although only indirectly objectifiable, i.e., as an object in the communication about it,[36] the concept of religious experience does symbolize a special constitutive momentum in the religious field. In turn, non-religious experiences, especially personal or societal crisis experiences (such as wars or natural disasters), also may impact religion. There is no religious experience as such. A given feeling must be attributed as religious through signs to become a religious experience. For example, when someone is articulating his or her feeling of being one with the universe, that feeling may be signified as a general aesthetic experience or a specific religious experience.

Religious patterns of experience include the communication with divinities or saints and other experiences of transcendence. This applies not only to conversion and dealing with crises but also to self-reassurance in general. This reassurance can certainly also happen indirectly. Accounts of existential awakening experiences (e.g., in Buddhism), visions, and apparitions are thus central elements of the hagiographies not just of religious founder figures. These not only serve to legitimize new religious dogmas and practices but also form attractors for the growth of religious communities – as is particularly conspicuous in the emergence of pilgrimage destinations.

At the same time, experiences defined as reproducible (for instance, the experience of community in rituals, levels of meditation anticipating ideas of salvation) are often part of the promise of salvation or a religious good to be acquired en route to this. Thus, the immersion states of Buddha (samādhis), for example, are described in texts like the Avatamsakasūtra in exuberant imagery. This metaphorical imagery of the texts is, in turn, reflected in the visual worlds of religious paintings (here: Vairocana depictions in East Asian art).

As the previous example indicates, attempts to induce religious experiences also involve the use of aesthetic means. Here, it is important to observe the inner logic of aesthetic experiences in terms of their conditions and impacts within and beyond the religious field and in particular in terms of how they interact with the field of art also developing in the course of religious contact.

The dimension of experience is always at work in the production of religion. However, this dimension may be highlighted in specific cases of religious contact and can be scientifically observed, respectively. Examples of religious contact concerning the dimension of experience include the following: The encounter between Jewish Kabbalah and Sufism in the Middle Ages strengthened the experiential dimension of Kabbalistic mysticism in contrast to the cognitive dimension. The Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia is a representative of

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36 Cf. Robert H. Sharf, "Experience," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor, 94–116 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

this encounter and its impact. His method of mystical ecstasy is based on the Sufi way. The method that Abulafia proposed includes specific articulation of the divine names, special ways of breathing and bodily movements, singing, bobbing of the head, and other techniques that were not common in traditional commandments of Judaism[37] but have much in common with Sufi *dhikr* ceremonies.[38] When Abulafia describes the new Jewish prayer practice, he even uses the Muslim term *sheikh*.

3.3   *The Dimension of Action*

Next to structure, action is the most important kind of social regulation. Action is the attribution of meaning to behavior. Max Weber speaks of action "insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his [or her] behavior – be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. Action is 'social' insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course."[39] The orientation happens during communication of acting and reacting – be it via bodily behavior or verbal language. There is no religious action as such. A given behavior must be attributed as religious through signification in communication to become religious action. If someone, for example, raises her or his arms, this behavior can be – depending on the context – a warning sign or an act of blessing.

For religion, action is especially important because, in religious communication, all sorts of things can be the object of meaning formation. Therefore, a high degree of regulation in the form of action as meaningful behavior is needed: "About non-empirical things, one can communicate unusually easily and uninhibitedly. [...] This 'uninhibitedness' of religious communication would deprive it of any seriousness, were it not in return restricted by an artificial 'scarcity.'"[40] Religion can vary considerably in mental perception. It therefore must be regulated in social communication within the oscillation between restriction and extension because: "What happens in the heads of the uncountable individuals can never build up 'religion' – except through communication."[41]

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37   Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*. SUNY Series in Judaica (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010).

38   Moshe Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*. SUNY Series in Judaica (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988).

39   Weber, *Economy*, 4.

40   Niklas Luhmann, "Die Ausdifferenzierung der Religion," in *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik: Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft, Bd. 3*, pp. 259–357 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1989); my translation, VK.

41   Niklas Luhmann, "Religion als Kommunikation," in *Religion als Kommunikation*, ed. Hartmann Tyrell, Volkhard Krech, and Hubert Knoblauch, 135–45. Religion in der Gesellschaft 4 (Würzburg: Ergon, 1998); my translation, VK.

In the dimension of action, religion forms in multiple ways: for instance, as ritual action, in meditation and prayer practices, in currents and organizations, and as an ethized approach to life. In older theories, the history of religion is reconstructed as one moving from ritual actions to ethization. But even if religions have developed concepts of an ethical conduct of life, religious rituals (for example, in the form of liturgies) are still part of the core of religious action. Similarly, meditation and prayer can be analyzed not only from the perspective of experience or soteriological ideas but also as ritualized performances.

In addition to religious structuring practices and ethics, there are other ones that form community and order. Thus, we must examine the reciprocal impacts between the religious field and other modes of action – for instance, in politics, law, and education. These relations are subject to variations that cannot simply be described as secularization. First, ritual rules and religious norms can be seen as the cradle of statutory law, as the terms dīn (Arabic) and dāt (Hebrew) show, whose meaning was only extended to 'religion' in modern times. Second, religion was already defined in the medium of law in Western antiquity, as in the distinction between 'religio' and 'superstitio' or 'religio licita' and 'religio illicita.'[42] With the emergence of sovereign nation-states and the extensive expropriation and abolishment of privileges of the churches in Europe, religious law may have been subjugated to secular law but continues in numerous enclaves.[43] The containment of religion under the control of the state raises questions regarding the general religious policy, law governing religion, and religious education (for instance, in schools) of a community. The spectrum ranges from strict 'laicism,' i.e., altogether banning religion from the public sphere, via disestablishment with well-meaning neutrality on the part of the government, all the way to various degrees of corporatist inclusion or pillarization and – in the extreme case – a theocratic constitution. In the figurations which vary in time and space, neither religion nor law and politics are fixed entities. On the contrary, we can assume that religion is under constant political and legal pressure to adapt and, vice-versa, that law and politics must react to changes in the religious field.

How single religious elements condense into traditions and how different traditions interact is of key importance from the perspective of "relational

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42   See Hans Gerhard Kippenberg and Gunnar Folke Schuppert, *Die verrechtlichte Religion: Der Öffentlichkeitsstatus von Religionsgemeinschaften* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

43   Regarding the relationship between religion and law in Western history see Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

religion." The religious field always emerges and reproduces itself through the observation of self and other by different currents, groups, and denominations, and thus under plural conditions. As religions ascribe themselves a normative and ordering power or as it is attributed to them, religious plurality is, however, also a challenge for many religious traditions as well as for religio-political and religio-legal regulations.

The dimension of action is always included in the making of religion. However, this dimension can be emphasized in specific cases of religious contact and thus be scientifically described, respectively. Examples of religious contact stressing the dimension of action include the following: During the Chinese rites controversy during the 17th and 18th centuries, representatives of Roman Catholicism and Confucianism observed each other with respect to ritual action. While the Jesuits argued that Chinese rites were cultural ceremonies and thus should be tolerated, the Dominicans and Franciscans disagreed and carried this issue to Rome.[44] The Jesuit Matteo Ricci referred to Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist practices as three Chinese approaches to religion, rather than three religions.[45] Ricci's evaluation of Chinese ancestor veneration and rites for Confucius was that such practices were "certainly not idolatrous, and perhaps not even superstitious."[46] In contrast, the Dominicans insisted that ancestor worship was idolatry, that rites were religious, and that Confucianism was more than just a 'philosophy.' However, beyond the official controversy, Chinese Christians creatively adapted traditional funerary rituals to accommodate their newly adopted belief system, such as bowing and prostrating before a crucifix, instead of the funerary portrait of a parent alone; distributing food offerings to the poor as alms, instead of eating the offerings oneself as a mourner; or substituting a rosary for Buddhist prayer beads in a posthumous portrait.[47] By the way: The difference between the official controversy lead by

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44 "Interpretations of the Rites Controversy can be placed on a spectrum between two extremes. One extreme regards the Rites Controversy as a watershed in the early modern history of Sino-western cultural relations while the other extreme views the Controversy as a purely European affair which can be easily omitted when attempting to understand the history of Christianity in China from a Chinese perspective"; David E. Mungello, "An Introduction to the Chinese Rites Controversy," in *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning*, ed. David E. Mungello, 3–12. Monumenta Serica Monograph Series 33 (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1994).

45 Nicolas Standaert, *The Interweaving of Rituals: Funerals in the Cultural Exchange Between China and Europe* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010).

46 Quoted after Standaert, *Interweaving*, 88.

47 See Standaert, *Interweaving*. Involvement in the controversy of Christian converts "through books, pamphlets, letters of protest etc. shows that they were truly imbedded in a Chinese society in which rites occupied an important place"; Nicolas Standaert, "Rites

literati and the hybrid practice of Chinese Christians is an excellent example of a different figuration of the relation between semantics and social structures.

3.4   *The Dimension of Materiality*

Mental perception, as well as socio-cultural experience and knowledge, always rely on the physical. Furthermore, perception, from which religion takes its starting point and which is transformed into socio-cultural experience, must be stimulated by objects. However, there is no 'thing as such,' as Immanuel Kant has taught us.[48] Mere physical matter is not part of socio-cultural reality in general and religion in particular. Things must always be signified to get a specific meaning and thus become significant for socio-cultural reality. Things are never only things; they can and do have various meanings, including a religious meaning. What, for example, is a coin? Usually, it is attributed as a physical medium to make a payment. However, within the cargo cult, it can be a religious medium and get a religious meaning.[49]

The perception of matter is always socio-culturally encoded, i.e., provided with a particular meaning. This happens in relation to different societal spheres: medicine, economics, politics, and art, for instance, provide sexuality, corporeality, and health with different meanings than does religion. The socio-cultural meaning of materiality varies both synchronically and diachronically. However, no socio-cultural circumstance can be described without the media function of physical objects. For example, it can make a difference whether religious meaning is transmitted in face-to-face communication, via bodily behavior, or speech acts, or whether religion proceeds via pictures or texts. Accordingly, the analysis of religion should consider the material, physical dimension. This includes the material nature of religious media (books and scrolls, pictures, sculptures, ritual objects, sacred buildings, to name a few) and the corporeality of certain performances, such as bodily acting out mythical narratives. In this sense, religious concepts are always embodied in physical matter, including the human body. However, physical matter can – but does not have to be – of religious significance. Religion can never proceed without

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Controversy," in *Handbook of Christianity in China: Volume One: 635–1800*, ed. Nicolas Standaert, 680–88. Handbook of Oriental Studies 15/1 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2001).

48   Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* [orig. 1781], ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): "If by a noumenon we understand a thing *insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition*, because we abstract from the manner of our intuition of it, then this is a noumenon in the *negative* sense."

49   Andrew Strathern. "The Red Box Money-Cult in Mount Hagen 1968–71. (Part I)." *Oceania* 50, no. 2 (1979): 88–102; Andrew Strathern. "The Red Box Money-Cult in Mount Hagen 1968–71. (Part II)." *Oceania* 50, no. 3 (1980): 161–75.

its physical environment. This applies to writing (you need objects with and on which you can write, and the writing itself also has a physical aspect), as well as to oral communication (the speech motor skills of those involved must be activated and the sound waves must be transmitted) nor in any other media (via pictures and other artificial objects). That is self-evident and trivial. The question of whether and, if so, how religion addresses its physical conditions as religiously relevant is less trivial.

The analysis of materiality issues considers the fact that in the interaction of the four dimensions of knowledge, experience, action, and materiality, the reference to physical objects has its specific inner logics. For instance, literature is not just defined by the logic of its exegesis but directly by material presence as well as its material and technical preconditions.[50] It is safe to say that the richness of the East Asian religious literature since the third century CE – in addition to cultural standards which emphasized the importance of written material – is above all due to the early availability of paper as a relatively economical and durable medium.[51] Buddhist manuscripts, ideally produced at great pains according to ritual rules, were not just for study or recital purposes. In fact, the embodiment of religious manuscripts itself was considered to have a power that made the creation, handling, touching, spatial arrangement, and viewing of textual media a religious act itself. Texts were immured in stupas as powerful relics or taken along on pilgrimages as a personal apotropaeum. Similar practices of dealing with text as an auratised material can be found, for instance, in Early Christianity, where texts are ritually enshrined or removed from use or treated as trash, respectively.[52]

As noted above, materiality is only part of socio-cultural reality in general and religion in particular. However, matter leads 'a life of its own' in the shape of constraints and affordances.[53] Constraints refer to the limits of socio-cultural encoding i.e., providing matter with a particular meaning. For instance, illness,

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50 Regarding the significance of the material dimension of books, see James W. Watts, ed., *Iconic Books and Texts* (Sheffield, UK, Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2013), and James W. Watts, *How and Why Books Matter: Essays on the Social Function of Iconic Texts.* Comparative Research on Iconic and Performative Texts (Bristol: Equinox, 2019).

51 Regarding China, see Timothy Hugh Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

52 See Richard Salomon, "Why Did the Gandhāran Buddhists Bury Their Manuscripts?," in *Buddhist Manuscript Cultures: Knowledge, Ritual, and Art*, ed. Stephen C. Berkwitz, Juliane Schober, and Claudia Brown, 19–34. Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism 52 (London, New York: Routledge, 2009); AnneMarie Luijendijk. "Sacred Scriptures as Trash: Biblical Papyri from Oxyrhynchus." *Vigiliae Christianae* 64, no. 3 (2010): 217–54.

53 See James J. Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances," in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, pp. 119–35. Psychology Press Classic Editions (New York, Hove, UK: Psychology Press, 2015).

pain, death, food, sexuality, objects of value, and dirt are unquestionably concepts produced historically and culturally and thus variably. Nonetheless, these concepts respond to physical constraints that place restrictions on the cultural encoding of material and suggest certain interpretations. Material constraints should not be understood solely as a restriction of human access to the material. Rather, material circumstances can evoke specific attributions in certain contexts. In Cultural Studies, we see this in the discussion that has been going on for some time now on an "agency of objects"[54] and – given a historical turn – a "biography of objects."[55] Matter is seen as an 'interaction partner' in changing socio-cultural attributions. The scope of action, within which the production of culturally designed embodiment takes place in permanent interaction between actors and material, enables diachronic and synchronic polyvalent attributions.

Materiality, here, is intended to describe culturally formed matter in toto. It can analytically be distinguished into three categories: corporeality, thingness, and physical space, which constantly forms in relational links between humans and things as well as between the things themselves.

3.4.1   Corporeality

The human body participates in the process of the emergence of religion in multiple ways. It can be the object and medium of religious actions, vehicle or object of religious knowledge, the place of religious experiences and emotions as well as the most direct social medium for (verbally or non-verbally) signaling these. Above all, the body is the place where social structures are reflected as dispositions. The body should not just be seen as a signifier or "tool" for acting out religious ideas but as a "host of belief."[56] This frees the concept of belief from the straitjacket of a propositional knowledge concept.[57] In this context, specificities of providing the body with religious meaning, particularly through the relationship between religion and medicine, have to be analyzed.[58]

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54   Gell, *Art*; Gosden, "Objects."

55   Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall. "The Cultural Biography of Objects." *World Archaeology* 31, no. 2 (1999): 169–78.

56   Morgan, David, "Materiality, Social Analysis, and the Study of Religions," in *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*, ed. David Morgan, pp. 55–74 (London, New York: Routledge, 2010).

57   Cf. Lynch, Gordon, "Object Theory: Toward an Intersubjective, Mediated, and Dynamic Theory of Religion," in *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*, ed. David Morgan, pp. 40–54 (London, New York: Routledge, 2010).

58   See, e. g., Bettina E. Schmidt, ed., *Spirituality and Wellbeing: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Study of Religious Experience and Health* (Sheffield, UK, Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2020); Giancarlo Lucchetti, Mario Fernando Prieto Peres, and Rodolfo Furlan Damiano, eds.,

3.4.2 Thingness

Material objects encompass artefacts and "natural" objects, which are attributed an active role in the interactions that determine the social blueprint of reality. David Morgan writes of "poetics of things, that is, their capacity to act upon us, to assert agency, to make rather than only to be made."[59] E. Frances King reflects upon what he coins the "charisma" of things – objects evoke and transport emotions and are thus directly related to the dimension of experience.[60] Visual objects thus become religious objects through a specific, emotional act of visual interaction heavily shaped by socio-cultural rules, described by Morgan as the "sacred gaze."[61]

Perceiving material objects also plays an important role in religious systems of knowledge, for instance, in the idea of vehicles. Due to the combination of the semantics of (spatial) overcoming and bridging associated with them, they are used in numerous religious ideas and performances – from the sun chariot that the Greek god Helios uses to drive across the sky and the journey of the dead by boat into the next world that we are familiar with in numerous religions, to the polemic metaphor of the "small" and "large vehicle" (yāna) for the methods of individual and collective salvation in Buddhism.

The fact that religions are also vulnerable as a result of their objectification is often overlooked. The burning of texts as well as the destruction of religious artefacts and institutions fall under this category of research.

3.4.3 Spatiality

A physical space or place is not religious per se. Nonetheless, particular places can be disposed towards the production of religious meaning.[62] There are some spatial arrangements that, in combination with religious knowledge and experience patterns, have a specific aesthetic disposition. On the other hand,

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Spirituality, Religiousness and Health: From Research to Clinical Practice. Religion, Spirituality and Health 4 (Cham: Springer, 2019); Dorothea Lüddeckens and Monika Schrimpf, eds., *Medicine – Religion – Spirituality: Global Perspectives on Traditional, Complementary, and Alternative Healing* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018).

59 Morgan, David, "Materiality, Social Analysis, and the Study of Religions," in *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*, ed. David Morgan, pp. 55–74 (London, New York: Routledge, 2010).

60 E. Frances King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture*. Routledge Studies in Religion 13 (London, New York: Routledge, 2009); see also Martin Radermacher. "From 'Fetish' to 'Aura': The Charisma of Objects?" *Journal of Religion in Europe* 12, no. 2 (2019): 166–90.

61 David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

62 Cf. Kim Knott. "Spatial Theory and the Study of Religion." *Religion Compass* 2, no. 6 (2008): 1102–16.

ascriptions of meaning can vary considerably depending on the temporal and social context. Consequently, it is important in this context to investigate above all the synchronic and diachronic polyvalence of spaces and the conditions for meaning attributions to physical space. For instance, a particular spatial arrangement of natural objects, such as the unusually symmetrically shaped Kailash massif set between two lakes in Tibet, can positively "invite" religious attribution processes. The Kailash has indeed played a prominent role in Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, and Bön-po religious history for more than two millennia, despite all religious transformation processes. This is not just a merely mimetic phenomenon, but the place itself may actively favor the possibility of attributing a religious meaning to it. Once charged with religious meaning, it emanates a religious aura. The impact on different religious currents and organizations takes on various forms and intensities and goes beyond the religious field – the Kailash can thus be the seat of the gods for Hindus, for Buddhists the center of the world maṇḍalas, for Mircea Eliade the axis mundi, for mountain climbers a popular destination, for tourist offices a gold mine; it can be a challenge, off-limits area, source of strength, historical monument, symbol of environmental conservation, contested political symbol or just another heap of stones all at the same time.

The dimension of materiality is always involved in the making and proceeding of religion. However, materiality does not necessarily have to be associated with religious meaning. A possible religious meaning of physical objects is contested in some cases of religious contact and can scientifically be analyzed. These cases of religious contact include, for example, the Byzantine image struggle (εἰκονομαχία) that lasted from about 726 to 787 and from 814 to 842. It "was about the role of sacred portraits – of Christ, of his mother the Virgin Mary, and saints – in Christian worship."[63] Open hostility toward religious representations began in 726 when Emperor Leo III publicly took a position against images. This resulted in their removal from churches and their destruction. Some historians assume an influence of Judaism and Islam on this development since both Muslims and Jews perceived Christian images as idols.[64] The iconophile counterargument was especially articulated by St. John of Damascus and St. Theodore the Studite. They claimed that the arguments

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63   Leslie Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm*. Studies in Early Medieval History (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012).

64   Gustave E. von Grunebaum. "Byzantine Iconoclasm and the Influence of the Islamic Environment." *History of Religions* 2, no. 1 (1962): 1–10; Patricia Crone, "Islam, Judeo-Christianity and Byzantine Iconoclasm," in *From Kavād to Al-Ghazālī: Religion, Law, and Political Thought in the Near East, C. 600–C. 1100*, pp. 59–96 (Aldershot, UK, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005).

against icons were confused. Images of Christ would not depict natures, being either Divine or human, but a concrete person, namely Jesus Christ, the incarnate son of the Christian God. Thus, the Byzantine image struggle is an example of religious contact regarding the question of whether a material object *signifies* a religious concept or whether the material object and the religious concept are considered *identical.*

Regarding physical space as a special kind of materiality, examples of religious contact include shared or mixed sanctuaries in the Mediterranean "where several religious groups perform devotional practices, often within the same space and at the same time."[65] While an individual physical place often is not relevant for religious identity, it also can be contested, as some places in Jerusalem show.[66]

4   Considerations on the Interplay between the Four Dimensions

The dimensions of knowledge, experience, and materiality largely correspond to different approaches in philosophical, sociological, and communication theory – matched broadly by the division of linguistic signs into the cognitive symbol function, the appellative signal function, and the expressive symptom function introduced by Karl Bühler.[67] It also mirrors Bertrand Russell's three conflicts, namely the conflict of the human being and nature, of a human and a human, and of the human being and him- or herself.[68] Jürgen Habermas' differentiation between three "actor-world relations" also comes to mind, notably the relationship of the actor to the "objective world," to the "social world," and to his or her "subjective world."[69] The material on which human existence is based is indeed being communicatively transmitted all the time, but it also has a life of its own in the form of organic and material constraints. Once provided

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65   Maria Couroucli, "Introduction: Sharing Sacred Places – a Mediterranean Tradition," in *Sharing Sacred Spaces in the Mediterranean: Christians, Muslims, and Jews at Shrines and Sanctuaries*, ed. Dionigi Albera and Maria Couroucli, 1–9. New Anthropologies of Europe (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2012).

66   See Maher Y. Abu-Munshar, *Islamic Jerusalem and Its Christians: A History of Tolerance and Tensions*. Library of Middle East History 13 (London, New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007).

67   Karl Bühler, *Sprachtheorie: Die Darstellungsfunktion Der Sprache* (Stuttgart: Gustav Fischer Verlag, 1965 [orig. 1934]).

68   See Bertrand Russell, *New Hopes for a Changing World* (London: Georg Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1951).

69   See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Vol 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Translated by Thomas MacCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1984).

with meaning, it is a part of socio-cultural reality in general and might become a part of religion in particular. This aspect is highlighted by the dimension of materiality we have introduced. The KHK worked on the premise that these four fundamental dimensions are involved in every religious contact situation and can be scientifically observed, respectively. Their concrete content, however, is subject to the specificities of socio-cultural settings in their historical context. In empiricism, all four dimensions are inter-related; they are categorical, yet linked distinctions:

– Actions can only take place on the basis of an existing pool of knowledge. E.g., the rites controversy included varying concepts of ritual, referred to concepts of afterlife,[70] were concerned with material objects of veneration, and, last but not least, different concepts of religion were involved (including related concepts such as idolatry, superstition, and paganism).[71]
– Furthermore, experiences may generate knowledge, as is the case with ecstatic Kabbalism and Sufism with their focus on imagination.[72] There are constantly transitions between perceptions, emotions as processed perceptions, feelings as conscious emotions, and cognitive knowledge. These transitions are mediated by socio-cultural patterns of experience.
– In turn, knowledge may determine organic and physical matter, as is the case with the debate on depiction. In addition, the debate is related to action, namely whether the devotion of pictures is proper religious behavior.

In empiricism, all of the four dimensions are interrelated. Each of them provides services for the others. The following keywords may tentatively name these services: (see figure 1.1):

– The dimension of knowledge endows experience, action, and materiality with *meaning.*

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70   Paul Rule. "The Chinese Rites Controversy: Confucian and Christian Views on the Afterlife." *Studies in Church History* 45 (2009): 280–300.

71   "Roberto de Nobili in Madurai and Matteo Ricci's successors in the Jesuit Chinese mission maintained a singular definition of religion, but some of their rivals already had conceived the opinion that Christianity and 'paganism' or 'superstition' constituted mutually-exclusive systems of cult"; Patricia Raeann Johnston, "The Church on Armenian Street: Capuchin friars, the British East The church on Armenian Street: Capuchin friars, the British East India Company, and the Second Church of Colonial Madras India Company, and the Second Church of Colonial Madras" (Dissertation, 2015), accessed February 23, 2017, https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/1650, 204.

72   Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Ṣūfism of Ibn ʿArabī*. Translated from the French by Ralph Manheim. Bollingen Series XCI (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969); Aaron W. Hughes, *The Texture of the Divine: Imagination in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).
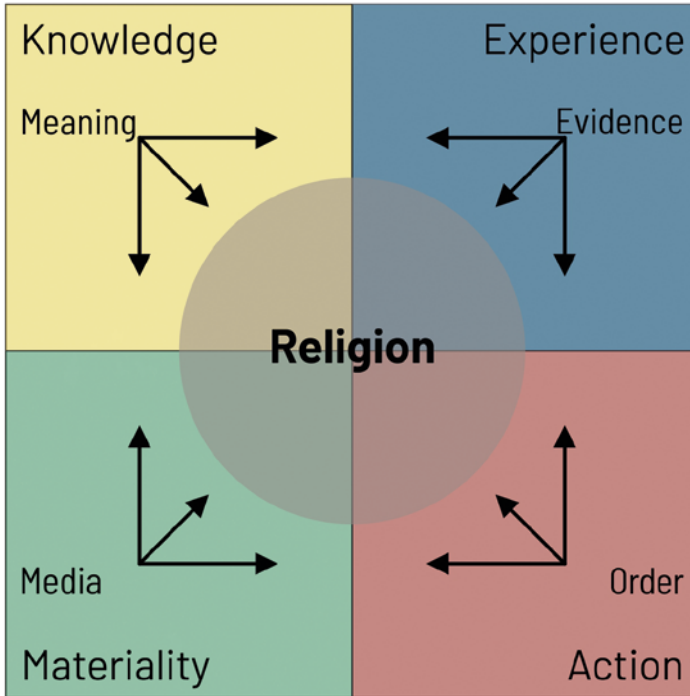
FIGURE 1.1   The interplay of the four dimensions
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- The dimension of experience gives *evidence* to knowledge, action, and materiality – in the sense of a connection between vividness and certainty.
- The dimension of regulation endows *social order* to knowledge, experience, and action.
- The dimension of materiality concerns physical objects but also objectified semantics. Materiality in the form of *media* (in the broadest sense, ranging from physical things to mass media) is relevant for knowledge, experience, and action. Storage and communication media represent the externalized physical reference of knowledge, and corporeality establishes the connection of knowledge, experience, and action to mental, organic, and bodily-physical processes.

While the dimensions of knowledge, experience, and the reference to materiality belong to the content of religion, the dimension of social structures through action shapes socio-cultural reality. In short: the semantics of a concrete religious contact is always embedded in social structures that, in turn, unfold in semantics and, at the same time, are restricted by them. Although there is a constant interplay between the four dimensions, it has made sense

analytically during the work of the KHK to examine the relationship of individual circumstances to each of these dimensions in order to better grasp specificities of concrete cases of religious contact.

5   The Emergence of a Global Religious Field

The KHK has been driven by the idea that local as well as regional religious fields and, finally, a global religious field mainly constitute through contacts between different socio-cultural entities. Within these contacts, the potential for religion is being realized by attributing something as religious. This approach differs from diffusionist approaches, such as postcolonial ones, which assume the origin of something – in our case: religious experiences, concepts, and practices – was 'exported' from Western spheres to other regions through imperialism and colonialism. This view is, of course, not totally wrong. However, it has to be complemented by the consideration that at least the potential for something – in our case: religious experiences, concepts, and practices – has to be within the culture in which something is 'imported.' In other words: issues that are not part of a particular religion must bear the potential for becoming religious through religious contact. Georg Simmel calls this potential "religioid."[73] In contrast to postcolonial perspectives, the Axial Age concept, as introduced by Karl Jaspers and further developed by various scholars, assumes universals across cultures, including religion.[74] This concept corresponds to a certain extent with the KHK approach. Thus, we synthesized the Axial Age concept with postcolonial perspectives. Taking only the four generic dimensions as a basis for research, the KHK was able to avoid the alternative of either starting from a 'universal prototype' with diffuse

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73   Georg Simmel, "Religion [1912 (1906)]," in *Essays on Religion*. Edited and translated by Horst Jürgen Helle in collaboration with Ludwig Nieder. Foreword by Phillip E. Hammond, pp. 137–214. Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. Monograph Series 10 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997): 158.

74   Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1953 [orig. 1949]). Regarding the discussion and further development of this concept, see, e.g., Jóhann Páll Árnason, Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, and Björn Wittrock, eds., *Axial Civilizations and World History*. Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture 4 (Leiden, Boston, MA: Brill, 2005), Robert Neelly Bellah and Hans Joas, eds., *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA, London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), Jan Assmann, *Achsenzeit: Eine Archäologie der Moderne* (München: C.H. Beck, 2018), and, with special regard to the emergence of Zoroastrism, Götz König, *Studien Zur Rationalitätsgeschichte Im Älteren Iran: Ein Beitrag Zur Achsenzeitdiskussion*. Iranica 26 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2018).

characteristics or understanding religion as a 'universal phenomenon' that has manifested itself in many places differently but with the same 'essence.'

To avoid essentialism, the KHK referred to the field concept of Pierre Bourdieu and further developed it. Following on from Bourdieu,[75] the KHK did not have a substantial understanding of "a religious field." It is not a fixed and static entity. Rather, it is permanently being constituted, reproduced, and changed by interactions between different components, such as ideas, agents, notions, institutional settings, experiences, objects, and concepts.[76] In the field approach, a single element's meaning, function, and impact cannot be understood in isolation but only in a broader context of mutual relations and attachments. A field of forces is both more and less than the aggregation of single elements and holds them together. Thus, single components of a religious field do not only constitute a religious field, but the latter also constitutes its components. Furthermore, a religious field is not to be understood essentially in the sense of a common ground, but as the interplay between elements that refer to each other, be it consensual or – as it is mostly the case – contested.

In addition, it is relevant to distinguish between the inner and the outer boundaries of a religious field. Its inner boundaries are permanently being established and reproduced by the intra- and inter-religious controversies surrounding its conceptual and practical content. Its outer boundaries emerge through the differentiation and interferences between religion and other societal fields. And, not to forget, the interaction between religious practice and its scientific observation, which constitutes a field of its own (it is, of course, an old and complex hermeneutical issue whether something is empirically grounded or scientifically applied to the object to be examined). In other words: single religious elements, religious traditions, and a religious field have to be studied with a relational approach, i.e., each religious entity comes into existence and is to be observed only in relation to other religious entities and non-religious entities:

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75   Pierre Bourdieu. "Genèse et structure du champ religieux." *Revue française de sociologie* 12 (1971): 295–334; English translation: Pierre Bourdieu. "Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field." *Comparative Social Research* 13 (1991): 1–44. Regarding the field concept, see Mathieu Hilgers and Eric Mangez, eds., *Bourdieu's Theory of Social Fields: Concepts and Applications*. Routledge Advances in Sociology 128 (London, New York: Routledge, 2015).

76   For instance, Thoralf Klein and Christian Meyer understand religion in China as a religious field "in which the diverse and distinct religious actors, concepts, practices and traditions meet, interact and contend with one another"; Thoralf Klein and Christian Meyer. "Beyond the Market: Exploring the Religious Field in Modern China." *Religion* 41, no. 4 (2011): 529–34.
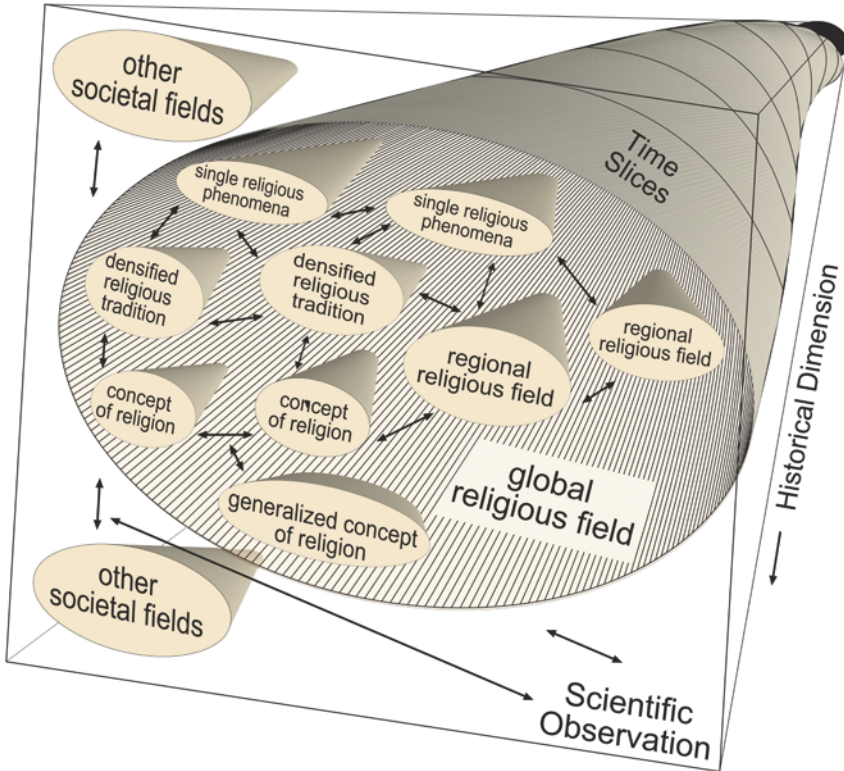
FIGURE 1.2   The emergence of a global religious field
            © V. KRECH

Various case studies conducted at the KHK were dedicated to investigating emergence processes within the religious field and the metalinguistic emergence of a "religious field" with outer boundaries in relation to other societal spheres and their repercussions on religious practice. Furthermore, the thesis has been discussed that, first, regionally-restricted religious fields arose, which then tended to grow together to form not a homogenous but still globally-connected religious field.[77] Religious globalization can be understood as a continuing conceptual abstraction of religion.

By concentrating on emergence processes, the KHK has brought into focus the inner dynamics of the religious field with the interaction of its components. At the same time, the development of the religious field is also dependent on its relationships to other societal fields. The contours adopted by the religious field are thus influenced to an equal extent by the intensification of

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77   See Peter Beyer, *Religions in Global Society* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006).

internal relations between individual components of the field within the four dimensions of knowledge, experience, action, and materiality, as well as by the outward relationships with other spheres of society each with their own inner logic. By investigating the emergence of the field on the basis of its changing relationships, whilst taking into account the outcomes of the work in other research areas, we intend at the same time to further develop the approach of "relational religion."

Religious contacts occur in a multitude of thematic areas and on a wide range of social levels. Revolutionary transformation processes in the history of religions often are brought about by small impetuses in individual areas (for instance, contact with new aesthetic modes). This leads to constructive and destructive superimpositions – either accelerating or inhibiting general developments – and thus to the dynamics of the history of religion. Impacts include varying figurations of the connection between semantics and social structures, for example, processes of condensation, amalgamation or diffusion, different forms of reference, and tradition building. The type of (re)figuration depends on how the inner logic of religious semantics, experiences, practices, and material foundations interact with the interests of the actors as well as on external conditions.

The relations within *interreligious contacts* take different shapes. They range, for instance, from religiously induced military violence[78] to polemic discourses of a global[79] and regional scale[80] all the way to attempts at interreligious understanding.[81] The conditions, modes of implementation, and possible subversion strategies of interreligious contact vary according to the political and cultural context – partly because religions spread in contexts as varied as wars or trade relations (cf. the spread of various religions along the silk road) or, for example, influenced both by diplomacy and conflicts in domestic policy (as was the case in the adoption of Buddhism in early Japan). Additionally, interreligious conflicts are occasionally influenced by culturally or ethnically defined alterity discourses. In line with these complex starting points, the *modes* of the processes of exchange and negotiation within these contacts range from strict delimitation and prioritisation to selective adaptation and assimilation to hybridisation and conceptual blending (such as

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78   For instance, the establishment of the Islamic Mughal Empire, crusades, Singhalese-Tamil civil war.

79   Cf., e.g., Samuel Huntington's thesis of the *clash of civilizations*; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

80   For instance conflicts over sacred buildings of religious minorities.

81   Cf., e.g., the Parliament of the World's Religions or Küng's Global Ethic project.

through the translation of Sanskrit or Prakritik Buddhist terminology with expressions common in "philosophical" Taoism).

Religious contacts are often both *synchronic* and *diachronic*. In the case of diachronic contacts, references are established to transmit previous states through constructed traditions. Conversely, the adoption of religious ideas, forms of expression, and practices seems to be encouraged wherever the received good is not perceived as attributable to a present, that is, competing institutionalised tradition, and so is seen as a common cultural possession. In the extreme case, alterity is done away with in order to facilitate adoption. For example, in the 13th century, European Judaism no longer explicitly defined Christians as idolaters and thus broke through a key barrier for the development of Jewish figurative art.[82]

Furthermore, the distinction must be made between different *symmetric* and *asymmetric* constellations and modes of encounter – for example, the asymmetric confrontation between an imported and an autochthonous religion (often in the context of missionary activities) as well as the symmetric "competition" between several networks of tradition for religious spaces which are not clearly occupied. In all of this, asymmetric processes also have their impacts and can occasionally bring virtually revolutionary consequences in their wake. Particularly conspicuous examples of this are the colonialisation and proselytisation of Central and South America and the ensuing discourse on nature and civilisation or the rites controversies in connection with the Jesuit mission in China and their lasting impacts on European Enlightenment.

Religious traditions mainly form and develop through *internal relations* of their components. Internal differences that arise are often problematised by the religious actors due to another (intrinsic or extrinsic) stimulus (e.g., competition, changed demand structures, political rivalries, economic factors, etc.). Analytically, it is possible to understand negotiation processes as *intrareligious contacts*. In Alois Hahn's view, one should assume that systematic reflections of religious circumstances only concern the minutest part of the potentially controversial aspects of intrareligious diversity, which, however, can be condensed *pars pro toto* into identity formulations.[83] This first of all involves processes which are often (not just object-linguistically) labeled as the formation of confessions, sects, and schools and are interpreted as the

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82   See., e.g., Ḳaṭrin Kogman-Appel. "Christianity, Idolatry, and the Question of Jewish Figural Painting in the Middle Ages." *Speculum* 84, no. 1 (2009): 73–107.

83   Alois Hahn, "Partizipative Identitäten," in *Konstruktionen des Selbst, der Welt und der Geschichte: Aufsätze zur Kultursoziologie*, pp. 13–79. Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 1505 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2000).

differentiation between orthodoxy and heterodoxy (or -praxy) all the way to "heresy." The exclusion of "heretical" groups from the spectrum of variation of a religion, which always occurs in conjunction with identity formation processes, has consequences with effects all the way into scientific metalanguage. Thus even in the theological language used today, one still sees the distinction between Christianity and gnosis. This conceals the fact that the followers of the latter movement largely see themselves as Christians. It is a similar situation when individual actions and content are systematically excluded from the religious field. Certain practices, for example, such as astrology, wearing amulets and the ritual manipulation of gods and powers can be forced into an area labeled "superstition" or "magic" located outside of the field of "legitimate" religion[84] – a process which, in the history of research, was supported by early Religious Studies in the distinction made between religion and magic and which formed the basis of various evolutionary religious theories (James Frazer, for example).[85] From a scientific perspective from outside the religious field, magic is a religious practice, among others.[86]

It is also important to consider the differences between various social classes and milieus in the history of religions when examining intrareligious contacts. One of the strategies in the history of religions for dealing with class-specific differences is inclusive reinterpretation. This takes place, for example, when the worship of Buddha statues in modern Theravāda Buddhism is psychologised as a transformational act of spiritual training under the influence of modernized religion.[87]

Intrareligious contact also includes internal missionary activities. The Muslim mission, for instance, (Arabic: daʿwa) in the 20th century was not designed first and foremost to convert non-believers but rather was aimed at its own brothers and sisters in faith, who – influenced by Western secularism and materialism – were thought to have gone astray (as was the position of Hasan al-Bannā, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood). The Jewish mission as carried out, for instance, by Chabad is clearly purely intrareligious. Other examples include the "Inner Mission" (*innere Mission*) propagated by

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84 Cf. Daniel Dubuisson, *Religion and Magic in Western Culture*. Supplements to Method & Theory in the Study of Religion 6 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2016).

85 See Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

86 See Bernd-Christian Otto, *Magie: Rezeptions- und diskursgeschichtliche Analysen von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit*. Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 57 (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2011).

87 David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Johann Hinrich Wichern in 19th century Germany combines charity work with (re)evangelisation initiatives and the claim for Europe as a mission region by pope Benedikt XVI.

Last, but not least, dynamics in the history of religions can themselves become a religious problem. This is the case, for instance, if actors strategically deny, cover-up or conceal diachronic transformations. Such strategies range from exegesis techniques in which more recent religious developments are projected back onto older texts to sedimented forms of the religious culture of memory or mere historiography. The radical nature of religious reforms can also be hidden by claiming an uninterrupted tradition, as is the case for instance with the introduction of the Pesach Seder in the Mishna, which by some Jews is described as a ritual in the form of a biblical tradition newly introduced after the destruction of the Temple.[88] The (re)encounter of geographically separated factions of the same religious tradition embedded in different cultural contexts can trigger special processes of religious dynamics. This is, for instance, apparent in the complex interplay between Western interpretation of Buddhism under the influence of romanticism, systems theory, and ecology, on the one hand, and the reform movements of East and South Asian Buddhists, on the other.[89]

6   Final Remarks

During the work of the KHK, the distinctions between semantics and social structures as well as between knowledge, experience, action, and materiality have proven to be helpful tools for analyzing conditions, modes, and impacts of religious contact. The future will show whether considering the mentioned distinctions and their interplay might also be helpful for the study of religion in general. I would like to add some personal remarks. Being part of the KHK has been an exciting journey. I really learned a lot, both regarding the study of religion and the aspect of the "human, all too human." I would like to thank everyone who was on board during this journey and made it possible: the Federal Ministry of Education and Research for generously funding the KHK, the fellows, my colleagues at the Ruhr University, the members of the advisory board, and the staff. I thank Maren Freudenberg, Franziska Burstyn, and all the others who organized the final conference – even under difficult conditions

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88   Cf. Baruch M. Bokser, *The Origins of the Seder: The Passover Rite and Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

89   See McMahan, *Making*.

due to COVID 19. My special thanks go to Tim Karis not only for being part of the organizing committee of this event but also for both his professional and friendly engagement to make things run smoothly and to keep everything together at the KHK. To my understanding, the final conference was not just a farewell but a step into new directions – at least at the Center for Religious Studies at Ruhr University Bochum that hosted the KHK.

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Transcending Space: Buddhist Travelogues across Cultural and Other Borders

Max Deeg

Abstract

This chapter looks at the spatial dimension of "transcendence" in the records of Chinese Buddhist "pilgrims," particularly in Xuanzang's "Record of the Western Regions of the Great Tang." Spatiality provides the basic concepts and metaphors for orientation in general and more specifically for the formal representation of transcendence. The travelogues are analysed according to different semiotic aspects used to express transcendence, such as religious-cultural or geographical (rivers, mountain ranges) borders or objects (*stūpa*s, statues). A higher degree of transcendence – for instance, at Bodhgayā – is often expressed by a higher density of 'sacred spots' defined by narratives.

Keywords

transcendence – Buddhism – sacred places – pilgrimage – India – Xuanzang

1 Introduction

My time as a fellow in Bochum fell into the year 2016–17 when the general topic – I have to confess: to my horror at first – was "the evolving of the distinction between transcendence and immanence as triggered by intra- and interreligious encounter" (academic year October 2016–September 2017). When I read the exposé on the TID (transcendence-immanence-distinction) – the "Leitlinie" by Knut Martin Stünkel[1] – I became a little bit more confident that I could indeed apply the material of my ongoing research project, a study (translation and extensive commentary) of the 7th century Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang's 玄奘 'travelogue' and his journey to and his stay in India

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1 Knut Stünkel, "The three-level model of transcending" (2016, unpublished manuscript for the Academic Session 2016–17, CERES).

(629–645), to the theoretical framework of the year's thematic focus. In the following contribution, I will engage some general observations about transcendence in narrative and 'descriptive' text genres with selected examples from the Chinese Buddhist travelogues[2] some of which I discussed in my presentation as CERES-fellow which bore the rather bulky title "From Ominous Appearance to Individual Miracle: Narrative References to the Transcendent in Xuanzang's Datang-Xiyu-ji [大唐西域記, "Record of the Western Regions of the Great Tang [Dynasty]"] and Huili's 慧立 biography Datang-Daciensi-sanzang-fashi-zhuan [大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳, "Biography of the Tripiṭaka Dharma-master of the Great Cien Monastery of the Great Tang [Dynasty]" (Biography)]. The present contribution is based on the ideas and thoughts developed in that presentation and expands it considerably.

2 Buddhism and Transcendence

When I thought through the three stages of transcendence proposed by Knut Stünkel, the basic one of pointing (or deixis), the formal one of "going beyond oneself," and the specific one of an expressive and dichotomic distinction between immanence and transcendence, I – as probably every scholar working in the field of Buddhist Studies – immediately thought of two dichotomic terminological and conceptual pairs as an example for a Buddhist distinction of the third stage or category.

In a Buddhist context transcendence is clearly expressed by space metaphors around the concept of 'crossing over'.[3] The term *kat exechon* for transcendence is Skt. *pāramitā* (and its translations into Chinese and Tibetan), traditionally interpreted as meaning "having gone to the other shore"

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2 For an overview of the texts (Faxian 法顯, Song Yun 宋雲, Xuanzang 玄奘, Yijing 義淨, Hyecho/Huichao 慧超) and their reception history see M. Deeg, "The historical turn: How Chinese Buddhist travelogues changed Western perception of Buddhism," *Hualin Journal of International Buddhist Studies* 1, no. 1 (2018): 43–75. Unfortunately the texts, biographical ones as well as travelogues, have attracted a lot of popular attention and in writing about them the term "transcendence" (and the attribute "transcendent") are used and applied in a naïve way: see, for example, P. Weeravardane, "Journey to the West: Dusty Roads, Stormy Seas and Transcendence," *biblioasia* (*National Library Singapore*) 5 (2009), no. 2: 18, who states, in a typically romantic way, that the Chinese travellers "… bring to us, at the beginning of the 21st century, the awareness of a rich and diverse Asian cultural heritage that has transcended time and place."

3 This concept is, of course, not restricted to Buddhism. The Jains call their Jinas "ford-makers" (*tīrthaṅkara*). On the "crossing" nature of Hindu *tīrtha*s see Diana Eck, "India's 'Tīrthas': 'Crossings' in Sacred Geography," *History of Religions* 20, no. 4 (1981): 323–344.

(*pāra(m) + itā*), and the 'canonical' texts (*sūtra*) contain plenty of references to this soteriological metaphor of crossing a water body (river, ocean), sometimes by a raft or a boat. The distinction between immanence and transcendence is most clearly, although not completely congruent with the 'usual' distinction,[4] formulated in the two terms *laukika*, "worldly, mundane," and *lokottara*, "transcending the world."[5] Although these concepts are valid and will work in a lot of Buddhist contexts, the discursive use of this terminology is restricted to doctrinal-philosophical texts and commentarial literature. In narrative and 'descriptive' sources as the ones I am working with, the terms will not be found very often. Instead, we will have to look out for semiotic placeholders referring to transcendence indirectly, or, to use Stünkel's terminology, pointing at transcendence.

Following up on the spatial connotation of the terms discussed in the previous paragraph (shore, crossing) I found it striking that the narratives and naturally the 'descriptive' parts of the travelogues in my sources, in the biographical literature but also in the travelogues, were not always but often enough linked to some particular space, place or site bearing a specific religious importance or meaning that may be understood as referring to transcendence. This raised the question of the role and function of narratively constructed space in general and more specifically in relation to the TID.[6] I particularly want to emphasize the constructed or 'fictional' dimension of my sources[7] because of the tendency to read them, particularly the travelogues, as historical 'eyewitness' reports',[8] an uncritical use of the texts which leaves no room for more

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4   In Buddhist uses and discussions the term *lokottara* – for instance, in the Yogācārabhūmi – does only refer to what could be called "high transcendence," the "unconditioned" *dharma* of the *parinirvāṇa* and therefore excludes many phenomena discussed here. See Christoph Kleine, "Zur Universalität der Unterscheidung *religiös/säkulär*: Eine systemtheoretische Betrachtung," in: *Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Berlin, Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 65–80, and Christoph Kleine, "Religion and the Secular in Premodern Japan from the Viewpoint of Systems Theory," *Journal of Religion in Japan* 2 (2013): 1–34.

5   David Seyfort Ruegg, *L'ordre spirituel et l'ordre temporel dans la pensée bouddhique de l'Inde et du Tibet: Quatres conférences au Collège de France* (Paris: Collège de France, 1995). See also Max Deeg, "Innerhalb und jenseits der Welt: Kritische Überlegungen zum buddhistischen Begriffspaar *laukika/lokottara* im Verhältnis zu säkular/religiös," in: Proceedings of the 8th workshop of the Arbeitskreis Asiatische Religionsgeschichte (AKAR), forthcoming.

6   For a discussion of the different aspects of a "narratology of space" in which, surprisingly, the aspect of transcendence is not touched upon is Katrin Dennerlein, *Narratologie des Raumes* (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2009).

7   In my view, the dimensions of narrativity and fictionality of this "genre" of texts are still understudied.

8   For a "history" of using (or sometimes: misusing) these texts see M. Deeg, "The historical turn."

sophisticated hermeneutical approaches that do the complexity of the sources more justice.

In the sources, moments or instances (in case of the biographical sources) and places or sites (in the travelogues) of contact between the immanent and the transcendent are often, but not necessarily, marked by miraculous events; these are, for example, miracles which the Buddha performs or phenomena of light emitting from a *stūpa*. It is striking that places which have no clear reference to and direct link with the 'historical' Buddha Śākyamuni and his life are predominantly attributed these features (saints, Buddhas of the past) which then seem to function like 'boosters of transcendence', while the sites of the events in the life of the Buddha Śākyamuni seem to be 'charged' with transcendence by the sheer fact of being linked to these events and, through them, to the Buddha. It seems that places linked to the 'deep past' of the former Buddhas (pre-Śākyamuni) or the 'shallow past' of Buddhist saints (post-Śākyamuni) need specific signs of transcendence because it is assumed that the transcendent quality of the places becomes weaker over time. There is therefore a paradox by which a high degree of transcendence is caused by a distance of time which creates, at the same time, its inaccessibility. Closeness in terms of space – being at the place where something happened – is not enough to give places the transcendent quality needed to attract the attention of the religious followers. It is also important to reassure oneself that the time distance to the events which make these places special is not neutralizing this very quality.

In this context, it is interesting to note that some biographical traditions of the Buddha's life make a distinction of time which reflects this observed quality of transcendence marked by time distance to the auctorial presence: the biography of the Buddha in the Pāli Nidānakathā, the introduction to the commentary of the collection of "birth stories" (*jātaka*) of the Buddha's previous existences by Buddhaghosa, for instance, divides the biographical "career" of the Buddha into three phases: the "distant period" (*dūrenidāna*) from the *bodhisattva*'s initial vow to become a Buddha in his existence as Sumedha at the time of the Buddha of the past Dīpaṅkara and the Buddha's career as a *bodhisattva* going through the ten different stages of perfection (*pārami*); the "not [so] distant period" (*avidūrenidāna*) of the *bodhisattva*'s descent from Tuṣita-heaven to the achievement of enlightenment; and the "close period" (*santikenidāna*) of the time from enlightenment onwards. Not only do these three periods express different time distances, but Buddhaghosa also seems to refer to spatial closeness and accessibility of sacred places linked to the post-enlightenment period in the biography of Gotama Buddha:

Herein, from the very outset, should the division of those periods be understood. The continuous narrative from the time of the resolution made by the Great Being at the feet of the Buddha Dīpaṅkara up to his birth in Tusita heaven after passing away from his existence as Vessantara, is called the Distant Epoch. The continuous narrative from the time he passed away from Tusita heaven up to his attainment of Omniscience at the throne of Enlightenment [at the foot of the Bodhi tree], is called the Intermediate Epoch. And the Recent Epoch can be accessed at all the places, at each place [where he] had dwelt [as a Buddha].[9]

There is a general difference of referring to transcendence, depending on the genre of the sources: in the narrative genre (hagio-biographies), the movement of the agents is clearly laid out as an itinerary, and their emotions when confronted with the transcendent are often expressed in statements or exclamations.

While in a specific Chinese context, the contact with transcendence can be a very direct one when the agent becomes "transcendent" or immortal (*xian* 仙),[10] in the Buddhist context the bio-hagiographical literature – Xuanzang's biography or the respective biographies of Buddhist travellers in the Chinese Buddhist biographical collections, Gaoseng-zhuan 高僧傳, "Biographies of Eminent Monks" – doctrinal-soteriological reasons mostly do not allow for a transformation of their agents into "transcendents"[11] and instead emphasize the encounter with the transcendent (Buddha, miracles).

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9   Translation adapted from N.A. Jayawickrama, N.A., The Story of Gotama Buddha: The Nidāna-kathā of the Jātakaṭṭhakathā (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 2002), 2; Pāli text: Viggo Fausbøll, The Jātaka, Together with its Commentary, Being Tales of the Anterior Births of Gotama Buddha. Volume 1 (London: Pali Text Society, 1962), 2: tattha ādito tāva tesaṃ nidānānaṃ paricchedo veditabbo. Dīpaṃkarapādamūlasmiṃ hi katābhinīhārassa Mahāsattassa yāva Vessantarattabhāvā cavitvā Tusitapure nibbatti tāva pavatto kathāmaggo Dūrenidānaṃ nāma. Tusitabhavanato pana cavitvā yāva bodhimaṇḍe sab-baññutappatti tāva pavatto kathāmaggo Avidūrenidānaṃ nāma. Santikenidānaṃ pana tesu tesu ṭhānesu viharato tasmiṃ tasmiṃ yeva ṭhāne labhatîti.

10   Robert F. Campany has worked extensively of the narratological aspects of such figures and encounters (miracles, divination, etc.) in early medieval Chinese literature: see Robert Ford Campany, To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong's Traditions of Divine Transcendents (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002); "Secrecy and Display in the Quest for Transcendence in China, ca. 220 BCE–350 CE," History of Religions 45, no. 4 (2006): 291–336; Making Transcendents: Ascetic and Social Memory in Early Medieval China (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2008).

11   This is, of course, different in case of the literary 'extension' and 'transformation' of Xuanzang's biography, the Ming novel Xiyou-ji 西遊記, "Journey to the West," by Wu

In travelogues this direct reference to transcendence of the agent through the experience of going from one place to another or of encountering the transcendent in form of a miracle or an appearance of a 'divine' or a 'saint' – the/a Buddha, an *arhat*, a *bodhisattva*, etc. – is missing exactly because usually there is no agent; in the very few cases where the agent/author comes into play, this then may be exactly in reference to a situation of an (attempted) encounter with the sacred/transcendent (see the examples discussed below).

Starting from these points, I began to rethink my own approach to the texts I am mostly working with – the records of the Chinese Buddhist travellers to India – in relation to the function of the basic categories of space and time. Accepting that space and time are socially and culturally constructed,[12] I began to look for structures and patterns in the texts which could mark a quality of transcendence related to the places presented in the texts.

The first observation was that in the specific context of the Chinese Buddhist travelogues 'sacred' places or sites – particularly the ones referred to in Xuanzang's Record – achieve, as already indicated above, their transcendent character by a notion of an *in illo tempore*: it was the sacred past of the Buddha's or, even projecting further back into a more remote past, the Buddhas of the past's presence, which marked them as soteriologically relevant and endowed with an aura of transcendence. Transcending space, in a way, as an attempt to access a temporally reverted transcendence – undertaking the difficult and dangerous journey from China to India – would, however, often lead to an experience of disillusionment *in situ* and corresponding expressions of sorrow or grief to not be able to meet the Buddha himself (see the examples discussed below). One could call this the paradox of inaccessibility: it is exactly the very fact that something or someone cannot be directly contacted because they are lost in a remote past which gives the places which are linked to these 'objects' their aura of transcendence.

The transcendence of the Buddha (or other "items") can then only be "pointed out" (Stünkel) by spatial-material markers such as caves (*shishi* 石室), pillars (*shizhu* 石柱), *stūpa*s (*sudubo* 窣堵波 or *ta* 塔), footprints (*fozu* 佛足), relics (*śarīra*/*sheli* 舍利), etc. They mark the places as having been 'touched' by

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Cheng'en 吳承恩 where the journey is reframed as a quest against odds and for enlightenment and liberation: see Robert Ford Campany, "Demons, Gods, and Pilgrims: The Demonology of the Hsi-yu Chi," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 7, no. 1/2 (1985): 95–115.

12   Barney Warf, *Time-Space Compression: Historical geographies* (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), 2; for the ancient Chinese construction of space see Mark Edward Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

the transcendence or the transcendent power of a Buddha, a *bodhisattva*, an *arhat*, etc.

The visit of such places – often called pilgrimage – in a Buddhist context is paradigmatically narrated in the "Legend of Aśoka" (Aśokāvadāna) where the paradigmatic Buddhist king Aśoka is led around to the most important places linked with the Buddha's life by his spiritual teacher Upagupta.[13] The first of these places which are visited according to their biographical sequence is Lumbinī, the place of the Buddha's birth,[14] and the last one Kuśinagara, the place of the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*. The narrative of the first visit at Lumbinī reflects quite well what I have, in a more general way, discussed above: the inaccessibility of the transcendence of the place caused through temporal distance and the emotions of sadness and frustration which are triggered thereby:

> First, Upagupta took [Aśoka] to the Lumbinī Wood, and stretching out his right hand he said: "In this place, great king, the Blessed One was born." And he added: "This is the first of the caityas of the Buddha whose eye is supreme. Here, as soon as he was born, the Sage took seven steps on the earth, looked down at the four directions, and spoke these words: 'This is my last birth, I'll not dwell in a womb again.'" Aśoka threw himself at Upagupta's feet, and getting up, he said, weeping and making an *añjali*: "They are fortunate and of great merit, those who witnessed the birth of the Sage and heard his delightful voice." Now for the sake of further increasing the king's faith, the elder asked Aśoka wether he would like to see the deity who witnessed in this wood the birth of the most eloquent Sage, saw him take the seven steps, and heard the words he spoke. Aśoka replied that he would. Upagupta, therefore, stretched out his right hand toward the tree whose branch Queen Mahāmāyā had grasped while giving birth, and said: "Let the divine maiden who resides in this *aśoka* tree and who witnessed the birth of the Buddha make herself manifest in her own body so that King Aśoka's faith will grow greater still." And immediately, the tree spirit appeared before Upagupta in her own form, and

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13   See John S. Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka. A Study and Translation of the Aśokāvadāna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 119ff. & 244ff. (translation of the Sanskrit text for which see Edward B. Cowell & Robert A. Neil, *The Divyāvadāna. A Collection of Early Buddhist Legends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1886), 389ff.). Strong emphasizes the parallel of the thirty-two places visited and the thirty-two marks of the Buddha as a "Great Being" (*mahāpuruṣa*) which reflects the constructed nature of such "pilgrimages" another example of which is young Sudhana's journey in the Avataṃsaka-sūtra.

14   On Lumbinī in different sources see Max Deeg, *The Places where Siddhārtha Trod: Lumbinī and Kapilavastu* (Lumbinī: Lumbinī International Research Institute, 2003).

said, making an *añjali*: "Elder, what is your command?" The elder said to Aśoka: "Great king, here is the goddess who saw the Buddha at the time of his birth." Aśoka said to her, making an *añjali*: "You witnessed his birth and saw his body adorned with the marks! You gazed upon his large lotus-like eyes! You heard in this wood the first delightful words of the leader of mankind!" The tree spirit replied: "I did indeed witness the birth of the best of men, the Teacher who dazzled like gold. I saw him take the seven steps, and also heard his words." "Tell me, goddess," said Aśoka, "what was it like – the magnificent moment of the Blessed One's birth?" "I cannot possibly fully describe it in words," answered the deity, "but, in brief, listen: Throughout Indra's threefold world, there shone a supernatural light, dazzling like gold and delighting the eye. The earth and its mountains, ringed by the ocean, shook like a ship being tossed at sea." Hearing this, Aśoka made an offering of one hundred pieces of gold to the birthplace of the Buddha, built a *caitya* there and went on.[15]

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15 *atha sthavirOpagupto rājānam Aśokaṃ sarvaprathamena lumbinīvanaṃ praveśayitvā dakṣiṇaṃ hastam abhiprasāryovāca: "asmin, mahārāja, pradeśe bhagavāñ jātaḥ," āha ca: "idaṃ hi prathamaṃ caityaṃ buddhasyottamacakṣuṣaḥ, jātamātreha sa muniḥ prakrāntaḥ saptapadaṃ bhuvi. caturdiśam avalokya vācaṃ bhāṣitavān purā: 'iyaṃ me paścimā jātir, garbhāvāsaś ca paścimaḥ.'" atha rājā sarvaśarīreṇa tatra pādayor nipatya utthāya kṛtāñjaliḥ prarudann uvāca: "dhanyāste kṛtapuṇyai(ṇyā)ś ca yair dṛṣṭaḥ sa mahāmuniḥ, prajātaḥ saṃśrutā yaiś ca vācas tasya manoramāḥ." atha sthaviro rājñaḥ prasādavṛddhyartham uvāca: "mahārāja, kiṃ drakṣyasi tāṃ devatām? yayā dṛṣṭaḥ prajāyan sa vane 'smin vadatāṃ varaḥ tramamāṇaḥ padān sapta śrutā vāco yayā muneḥ." rājā āha: "paraṃ, sthavira, drakṣyāmi," atha sthavirOpagupto yasya vṛkṣasya śākham ava-lambya devī mahāmāyā prasūtā, tena dakṣiṇahastam abhiprasāryovāca: "naivāsikā yā ihāśokavṛkṣe saṃbuddhadarśinī yā devakanyā; sākṣād asau darśayatu svadehaṃ rājño hy Aśokasya {manaḥ}prasādavṛddhyai." yāvat sā devatā svarūpeṇa sthavirOpaguptasamīpe sthitvā kṛtāñjalir uvāca: "sthavira, kim ājñāpayasi?" atha sthaviro rājānām Aśokam uvāca: "mahārāja, iyaṃ sā devatā, yayā dṛṣṭo bhagavāñ jāyamānaḥ," atha rājā kṛtāñjalis tāṃ devatām uvāca: "dṛṣṭas tvayā lakṣaṇabhūṣitāṅgaḥ prajāyamānaḥ kamalāyatākṣaḥ, śrutvās tvayā tasya nararṣabhasya vāco manojñāḥ prathamā vane 'smin." devatā prāha: "mayā hi dṛṣṭaḥ kanakāvadātaḥ prajāyamāno dvipadapradhānaḥ/ padāni sapta kramāṇa eva śrutā ca vācam api tasya śāstuḥ." rājā āha: "kathaya, devate, kīdṛśī bhagavato jāyamānasya śrīr babhūveti," devatā prāha: "na śakyaṃ mayā vāgbhiḥ saṃprakāśayitum, api tu saṃkṣepataḥ śṛṇu: vinirmitābhā kanakāvadātā sendre triloke nayanābhirāmā, sasāgarāntā ca mahī saśailā mahārṇavasthā iva nauścāla." yāvad rājñā jātyāṃ śatasahasraṃ dattam, caityaṃ ca pratiṣṭhāpya rājā prakrāntaḥ.* (Cowell & Neil, *The Divyāvadāna*, 389f.); translation: Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka*, 244ff. A similar sub-narrative is given when Upagupta and Aśoka visit the place where the *nāga* Kālika praised the Buddha: see Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka*, 249f.

As John Strong has correctly pointed out, there is a focus on "seeing" in this paradigmatic encounter with Buddhist sacred places which links quite neatly to the Indian concept of *darśan* (Skt. *darśana*) in the sense of images or places of pilgrimage highlighted by Diana Eck as a crucial element of Hindu religions[16] which is, however, also applicable to other South Asian religious traditions.[17] Staying in the framework of Stünkel's transcendence model, one could argue that before one points out at something, one must first see it (or experience it with other senses). The episode in the Aśokāvadāna, however, also refers to a very important point linked to the transcendence of time, or rather to the impossibility to transcend time which creates an inaccessibility of the transcendent represented by the Buddha.

Travelogues seem to be promising texts for tracing notions of transcendence since any spatial movement, naturally, implies transcending space in the most common sense of the word. This seems to be a trivial statement, but it links well with the emphasis of the so-called "spatial turn" on mapping in defining the relation between space and place,[18] but also between places. Such mapping links different places through a common narrative which is often, in religious contexts, based on the biography (or hagiography) of a religious founder or an eminent religious individual (saint, seer, prophet, etc.).[19]

If the previously stated is true then travelogues should reflect, on the semantic and semiotic level, this kind of "basic" (Stünkel) transcendence, a passing from A to B. They are, to use and appropriate the 'smart' title of a book on travel writing edited by James Duncan and Derek Gregory on travel writing, "writes of passage."[20] The specific 'genre' of Chinese Buddhist travelogues, often and wrongly called "pilgrim records,"[21] also reflects dimensions of transcendence

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16   Diana Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007).

17   In the context of Buddhism this has been highlighted by Malcolm David Eckel, *To See the Buddha: A Philosopher's Quest for the Meaning of Emptiness*. Princeton (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992); in the context of the Buddha's relics the aspect of *darśan* has been emphasized by John S. Strong, *Relics of the Buddha* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004): 234f.

18   Barney Warf, Santa Arias, "Introduction: the reinsertion of space into the social sciences and humanities," in *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. B. Warf, S. Arias (London, New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.

19   As such the more dynamic projection of "narrative places" into an otherwise meaningless space goes beyond the pure symbolic value of imagined places as claimed by J. Corrigan, "Spatiality and religion," in *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. B. Warf, and S. Arias (London, New York: Routledge, 2009), 116.

20   Duncan, James, and Gregory, Derek, eds., *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999).

21   For a critique see Max Deeg, "When Peregrinus is not Pilgrim: The Chinese 'Pilgrims' Records – A Revision of Literary Genre and its Context," in *Dharmayātra – Buddhist*

of space: the spatial metaphors of 'crossing' (Chinese *du* 度, *guo* 過) and 'reaching' (Chinese *zhi* 至, *dao* 到) are clearly present in the terminology of my sources. Concretizing the Buddhist metaphor of 'crossing', this often refers to very specific natural or semi-natural barriers such as rivers, oceans, mountains/mountain ranges or forests (jungles) after which one reaches or enters – in some cases also leaves – a site or a region with a higher degree of religious meaning (transcendence) (see below).

At places, Xuanzang's Record reflects the transition from one to a particular spatial sphere of a different quality which may be called 'transcendent'. There are, in my view, two dimensions represented in the texts with relation to transcendence; one could be called a macro-spatial transcendent dimension, the other one micro-spatial transcendent dimension. By the first term I refer to transitions in a wider regional sphere where certain spaces are defined and singled out as bearing a higher degree of transcendence by geographically defined and/or constructed through culturally and religiously meaningful – in the sense of assigned meaning – boundaries and features. By the second, which can play a role in the construction of space of the first category, I refer to specific sites or places or clusters of them which are religiously meaningful because they are linked or linkable to narratives of the founder of the religion, the Buddha, and deliver both religious identity and soteriological meaning. Visiting and venerating these places where the Buddha's transcendence becomes, at least to a certain degree, 'tangible' and at the same time allows to generate religious benefit or "merit" (*puṇya*/*gongde* 功德 or *fu* 福).

3   Narrative Encounters with the Transcendence

In my presentation at CERES in my fellowship year, I focused on the Chinese concepts of *ganying* 感應, "correlative (or: sympathetic[22]) resonance," and *yingyan* 應驗, "responsive manifestation,"[23] as formal aspects or expressions

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Pilgrimage in Time and Space, ed. C. Cueppers, and M. Deeg (eds.) (Lumbinī: Lumbinī International Research Institute, 2014), 65–95.

22   See, for example, Robert H. Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 26, who translates the term as "stimulus-response" (p. 78).

23   Also translated as "miraculous manifestation" or "miraculous response": see Robert Ford Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm. Buddhist Miracle Tales from Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012). Almost synonyms are *lingyan* 靈驗, or *lingying* 靈應: see Sharf, *Coming to Terms*, (93ff.). For an interpretation and application of this term in the context of contemporary Chinese folk religion see Adam Yuet Chao,

of transcendence or of the relation between the immanent and the transcendent. As one example, I selected an episode from the Biography[24] in which Xuanzang, on his way on a boat from Ayodhyā on the river Gaṅgā, encounters pirates and worshippers of the goddess Durgā (Tuqie *tianshen* 突伽天神) who want to sacrifice him to the goddess. He asks the pirates to give him time to prepare for his death and enters a deep contemplation to encounter the *bodhisattva* Maitreya in Tuṣita heaven. As a consequence of his devotion a thunderstorm rises ("responsive manifestation") and the pirates are converted and abdicate their former cult.[25]

While in this example the transcendent realm of Tuṣita heaven, the 'waiting room' of the future Buddha Maitreya, is accessible in a potential situation of transition – the pending execution and death of the hero – and a "responsive manifestation" is triggered by this, in another example from the earliest extant Chinese Buddhist travelogue, Faxian's Foguo-ji 佛國記, "Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms" (aka Gaoseng-Faxian-zhuan 高僧法顯傳, "Record of the Eminent Monk Faxian") the author expressed his frustration of not being able to encounter the Buddha directly:

> Faxian bought incense, flowers and oil lamps in the New City of [Rājagṛha] and asked two local *bhikṣu*s to lead him up to the Gṛdhrakūṭa Mount. [There he] offered the flowers and the incense and lighted the lamps to illuminate [the place when it got dark]. [He] was very upset and sad, wiped off [his] tears and said: "Once the Buddha preached the Śūraṅgama[-sūtra] at this place. [I] Faxian was born [at a time] when [I] cannot meet the Buddha but can only see the traces where had had dwelled." Thereupon, [he] recited the Śūraṅgama[-sūtra] in front of the cave, stayed one night [on top of the mountain] and returned to the New City of [Rājagṛha].[26]

Miracular Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

24   For the sake of convenience, in this chapter I refer to passages from Xuanzang Biography and his Record not directly quoted and translated by myself to Li Rongxi's English translations. For the present story see Li Rongxi, *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1995), 76ff. (Chinese text: T.2053. 233c.23ff.).

25   This episode has been discussed at some length and with a focus on the aspect of *darśan* by Eckel, *To See the Buddha*, 131ff.

26   T.2085.862c.29ff. 法顯於新城中買香，華，油，燈，倩二舊比丘送法顯到耆闍崛山。華，香供養，然燈續明。慨然悲傷，收淚而言："佛昔於此住，說首楞嚴。法顯生不值佛，但見遺跡處所而已。" 即於石窟前誦首楞嚴。停止一宿，還向新城。 See also Max Deeg, Das Gaoseng-Faxian-zhuan als religionsgeschichtliche Quelle. Der älteste Bericht eines chinesischen buddhistischen Pilgermönches über

What is missing in this episode is a responsive manifestation of the transcendent, a "defect" which obviously was felt and rectified by the biographer of Faxian when he describes how wild lions become tame when the monk recites a *sūtra*. The inaccessibility of a place loaded with transcendence is in the same biography in Huijiao's 慧皎 Gaoseng-zhuan 高僧傳 when, on his way back from Gṛdhrakūṭa, Faxian meets the Buddha's disciple Mahākāśyapa who dwells in the mountain and waits for the advent of the future Buddha Maitreya to transmit Śākyamuni's robe to him as Śākyamuni's rightful successor.[27] When, after realizing whom he has just met, Faxian tries to access Mahākāśyapa's his way is blocked by rocks and Mahākāśyapa's dwelling place in the mountain is inaccessible.[28] The reaction is sadness and frustration,[29] in some cases expressed in poetic form.[30]

4　　Constructing Transcendent Space

Seen from a Chinese Buddhist worldview up to the Tang period, there is a concentricity of 'sacredness' or transcendence which has its centre in India, the land of the Buddha. The Chinese travellers approached this 'centre' through different stages or regions of increasing 'sacredness'. For Xuanzang it was obviously very important to state this very fact by clearly discerning between the different regions of India. The Record – I deliberately avoid the terms 'traveller' or 'pilgrim' as the text itself does not have such an agent – moves from an outer, peripheral area to an increasingly relevant and meaningful religious centre, or rather centres, in terms of soteriological transcendence which is, or which are, directly linked to major, soteriologically important events in the biography

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seine Reise nach Indien mit Übersetzung des Textes (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2005), 552.

27 On this Buddhist "Kyffhäuser" tradition see Max Deeg, "Das Ende des Dharma und die Ankunft des Maitreya. Endzeit- und Neue-Zeit-Vorstellungen im Buddhismus mit einem Exkurs zur Kāśyapa-Legende," *Zeitschrift für Relgionswissenschaft* 7 (1999): 145–169. An inscription from the area around Rājagṛha shows that the narrative has been well-known in the region: see Vincent Tournier, "Matériaux pour une histoire de la légende et du culte de Mahākāśyapa: une relecture d'une fragment de statue inscrit retrouvé à Silao (Bihār)," In *Autour de Bāmiyān: de la Bactriane héllenisée à l'Inde bouddhique* (Archaeologia Afghana, Série scientifique), edited by G. Ducœur. Paris: De Boccard, 2012: 375–413.

28 Deeg, *Das Gaoseng-Faxian-zhuan*: 615f.

29 See T.H. Barrett, "Exploratory Observations on Some Weeping Pilgrims," in *The Buddhist Forum, Volume 1*, edited by Tadeusz Skorupski (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1990): 99–110.

30 Max Deeg, "Wailing for Identity: Topical and Poetic Expressions of Cultural Belonging in Chinese Buddhist Literature," in *Identity and Network: Exchange Relations between China and the World*, ed. A. Heirman, C. Meinert, and C. Anderl (Leiden: Brill, 2018): 227–252.

of the Buddha, for instance the four Great Places (*mahāsthāna*) of birth at Lumbinī, of enlightenment at Bodhgayā, of the first sermon at Sārnāth near Vārāṇasī and *parinirvāṇa* at Kuśinagara.[31]

In the other direction, from centre to periphery, necessarily but in some contexts the sacred centre is the *bodhimaṇḍa*(*na*) (*daochang* 道場), the place underneath the *bodhi* tree where the Buddha attained enlightenment. I will discuss the phenomenon of densification of transcendence at places like Bodhgayā later, but on a geo-topographical macro-level there is clearly a hierarchy of transcendence with an utmost concentration around the spot of the enlightenment.

Moving away from the centre, the next circle is Magadha, a region to which Xuanzang dedicates two complete chapters (out of twelve) and which includes, among others, Rājagṛha and Pāṭaliputra, the two capitals of the most important early royal supporters of Buddhism, Bimbisāra, Ajātaśatru and Aśoka. Accepting the Gaṅgā as the northern border of Magadha Xuanzang seems to adopt the extension of the kingdom at the time of the Buddha and the kings Bimbisāra and Ajātaśatru, while in reality and historically Magadha included a considerable bigger territory north of the great river,[32] a process which, according to Buddhist tradition, already started with king Ajātaśatru's imperial ambitions towards the end of the lifetime of the Buddha.

The next "circle" is Central India – Zhong-yindu 中印度 in Xuanzang's terminology or Zhong-tianzhu 中天竺 –, sometimes also called "Middle Region," *madhyadeśa* (Chin. *zhongguo* 中國); this is the region where the important events in the life of the Buddha mentioned above happened. The other regions, arranged according to the cardinal directions, do not have – with the one exception of North India (see below) – a direct connection with the biography of the Buddha;[33] they are, in a way, less loaded with transcendence than the inner circles.

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31   It is interesting to note that the birth of the *bodhisattva* at Lumbinī ontologically is the moment when the Buddha transcends but, as it were, invertedly, from a transcendent place, the Tuṣita-heaven, into immanence – at least from a "Buddhological" (in the sense of "theology") standpoint which does not assume the overall transcendency of the Buddha, so to speak: his dharmakāyic nature. John Strong (*The Relics of the Buddha*, 230), has referred to this aspect as "the comings and goings" of the Buddha/Tathāgata, without using, however, the concept of transcendence.

32   On Magadha and its specific place in the cultural development of India see Johannes Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha. Studies in the Culture of Early India* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2007).

33   Indirectly, the special status of Central India is also expressed by the general description of India in the second chapter where the overall geographical character of the other four regions is specified but Central India is left out (T.2087.875b.27ff.): 五印度

In concrete terms, the "description" in the Record starts at the periphery of the Central Asian borderland (*biandi* 邊地), in Kuča and first, in Central Asia, moves through soteriologically neutral territory. India itself is divided into five greater regions, the "Five Indias" (Wu-Tianzhu 五天竺 or in the Record Wu-Yindu 五印度) of the Chinese, into four more peripheral regions, North, West, East and South (Bei-Yindu 北印度, Xi-Yindu 西印度, Dong-Yindu 東印度, Nan-Yindu 南印度), all-encompassing Central India (Zhong-Yindu 中印度) or Magadha (Mojietuo 摩揭陀) with its centre, the place of the enlightenment of the Buddha at Bodhgayā.

With the "Five Indias" Xuanzang uses a divisional geographical scheme for India which is neither found in other Indian texts around his time but also not in earlier Buddhist texts. It is a very ancient one from the Vedic period. The idea of India being divided in five greater regions is based on the archaic concept of five *janapada*s, the ancient ṛgvedic "five regions" or "tribes" (*pañca kṣitayaḥ, pañca janāḥ*)[34] according to which India (Jambudvīpa) was divided of five parts: the centre or *madhyamāpratiṣṭhā diś* corresponding to the later *madhyadeśa* (*zhongguo* 中國), the north or *udīcī diś*, the east or *prācī diś*, the south or *dakṣiṇā diś*, and the west or *pratīcī* or *aparāntā diś*. This rather schematic concept of division into five *janapada*s had already become defunct at an early point: the number of the *janapada*s increased continuously,[35] and in the canonical Buddhist literature already sixteen *mahājanapada*s are known.[36] It has to be doubted whether such a system, and be it only in an idealized way, was still in use in 7th century Northern India under the relatively stable unity of Śīlāditya's empire. Nevertheless, the "Five Indias" – often shortened to Wutian 五天 (for Wu-Tianzhu) – of Xuanzang, not found in Buddhist literature

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之境，周九萬餘里，三垂大海，北背雪山。北廣南狹，形如半月。畫野區分，七十餘國。時特暑熱，地多泉濕。北乃山阜隱軫，丘陵舄鹵；東則川野沃潤，疇壠膏腴；南方草木榮茂；西方土地磽确。 ("The territory of the Five Indias encompasses more than ninety thousand miles, has oceans on three [sides, and] to the north [it] is bordered by the 'Snow Mountains'. [Its] northern [part] is wide [and] its southern [part] is narrow, [so that its] form is like a half-moon. [It] is divided into more than seventy kingdoms. The seasons are extremely hot, [and] the land [provides] a lot of water [and is very] humid. The north is covered by mountains, [and the soil of] the craggy terrain is acidic; the river-plains of the east are fertile and moist, [and its] beds and fields are fertile; the south [is covered by] dense vegetation; the west is barren land.").

34   Sudama Misra, *Janapada State in Ancient India* (Vārāṇasī: Bhāratīya Vidyā Prakāśana, 1973): 24; Hartmut Scharfe, *The State in Indian Tradition* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989): 11f.

35   Mishra, *Janapada State*, 44; the list in the Purāṇas has seven *janapada*s, a number also found in the Dīghanikāya: Scharfe, *The State in Indian Tradition*, 14.

36   Mishra, *Janapada State*, 262; this number is also given in the Jain Bhagavatīsūtra, while other Buddhis texts (Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra) have twelve *janapada*s.

before the Record, became the most used term for the subcontinent in Chinese Buddhist sources.

So, what intention may lie behind the construction of India in this way, particularly when looking at the territory defined as Central India? According to Xuanzang the most western region of Central India was Mathurā, the most eastern kingdom Puṇḍravardhana; the southern border is defined by Bodhgayā and (southern) Kosala, and in the north it still includes Śrāvastī and Kapilavastu and Lumbinī which one may expect to belong to North India. This geographical definition creates, as can be seen on the 19th-century archaeologist and Xuanzang-"enthusiast" Alexander Cunningham's map (Figure 2.1),[37] a disproportionately distributed Central India in terms of size and position, the goal of which seems to be to include all sacred sites linked to the traditional biography of the Buddha; but it also includes, on its extreme western side, places like Mathurā, probably as the place of origin of the important Buddhist patriarch Upagupta,[38] and Sthaneśvara as the home region of the ruling dynasty of king Śīlāditya Harṣavardhana (which happens to be the place of the *dharmakṣetra*, the great battlefield of the Mahābhārata).[39]

When the Record 'enters' India proper, into the North(-West) Indian region of Greater Gandhāra, Xuanzang expressively points out this transfer into a different realm of sanctity: Bei-yindu, "North India," the region which, according to one Buddhist tradition, is also consecrated by a visit of the Buddha – it is a centre at the periphery of the real centre, Magadha. It is interesting that the access to this peripheric centre of transcendence is marked by a spatial 'transcending':

> [If one] goes from there (i.e., from the region around Kāpiśī, MD) more than six hundred miles in eastern [direction], [with] the valleys running parallel [and] the mountain peaks [being] steep, one crosses the 'Black

37   Alexander Cunningham, *The Ancient Geography of India, 1. The Buddhist Period Including the Campaigns of Alexander, and the Travels of Hwen-Thsang* (London: Trübner and Co., 1871).

38   Xuanzang himself probably did not visit Mathurā: see Max Deeg, "Has Xuanzang Really Been in Mathurā? Interpretatio Sinica or Interpretatio Occidentalia – How to Critically Read the Records of the Chinese Pilgrims," in *Essays on East Asian Religion and Culture. Festschrift in honour of Nishiwaki Tsuneki on the occasion of his 65th birthday*, ed. C. Wittern, and Shi Lishan (Kyoto: Editiorial committee for the Festschrift in honour of Nishiwaki Tsuneki, 2007), 35–73.

39   On Xuanzang's description of this region see Max Deeg, "'Show Me the Land Where the Buddha Dwelled …' – Xuanzang's 'Record of the Western Regions' (Xiyu ji): A Misunderstood Text?" *China Report* 48 (2012): 101ff.
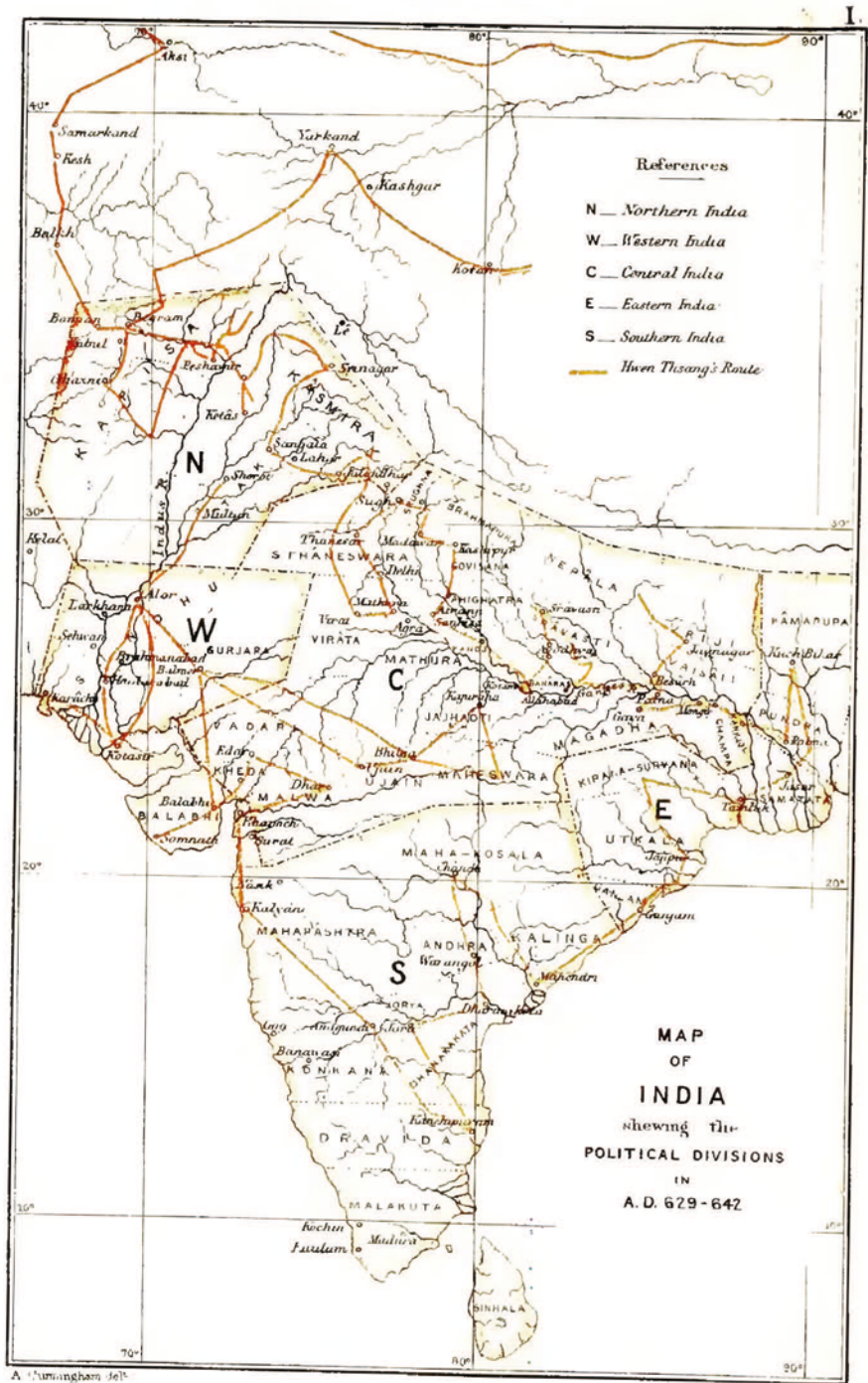
FIGURE 2.1   Alexander Cunningham's map of Xuanzang's India (1871)

Mountain Range', enters the territory of Northern India [and] arrives in the kingdom of Lanbo (territory of Northern India).[40]

The described route from Kāpiśī (Begram), the last place described before entering India/North India proper, to Lanbo/Lampāka (modern Laghmān) does not follow the most natural way through the valleys in southern direction towards Kabul and then along the course of the Kabul river but instead crosses the mountains (Figure 2.2). The route comes from an area which was not sanctified by the presence of the Buddha, to the first region in (Northern) India which was, according to the version of the Buddha biography known to Xuanzang, visited by the Buddha, and still had considerable remnants of this visit, south of Lampāka. After another crossing over mountains[41] – which does not exist in reality since the natural access to the Kabul river valley from Lampāka follows the course of the Alishing river (modern Laghman-Sukhakhan highway) –, the area around Nagarahāra (modern Jalālābād) is reached. The Record 'transcends', as it were, to the site where the Buddha, on his visit to the Northwest of the subcontinent, left the most tangible/visible trace of his presence, his famous shadow image (*foying* 佛影) in a cave near the city of Nagarahāra;[42] nearby this extremely important site, there were also the relics of the parietal bone, the cranial bone (*uṣṇīṣā*), of an eyeball, the *kāṣāya* and *saṅghāṭī*, and the mendicant staff (*khakkhara*) of the Buddha.[43]

A similar 'description'[44] of crossing is found when the Record enters Magadha, the inner circle of Central India; it is explicitly stated that this is marked by crossing the river Gaṅgā although the cultural-political borders of

40   T.2087.875b.4ff.: 自此東行六百餘里，山谷接連，峯巖峭峻，越黑嶺，入北印度境，至濫波國(北印度境)。

41   T.2087.878b.25f.: 從此東南行百餘里，踰大嶺，濟大河，至那揭羅曷國(北印度境)。("Going more than a hundred miles to the south-east from there (i.e., Lanbo), climbing over the great mountain range and crossing a great river [one] arrives in the kingdom of Najieluohe (Nagarahāra).")

42   Li, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record*, 67f. For a discussion of the legend attached to this site see Max Deeg, *Miscellanae Nepalicae: Early Chinese Reports on Nepal – The Foundation Legend of Nepal in its Trans-Himalayan Context* (Lumbinī: Lumbinī International Research Institute, 2016), 100–113.

43   Li, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record*, 69.

44   For obvious reasons, I use "description" in inverted commas to point to the fact that the travelogues are more complex than documentaries: they are situated between inherited tropes of Chinese geographical and ethnographical concepts and a complex intentionality of the authors to project an idealized Buddhist India to their Chinese readership and to "prove" that what is known from Buddhist texts is "really" found *in situ*.

FIGURE 2.2   Routes from Kāpiśī to Nagarahāra (blue: described route; red: natural route)

Magadha at that time (first half of the 7th century) and before certainly were not restricted through the river (see above).

5   Narrative and Spatial Density of Transcendence

If a hierarchy of transcendence is expressed through *loci*/places which are religiously meaningful because they are linked, in one way or another, to the biography of the Buddha one may expect places where this transcendence is "compressed" by frequent visits of the Buddha. The "Vulture Peak" (Gṛdhrakūṭa) near Rājagṛha, for instance, is highly venerated and frequently visited because of its accumulated transcendent aura as could already be seen in the episode of Faxian's visit discussed above. The reason for this importance as a place of transcendence is not that the mountain is connected with one particularly important episode in the life of the Buddha but because it is here that the Buddha delivered many of his sermons; it is the place where most of the Mahāyāna-sūtras like the Śūraṅgamasamādhi-sūtra mentioned and recited by Faxian (see above) locate the preaching of the Buddha.

Other places attain their status as sites of transcendence by the soteriological importance of a series of biographical events connected to them. They usually reflect a higher 'density' of sites echoing the narrative of the Buddha's

biography in which events 'densify' towards the important main event, the point of narrative culmination, as it were, in a dramatic way. This phenomenon can be observed in the case of the four major events, the birth, the enlightenment, the first sermon and the *parinirvāṇa*. Translated in spatial terms, this could create a high density of sites in a quite narrow environment around a centre of veneration which the travelogues, particularly the Record, reflect.

The most prominent site of this kind has been and is Bodhgayā, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment[45] where the described feature of densification is most prominent. Here some of the places are only some steps away from each other, but they all lead to or from the centre which is the place where enlightenment was achieved, symbolized through the *bodhi* tree and called the "diamond seat," the *vajrāsana*.[46]

A list of places which are described in the Record – brought into a narrative-biographical order in which they are told in the biographies which is not completely but followed in the topographical sequence of the places towards the *centrum dramatis* (marked bold below) in Xuanzang's Record – are:[47]

F.   The place of the *bodhisattva*'s extreme austerities for a period of six years.

G.   The place where the *bodhisattva* took a bath before accepting food.

H.   The place where the *bodhisattva* ended the practice of harsh asceticism and accepted the milk gruel from two village girl.

I.   The encounter of the *bodhisattva* with the *nāga* Kālika (or Kāla) and the crossing (sic!) of the Nairañjanā-river.

J.   The place where the *bodhisattva* entered the Nairañjanā-river to take a bath.

K.   The cave in which the *bodhisattva* meditated before approaching the *bodhi*-tree (*prāgbodhi*).

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45   The Aśokāvadāna, for instance, singles out Bodhgayā, particularly the *bodhi* tree, as the place which receives the utmost attention and veneration of the king: see Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka*, 125ff. & 257.

46   Another aspect is how the different stages are "repleted" with doctrinal content: see, for instance, the analysis in Ghiorgo Zafiropulo, *L'Illumination du Buddha. De la Quête à l'Annonce de l'Eveil: Essais de chronologie relative et de stratigraphie textuelle* (*Enquête sur l'ensemble des textes canoniques bouddhistes se référant – à titre principal ou accessoire – à l'« Abhisaṃbodhi » du fondateur at à quelques épisodes connexes: antérieurs ou postérieurs*) (Innsbruck: Institut für Sprachwissenschaft der Universität Innsbruck, 1993).

47   Li, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record*, 243ff. (T.2087.915a.14ff.).

L.   The place where the *bodhisattva* received grass for the diamond-
      seat for the from a grass cutter.
M.   The place of the appearance of the ominous birds guiding the
      bodhisattva to the *bodhi*-tree.
N.   **The *bodhi*-tree (enlightenment).**
O.   **The diamond-seat (*vajrāsana*) (enlightenment).**
P.   The place where the Buddha realized the law of cause and effect
      (enlightenment).
Q.   The place of Māra's temptation (enlightenment).
R.   The place of the image of the earth-deity (enlightenment).
S.   The pond where the Buddha washed himself after the enlightenment.
T.   The place where the Buddha received food from two village girls
      after enlightenment.
U.   The Buddha's *caṅkramana*-path where he walked in meditation for
      one week after his enlightenment.
V.   The place where the four guardian deities of the four directions
      donated the alms bowl to the Buddha.
W.   The places of the Buddha's post-enlightenment contemplation
      (7×7 days).
X.   The pond of the *nāga*-king Mucilinda who protected the Buddha
      from a thunderstorm.
Y.   The place of the food donation by the two merchants (Trapuṣa and
      Bhallika).
Z.   The place where Brahmā urged the Buddha to turn the *dharma*-
      wheel.
AA.   The place where the Buddha ascended to Trayastriṃśa-heaven to
      teach the *dharma* to his deceased mother.
BB.   Departure for Vārāṇasī – another place of transcendence – to teach
      the first sermon.

The microspatial aspect of a hierarchy of transcendence is expressed in the
Record through an increasing density of religiously meaningful places (see
e.g. Figure 2.3 for Alexander Cunningham's identification of most sites). The
bodhisattva is moving towards the centre, the *vajrāsana*, accompanied by a
series of ominous or miraculous signs (e.g., the blind *nāga* Kālika regaining
his eyesight). The centre itself is described as the eternal centre of the world
which does, however, already show signs of inaccessibility (invisibility) due to
the decline of the *dharma*:
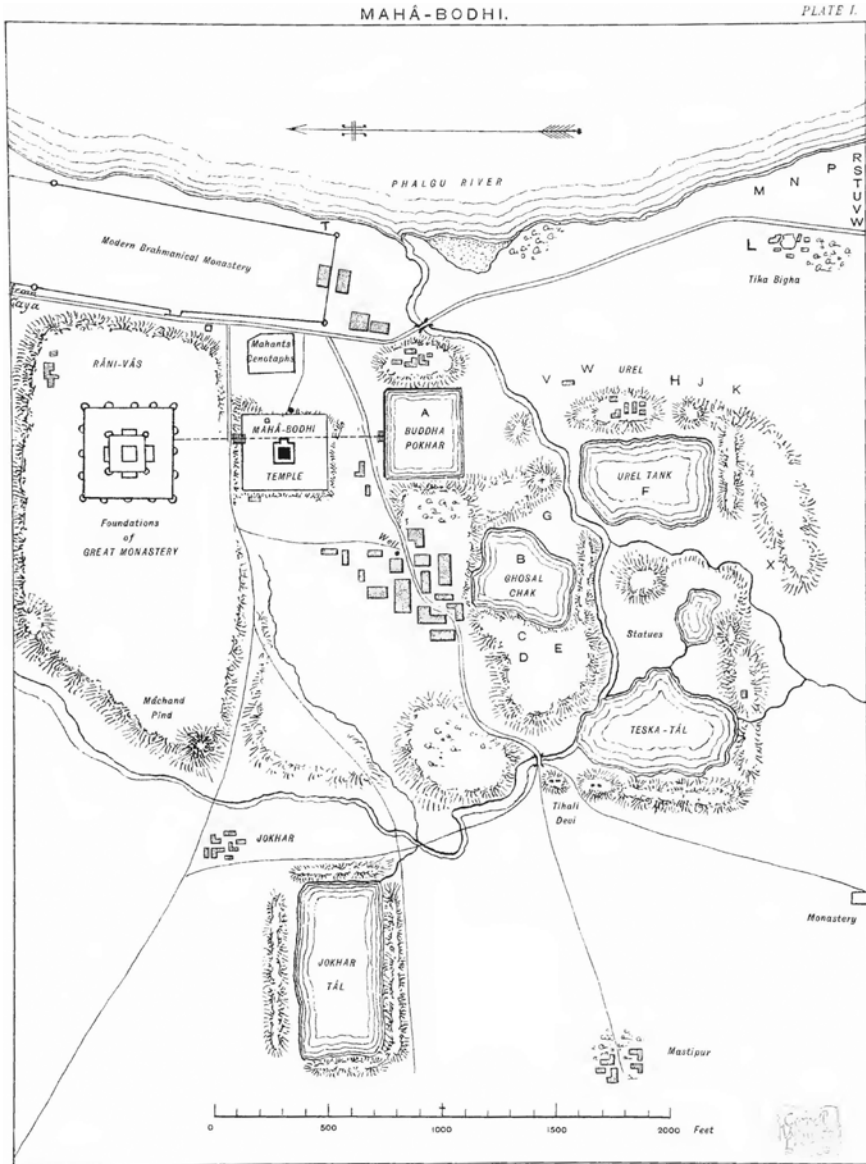
FIGURE 2.3   Bodhgayā (Alexander Cunningham, *Mahābodhi*, 1892)

Right in the centre of the wall [around] the *bodhi*-tree is the 'Diamond-Seat'. It came into existence at the beginning of the *bhadrakalpa*, rose together with the Great Earth, occupies the centre of the three thousand great thousand worlds, reaches all the way down to the 'Golden Wheel' and above gets near the extreme [ends] of the earth; [it is] built from diamond, has a circumference of more than one hundred paces; the Buddhas of the *bhadrakalpa* sit on it and entered [the stage] of 'Diamond-Contemplation': that is why it is called 'Diamond-Seat'. Where the sacred Dao (*bodhi*) is realized is also called 'Place of the Dao'. [Even when] the great world is shattered [by an earthquake], only [this place] does not collapse. Therefore, [when] the Bodhisattva was about to realize full enlightenment and [he] passed the four corners of this ['Diamond Seat'], the whole earth shook, [but when he] then arrived at that place [the earth] was calm and did not shake [anymore]. From [the time when the world] has entered the end of the *kalpa* [and] the True Dharma degenerates, sandy soil covers [the seat] [so that one] cannot see it anymore.[48]

6   Individual Places and (Again) the Transcendence of Inaccessibility

As another example of transcendence indicated through the inaccessibility of space I would like to discuss an example in the inner circle of the region or kingdom of Magadha which is linked to an unspecified episode in the life of the Buddha which I had, so far, not been able to identify in the extant biographical sources.[49] The place identified with the site described by Xuanzang was visited and identified by a research team on a field trip in the Indian state of Bihār in January 2020.[50] On this trip we were trying to identify, among others, a site described by Xuanzang as follows:

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48   T.2087.915b.15ff.   菩提樹垣正中有金剛座。昔賢劫初成，與大地俱起，據三千大千世界中，下極金輪，上侵地際，金剛所成，周百餘步，賢劫千佛坐之而入金剛定，故曰金剛座焉。證聖道所，亦曰道場，大地震動，獨無傾搖。是故如來將證正覺也，歷此四隅，地皆傾動，後至此處，安靜不傾。自入末劫，正法浸微，沙土彌覆，無復得見。

49   From the description and the fact that Xuanzang himself probably never visited and saw the place it may be concluded that this is a local tradition.

50   The trip was part of the ongoing project "The Xuanzang Trail," funded by the Bihar Heritage Development Society and co-investigated by Dr. Bijoy Choudhary and me with a team of colleagues from different disciplines (archaeology, history, science); the goal of this project is to revisit, reassess and identify the different sites in Bihar mentioned in Xuanzang's *Record*.

More than ninety miles southwest of the Tailāḍhaka-monastery [one arrives] at a big mountain with one rock next to the other [reaching up to] the clouds, [where] spirits and immortals reside. Poisonous snakes and violent *nāga*s gather in its caves; fierce beasts and birds of prey dwell in its forests. On the crest of the mountain is a huge boulder, and on top of it is a *stūpa*, more than ten feet high and [marking] the place where the Buddha entered contemplation. Formerly, [when] the Tathāgata had subdued a local spirit (*shen* 神) and stayed there, he was sitting on this boulder, entered the 'Contemplation of Extinction', [and] at that time he spent the night there. All the gods and divine immortals made offerings to the Tathāgata, played celestial music, [and] had celestial flowers rain down. [When] the Tathāgata emerged from contemplation, all the gods felt grateful and built a *stūpa* from jewels, gold, and silver. [Now that] the [lifetime] of the Saint is already so far away, the jewels have turned into stone. Since ancient time until today, it is only [when one] looks at the high mountain from the distance that [one] sees the strange creatures[3]. [Together like] close relatives[4] huge snakes and fierce beasts circumambulate [the *stūpa*] clockwise. Celestial immortals and divine saints come follow each other according to their seniority to pay reference [to the *stūpa*].[51]

What already becomes clear through this passage is that the transcendent nature of the miraculous stone *stūpa* on top of the mountain described in the text is characterized by its inaccessibility to humans: it is originally built by the gods and only venerated by wild animals.

Following the corrected distances and directions given in Xuanzang's Record, we were looking for this site at or around the rock formation of the Barābār Hills, about 50 kilometres south of the modern city of Paṭnā (Figure 2.4), the site of the old Magadhan capital Pāṭaliputra from the Mauryan (2nd cent. BC) to the Gupta period (5th cent. AD). The Barābār Hills were a good candidate for the site described by Xuanzang, who probably never visited the site himself, since they house man-made rock caves with inscriptions identifying them as dwelling places given to the ascetic Ājīvika denomination from the Mauryan

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51   T.913c.2ff.   鞮羅釋迦伽藍西南九十餘里，至大山，雲石幽蔚，靈儼攸舍。毒蛇
暴龍，窟穴其藪；猛獸鷙鳥，棲伏其林。山頂有大盤石，上建窣堵波，其高
十餘尺，是佛入定處也。昔者如來降神止此，坐斯磐石，入滅盡定，時經宿
焉。諸天靈聖，供養如來，鼓天樂，雨天花。如來出定，諸天感慕，以寶金
銀起窣堵波。去聖逾邈，寶變為石。自古迄今，人未有至，遙望高山，乃見
異類。長蛇猛獸，群從右旋。天仙靈聖，肩隨讚禮。

period onwards.[52] As remote mountain caves for religious specialists, ascetics and *śramaṇa*s, searching for transcendence in form of being released from the circle of rebirth they were, *per se*, places of transcendence – but unfortunately there was no direct evidence for a Buddhist presence at or around the main rock formation of Barābār.

When we left the Barābār Hill complex in the late afternoon and drove back in western direction, we suddenly were stunned by the scenery of an individual conical hill at some distance and in the dimming light of the sunset (Figure 2.5); this hill was crowned by a rock boulder that looked like a *stūpa*. The hill itself, the flanks of which are covered by rock boulders, is called Kauvadol in Hindī, which literally means "Crow's Swing": a local narrative has it that the rock on top of the hill – the one we saw from the distance – starts swinging when a crow is landing on it.

On the bottom of the hill there is a shrine with a huge statue of the Buddha (Figure 2.7) in meditational posture, and on the lowest row of rocks around the hill there are images of the Buddha in meditation and various deities (Figure 2.6). The hill does not show any sign of human modification to make it accessible – as, for instance, the staircases hewn into the rock at the nearby Barābār Hills do. This and the other features (the shrine and the stone reliefs) allow for a clear identification of Kauvadol with the site described by Xuanzang. The setting of the place also makes it very likely that the "stone *stūpa*" on top of the hill has been venerated only from below, as Xuanzang's description implies as well. This veneration from the distance is, I would claim, a clear reference to the inaccessible transcendence of an individual place.

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52   On the Barābār Hills and caves see Harry Falk, *Aśokan Sites and Artefacts. A Source-Book with Bibliography* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2006), 258ff.

FIGURE 2.5 Kauvadol, sunset (approaching direction west from the Barabar Hills)
PHOTO: M. DEEG

FIGURE 2.6 Kauvadol: rock images, Buddha and other deities
PHOTO: M. DEEG

FIGURE 2.7   Kauvadol: Buddha statue (8th/9th cent.)
PHOTO: COURTESY LAXSHMI GREAVES

7   **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I based my analysis of some passages in the Chinese Buddhist travelogues and related sources (bio-hagiographies) on a distinction between – and separation of – immanence and transcendence which is not the absolute one of religious metaphysical-doctrinal discourses. Such a more fluid and flexible understanding of transcendence and the transcendent can change the theoretical perspectives and interpretative approach to the sources I am studying in a wider hermeneutical framework which allows to clearly articulate a layer of meaning which goes beyond the positivist reading of the text as a description of a historically 'real' landscape. In my sources, the notion of transcendence is intensified through a tension between spatial accessibility and temporal inaccessibility. To understand the construction of space and landscape in a text like Xuanzang's Record, one has to take into account the different layers of meaning expressed in the text, and this includes implied references to transcendence.

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Future Perspectives in the Study of Religion

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SECTION 1

Knowledge

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Researching Religious Communities in the Twenty-first Century: The Phenomenology of Religion, Local Agency and the Joint Ownership of Knowledge

James L. Cox

Abstract

The phenomenology of religion increasingly is being criticized as outdated. This chapter argues that phenomenology retains relevance to contemporary research methods, as illustrated by two differing projects in Australia on the repatriation of Indigenous knowledge. After presenting these cases, they are analyzed in light of the contrasting arguments of the phenomenologist Wilfred Cantwell Smith and the philosopher Wayne Proudfoot about the influence of believers on research findings. The chapter concludes that the phenomenological method, when re-configured in terms of relationality, local agency and the joint ownership of knowledge, can play a decisive role in determining future directions in religious studies.

Keywords

phenomenology – relationality – agency – knowledge – repatriation – locality – methodology – dialogue – reductionism – power

1   Introduction

Research on religious communities using contemporary scientific methods originated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from disciplines as diverse as linguistic and textual studies, anthropology, sociology, archaeology, economics and political studies. The phenomenology of religion, as a specific branch of the science of religion, was influenced from two main sources: the philosophical phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and liberal Christian theology as it developed at the end of the nineteenth century. Ultimately,

phenomenologists of religion distinguished their approach from methods employed by theologians, philosophers and social scientists by arguing that religions must be interpreted according to a unique methodology. Although the social sciences were regarded as integral to contributing to an understanding of religion, scholars in the phenomenological tradition insisted that a method needed to be developed that would identify and interpret distinctively religious elements that were interwoven into historical and social contexts. Philosophy was employed inconsistently by phenomenologists of religion with most scholars selecting basic concepts derived from philosophical phenomenology, such as Husserl's use of the *epoché*, without attempting to apply its methods in depth. Theology, since it originated from within specific traditions, was regarded as forming part of the phenomena of religion, which alongside other typological classifications, such as myths, rituals and sacred practitioners, comprised part of the data for the study of religion itself.[1]

From the 1930s until the 1970s, phenomenologists of religion played pivotal roles in departments for the study of the history of religion and thus helped shape the direction taken by the academic study of religion through a large part of the twentieth century. Key thinkers in the phenomenology of religion became household names among students of religion: W. Brede Kristensen, Gerardus van der Leeuw, C.J. Bleeker, Raffaele Pettazzoni, Mircea Eliade, Ugo Bianchi, Ninian Smart, Geo Widengren, to name just a few. In the sociology of religion, phenomenological principles were made prominent in the writings of Joachim Wach and Alfred Schutz, and in theology by Rudolf Otto, Karl Heim, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and John Hick. The list, of course, is far wider than those I have named, but they serve to demonstrate how influential the phenomenology of religion was through most of the twentieth century.

During the last twenty years of the twentieth century and throughout the twenty-first century, the dominance of phenomenological methods in the study of religion has waned, until it is now generally dismissed as an approach that tended to essentialize religion through grand interpretations, such as Eliade's idea of "the sacred,"[2] van der Leeuw's reduction of religion to

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1   James L. Cox, *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion: Key Figures, Formative Influences and Subsequent Debates* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006); James L. Cox, *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010); James L. Cox, "The Phenomenology of Religion," in *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*, ed. R. King (New York: Columbia University Press), 401–412.

2   Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, 1987 [1959]), 20–24.

"power"[3] or Wilfred Cantwell Smith's essence of religion as the relationship of personal faith within cumulative traditions to an overarching idea he called "trancendence."[4] Critics, such as Robert Segal[5] and Paul-François Tremlett,[6] have argued that the phenomenological eidos, or essence of religion, disguises theological motives that are entirely non-empirical and hence non-scientific. The insistence that scholarly interpretations of religious communities must reflect the perspectives of adherents further confirmed for its detractors that critical reflection on religion was suppressed by the phenomenological method, as voiced in W. Brede Kristensen's famous dictum: "the believers were completely right."[7] The widespread academic censure of the phenomenology of religion was articulated succinctly by Timothy Fitzgerald in his ground-breaking volume published in 2000, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*: "Little of critical value has come from religious studies qua religious studies, that is, insofar as the field has been dominated by phenomenology of religion and, beyond that, liberal ecumenical theology."[8]

In this chapter, which looks towards new directions in the academic study of religion, I argue that the almost total rejection of phenomenology as a viable method in the academic and scientific study of religion has resulted from a failure to recognize that many of its elements remain highly relevant for researchers today and that under new interpretations the phenomenology of religion may even define the cutting edge in forming innovative methodologies for future scholarly projects. I fully admit that phenomenologists, like van der Leeuw, Eliade and W.C. Smith, conflated theological concepts with seeing into the essence of religion, but their emphases on employing the *epoché* as a technique promoting self-awareness or reflexivity and their attempt to apply the procedure I have called empathetic interpolation to see as a believer sees resonate with the attempts of many contemporary scholars to situate themselves within research contexts, to challenge their assumed right to extract knowledge from religious communities and to engage in dialogue with those who form the 'objects' of academic research. Many of the key ideas first

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3   Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1938), 23–28.

4   Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion. A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: Mentor Books, 1964), 168.

5   Robert Segal, "In Defense of Reductionism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51, no. 1 (1983): 97–124.

6   Paul-François Tremlett, *Religion and Discourse on Modernity* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008).

7   W. Brede Kristensen, *The Meaning of Religion* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 14.

8   Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 217.

developed by phenomenologists of religion are now being adopted by scholars in other fields of expertise. Nowhere can this be seen better than in the study of Indigenous communities and the religious practices they maintain within a complex inter-related set of social and cultural influences.

For example, the anthropologist Marcia Langton of Melbourne University claims that Indigenous societies traditionally have been reified, or turned into objects, by academic researchers. Langton, herself an Indigenous Australian, argues that the most important innovation introduced by current approaches in Indigenous Studies is "its restitution of the agency of Indigenous people" through which the scholar brings "the voice of the Indigenous protagonists into their own history" and explains "events by reference to the perspectives and theories that they themselves exerted on their affairs."[9] Langton suggests that the important book by Stuart Kirsch, entitled *Reverse Anthropology*,[10] which deals with issues of environment and society from the perspective of the Indigenous peoples of New Guinea, "admitted and explained the agency of people who had largely been regarded as mere subjects trapped in a world not of their own making."[11] This leads to Langton's conclusion that the "greatest contribution of Indigenous studies as a field of scholarly endeavour has been to reinstate those people who were once simple subjects as people with agency."[12]

A similar conclusion has been made by a group of researchers that participated in a study funded by the Social Science Medicine Africa Network (Soma-net) in Kenya between 2003 and 2006. The aim of the project was to provide education on the prevention of AIDS among school pupils in a region south of Nairobi. After its conclusion in 2006, the researchers built on the Soma-net project by using what they call "participatory and dialogic approaches" to help members of the local community reach consensus on practical issues that confront them, the most recent of which has been a tree-planting exercise aimed at restoring ecologically damaged land.[13] After encountering numerous problems caused by a multifaceted set of cultural and gender issues in the initial research project, factors not immediately apparent

9   Marcia Langton, "The Diaspora and the Return: History and Memory in Cape York Penin-sula, Australia," in *Anthropologists, Indigenous Scholars and the Research Endeavour: Seek-ing Bridges towards Mutual Respect*, eds Joy Hendry and Laura Fitznor (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 173.

10   Stuart Kirsch, *Reverse Anthropology: Indigenous Analysis of Social and Environmental Relations in New Guinea* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

11   Langton, "Diaspora and Return," 173.

12   Langton, "Diaspora and Return," 173.

13   Beth Maina Ahlberg et al., "'A Child, a Tree': Challenges in Building a Community Research Project in a Kenyan Context," *Action Research* 14, no. 3 (2016): 258.

to outside donors, the researchers adopted a method called "communicative action," an approach, they explain, that "allows participants to consciously and deliberately reach intersubjective agreement as the basis for mutual understanding about what to do in their particular practical situation."[14]

Langton's emphasis on 'agency' and the Soma-net research team's method they labelled 'communicative action' resonate closely with widely shared and long-held assumptions maintained by phenomenologists of religion. From its inception in the early twentieth century, the phenomenology of religion had three fundamental aims: 1) to enable researchers to gain understanding of the religions they were studying by overcoming the subject-object dichotomy, sometimes called the 'insider-outsider predicament'; 2) to provide interpretations of religions that can be affirmed by the practitioners of the religions being researched; 3) to make the scholarly study of religious communities a joint effort or partnership between the academics who are conducting the research and adherents within the religion under study.[15] It will be clear that these aims are consistent with Langton's call to acknowledge that the adherents themselves, who form the subject matter of religious studies, possess 'agency' and with the Soma-net team's advocacy for a programme of collaborative action between researchers and those they are researching. In both cases, local communities are depicted as active participants in research projects rather than passive 'objects' that can be studied as if they are impersonal non-organic 'things'.

2   J.A. Barnes and Types of Knowledge

Relevant to this discussion is the analysis of types of knowledge developed by the social anthropologist J.A. Barnes. Barnes divided knowledge into three types with differing purposes: 1) Knowledge as enlightenment; 2) Knowledge as power; 3) Knowledge as property. In his book entitled *Who Should Know What?*,[16] he argued that the twentieth century witnessed a shift away from how knowledge had been understood previously as a source of enlightenment to knowledge perceived as power. He explains that, under the new circumstances, knowledge is "seen as a source of power to be used by those who

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14   Ahlberg et al., "'A Child, A Tree'," 259.
15   James L. Cox, *Restoring the Chain of Memory. T.G.H. Strehlow and the Repatriation of Australian Indigenous Knowledge* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2018), 130.
16   J.A. Barnes, *Who Should Know What? Social Science, Privacy and Ethics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1979).

control it for their own advantage rather than for the enlightenment and benefit of mankind."[17] He then suggests that more recently, particularly among communities in the Third World and minority groups, knowledge has been conceived as property in which it is "regarded as ... an asset possessed by an individual or a group which may be treasured but is not intended for use and which is available for sale or gift only under restrictive conditions, if at all."[18]

In a later book, Barnes argued that social sciences developed in the late eighteenth century when "ethnographic information was perceived by those who first started to collect it as a source of enlightenment."[19] In the nineteenth century, knowledge, particularly of the "lower classes and dependent peoples," was sought because the ruling elite believed the lower classes could not articulate their needs for themselves.[20] This led during the early part of the twentieth century towards a use of knowledge as beneficent power whereby "the knowledge gained by empirical inquiry was seen as a means for discovering how to change people's lives," usually for the better, for example, by teaching them how to build latrines, avoid alcohol or to "stop beating their wives."[21] Barnes then suggests that after 1945 more and more people who had been the subject of ethnographic research simply refused to cooperate by withholding the information sought by outside researchers. This indicates a change in which the subjects of research began to treat knowledge of their own societies as their own private property.

Barnes's analysis of the three types of knowledge is particularly relevant for current applications of the phenomenology of religion to programmes in Indigenous Studies. Barnes refers to holdings in museums of objects that once belonged to Indigenous peoples as "cultural trophies," the acquisition of which was justified "by reference to the universal values of science."[22] He explains: "The argument is, or was, that we are not impoverishing the Lapps or the Bushmen by displaying their artefacts in our museums," but "we are doing all mankind a service by rescuing them from destruction."[23] The justification for removing artefacts from their original owners and placing them in museums is based on the concept of knowledge as enlightenment, in which "works of art and representative material objects, like knowledge itself, are sources of

17   Barnes, *Who Should Know What?*, 64.
18   Barnes, *Who Should Know What?*, 64.
19   J.A. Barnes, *Models and Interpretations: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 210.
20   Barnes, *Models and Interpretations*, 210.
21   Barnes, *Models and Interpretations*, 210.
22   Barnes, *Who Should Know What?*, 65.
23   Barnes, *Who Should Know What?*, 65.

enlightenment."[24] The same objects represent knowledge as power and ownership, both for Indigenous peoples and for those who removed them from their traditional owners. The power to interpret the artefacts, control their use and convey their meanings to future generations traditionally resided with Indigenous communities. Removing these objects from Indigenous groups and displaying them in museums and exhibitions required an audacious exercise of power, usurped their original intentions and made them subject to outside interpretations, but what is even more significant, it violated the legitimate right to ownership of the objects by Indigenous peoples themselves.

Many of the artefacts to which Barnes refers are now being returned or repatriated to Indigenous communities around the world. An excellent example of this is found in the Australian Government's Policy on Indigenous Repatriation, which aims at returning all Indigenous ancestral remains and secret-sacred objects to their Traditional Owners, whom the Australian Government calls "the rightful custodians of their ancestral remains."[25] The policy document prescribes that when museums in Australia are requested by Traditional Owners to repatriate their ancestral remains and secret-sacred objects, "these are to be returned to the community unconditionally."[26] Under its current Indigenous Repatriation project, the Australian Government has expanded its efforts to return cultural property beyond that retained in Australian museums to include international holdings. Its policy document indicates that the Government will act on behalf of local communities by seeking "the voluntary and unconditional return of ancestral remains and associated notes and data," many of which are housed in museums in the United Kingdom, Germany, France and the United States.[27]

It is important to note that the return of sacred objects does not imply that knowledge of their original meanings and uses is understood in contemporary circumstances by Indigenous communities. Originally, ancient artefacts conveyed to Indigenous people knowledge of their traditions and time-honoured patterns of life and, frequently, played a critical function in ritual re-enactments of sacred stories and foundational myths. Knowledge, in this customary context, belonged to or was the communal property of its original owners. That it was extracted from them for purposes of enlightening the

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24   Barnes, *Who Should Know What?*, 65.
25   Australian Government, Department of Communication and the Arts. *Australian Government Policy on Indigenous Repatriation* (September 2016), 10. https://www.arts.gov.au/publications/australian-government-policy-indigenous-repatriation (accessed June 17, 2023).
26   *Policy on Indigenous Repatriation*, 9.
27   *Policy on Indigenous Repatriation*, 5.

world or for purposes of scientific research does not obviate the fact that it was taken from Indigenous communities, often without their consent, and appropriated by means of superior power by those who had no legitimate claim to it.

We can conclude, therefore, that repatriation has more to do with a broad interpretation of cultural heritage than is implied strictly by reference to material objects. Repatriation includes the meaning of the ancestral remains and the secret-sacred objects associated with them, much of which was retained in the memory of communities through oral traditions, songs and ritual performances. In many cases around the world, the memory on which the meaning of repatriated objects depends has been lost or seriously disrupted by forces of modernity, including colonial oppression, missionary activities, Western education, global economic structures, rapidly advancing communication systems and urbanization.

I turn now to consider two specific contemporary cases where the problem of the repatriation of knowledge is being addressed by Indigenous populations. The first focuses on the repatriation of knowledge project in Central Australia at the Strehlow Research Centre, located in Alice Springs in the Northern Territory, about which I have written in my book *Restoring the Chain of Memory: T.G.H. Strehlow and the Repatriation of Australian Indigenous Knowledge*.[28] The second, as recounted by Claire Smith, Vincent Copley Sr, and Gary Jackson, describes a specific restriction imposed by an academic researcher that thwarted the efforts of the Ngadjuri people of South Australia to recover cultural knowledge that was lost to them during the early colonial period, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, when the Ngadjuri were moved off their native homelands to make room for British settlers.[29]

3   The Repatriation of Knowledge Project in Central Australia

The Strehlow Research Centre houses the vast collection of research material obtained by the linguist and ethnographer T.G.H. Strehlow (1908–1978), whose work, primarily among the Arrernte speaking groups of Central Australia, stretched from 1932 to 1972. Strehlow, the son of the missionary linguist Carl Strehlow, was born on the Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission located around

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28   Cox, *Restoring Chain of Memory*.
29   Claire Smith, Vincent Copley Sr, and Gary Jackson, "Intellectual Soup: On the Reformulation and Repatriation of Indigenous Knowledge," in *Shared Knowledge, Shared Power. Engaging Local and Indigenous Heritage*, ed. V. Apaydin (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018), 9–28.

130 kilometres west of Alice Springs. He was the only white child on the mission, learned the Arrernte language from an early age and was trusted by his Indigenous peers with traditional knowledge, particularly about initiation rituals. At the age of fourteen, when his father died, he travelled with his mother to Adelaide, where he completed his education. In 1932, he returned to Central Australia to work on an Arrernte grammar, but soon realized that language and culture were intricately connected. What began as a limited linguistic exercise turned into Strehlow's life-long project in which he collected and recorded an enormous amount of data on traditional Arrernte culture.[30]

The concerted effort to replace Indigenous culture with the values and practices of the colonizing culture, promoted by cooperation between government and missionary agencies from the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, provided one of Strehlow's chief motivations to preserve records of the rituals, ceremonies, stories, social obligations and genealogies as he found them when he began conducting research among the Arrernte in the early 1930s. He used a variety of tools to document his findings, including making detailed notes in his own personal diaries that contained interviews with Elders explaining ancestral stories, meanings associated with secret-sacred objects (*tjurunga*), and also in which he recorded detailed descriptions of rituals and ceremonies that he had observed. He took great care to produce sound recordings of interviews and ceremonial functions, including the songs that were sung during the ceremonies. Later, because he had earned the trust of local Elders, he was given permission to film some of the most important rituals relating to particular totems that were conducted at sacred ceremonial sites. His notes and publications also contained maps on which he drew boundaries based on genealogical evidence and on which he traced the mythical wanderings of the primordial ancestors. He used his extensive knowledge of Indigenous languages to translate stories and songs into English.

Throughout the forty years that T.G.H. Strehlow actively conducted research in Central Australia, he was able to document the extensive changes that had resulted from the intervention of outside forces. He concluded that the traditions he first encountered as a child and began recording as a young man had been so extensively disrupted that, apart from the detailed data he had produced, virtually all knowledge of the ancient traditions had been lost. The current repatriation of knowledge project emanating from the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs has organized Strehlow's massive collection of documented material in precisely the manner he intended, as a means for restoring among members of the present generation links to age-old, traditional ways of

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30   Cox, *Restoring Chain of Memory*, 1–5.

life. According to the Australian anthropologist John Morton, Strehlow's collection, now housed in Alice Springs, includes "700 objects (largely secret-sacred), 15 kilometres of movie film, 7,000 slides, thousands of pages of genealogical records, myths, sound recordings, 42 of Strehlow's diaries outlining his ethnographic work, as well as paintings, letters, maps and a 1000 volume library."[31]

Strehlow's far-reaching collection currently is being consulted increasingly by Indigenous leaders in Central Australia, not primarily in an effort to return secret-sacred objects to their legitimate owners in accordance with recognized genealogical data collected by Strehlow, but as a source for restoring knowledge of Indigenous cultural traditions, ceremonies, stories and social customs that have been lost or forgotten by members of the contemporary generation. In an interview conducted in 2010 by the Australian researcher Penelope Bergen, Michael Cawthorn, the former Deputy Director of the Strehlow Research Centre, explained that "the bulk of the audio and film recordings are ceremonial acts," most of which "aren't performed anymore and we try to be very active in digitally repatriating that material where we can."[32] Cawthorn referred to the connection between the Strehlow Collection and the Return of Indigenous Cultural Property programme of the Australian Government. He noted that the RICP programme "provides us with the opportunity to be proactive in terms of actually contacting people and making them aware that they have material housed in the centre."[33]

In 2009, Adam Macfie was appointed Repatriation Anthropologist in charge of managing the Indigenous Repatriation Program for the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT). Based at the Strehlow Research Centre, Macfie consulted extensively with local Arrernte communities in researching the sacred objects and genealogical records held in the Strehlow Collection. In 2013, MAGNT employed two Arrernte researchers, Mark Inkamala and Shaun Angeles, to assist in the development of the Repatriation Project at the Strehlow Research Centre. The purpose of the Indigenous Repatriation Programme in Macfie's words "is to reconnect Indigenous communities of the Northern Territory with their ancestral remains and their secret sacred objects held in the collections under the care of MAGNT."[34]

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31   John Morton, "The Strehlow Collection of Sacred Objects," Central Land Council. http://www.clc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Strehlow-collection-of-sacred-objects.pdf (acessed June 17, 2023).

32   Penelope Bergen, "Repatriation of Sacred Items High on Strehlow's Agenda." *ABC Rural*, 2010. Cited in Cox, *Restoring Chain of Memory*, 151.

33   Bergen, "Repatriation of Sacred Items," in Cox, *Restoring Chain of Memory*, 152.

34   Adam Macfie, Mark Inkamala and Shaun Angeles, "Abstract: Cultural Mapping Interactive Workshop," Strehlow Conference, September 24, 2014. Cited in Cox, *Restoring Chain of Memory*, 152.

In 2014, Macfie, Inkamala and Angeles presented a paper at a conference held in Alice Springs, organized by John Strehlow, the son of T.G.H. Strehlow, in which they outlined the current work of the Repatriation Project. They explained how central T.G.H. Strehlow's research diaries had become in the efforts to repatriate knowledge among the Arrernte peoples:

> Over the past few years our attention has been drawn more and more to the maps found in the archive which Strehlow … annotated on published government survey map sheets for the region. … The origin of all of these maps can be found in his forty or so handwritten field diaries produced between 1935 and 1971. … Our cultural mapping project is based on archival research and participatory engagement with the traditional owners and has become an invaluable practice for the Strehlow Research Centre and its repatriation programme.[35]

On 28 September 2016, an event was held at the Strehlow Research Centre to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the opening of the Centre in 1991. The ceremony honouring this important anniversary contained a welcome speech by the Chairman of the Board, Ken Lechleitner, and an address by Shaun Angeles. In his opening remarks, Lechleitner highlighted an important concept that has often been overlooked in repatriation discussions, that of Indigenous agency, which in the case of the Strehlow material, acknowledges that T.G.H. Strehlow was not in total control of his own data collection. Rather, Indigenous Elders decided what to share with him, which secret-sacred objects to entrust to him and which ceremonies he was allowed to film and record. Lechleitner suggested that the Strehlow Collection was formed in a partnership between "the real visionaries in this story – the elders who entrusted Theodore [TGH] Strehlow with their cultural knowledge and Theodore himself who dedicated his life to collecting and preserving this knowledge."[36]

In his address to the assembly, Shaun Angeles pursued the theme of Indigenous agency. He explained first that he is "a Penangke man from Ayampe country" (around 70 kilometres northeast of Alice Springs), who began working at the Strehlow Research Centre in September 2013 as an "Indigenous Repatriation Researcher."[37] He added that he had "worked intimately with the collection for three years – analysing field diaries, editing the ceremonial film footage, working with individuals and families with the genealogies, digitising

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35   Macfie, Inkamala and Angeles, "Abstract," in Cox, *Restoring Chain of Memory*, 153.

36   Kieran Finnane, "'This Beautiful Body of Knowledge' at the Strehlow Centre," *Alice Springs News* 23, no. 8 (September 30, 2016).

37   Finnane, "Beautiful Body of Knowledge."

the ceremonial song catalogue and travelling to museums within Australia searching for artefacts that left this landscape in some instances over a hundred years ago."[38] Throughout this process, Angeles observed, he had begun to feel as if he knew "these old men, in sometimes tracking their lives through four decades of work with TGH."[39] After paying respect to Strehlow and the work he completed during his life, Angeles then made a telling remark: "I want to ... elevate the story of the Aknegerrapte (senior cultural leaders) who ... possessed the greatest agency in this story."[40] By agency, he explained, he was referring to the fact that "they chose what to show Strehlow."[41] Certainly, Strehlow had gained their trust, but the Elders freely chose to share their secret knowledge with him; they also selected which information to withhold from him. Angeles argued that it was just this choice which has preserved "the deepest aspects of Aboriginal men's culture in Central Australia for the benefit of their future generations."[42]

4   Perspectives from within Heritage Studies and Archaeology: The Case of the Ngadjuri of South Australia

Issues arising from the repatriation of knowledge have been addressed recently from the perspectives of Archaeology and Heritage Studies. An important book, edited by V. Apaydin of the Institute of Archaeology at University College London, entitled *Shared Knowledge, Shared Power*, explores new theories and methods in the study of human communities based on revised understandings of intellectual property rights.[43] Chapter Two, written by Claire Smith, an archaeological anthropologist at Flinders University, in Adelaide, Australia, her colleague at Flinders, Gary Jackson, and Vincent Copley Sr, Chair of the Ngadjuri Elders Heritage and Landcare Council, suggests a method for reformulating approaches to Indigenous Knowledge under the intriguing title, "Intellectual Soup."[44]

    Smith, Copley and Jackson introduce their chapter by referring to the relationship of Copley's grandfather, the Ngadjuri Elder Barney Warria, with the

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38   Finnane, "Beautiful Body of Knowledge."
39   Finnane, "Beautiful Body of Knowledge."
40   Finnane, "Beautiful Body of Knowledge."
41   Finnane, "Beautiful Body of Knowledge."
42   Finnane, "Beautiful Body of Knowledge."
43   Veysel Apaydin, ed. *Shared Knowledge, Shared Power. Engaging Local and Indigenous Heritage* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018).
44   Smith, Copley Sr, and Jackson, "Intellectual Soup," 9–28.

well-known Australian anthropologist Ronald Berndt, who died in 1990. When he was a young researcher, between 1939 and 1944, Berndt worked closely with Warria compiling detailed field notes describing Ngadjuri culture, traditions, genealogies and ceremonies.[45] The Ngadjuri lands, which are located in the mid-north region of South Australia, were among the earliest Indigenous populations in Australia to be colonized due to the arable land they inhabited. After Berndt's death, a thirty-year embargo was placed on access to Berndt's field notes by his widow and co-researcher, Catherine Berndt, who died four years after her husband. Vincent Copley contends that much of the cultural knowledge that was contained in Ronald Berndt's field notes had been lost to or forgotten by the present generation. The data compiled by Berndt was needed in the early 1990s, not only to support cultural renewal projects, but to supply information based on genealogical charts relevant to land claims that were being adjudicated with the Australian government.[46]

Smith, Copley and Jackson argue that Catherine Berndt imposed the embargo on her husband's early field notes because "she felt that the material might be used by government agencies to damage Aboriginal causes."[47] They suggest that her fears may have been justified because the Mabo decision overturning the legal doctrine that Australian land belonged to no one prior to British colonization (*terra nullius*) was not imposed by the Australian courts until 1992.[48] A further reason confirming Catherine Berndt's distrust of how her husband's field notes would be used, according to Smith, Copley and Jackson, was based on the commonly maintained Western understanding that intellectual property rights belong to individuals and primarily reflect commercial interests. Little attention would have been given to the rights of communities with respect to knowledge that they possessed and which they

45   George Nicholas and Claire Smith, "Considering the Denigration and Destruction of Indigenous Heritage as Violence," in *Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage: Construction, Transformation and Destruction*, ed. V. Apaydin (London: UCL Press, 2020), 149.

46   Smith, Copley Sr, and Jackson, "Intellectual Soup," 9.

47   Smith, Copley Sr, and Jackson, "Intellectual Soup," 10.

48   "The lands of this continent were not *terra nullius* or 'practically unoccupied' in 1788. So spoke the High Court of Australia in the case of Eddie Mabo and others v The State of Queensland on 3 June 1992. ... The fiction of *terra nullius* allowed the European community of nations to expand their colonial horizons with minimal concern for Indigenous peoples. In the eighteenth century the common law took its lead from international law. In *Mabo*, three judges, acknowledging their law-making role said, 'It is imperative in today's world that the common law should neither be nor be seen to be frozen in an age of racial discrimination.'" Frank Brennan, *Land Rights: The Religious Factor* (Adelaide: Charles Strong Memorial Trust, 1993), 22–23.

had shared with academic researchers.[49] Finally, the Berndts knew that it was widely held by academics and government representatives that the Ngadjuri people had disappeared from their original homelands by the early twentieth century and had been absorbed into the urban population of Adelaide, thereby excusing any interested parties from entering into negotiations with their descendants on the use of Ngadjuri land and the appropriation of Indigenous cultural knowledge.[50]

George Nicholas and Claire Smith explain that the embargo on Berndt's field notes, which was included as a clause in Catherine Berndt's will, is currently being enforced by the University of Western Australia, which houses the notes in the University's Berndt Museum. Nicholas and Smith call maintaining the embargo by a major Australian academic institution a denigration of "the rights of Indigenous people."[51] Ngadjuri Elders have attempted to gain access to the field notes for nearly thirty years arguing that, in the words of Nicholas and Smith, "there is no legal basis for the current embargo" as the field notes were rightfully the shared intellectual property of Ronald Berndt and Barney Warria.[52] Vincent Copley has made the case that the knowledge Warria conveyed to Berndt was recorded "verbatim" by Berndt.[53] He argues that this confirms his contention that the field notes were shared property, Warria providing the details of Ngadjuri culture while Berndt recorded the knowledge that Warria conveyed to him. According to Nicholas and Smith, Western Australia University has consistently rejected Ngadjuri Elders' requests to consult Berndt's material and will continue do so until 2024, according to Catherine Berndt's stated wishes.[54]

As an Ngadjuri activist and Elder, for nearly thirty years Vincent Copley has campaigned for Ngadjuri rights of recognition, land claims and cultural identity. He credits his commitment to this cause to a surprising encounter with Ronald Berndt, who later in life, after he had become a distinguished academic at Western Australia University, learned that Copley was the grandson of Barney Warria. Copley, who at the time worked for the Department for Aboriginal Affairs, received a telephone call from Berndt telling him that he had discovered a photo of his grandfather among his notes. Berndt delivered the photo to Copley at his office without entering into a conversation with him, an act that prompted Copley to begin looking into his own cultural background

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49   Smith, Copley Sr, and Jackson, "Intellectual Soup," 10.
50   Smith, Copley Sr, and Jackson, "Intellectual Soup," 11.
51   Nicholas and Smith, "Denigration and Destruction," 149.
52   Nicholas and Smith, "Denigration and Destruction," 149.
53   Nicholas and Smith, "Denigration and Destruction," 150.
54   Nicholas and Smith, "Denigration and Destruction," 150.

on his father's side. His mother was from the Narangga people on the Yorke Peninsula located around 110 kilometres west of Adelaide in South Australia. Copley's father died when he was just two years old meaning that what he knew about Aboriginal traditions came largely from his Narangga mother. The brief meeting he had with Ronald Berndt prompted Copley to embark on a project of wide-ranging research exploring Indigenous traditions on his father's line. Because of the extensive dislocation of his father's people from their lands at the end of the nineteenth century, genealogical information possessed by Berndt was critical for reconstructing Ngadjuri ancestry and consequently for confirming land rights.[55] The thirty-year ban on Berndt's notes imposed by his wife for interests aimed at protecting Aboriginal rights and traditional knowledge, as Nicholas and Smith confirm, in effect obstructed efforts by Ngadjuri Elders to regain knowledge of their ancient cultural traditions and inhibited them from making a case for the return of their original homelands.[56]

Smith, Copley and Jackson use the case of the embargo on Berndt's interviews with Copley's grandfather to pose fundamental questions related to communal intellectual property and its relation to academic research. They ask:

> How could such an unfair situation arise? Are other Indigenous people ... affected by similar restrictions on accessing knowledge that has been given to researchers by their forebears? What about non-Indigenous people? Does this affect them as well? Is there anything that can be done to remedy this situation, not only for Ngadjuri people, but for others in similar situations?[57]

The issue identified by Smith, Copley and Jackson clearly is not restricted to the prohibition of access placed on her husband's early research among the Ngadjuri people by Catherine Berndt, but more broadly relates to intellectual property rights asking who actually owned the knowledge that Berndt obtained in the 1930s from Barney Warria. Catherine Berndt, despite her altruistic motives, interpreted her husband's research notes as his (and her) private property, something that Vincent Copley slowly challenged as he and his fellow Ngadjuri Elders began the arduous task of reconstructing and repatriating the knowledge that originally belonged to their forebears. For Claire Smith and Gary Jackson, as staff members of a major Australian university, the problem encountered by the Ngadjuri Elders brought to the surface critical issues

55   Smith, Copley Sr., and Jackson, "Intellectual Soup," 11.
56   Nicholas and Smith, "Denigration and Destruction," 149–50.
57   Smith, Copley Sr, and Jackson, "Intellectual Soup," 9.

surrounding the relationship between the aims of academic research and the interests of the communities that constitute the subjects of the research, particularly around questions of communal ownership of knowledge. Smith, Copley and Jackson explain:

> Controversies over cultural and intellectual property have emerged in the form of questions over ownership or access to the results of research and the many claims that descendant communities (including Indigenous peoples) and others make on cultural knowledge and information. ... Concerns about claims to the ownership and use of cultural and intellectual property rights are rapidly emerging in all research disciplines and in many policy contexts, as the economic, scientific and cultural uses and values of traditional and Indigenous knowledge demand mounting attention.[58]

5   Repatriation, Ownership and Dissemination of Knowledge: The Analogy of "Intellectual Soup"

As I noted above, repatriation frequently has been associated with the return of material objects often held in museums in Europe or the United States, but Smith, Copley and Jackson, writing from the perspectives of archaeology, heritage studies and Indigenous activism, confirm my contention that repatriation refers equally, or even more importantly, to returning knowledge of religious/cultural traditions that were taken or stolen from Indigenous groups. They write: "Markedly less attention has been given to the intangible intellectual aspects of archaeological research or cultural knowledge, although this promises to have as great, or greater, an influence on research and policy in the coming decades."[59]

Using the analogy of preparing soup, Smith, Copley and Jackson outline the various ingredients and stages when an "intellectual soup" is concocted by a group of interested cooks. In the case of research into local communities, as demonstrated in the example of Berndt and Warria, at least two cooks are required: "one to provide the essential ingredients of Aboriginal knowledge (Barney Warria) and the other (Ronald Berndt) to provide essential ingredients relating to the method of production and the tastes of intended consumers."[60]

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58   Smith, Copley Sr, and Jackson, "Intellectual Soup," 13.
59   Smith, Copley Sr, and Jackson, "Intellectual Soup," 14.
60   Smith, Copley Sr, and Jackson, "Intellectual Soup," 15.

The ingredients used in making the intellectual soup also suggest two essential elements: Indigenous knowledge and theoretical frameworks. The recipe that is followed is largely developed by academics, but Indigenous people can use their own knowledge to alter the recipe. The kitchen and the cooking implements reflect practical instruments: the research environment, including the context in which the research is envisaged (usually universities) and the local environment where the data is collected and recorded, which is determined by the community being studied. The consumers of the soup, those interested in and affected by the results of the research, include the scholarly community, the general public, and sometimes governmental policy makers and commercial agents. Primarily, however, Smith, Copley and Jackson argue, "Aboriginal people … now expect knowledge to be returned to their communities and to participate in the dissemination of the knowledge."[61] Once the intellectual soup is completed and ready to be consumed, the final and most important question is asked: "Who owns the soup?"[62]

Smith, Copley and Jackson observe that the analogy of an intellectual soup implies that the product of the collaborative effort between the researcher and the community being researched leads to the conclusion that both can claim equal rights of ownership in every aspect of its preparation and serving. This means that the knowledge acquired from research, including the analysis and dissemination of findings that researchers often guard as comprising their academic freedom, must be repatriated to the community that supplied the information in the first place. This is because knowledge that was obtained from past generations can play important roles in contemporary local projects that empower communities to restore cultural pride, solidify their identities and enable them to negotiate with policy makers over issues related to life in the modern world, including business interests, dialogue on religious beliefs and ritual performances, tourism, land claims and re-interpretations of historical records.

6   Phenomenological Principles Applied to the Repatriation of Knowledge in Central Australia and South Australia

How do the cases of the repatriation of knowledge project at the Strehlow Research Centre in Central Australia and the analogy of intellectual soup based on the efforts of the Ngadjuri Elders of mid-north South Australia to

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61   Smith, Copley Sr, and Jackson, "Intellectual Soup," 17.
62   Smith, Copley Sr, and Jackson, "Intellectual Soup," 17.

obtain field notes of Ronald Berndt held by the University of Western Australia converge with phenomenological principles in the study of religion? To answer this, I return to the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who argued forcefully for a method that includes the perspectives of believers in any academic descriptions and interpretations of religious communities. Writing in 1959, Smith maintained that the study of religion was undergoing a fundamental transformation from one that regards religion objectively as an "it" to a more personal understanding of the inner faith of believers.[63] Smith explained that the first stage in personalising the study of religion had already occurred, since scholars had begun describing personal faith in terms of what people, referred to as "they," say, do or believe. This even now is advancing to a deeper level whereby scholars are becoming aware of their own involvement with those they are studying, so that "we" are now talking about what "they" say, do or believe. Smith then urged scholars to advance to the next phase in the personalization process by adopting a dialogical approach so that the "they" is changed to a "you" and the study becomes one of "we" talking to "you." If this is accomplished, a scholar will finally understand that the study of human faith requires breaking down the old subject-object dichotomy so that the one doing the studying and the one being studied merge into a common enterprise consisting of "'we all' … talking with each other about 'us'."[64] The culmination of the dialogical approach, Smith concluded, results in the recognition that "in comparative religion man is studying himself."[65]

In a book entitled *Towards a World Theology*, published twenty-two years after he wrote these words, Smith renamed and revised the dialogical method, calling it "corporate critical self-consciousness."[66] By this he was referring to a form of reflexivity whereby the scholar adopts a "critical, rational and inductive" self-conscious approach to the study of a community of persons, a community that is comprised of at least two people, the one doing the studying and the one being studied.[67] The community, what Smith called earlier the "we" talking to "us," becomes aware of "any given particular human condition, or action as a condition or action of itself as a community."[68] In other words,

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63   Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Comparative Religion: Whither – and Why?" in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, eds M. Eliade and J. Kitagawa (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 34.

64   Smith, "Comparative Religion," 34.

65   Smith, "Comparative Religion," 55.

66   Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology. Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 59–60.

67   Smith, *World Theology*, 60.

68   Smith, *World Theology*, 60.

when scholars engage in a study of religion, they include themselves as humans in their investigations as well as the participants in the communities they are studying. This implies that the scholar experiences and understands the conditions or actions he or she is studying simultaneously, both subjectively as participant and objectively as observer. In this way, the subjective experience of the scholar, comprising a personal and existential involvement much like faith, is united with objective knowledge, which adopts an external, critical, analytical and scientific perspective.

The results of scholarship are verified using this method both subjectively and objectively, experientially and empirically. Smith called this "the verificationist principle" of "humane knowledge."[69] The principle is applied in three stages. The first requires that an outside observer's statement be acceptable to the faith of the community being studied. He writes:

> No statement about Islamic faith is true that Muslims cannot accept. No personalist statement about Hindu religious life is legitimate in which Hindus cannot recognize themselves. No interpretation of Buddhist doctrine is valid unless Buddhists can respond, "Yes! That is what we hold."[70]

The second part of the principle applies to the outside observer, so that what is said about faith communities "must satisfy the non-participant, and satisfy all the most exacting requirements of rational inquiry and academic rigour."[71] Finally, the third aspect applies to people of other faiths, so that no statement about Muslims, for example, can be regarded as true that non-Muslims cannot accept. No account of Hinduism can be legitimate if the Hindu's neighbours cannot recognize the Hindu in the accounts. "No statement about Buddhist doctrine is valid unless non-Buddhists can respond, 'Yes – now we understand what those Buddhists hold.'"[72]

We can see the verificationist principle in action if we apply it to the current repatriation of knowledge project at the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs. As outsiders, if we are to appreciate the knowledge enshrined in Strehlow's notes, films, recording, genealogies, maps and in his collection of secret-sacred objects, in Smith's words, we must "get inside the consciousness" of those for whom the collection is sacred and experience "how it feels and

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69   Smith, *World Theology*, 97.
70   Smith, *World Theology*, 97.
71   Smith, *World Theology*, 97.
72   Smith, *World Theology*, 97.

what it means"[73] to those who are recovering the knowledge contained within it. At the same time, as scholars, we must investigate the process of repatriation objectively. Admittedly, we do not have access as outsiders to the actual material itself, since, according to tradition, this knowledge is guarded fiercely as private and secret. Nonetheless, scholars can learn the facts surrounding the collection, which help promote understanding about the history of the communities who have access to the material, and thereby comprehend the significance of the collection and its history in the context of current relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in Central Australia and more widely in Australia itself. Part of this process includes understanding how various players in the repatriation project operate, including officials in the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, land claims activists and legal experts, social workers, church groups and other outside parties interested in the affairs of Indigenous communities of Central Australia.

We can also apply Smith's verificationist principle to the thirty-year struggle of Ngadjuri Elders to claim their right of ownership over notes, which contain crucial information about their own cultural traditions and genealogical records that were compiled seventy years ago by the academic researcher, Ronald Berndt. Smith's insights are particularly relevant to building a case in support of joint ownership of research projects by those doing the studying and those being studied. The collaboration begins at the inception of the research design and is carried forward through conducting the research to the interpretation and dissemination of the findings. The gradual recognition among academics following Smith's outline results in the admission that the researcher and the researched form part of a community: "we" talking about "us." This is precisely what the researchers, Claire Smith, Gary Jackson, and the Ngadjuri Elder Vincent Copley Sr, intended when they likened a research project to cooking an 'intellectual soup'. From determining the participants in the research (the cooks) through devising the recipe to consuming the final product, the entire project is collectively owned. Humane knowledge, when understood as corporate, is verified by the insiders (those being studied), the outsiders (those who do the studying) and interested parties (those who share common interests in the results of the research). This means that no one participant has the power to impose an interpretation on the findings because the project is collectively owned.

If we apply the phenomenological concept W.C. Smith called "corporate critical self-consciousness" faithfully and rigorously to the case of the repatriation of knowledge project in Central Australia and to the persistent efforts of

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73   Smith, *World Theology*, 66.

Ngadjuri Elders to gain access to notes about their own traditions, as scholars, we will confirm that true and verifiable knowledge of these specific Indigenous communities can be attained only by fully participating with them in developing research goals and carrying them to completion. Smith would call this an example of achieving "humane knowledge," the aim of which is not pure objectivity, but "disciplined corporate self-consciousness, critical, comprehensive, global,"[74] a form of knowing that collapses once and for all the subject-object dichotomy that for so long has dominated Western approaches to the study of fellow human beings.

7   Implications for the Future of Religious Studies

By referring to an argument developed in the last century by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a phenomenologist and liberal theologian, I could be accused of hanging on to and perpetuating outdated and increasingly discredited epistemological theories that commit the error of confusing insider or confessional perspectives with outsider or scientific analyses. I would argue, on the contrary, that Smith's method was ahead of its time and is now being applied in different ways among scholars from diverse disciplines, particularly around issues related to intellectual property rights. As Claire Smith, Copley and Jackson demonstrated through their analogy of 'intellectual soup', determining who owns knowledge equates to identifying who has the right to exercise power over the interpretations and explanations of the knowledge obtained. They attempt to resolve conflicting claims to legitimate ownership of knowledge by asserting that if "intellectual property is jointly owned, it follows that it should be subject to joint control."[75] They admit that in the discipline of archaeology (and arguably in religious studies), this concession is highly controversial because it raises "the spectre of potential censorship" over what an academic can or cannot say about the contents of the research conducted.[76] The prospect that members of a community being researched have a right to veto what is being said about them offends many academics who would contend that this restricts the researcher from employing critical analysis of the data obtained. With respect to religious communities, this would mean that anything that offends the belief system of the community, even if true, would appear to be ruled out. Surely, this would limit academic freedom and critical analysis.

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74   Smith, *World Theology*, 78–79.
75   Smith, Copley Sr, and Jackson, "Intellectual Soup," 18.
76   Smith, Copley Sr, and Jackson, "Intellectual Soup," 18.

In a book published in 1985, dealing primarily with religious experience, the philosopher of religion, Wayne Proudfoot, proposed a solution to this problem by distinguishing between descriptive and explanatory forms of reduction. Proudfoot defined reductionism as explaining religion in non-religious categories, frequently "in historical, psychological, or sociological terms."[77] He argued that phenomenologists were correct when they rejected *descriptive* reduction, an error that occurs when a scholar fails to "identify an emotion, practice or experience under the description by which the subject identifies it."[78] For example, if a person walking in the woods relates having an experience of fear due to seeing a bear, for an outsider to describe the experience as resulting from the subject's mistaking a log for a bear would illustrate what is meant by a descriptive reduction. Proudfoot contends that the person "may mistakenly perceive a fallen tree trunk for a bear, but his fear is properly described as fear of a bear."[79] By contrast, explanatory reduction "consists in offering an explanation of an experience in terms that are not those of the subject" and indeed might not meet with the subject's approval.[80] In the case of the person who experienced fear at seeing a bear, an explanation of this experience might be that the individual actually mistook a log for a bear and became afraid as a result. The explanation may or may not be acceptable to the one who experienced the fear, but Proudfoot maintains, this is "perfectly justifiable" because "the terms of explanation need not be familiar or acceptable to the subject."[81]

Proudfoot developed this analysis, in part, in response to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, whom Proudfoot cites as a prime example of a scholar who mistakenly conflated descriptive with explanatory reduction. Proudfoot (correctly, as we have seen) identifies Smith's main argument as positing that "a necessary requirement of the validity of any statement about a religion is that it be acknowledged and accepted by adherents of that religious tradition."[82] This is appropriate, according to Proudfoot, "if it is addressed to the problem of providing identifying descriptions of experiences in different traditions, but it is inappropriate if extended to include all statements about religion."[83] For Proudfoot, explanations of religious behaviours that are formulated according to academic theories and tested by empirical investigation operate at a

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77   Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1985), 190.
78   Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 196.
79   Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 193.
80   Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 197.
81   Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 197.
82   Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 198.
83   Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 198.

different level from descriptions of the same behaviours, in which, indeed, believers must be able to recognize what is being said about themselves.

Although Proudfoot's analysis is helpful, he fails to distinguish between explanations of religious behaviour that are offensive to believing communities and ones that use academic concepts unfamiliar to adherents, but, which, if understood, would not be rejected by them. For example, the historian and phenomenologist of religion, Mircea Eliade, developed theories about religious communities in which he emphasized the importance of orientation in space and time as a key interpretative tool leading to understanding the community's religious world view. Eliade highlighted the significance for religious traditions of beliefs in sacred intrusions or appearances, which he called "hierophanies."[84] He maintained that for religious people the terror of undifferentiated space and time creates a sense of disorientation, which is resolved through what they perceive as the manifestation of the sacred in mundane or worldly forms, often told in myths and re-enacted in rituals.[85] He observed that religious communities frequently identify hierophanies in objects that reach to the sky, such as mountains, birds, sun and moon, or rain that falls from the sky. He cited numerous instances of how religions organize their ceremonial life around an axis linking the upper world to this world, and connecting both to the underworld. Examples are found in the central focus for Islamic believers who pray always in the direction of Mecca, or by the symbol of the cosmic tree, as recorded among the Altaic communities of inner Asia.[86] In this context, I am not assessing the usefulness nor the accuracy of Eliade's interpretation of religion, but asserting that believing communities would not be offended by his explanations of the meaning of their religious life. They would not use the language of hierophanies nor refer to the terror of the homogeneity of space and time, but if they understood how Eliade was using these concepts, they would not object to his interpretation in a way that they would if their religion were being explained, to take two obvious examples, as an infantile neurosis (Freud)[87] or as the opium of the people (Marx).[88] The case of Eliade demonstrates that the results of collaborative research need not affirm

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84   Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 8–10.

85   Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 20–22.

86   Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Harmondsworth: Arkana Penguin Books, 1989), 20–22.

87   Sigmund Freud, "*The Future of an Illusion*," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XXI (1927–1931)*, Translated by J. Strachey, (London: Hogarth, 1961), 5–56.

88   Warren S. Goldstein, "Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich," in *The Sage Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religion*, eds. A. Possamai and A.J. Blasi (Los Angeles: Sage Reference, 2020), 473–476.

confessionally the beliefs of religious communities, but it illustrates how the aims and conclusions reached can be agreed by all interested parties.

A scholarly commitment to respecting the intellectual property of communities being investigated suggests that Proudfoot's distinction between descriptive and explanatory reduction only works if the accepted aim of research is seen exclusively as promoting enlightenment. The situation looks far different when researchers accept that the acquisition of knowledge immediately raises issues of power and ownership. If academics are to look at themselves critically, they must at the very least consider the objection that by excluding believers from active participation in what is said about them, both in descriptions and explanations of their beliefs, practices and experiences, power is being exercised unfairly and knowledge that belongs to the communities is being exploited for the scholar's own ends, or at least for purposes unrelated to the interests of the community being described and explained. If they accept this premise, academics will voluntarily impose a limitation on their research design by involving the subjects of research not only in the descriptions of their religious practices, but also in the content and scope of the interpretations and explanations achieved. Although this approach clearly restricts the traditional aims of academic research, it represents just one necessary limitation among a number of other conditions that constrain all research projects.

8   Concluding Remarks

I have argued throughout this chapter that the first step in the reformulation of the study of religions is to acknowledge that, in the first instance, the communities being researched own the knowledge that is being investigated; it is their communal intellectual property. Beginning at that point, it becomes clear that religious adherents must be involved throughout the development and implementation of a research project in full recognition that they are in control of what they choose to reveal to outside researchers. Academics are enabled to conduct research only by invitation, as Graham Harvey has suggested, as "guests" of the communities to which they are invited.[89] Once invited, researchers are confronted with increasingly complicated issues resulting from questions about what they do with the knowledge acquired according to academic principles, while still respecting the property of those being investigated.

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89   Graham Harvey, "Guesthood as Ethical Decolonising Research Method," *Numen* 50, no. 2 (2003): 125–146.

To resolve the dilemma created by the potential conflict between academic and community interests in research projects, in this chapter, I have highlighted insights articulated by phenomenologists of religion, who maintained that scholarly interpretations that offend the religious communities being studied are illegitimate because they distort the data on which the interpretations are based. I continue to support this conclusion, despite Wayne Proudfoot's attempt to remove the problem by introducing a linguistic and conceptual distinction around the term 'reductionism'. In my view, phenomenologists of religion correctly asserted that religious adherents, who cannot recognize themselves in the scholarly explanations offered, are not being described or interpreted accurately nor are scientific principles being observed. This is because phenomenologists have insisted universally that the validity of explanations must be judged on criteria that include believing communities themselves, without which there would be no data on which to build academic theories and without which genuine understanding (*Verstehen*) cannot be achieved.

Finally, we have seen in this chapter, by examining the cases of the repatriation of knowledge project in Central Australia and the efforts by the Ngadjuri Elders to recover forgotten memories from the embargoed notes of the anthropologist Ronald Berndt, how Indigenous societies, which traditionally guarded their knowledge as secret, were subjected to the power exercised by outside forces, including academics, colonial administrators and missionary agents. The changes occurring currently in Australia bear witness to the increasing impact on public perceptions of Indigenous groups, like the Arrernte of Central Australia and the Ngadjuri of South Australia, who are reclaiming the knowledge that was originally theirs, re-interpreting that knowledge for contemporary times and re-empowering local communities as they restore the memory of past traditions. These important developments among Australian Indigenous peoples demonstrate that, when re-configured in terms of local agency and humane knowledge, principles rooted in the phenomenology of religion promise to play a pivotal and, one might even say revolutionary, role in how future research projects among contemporary religious groups globally are constructed, employed, applied and disseminated.

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CHAPTER 4

Space Aliens and Deities Compared

Darlene M. Juschka

Abstract

This chapter examines alien abduction narratives and possession narratives to ask the what, how and why of space aliens toward understanding the what, how and why of religious belief and practice. Drawing on concepts of alien abduction in film, news media and narratives of alien abduction, this contribution critically compares discourses of alien abduction and systems of belief and practice in an effort to understand why deities and their interaction with humans are taken to be more tenable than aliens and their interactions with humans. Comparing concepts and actions around deities and aliens and the social authority ascribed to them provides insight into both and, at the same time, illuminates how scholars invent and then defend the object of their studies, religion. In the defense of "religion" as a pristine object of study, religious studies scholars act as caretakers and gatekeepers authorizing and deauthorizing systems of belief and practice naming what is legitimate, deities, and illegitimate, space aliens, to our study.

Keywords

space aliens – abduction narratives – possession narratives – alien abduction – social authority – religion

1 Introduction[1]

Some scholars, pundits, and the general population might consider a discursive comparison of space aliens and deities as disrespectful and flippant

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1 When I speak of "system of belief and practice," I use the term system to indicate a collection of independent but equally interrelated constituents that comprise a unified whole, while belief is any cognitive content held to be true, and practiced as a customary and/or traditional way of acting and being. My understanding of the phrase shows some continuity with Nikolas Luhmann's systems theory, in that I understand systems to be open to their

thinking as they might that space aliens are fictional beings while deities are not. Equally, scholars and pundits might further argue that such a comparison is disrespectful to those who adhere to a system of belief and practice that upholds belief in a deity or deities. Such a position, however, assumes deity or deities are things in existence, while aliens are not, when indeed if one considers the current technological capacity of humanity, the vastness of the universe with its fourteen billion years of existence and two trillion galaxies, the existence of space aliens, non-earth life forms, seem very reasonable. Indeed according to the Drake and Seager equations it is statistically impossible for alien life not to exist. Whether you adhere to the validity of the Drake or Seager is immaterial since it serves as an aspect of our knowledge systems making claims about our universe, hence my use of it.

The Drake equation proposes:

N = The number of civilizations in the Milky Way Galaxy whose electromagnetic emissions are detectable.

R* = The rate of formation of stars suitable for the development of intelligent life.

fp = The fraction of those stars with planetary systems.

ne = The number of planets, per solar system, with an environment suitable for life.

fl = The fraction of suitable planets on which life actually appears.

fi = The fraction of life bearing planets on which intelligent life emerges.

fc = The fraction of civilizations that develop a technology that releases detectable signs of their existence into space.

L = The length of time such civilizations release detectable signals into space.[2]

Classical numerical outcomes for the Drake equation are 3,500 alien species in the Milky Way Galaxy alone.[3] Thinking in terms of the Drake equation it becomes absolutely certain that life must be in play elsewhere in the universe. So why is it that space aliens are taken to be mere fictions of an overactive or paranoid imagination in light of these scientific equations? And furthermore, why is belief in deity – Allah, Jesus, YHWH, Kali, or Artemis to name a

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environments as well as to autopoiesis. See Niklas Luhmann and Dirk Baecker. *Introduction to Systems Theory*. English ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

2   Claudio Maccone, "The Statistical Drake Equation," *Acta Astronautic* 67, no. 11–12 (2010): 1367.

3   Maccone, "The Statistical Drake Equation," 1371.

few – considered tenable and rational and not due to hysteria and paranoia as with space aliens by scholars of religion?

Standing in the position of a non-believer in deities, while I have yet to meet an alien, it strikes me as significant that deities, or at least some deities, are given discursive legitimacy and credence, while aliens are not, even in light of statistical evidence. I also note that in both kinds of narratives, they share similar aspects and kinds of relationships with their human followers. To follow up on this problem of the rejection of space alien existence and the embracing of deity existence, I compare the discursive representation of aliens and deities in terms of their imagined space, figuring, capacity, benefits and harms, forms of contact and relationships between human, alien and divine entities along with perceived complications in these relationships. I chose to look at these discursive aspects largely because they are often the assumed criteria that mark something as "religious." To complete this study I compare narratives of destruction and retribution wherein a violent death accesses followers to the realm of deities or the worlds of space aliens. Comparing discursive formations it becomes evident that deities and aliens aren't so different begging the question, why the linking of veracity to one kind, deities, and the rejection of veracity to the other kind, space aliens in the academic study of religion? In other words, why are narratives about deity given authority while narratives about space aliens are not? Could it be that as scholars of religion we precipitously shut the door if a system of belief and practice does not meet our debated criteria of a definition of religion? And what is that criteria that would allow for the exclusion of space aliens and their proponents, followers, and worshipers?

Human devised systems of belief and practice are referenced in text as early as writing itself, while the presence of these systems preceded writing and were certainly operating in the Neolithic period[4] if not earlier. Attention to the celestial canopy overhead is equally an ancient practice and evidence for tracking stars, the sun and the moon appear at Neolithic sites as well; the circles and megaliths of Nabta Playa in Southern Egypt, dating to the middle and late Neolithic (5500 BCE), marked the summer solstice, while a sundial charted the passage of the sun.[5] Stonehenge would do the same a thousand or more years into the future, while the ancient Sumerians and Babylonians

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4   Ian Hodder, ed., *Religion at Work in a Neolithic Society: Vital Matters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Ian Hodder, ed., *Religion in the Emergence of Civilization: Çatalhöyük as a Case Study* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

5   Christine Mullen Kreamer, et al., *African Cosmos: Stellar Arts*, contributors Randall Bird and et al. (Washington, DC: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution; New York: Monacelli Press, 2012), 18–19.

charted the night sky linking their deities to stars and planets, much as the ancient Greeks and Mayans. Although not aliens from distant planets, the deities are nonetheless associated with the planets, stars, moon and sun to which their being, attributes and aspects are linked. From the outset, then, in human conceptualizations the space of the sky is the space of beings like, but unlike, and superior to human beings.

The concept of space aliens was not significantly operational in the ancient world and it would not appear as a persistent phenomenon until the modern era with their manifestation associated with UAOs (unidentified aerial objects).[6] On 24 June 1947[7] pilot Kenneth Arnold reported that he saw "nine metallic objects flying near Mt. Rainier."[8] By the 1950s crashes of UAOs were reported and thereafter contact was made between humans and aliens, according to the testimonials of contactees like Joe Simonton of Wisconsin who said he provided water for some aliens when they landed their craft in the driveway of his farm on 18 April 1961.[9] Certainly earlier contact through other kinds of media such as trance and automatic writing put spiritualists of the nineteen and early twentieth centuries in touch with space aliens, along with ghosts and other non-terrestrials,[10] but now aliens had landed on earth and in due time would, according to abductee testimonial, reproduce with humans, referred to as earthlings in this discursive frame.

6   World Heritage Encyclopedia. List of Reported UFO Sightings. *World Heritage Encyclopedia* http://worldheritage.org/article/WHEBN0000375217/List%20of%20reported%20 UFO%20sightings.

7   There were earlier sightings of unknown celestial objects in a number of countries but no organized thinking on the subject was yet in place. A few UAO (Unidentified Aerial Object) sightings took place in the ancient Roman world and then some few others in the early modern period and the 1800s, but it is the twentieth century that sees a significant increase of reports and ultimately contact, something not seen in these earlier sightings. The so-called foo-fighters of WWII that Diana G. Tumminia refers to in her text *Alien Worlds: Social and Religious Dimensions of Extraterrestrial Contact*, or the ghost rockets that plagued Scandinavia of 1946 as Denzler comments on in her text, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs*, 7 are good examples. The 1947 event, which is the first officially recorded event, marks the beginning of organized thinking on the subject.

8   Brenda Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 4.

9   Denzler, *Lure of the Edge*, 40.

10   Diana G. Tumminia, *Alien Worlds: Social and Religious Dimensions of Extraterrestrial Contact*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007), xxx–xxxi.

2   The U.S. Context

The contexts that produce discourses of sky dwelling entities are many over the space and time of human history, therefore this contribution focuses primarily on the US, as narratives concerning space aliens are abundant and the majority of its population, seventy-four percent, believe in a deity or deities. Of this seventy-four percent, sixty-five percent identify as Christian.[11] Furthermore, the phenomenon of space aliens appears to have the greatest prevalence in the United States; although certainly other countries such as Sweden, Canada, the UK and so forth report sightings, these are considerably less in number. I have also limited the period of time and largely focus on mid to late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries' narratives of physical contact between UAO encapsulated space aliens and humans.

After World War II there was a shift toward global engagement with the emergence of the United Nations, NATO, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This shift to globalization, a shift that filled the power vacuum left by decolonization, ensured powerful countries continued to have access to the resources and peoples of once colonized locations. Accessing these resources required political and economic strategizing, which required intelligence, and so the CIA came into existence July 25, 1947,[12] interestingly, one month and one day after the first official UAO sighting. This sighting, along with others over the next decades, consisted of space aliens in US air space apparently watching humans, much like deities are said to watch humans.

The US context over the period of the 1960s and into the 1970s was a turbulent time with challenges to domination based on gender, race and sexuality engendered, while oppressive, corrupt and villainous US actions at home (Nixon and Watergate in 1974) and abroad (Vietnam War from 1955–1975) came under broad social and political censure. Even as this social censure appeared in the US, the new right was beginning to organize in order to stem the "red tide." It was in the 1970s that neoliberalism came into play exemplified in Chile by Pinochet's new government in 1973, while the 1976 Soweto uprising and the murder of black high school students by white South Afrikaans police made apparent the continued horror of South African Apartheid. The 1973–1974 oil crisis and the founding of OPEC undercut non-middle Eastern control of oil and gas both of which contributed to the weakening of the US economy resulting in part in the economic crash of 1973–1974. The crash had a serious effect on

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11   Pew Research Center, *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace* (Washington, DC, 2019), 3.

12   L. Britt Snider, *Congress and the CIA* (New York: Nova Science, 2009), 5.

US citizens who had begun to distrust their governments. The environmental tragedy of Love Canal (Niagara Falls, New York) exposed in 1978 and the Three Mile Island disaster of 1979 gave rise to further doubts about the US government, doubts about what happens behind the scenes along with suspecting the operations of a shadow government unchecked by the democratic systems in place. In the face of such doubts an environmental movement came into full swing, a movement that called into question the safety of nuclear power and the fear of mutual annihilation should there be a nuclear war. The 1979 film *The China Syndrome* was released twelve days prior to the partial meltdown at Three Mile Island, while the 1983 film *The Day After* and 1984 film *Threads* both imagined a world laid waste by nuclear war. All three films locate the US government (and Russia in two of the films) as a threat to its own citizens and the world.

The Moon Landing of 1969 and the beginning of the exploration of space with the launch of the two robotic probes Voyager One and Two in 1977 were preceded by the film *2001 a Space Odyssey* released in 1968. Within a decade *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* were released in 1977, while a remake of the 1956 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was released in 1978 and *Aliens* in 1979. On television *Star Trek* had prepared viewers throughout the 1960s for alien beings and space travel, while shows like *Space 1999* (1975–1977) and *Battlestar Galactica* (1978–1979) sent humans hurtling into unknown space looking for a new home and meeting many kinds of space aliens along the way.

In the films of this period, aliens are represented often as hostile and/or threatening to humanity, for example, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* where aliens wipe out humanity and take over the earth, *Aliens* where humans are used to incubate alien young and the robotic Cylons of *Battlestar Galactica* who destroyed the Twelve Colonies and pursued to the death all the humans who survived this attack. Although many of the aliens in these science fiction films are hostile, there are moments in other films, such as the 1977 contact film *Close Encounters of A Third Kind*, where human and alien interact in meaningful ways. There are deep friendships made such as the human Hans Solo and the wookiee Chewbacca in *Star Wars* and sexual and reproductive intermingling producing Spock of *Star Trek*, for example, the son of a Vulcan father and human mother.[13]

If human space travel and aliens were making their presence known in the 1970s, so too were demons and gods in the novel *The Exorcist* published

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13   Heidi Kaye and I.Q. Hunter, "Introduction – Alien Identities: Exploring Difference in Film and Fiction," in *Alien Identities: Exploring Difference in Film and Fiction*, eds. Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter, Heidi Kaye, and Imelda Whelehan (London, UK, 1999), 1–10.

in 1971 and made into film in 1973. Following *The Exorcist* was *The Omen* (1976), *Exorcist II: The Heretic* (1977) and *Damien: The Omen II* (1978). As with space aliens, demons are presented as a threat to humans seeking to destroy them individually and as a group. These films use children as the doorway for demonic access to the human world underscoring the vulnerability of humans in the face of these non-human others. This pattern is also apparent in the film *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) wherein the baby, the child of Satan and Rosemary, was the vector for demonic takeover of the earth under the auspices of the Antichrist. *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist* and *The Omen* were iconic films and quickly became horror classics.[14]

If demons occupied the minds of many movie goers in the US, cults occupied the minds of journalists and governments. On 9 August 1969 the members of The Family headed by Charles Manson murdered Sharon Tate and her almost term unborn child, along with four others at her home. The next day The Family killed Rosemary and Leno LaBianca in their home. In total nine were killed on the orders of Manson.[15] The particulars of the trial, which opened with Manson laying responsibility for the murders at the feet of the society that had essentially failed him, as he saw it, produced good headlines and horrified the public who wondered: how could these young, largely female, followers of Manson mercilessly slaughter nine people at the direction of their perceived messiah? Manson saw himself as a prophet who could understand the will of deity and even likened himself to the Christian Jesus:

> Oftentimes, Manson would compare himself to Jesus Christ and other times, when the group was high on LSD, he would re-enact the crucifixion, with his followers pretending to nail him on a cross. Aligned with this display, there would often be bizarre tests of devotion. Manson would ask his followers to stand against a tree and he would throw a hatchet at them, asking, "Do you trust me? Will you die for me? Will you be me?"[16]

Sheila Whiteley referred to Manson as a "psychedelic Satanist" in her text,[17] one who used the story of Helter Skelter, the racial war and end times, sexual

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14   Philip C. Almond, *The Devil: A New Biography* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2014).

15   Danielle Sutton, "Durkheim, Totemism, and the Manson Family: Theorizing on the Relationship between Religion and Violence," in *Homicide and Violent Crime*, ed. M. Deflem (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018), 65.

16   Sutton, "Durkheim, Totemism, and the Manson Family," 72.

17   Sheila Whiteley, *The Space Between the Note: Rock and the Counterculture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 100.

ritual and rites that circled around obedience in order to convince his followers to torture and murder nine people. Other marginal systems of belief and practice in the US with views to end times were Jim Jones and The Peoples Temple Full Gospel Church organized in 1955 and affiliated with the Disciples of Christ in 1959, and Heaven's Gate founded in 1974. Both shocked the world with their communal suicide, the Peoples Temple in 1978 and Heaven's Gate in 1997.

The US context supports the idea that contact with space aliens and deities is possible. The paranoia and espionage of the Cold War years, the advancement of science that made space travel possible, the social upheavals of Civil Rights, the Women's Movement, the environmental and anti-Nuclear movements all destabilized the certainty of knowledge, while revelations about governmental dishonesty, cover-up and corruption produced distrust in the government. Paranoia fostered a sense of watchfulness and being watched, technological development opened the door to the unknown and the challenge to certain knowledge opened the door to a multitude of narratives all purporting to *be* the truth. As to government dishonesty, cover-up and corruption brought in its wake cynicism, distrust and loss leaving many US citizens vulnerable to uncertainty and conspiracy narratives. Although such a context does not necessarily have to produce narratives of interactions between space aliens, deities and humans, it certainly provided the conditions whereby such narratives made sense. The followers of Manson took him to be an emissary of god or even Jesus Christ particularly when he grew his hair and beard out[18] and within a framework of end times as proposed by Manson, Tex Watson, Susan Atkins and other family members, carried out their slaughter. Under Manson's direction they were to initiate the race riots that would destroy the world, while Manson and his followers would hide in the bottomless pit in the desert until African American people (he called them "the blacks") needed them to help rebuild the world.[19]

3 Imagined Spaces and Beings: Deities, Aliens and Humans

In the past, many systems of belief and practice looked to the sky to locate their deities. Apollo descends down the mountain from Olympus in Homer's *Iliad*, while the Roman deity Jupiter occupied the north sky and through haruspicy and augury provided Romans with intelligence. Within the Hellenistic period

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18   Sutton, "Durkheim, Totemism, and the Manson Family," 73.
19   Sutton, "Durkheim, Totemism, and the Manson Family," 71.

under the influence of Plato and other earlier Greek thinkers like Pythagorus and Anaximander, deities were situated in the realm beyond the fixed stars. The idea of a realm of fixed stars operated within the Ptolemaic model of the universe, which had come to dominate thinking throughout the Hellenistic period (*c.* 322 BCE–30 BCE). This model of a sky located deity(ies) came to dominate three monotheistic systems that would shape the conceptualization of deity in the Eurowest and beyond in light of colonization.

Deity in the sky was not a problem as long as the sky was removed from human activity; the sky was the place where deity (and their helpers), unseen, watched humans. With the advent of flight and then space flight such conceptualizations had to be adjusted. Joni Mitchell laments in her 1973 song "The same situation," "Still I sent up my prayer, Wondering where it had to go, With heaven full of astronauts …"[20] Deity could not occupy the sky that planes and rockets flew through, so deity must occupy another sky – a different realm, the realm of deities that is not available to humans. In myth deity in the sky can be called (prayer) and when called is able to intervene in some fashion, frequently through emissaries such as angels and demons, divine children often from a human parent and a divine parent, prophets and other spokespersons such as ritual and theological experts.

Discursively, space aliens also come from the sky, but they do not occupy the sky like Zeus, Jupiter, Isis or Jesus: instead they enter the sky from behind the sky, or from the outer side, that is outer space. Aliens come down from space and enter the sky whereupon, like deities, they watch humans and interact with humans. Aliens are often emissaries for their distant planet/civilization. The capacity for air and then space travel in the twentieth century exposed the expanse of the sky and beyond. Such an exposure revealed the absence of deity(ies) and the emptiness of space, an emptiness that was soon filled with the possibility of aliens and their associated civilizations. Thirty-nine members of Heaven's Gate took astral events very seriously and with the return of the comet Hale-Bopp in March 1997 took their lives in order to catch a ride on the comet to their new destination in space.[21] Heaven's Gate, a mix of Protestant Christianity, New Age orientations and UFOlogy combined the space of deity and aliens giving privilege to a human "spiritual" body over and against a

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20   Thanks to Bill Arnal for reminding me of Joni Mitchell's song that nicely represents my point.

21   Benjamin E. Zeller, "Scaling Heaven's Gate: Individualism and Salvation in a New Religious Movement," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 10, no. 2 (2006): 93.

human fleshy body, the former of which allowed the members of Heaven's Gate to ascend to a fully evolved form, a form that allowed space travel.[22]

Occupying the same physical space of the sky and beyond, aliens and deities are brought together and are similar insofar as they are not bound to the earth in the same way humans are bound. It is in the space of sky that ideas around deities and aliens converge and are seen in the concept of celestial being(s), beings not from the earth; rather they come from beyond earth. For example, according to *The Urantia Book*, celestial beings journeyed from the Isle of Paradise, which is "the Absolute of the material-gravity control of the First Source and Center. ...The Isle of Paradise has a universe location but no position in space"[23] to bring knowledge to humans since "... there dwells within the human mind a fragment of God ..."[24] *The Urantia Book* is a book of teachings provided by "Orvonton Divine Counselor, Chief of the Corps of Superuniverse Personalities"[25] and upon publication was disseminated freely by the Urantian Foundation. Urantia is the name for earth in the book, which works to bring into concordance three significant narratives of the modern period: Protestant Christianity, Enlightenment science and philosophy. Like the *Bible*, the *Tanakh* or the *Qur'an*, *The Urantia Book* provides guidance to adherents.

3.1 The Morphology of Deities and Space Aliens

Narratives of deities and aliens locate the sky and space beyond as the "home" of these two kinds allowing for the convergence of the two seen, for example, in *The Book of Urantia*. Visually, demons, angels and deities have a human-like shape and are typically bipedal, with arms and hands for reaching and grasping, faces with eyes, nose and mouth even if the form is a non-human animal. In Christianities deity is masculine – a father – who has a son with a human female, Jesus Christ, who is represented as a male human and therefore bipedal with hands and a face. In the monotheisms deity is gendered masculine and when interacting with humans is presented as taking human form. In Genesis 18, for example, Abraham and Sarah receive three male "lords" in human form one or all of whom are deities and Joshua 5:13 when Joshua meets the war god YHWH, who takes the form of a male human brandishing a sword, and who provided Joshua with the means to conquer the Canaanite town of Jericho in the myth.

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22   Susan Raine, "Reconceptualising the Human Body: Heaven's Gate and the Quest for Divine Transformation," *Religion* 35, no. 2 (2005): 108.

23   n.a., *The Urantia Book* (Chicago: Urantia Foundation, 1955), 7.

24   n.a., *The Urantia Book*, 17.

25   n.a., *The Urantia Book*, 17.

Certainly deities have taken the form of non-human animals, hybrid human and non-human animals, along with such forms as elements, mountains, stones, lakes, stars and planets, but always when interacting directly with humans, mythology presents deities in forms humans recognize. Dionysus of ancient Greek myth and Hapis and Ptah of Egyptian myth are represented as taking the forms of both bull and human, while the Kachina of the A:shiwi, take the form of ducks, and the Mayan twin deities Huanapu and Xbalanque take the form of the sun and the moon. As different as these presentations are, they are all familiar to the inhabitants of planet earth.

As with deities, aliens take recognizable forms appearing as humanoids of various kinds with the two dominant kinds being the Grays and the Reptoids with the Grays being the most human although they are quite diminutive in stature with large black eyes, a small mouth, no ears and long fingers. The Grays are the aliens most often represented as probing and experimenting on abducted humans. The Reptoids tend to be among the more hostile aliens and are a threat to human abductees. According to one contactee the Reptoids "rape, torture and murder" humans.[26] The Reptoids are tall with reptilian eyes and mouth. Diana Tumminia has catalogued some alien types in her work providing descriptions from accounts of contactees and abductees. Some other alien forms are the tall white and blond Betas, the hairy Gammas like BigFoot, humanoid Martians, multidimensional travelling Ultraterrestrials and their human alien offspring called Starseeds.[27] All these beings, and others not mentioned, share many features with humans such as bipedalism, faces, heads, torso and appendages and speech. Emergent from the narratives of contactees and abductees are space aliens who look, think, and act in the way people do, particularly people of the twentieth century. This is not surprising as humans have only their own world(s) to draw from in order to construct the world(s) of aliens.

Aliens and deities share characteristics with each other, which is not surprising in light of how both come into existence in and through discourse and discursive formations. Deities and aliens both communicate with humans through some form of speech either spoken or thought, they have and use their eyes – that is they give priority to the visual sense – and they often are represented as hearing. They walk, amble and run, while they carry things in their hands. They breathe oxygen and reproduce with human beings,

26   Christopher Partridge, "Alien Demonology: The Christian Roots of the Malevolent Extra-terrestrial in UFO Religions and Abduction Spiritualities," *Religio* 34, no. 3 (2004): 180.

27   Diana G. Tumminia, *Alien Worlds*, 313–15.

producing semi-divine offspring, for example, Jesus Christ or semi-alien such as the Starseeds.

4 Systems of Belief and Practice Concerning Aliens and Deities: Abduction and Spirit Possession

In their respective mythic narratives, deities and aliens share space located in the sky and/or beyond in outer space and they share somatic structures having faces, appendages and torsos, while communicating with their mouths using speech and both reproduce with humans. In light of these similarities it is not surprising that they also interact similarly with humans providing them with messages and information about existence, the past and the future. Equally deities and aliens appropriate humans through such means as possession and abduction. The oracle at the Pythia at ancient Delphi, for example, was possessed by Apollo in order to respond to pilgrims' queries; Muhammad, taught by an angel, became the great prophet of Islam relaying the mind of the deity Allah; while in Cuban Santoria individual Orisha such as Legba or Yemaya possess their followers in order to help them and others around them, but also to enjoy the sweetness of human life.

Discursively, among alien abductees and contactees similar relations abound but with aliens rather than deities. Among the members of the Unarius Academy of Science efforts are made to receive contact from the "Space Brothers" who have reached out to humanity to help them realize their glorious future when thirty-three interplanetary spaceships will land on Earth. In the films developed by Unarius, the Space Brothers are represented as tall, fully human-like, white-skinned with a third crystal-like eye in the middle of their foreheads. They teach love and peace being spiritual beings who take the form of cosmic scientists.[28] Contact with the Space Brothers is made through "dreams, recovered memories of past lives, visions, bodily sensations, psychic readings, channelings, and other experiences …"[29]

In alien abduction narratives, however, there is less a sense of love and peace and a greater sense of fear and threat. The alien group referred to as the Grays are said to conduct physical exams of abductees, explore their bodies and seek to reproduce or have other aliens reproduce with humans. The famous Betty

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28   Diana Tumminia, *When Prophecy Never Fails: Myth and Reality in a Flying-Saucer Group* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.

29   Diana G. Tumminia, "In the Dreamtime of the Saucer People: Sense-Making and Interpretive Boundaries in a Contactee Group," in *Alien Worlds*, 80–96.

and Barney Hill 1961 alien abduction narrative, made public in 1965, indicated both had been subjected to physical exams with Barney having felt something removed from his groin[30] and Betty having had a needle inserted into her abdomen. Betty reported that one of the aliens told her it was a pregnancy test.[31] The Hill narrative of abduction established, as Brenda Denzler notes, "the basic pattern for the abduction subtheme of the UFO myth, the salient features of which involved missing time, physical examination while on board the UFO, a tour of the ship, conversation with the aliens, and the use of hypnotic regression to recover lost memories"[32] and further added is the experience of being levitated often to and from the surgical bed.[33,34] As the alien abduction narrative developed, reproduction of hybrid human and alien offspring was added. A significant figure in the alien abduction movement, Budd Hopkins, proposed that an "ongoing and systematic breeding experiment must be considered one of the central purposes of the UFO abductions" in his 1987 book *Intruders:*[35] belief in the breeding myth has come to dominate alien abduction narratives.

Both deities and aliens, when interacting with humans at a distance, teach and protect them. Jesus and Mary, neither of whom as deities directly interact with humans, are represented as advising and protecting humans. However, when interaction between human and deity is close up and personal, the outcomes are said to be a little different. For example, a story in the book of Acts 2:4 relays how the holy spirit rushed like the wind into the house where the disciples were sitting and marking each with a flame filled them so that they spoke in different languages. In Acts 4:31 the Holy Spirit shakes the space within which they are gathered, filling them and providing them with "bold speech" while in Acts 10:44 the Holy Spirit falls on and possesses all those listening to the words of Peter so that they too could speak in tongues and extol

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30   Denzler, *Lure of the Edge*, 49.

31   Denzler, *Lure of the Edge*, 49.

32   Denzler, *Lure of the Edge*, 49–50.

33   D.W. Pasulka, *American Cosmic: UFOs, Religion and Technology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 218.

34   Star Trek Next Generation episode 137 (airing Oct 19, 1992) entitled "Schism" utilizes this pattern to great effect. A number of the crew members are taken from the ship into another dimension where they are experimented upon and then returned to the ship. With the help of the ship's counsellor, Diana Troy, they are able to reclaim their memories of their abductions and determine and close the breach between dimensions preventing the abduction of, experimentation on, more crew members.

35   In Bridget Brown, *They Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves: The History and Politics of Alien Abduction* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 83.

deity. In all instances the Holy Spirit is presented as overtaking and controlling humans, much as demons were said to have done or do.

Others who have approached or come too close to deity or have caught their eye do not do well either. In Leviticus 10 the sons of Aaron are incinerated because they were ritually unclean when they entered the tent of the tabernacle or Miriam in Numbers 12 who was punished with leprous skin for having set herself against her brother Moses. Unclean, she remained apart from the people until deity made her clean again. In ancient Greek mythography too close contact with deity generally led to death or suffering as the narratives of Heracles, Helen or any other ancient Greek heroes relate. Semele, impregnated by Zeus died in his lightning fire when he revealed himself to her. Even in modern rural Greece, saints will trouble "chosen" village people until they recognize, interact with and properly honour the saint, whereupon some of these folks then take up fire walking enacted at the festival of the Anastenaria.[36] In Cuban Santoria, the Orisha who sits on one's head demands attention and proper acknowledgment lest they rain grief down upon their followers. The spirits and ancestors of systems of belief and practice, such as in Korean shamanism, are said to harass a person until they take the shamanic path.[37] Close contact between humans and deities and humans and aliens represented as problematic appears to be a shared aspect of the narratives concerned with the interaction between humans and those others, deities and space aliens.

Deities at times, or those beings associated with them, are represented as having sexual congress with humans. In ancient Greek narratives Zeus has multiple offspring with human females as does Apollo, Hermes and the majority of the Greek gods. In Genesis angels have relations with human females, the offspring of whom are destroyed by deity in a flood. In Christian myth Jesus is the offspring of a human female and the spirit of deity who will save the world, while Satan is said to bring about the apocalypse through his offspring the Antichrist. Cú Chulainn is the hero son of warrior god Lugh of the Tuatha de Danann and Deichtine, the daughter of Maga and Cathbad the Druid. There are many other examples of the mythologies concerning the offspring of deity and human sexual congress, and indeed these demigods often generate their own mythologies that then ground systems of belief and practice.

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36 Loring Danforth, *Firewalking and Religious Healing: The Anastenaria of Greece and the American Firewalking Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

37 Youngsook Kim Harvey, *Six Korean Women: The Socialization of Shamans* (St. Paul: West Pub, 1979); Margery Wolf, *A Thrice-Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1992).

Comparing mythic narratives concerning human interaction with deities and space aliens demonstrates that there is little actual difference between aliens and deities. Both are teachers of humans and provide humans with the capacity to know the "true" world, but when approached too closely both space aliens and deities become threats, intentional and unintentional, to humans. Too close to the fire of both and humans die, while reproduction with either alien or deity is fraught. For the best results interaction with deity and space aliens must be done at a distance; through prayer, priest, dream, telepathy, or past life regression.

5   Belief Deployed: Peoples Temple and Heaven's Gate – The Dead from Both Groups

The organizations that have developed around the acknowledgment and appreciation of deities and space aliens are numerous in the case of deities and less so in the case of the space aliens. But as UAO religions only emerged in the twentieth century, they have had considerably less time to organize their systems of belief and practice. Equally, UFOlogy is not accepted as legitimate and therefore often dismissed, and dismissed it is then considerably under-studied. For this last section I want to set side by side two groups, one adhering to the saviour Jesus and the other adhering to saviour space aliens: the Peoples Temple Christian Church with Jim Jones (1931–1978) and Heaven's Gate with Marshall Herff Applewhite (1931–1997) and Bonnie Lu Nettles (1927–1985).[38] The tragic end of these two groups was brought about by members drinking a cocktail of death in 1978 Guyana for the Peoples Temple and 1997 and the return of Hale-Bopp for the thirty-nine members of Heaven's Gate.

The history of these two groups is beyond the scope of this chapter, but a few words. Both appear in the mid-twentieth century; Jones founded the Peoples Temple Full Gospel Church in Indianapolis in 1955 and moved the church to California in 1965[39] where they adopted a new name, the People's Temple Christian Church, while Heaven's Gate founders began their teachings in 1975 as a series of lectures across the US and Canada.[40] Both groups, from the outset, were marginal; one marked by race and class in terms of

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38   George D. Chryssides, "Approaching Heaven's Gate," in *Heaven's Gate: Postmodernity and Popular Culture in a Suicide Group*, ed. George D. Chryssides (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 1.

39   Denice Stephenson, ed., *Dear People: Remembering Jonestown* (Berkeley, Cal: Hayday Books, 2005), 9.

40   Chryssides, "Approaching Heaven's Gate," 1.

the Peoples Temple and the other by reclusiveness with regard to Heaven's Gate. In the latter case the two founders claimed to be the two witnesses in Revelation 11 who prophesy, die, and then are resurrected on the third day to dwell in heaven.[41] They also indicated that they would, in the next evolutionary level, discard their human bodies and rise through the heavens to join the UAO and the Space Brothers who awaited them.

Both groups closed themselves off from the lives and world they previously had shared with family, friends and loved ones. Isolated, people of both groups recreated themselves under the guidance of their leaders. Members of Heaven's Gate had to unlearn being human, to cease normal human practices, to alter their appearances and to reject loving relationships,[42] while members of the Peoples Temple followed Jones from Indiana to California, California to Brazil and finally to a piece of jungle in Guyana where they lived isolated lives and followed the teachings of Jones.[43] Removed from their past lives, the people of both groups used their systems of belief and practice to construct worlds where alien space ships and non-corporeal bodies made sense, as did the jettisoning of these bodies by poison in order to evolve into a new way of being and join the spacecraft that shadowed Hale Bopp's appearance in March 1997, or to avoid the government and others said to be coming to torture and kill the children and people of Jonestown.[44] Speaking to members, Jones encourages them to drink the cyanide-laced drink:

> Don't, don't fail to follow my advice. You'll be sorry. If we do it … have trust. You have to step across. We used to think this world was – this world was not our home – well, it sure isn't – we were saying – it sure wasn't. … Can't some people assure these children of the relaxation of stepping over to the next plane?[45]

When the founders and leaders of Heaven's Gate, Bonnie and Marshall, now called Ti and Do, wrote out and shared their first statement in 1975, they used the metaphor of a caterpillar's metamorphosis to explain human existence

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41 Benjamin E. Zeller, "Extraterrestrial Biblical Hermeneutics and the Making of Heaven's Gate," *The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 14, no. 2 (November 2010): 47.

42 Robert Balch, "Waiting for the Ships: Disillusionment and the Revitalization of Faith in Bo and Peep's UFO Cult," in *The Gods Have Landed: New Religions from Other Worlds*, ed. James R. Lewis (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 149.

43 Stephenson, *Dear People.*

44 Stephenson, *Dear People*, 127–42.

45 Stephenson, *Dear People*, 142.

according to what they knew as two who had come from the kingdom to guide others back:

> He [Jesus] did not leave his body in the grave. He converted it into his body of that next kingdom. ... Each human has that full potential. ... There are two individuals here now who have also come from the next kingdom, incarnate as humans, awakened, and will soon demonstrate the same proof of overcoming death. They are "sent" from that kingdom by the "Father" to bear the same truth that was Jesus'. ... Those who can believe this process and do it will be "lifted up" individually and "saved" from death – literally.[46]

Having created worlds where fleshy bodies are considered mere vehicles, the steps toward neutralizing and discarding the body appear to make logical sense. Ti's death by cancer amounted to Ti leaving her "human vehicle" whereupon in the Kingdom she would be given a new body, one that was grown from a vine.[47] Equally so with the Peoples Temple, most of whom had suffered under racism, racism based on a bodily condition that would no longer exist in "Zion," as a woman declared prior to her drinking the poisoned beverage. She also thanked Jones, Dad as she called him,[48] making apparent her complete acceptance of the world according to Jim Jones, a world that accorded in part or whole with her own experience.

The world constructions of the Peoples Temple and Heaven's Gate were strongly influenced by biblical texts, particularly the New Testament and one of its central protagonists, Jesus. Jones, a healer, drew on the power of Christ to heal the blind, the sick, and the dying as well as resurrecting the dead, something he claimed he could do by the 1970s.[49] Heaven's Gate also spoke of Jesus but took him to be a traveller from the Kingdom, much like Ti and Do, who tried to show humans how to evolve to the next level. Ti and Do would provide a "repeat performance ... [in order] to restate the truth Jesus bore ..."[50] The figure of Jesus in the Christian myth is that of one who was marginalized and scoffed at, disrespected and dismissed, and finally hunted

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46   Marshall Applewhite, "'88 Update – the UFO Two and Their Crew," in *Heaven's Gate: Postmodernity and Popular Culture in a Suicide Group*, ed. George D. Chryssides (Surrey UK: Ashgate, 2011), 22.

47   Applewhite, "88 Update," 29.

48   Stephenson, *Dear People*, 141.

49   Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 106.

50   Applewhite, "88 Update," 22.

and killed only to overcome his enemies and death by being apotheosized into the heavens. This narrative is certainly mirrored in the mythology of the Peoples Temple and Heaven's Gate. Jones ran a series of white nights beginning in 1978 requiring members protect Jonestown from those who would murder Jones, take the children and torture others for their political beliefs. Jones, like Jesus, was being attacked by worldly powers. He and his believers had fled to remote Guyana but still his detractors and enemies followed and like Jesus, he would die, he claimed, "protesting the conditions of an inhumane world."[51] The two witnesses and the members of Heaven's Gate equally saw themselves as misunderstood as Jesus. Their message of evolution to the next level was "criticized by almost every camp" including psychologists, Christians and their ministers, and UFOlogists.[52] Although not feeling hunted, Heaven's Gate members lived with each other in houses and although working to support themselves, kept their distance from distractions that kept them fixed in their human natures. Rejected by and rejecting the larger world, members of Heaven's Gate embraced the reality proposed by Do even if they did not take it to be completely true:

> Nrrody: Ti and Do and the Next Level are my life. Without them, there is nothing – literally. Nothing else is real.
> Stmody: I am totally dependent on them for everything and am better off because of it. I am lost without them.[53]

The Peoples Temple and Heaven's Gate are both beholden to the New Testament, although interestingly enough the first is (reluctantly) taken to be Protestant Christianity and therefore a religion, while the second is dismissed as a UAO cult. They have much in common, however, sharing a sense of alienation, disappointment and a hope for the future either in a remote community or in space with other beings of the Kingdom. The dream of the Peoples Temple, founded in the face of oppression (as they understood it), was to escape to "Zion" or the heavenly city, while Heaven's Gate members, having waited for over twenty years in 1997 finally caught a ride on the spaceship that shadowed Hale-Bopp.

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51   Stephenson, *Dear People*, 142.
52   Applewhite, "88 Update," 35.
53   Winston Davis, "Heaven's Gate: A Study of Religious Obedience," in *Heaven's Gate: Postmodernity and Popular Culture in a Suicide Group*, ed. George D. Chryssides (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 98.

6   Implications and Outcomes of Comparison

In the context of the twentieth century of the US both aliens and deities are given credence, although the former is given less so than the latter, even if aliens are far more likely to exist than deities. Comparing the attributes and actions of aliens and deities found in the discourses of both, it is obvious that they are conceptually very similar. Indeed, when closely examined one notes variation but of the same kind – deities and aliens are other and belong to the realm of the other. Equally, their interaction with believers is similar; having equal measure of love, knowledge, and the threat to life and limb that comes with approaching aliens and deities too closely. When it comes to systems of belief and practice that enthrone principles of isolation, paranoia, secrecy, the rejection of current existence for another unseen existence, and organize around heroic figures, be they space aliens or deities, similar paths lead to similar outcomes, death to the practitioners.

Standing back and thinking about the comparison of aliens and deities and of the study of systems of belief and practice, it becomes equally obvious that treating some social practices as legitimate, those associated with deities, and others as illegitimate, those associated with space aliens, means we are doing more than studying religion; we are now in the business of caretaking religion, as Russell McCutcheon has argued.[54] But more than this, we are constructing religion itself as a category[55] even as we participate in the legitimization of systems of belief and practice themselves. This can only be the case since it has, I think, become also obvious in this comparison that aliens and deities are conceptualized similarly and are seen to interact with humans in similar ways, but aliens and all things associated with them are excluded from the study of systems of belief and practice as they have not been authorized or legitimated. Furthermore, in this process of caretaking in the study of religion we are also acting as gatekeepers, constructing the proper canon for Religious Studies. By caretaking and gatekeeping a theological agenda is made visible insofar as those systems of belief and practice, such as those encountered in communities wherein space aliens are at the center, are excluded and thereby deemed not worth studying.

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54   Russel T. McCutcheon. *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion.* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

55   See also, William E. Arnal and Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Sacred is the Profane: The Political Nature of "Religion"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Between practitioners practicing and scholars studying "religion" and kinds of "religion" are given social, cultural, and epistemological legitimacy and certitude. By not studying space aliens or other non-material beings given narrative and symbolic space in our social bodies, we deauthorize these systems of belief and practice as properly religious: the best we can do is provide them with cult status. By explicitly not authorizing the study of aliens and alien contact and abduction, for example, we are implicitly authorizing those systems of belief and practice we do study. For the purposes of the study of systems of belief and practice, then, Christianity is authentically a "religion," Paganism is not; Judaism is authentic, Messianic Judaism is not; Islam is authentic, The Nation of Islam is not and so on. There are a limited number of systems of belief and practice that are given street credibility, and that street credibility is delivered by the scholars who study them. To further make this point of exclusion, consider the discipline of anthropology which does not actively exclude kinds of people on the basis of some deemed inauthenticity, or the discipline of sociology which does not dismiss a society because they are not authentically a society. Put this way it becomes apparent that there is more going on in the study of systems of belief and practice than meets the eye.

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SECTION 2

Experience

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Religious Experience: A Genealogy of the Concept and Future Prospects of Its Scholarly Use

Jens Schlieter

Abstract

The contribution discusses the genealogy of the concept of "religious experience" and its transformation into a category for the systematic study of religion/s from a historical perspective. As experience is necessarily subjective, the problem arises for the experiencing individual of how to know that a certain experience is "religious" – an encounter with the "divine," or the "real." Individuals, I argue, solve the problem by referring to similar experiences that they had earlier in life. Moreover, they emphasize that the experience can be termed religious by its post-experiential transformative effects. Accordingly, a scholarly reconstruction of "religious experience" should pay attention to these autobiographical frames.

Keywords

religious experience – religious autobiography – subjective experience – conceptual history

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It is needless to remind you once more of the admirable congruity of Protestant theology with the structure of the mind as shown in such experiences.

(T)he best fruits of religious experience are the best things that history has to show.

WILLIAM JAMES

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1   Introduction

"Religious experience" has often been declared to be simple, universal, and unmediated. Religious experience has been said to be essential for every religion. And, as a concept, religious experience can be defined as experiences that turn out to be "religious" – especially due to their specific effects on the individual. Interestingly, very few studies so far were concerned with the conceptual history of this compound – "religious experience" – and the question of how it became the central, although still often disputed, category it is now. In this contribution, I will try to achieve two goals: First, I will aim to show that the concept "religious experience" became a central category for the study of religion by fusing two different meanings, namely, religious experience (1) as a kind of *sense perception* (*of a sacred object or a numinous situation*) and (2) as an *extremely meaningful, often life-changing event* (*conversion, epiphany, rupture, etc.*). Secondly, I will argue that to uncover both meanings one must necessarily refer to accounts from a first-person perspective. Experiences are accessible through narratives of experiences, or by way of one's own experiences. Thus, experiences viewed as religious (especially in the meaning of 2 above) are always part of a personal biography and can only be fully understood in their given context of the individual's autobiographical narrative. Religious experience does not appear out of nowhere. I will argue that to include the full biography of a person, and especially religious socialization in childhood and youth, is key. Dealing with "religious experience," I hold, one must correlate the experiencer's report and the experiencer's biography, because the latter is the indispensable background for resolving shortcomings of the first-person perspective. It is a methodological necessity. Secondly, I will try to show how from the second half the nineteenth century onwards, various scholars declared emphatically "religious experience" to be the core and essence of religion, and thus also of all religions that may with full legitimacy be called a "religion." In consequence, respective scholars were of the opinion that in order to grasp the full meaning of a certain religious tradition or individual religiosity, respectively, one had to direct one's attention to exactly this "religious experience" forming the original root of all other expressions of religion/s (teachings, dogmas, texts, rituals, communities, and even architecture).

  In sum: How could the concept of "religious experience" emerge in such a way that it is primarily seen as a distinct event, either a kind of *sense perception of the sacred* or a distinct experience of *personal and/or epistemic transformation* becoming the guiding model? And secondly, which semantic background of "religious," "religion," and "religions" enabled this use of religious experience as a category? As a first step, I will discuss how semantic shifts in both

elements, "religious" (religion/s) and "experience," made it possible to speak of "religious experience" in this new meaning. How could that happen? The most important historical factors, I will argue with extant studies, were (a) the emergence of confessional *autobiographies*, (b) the Protestant emphasis of a second spiritual *conversion*, (c) *empiricist philosophies* and *scientific experimentalism*, and, in combination with the factors mentioned, the all-pervasive, (d) emerging culture of the *individualist self*.

2 Part One: Towards A Genealogy of the Concept "Religious Experience"

The concept of "religious experience," an integral part of the academic study of religion for more than 150 years, can be considered as one of the discipline's most disputed terms. Combining two epistemically challenging concepts – religion and experience – it has most often been discussed in its (often disputed) value to describe the origin, core, or the authentic practice of more complex religions and their historical founders. As is well known, a prominent tradition of philosophers and scholars of religion considers an unmediated, simple, deep, true, but ineffable "mystical experience" as the "Perennial core" in authentic religious experiences. This uniform experience, however, shines through a variety of culturally clouded expressions or articulates itself in conceptual "symbols," adherents hold, so that they call for intensive efforts to uncover the experience in the flower bucket of very heterogeneous witness reports. Against this claim by "Perennialists" (for example, William James, Mircea Eliade, W.T. Stace, or Robert K. Forman), Constructivists (as, for example, Wayne Proudfoot, Steven Katz, or Robert H. Sharf) argued that experiences are culturally framed and expressed in a certain language.[1] Thus, such experiences can only be studied through their reports.

One of the most prominent critics of the scholarly use of the concept "religious experience," Robert H. Sharf, identifies as the backbone of James's, Otto's, Huxley's, or Stace's conceptualization exactly this assumption that "mystical experience," the more enthusiastic and less denominational twin concept of "religious experience," consists of an unmediated and direct encounter of the absolute or divine. Thus, mystical experience forms the transcultural core of

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1 William James, Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature (London: Routledge, 2004 [1902]); Wayne Proudfoot, Religious Experience (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), Robert H. Sharf, "Experience," in Religious Experience: A Reader, eds. L. Durrough Smith, C. Martin and R. McCutcheon (Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing, 2012).

"religious experiences" more broadly. In other words, *authentic* religious experiences are mystical in their core, and they will be articulated according to their specific backgrounds – Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, etc. Regarding this Perennialist view, Robert Sharf, Burkhard Gladigow, and others critically remark that scholars advocating a mystical "core experience" often simply take their *own* experiences and their resulting *normative* views of such experiences as a valid criterion for identifying the intersubjective and transhistorical core. Steven M. Wasserstrom correctly observes that such "claims for a 'deep' understanding of 'religious experience'" are "simply circular." They "appoint a psychic event familiar to the scholar to serve as exalted object of inquiry; this object is recognizable when encountered because it looks like what the scholar already recognizes: his own original 'experience.'"[2] More radical, Sharf even opted to entirely dismiss the concept of religious experience. Referring to Katz and his view that mystical experience is not "unmediated," Sharf concludes that "mystical experience" is "wholly shaped by a mystic's cultural environment, personal history, doctrinal commitments, religious training, expectations, aspirations, and so on."[3] One should remark that "personal history" is mentioned here; however, as said, the individual's own biography as indispensable factor *for them* to identify experiences as religious is rarely discussed. Certainly, there are some studies on religious virtuosi, mystics, or religious practitioners in which biographical circumstances, socialization, family, friends, or existential turns, sufferings, etc., figure as elements for understanding (or even "explaining") religious experiences. One can consult a mass of literature trying to explain "visionary" or "mystical experiences" with reference to neurological disorders, or childhood traumata. Yet, there is more to the individual autobiographical frame than simply offering an "etiology" or psychological-medical "explanation" for certain religious experiences. It is the autobiographical first-person view on one's own life in its entirety which allows a person to speak of any meaningful "experiences" as specifically "*religious,*" and it is this fact that I would like to acknowledge and emphasize from a third-person view, too.

In regard to the concept itself, Sharf identifies two distinct usages, as he says, of (religious) "experience": (1) as "participate in," "live through," and (2) as "directly perceive," "observe," "be aware of," "be conscious of."[4] Sharf argues, that the latter is problematic if conceptualized as immaterial substance, given

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2   Steven M. Wasserstrom, "The Medium of the Divine," in Experientia. 1. Inquiry into Religious Experience in Early Judaism and Early Christianity, eds. Frances, Flannery, et al. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 76.

3   Sharf, "Experience," 98.

4   See Robert H. Sharf, "Experience," in Critical Terms for Religious Studies, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 94–116, 104.

in an immediate, non-mediated way. Sharf argues in a Wittgensteinian way that in this case it cannot be construed as denoting a referent, and thus, it cannot be related "to determinative phenomenal events at all" to be studied by scholars – instead, legitimate objects of study are "texts, narratives, performances."[5]

However, while Perennialists and Constructivists come to very different results regarding the nature, status and function of religious experience, and the respective methodology, they nevertheless seem to agree in one central respect: Religious experience is predominantly seen as a *distinct*, *autonomous*, and mostly *extremely meaningful momentary event*.[6] Such a conceptualization follows the experiencer's retrospective account that "the experience" and its cognitive or emotional content has had a clear beginning and end. It allows to speak of an experience of "something" that is observed or perceived, even if this something is "not a sensory object."[7]

Many studies aimed to offer a complete account of elements that belong to a generalized model of such a distinct and autonomous *religious* experience. Yet, they often leave a crucial question unconsidered – or declare it to be unanswerable –, namely: What do specific individuals in certain cultural contexts intend to say or convey when they say that an *experience* of a certain kind has *happened to them* – an experience they consider to be *religious*? What is it exactly what they want to evoke in others by choosing these terms, "religious" and "experience"? In their attempt to establish a generalized model of "religious experience," Perennialists and most Constructivists do not engage with particularities of individual cases. Isolating the reported experiences, studies of religious experience skip over factors such as the idiosyncratic language use, socialization into a religious worldview and other biographical specifics. Usually, scholars only mention in passing the full autobiographical narrative that the individual offer themselves to convey why a certain singular religious experience was meaningful. Instead, scholars of religious experience follow by default emic discourse of *virtuosi* who identify isolated and extremely meaningful experiential events as their central "religious" or "mystical experience": such as a conversion, a naked and unmediated encounter with the real, or a disclosure of the sacred, of God – or any other form of enlightenment, awakening, and so forth. In line with the points just mentioned, few studies so far were

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5 Sharf, "Experience," 110–111.
6 In their introduction to the recent Cambridge Companion to Religious Experience, Paul K. Moser and Chad Meister define "religious experience" as involving "overarching meaning for a person's life." (Paul K. Moser, Chad Meister, The Cambridge Companion to Religious Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020)), 2.
7 Moser and Meister, Companion to Religious Experience, 1.

interested in the genealogy of the term "religious experience" itself, which is why I will proceed with this task first.

2.1   *A Short Genealogy of the Concept "Religious Experience"*

A more elaborate genealogy of the terms "religious experience," and of the somewhat older "experience of religion" should include the semantic field on alternative attributes of "experience" (e.g., "visionary," or "mystical," or "inward," instead of religious), and alternative objects in the position of "religion" (e.g., "God") – see Fig. 5.1. Here, however, I will only outline the basic conceptual history of "religious experience."

Actually, the concept of "religious experience" possesses an inbuild, or inherent, *comparative* perspective. By declaring experience to be "religious," one articulates a quality that is assumed to be characteristic for "religion," and, thus, essential for (at least certain adherents) of religious traditions. This, of course, depends on how the qualifying adjective "religious" is used. I will return to this question below. Reviewing the history of the use of the concept "religious experience," one might not be wrong in assuming that co-evolving with its use, the scholarly interest in such experiences as characteristic for "religion" was raised, too. From the beginning, in the initial use of the concept,
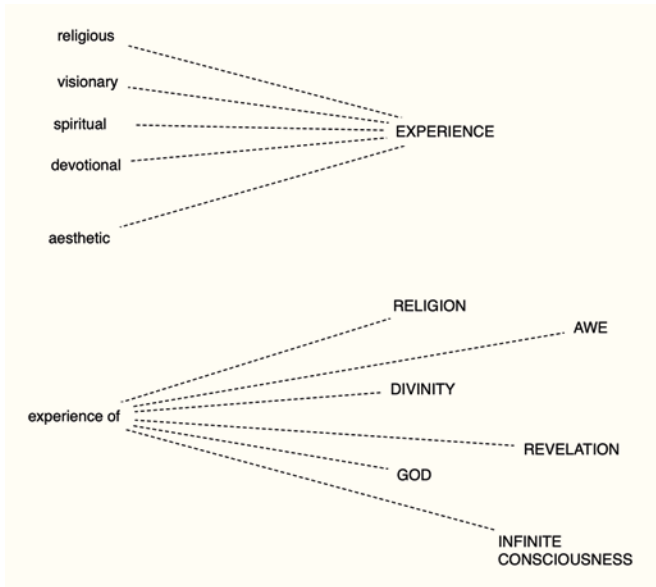

FIGURE 5.1   Elements of the semantic field of "religious experience"
and "experience of religion" (characteristic examples)
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religionists and theologians were part of the process to declare "experience" to be a source of authentic religion, and a criterion of religious truth – a relationship that was later adopted by scholars of religion, too.

2.2 Building Blocks of "Religious Experience": Historical Changes of Conceptualizing "Experience"

In her impressive study on the modern usage of the English key term "experience," Anna Wierzbicka presented the following field of meaning, distinguishing the following forms: *experience₁*: which is the model of **past experience**, as **accumulated knowledge** by either a doer or an undergoer (both forms of Shakespearean use), or an observer. It usually requires that such knowledge has been gathered with difficulties, laborious repetition, and over years, that is, it requires that one has lived long (*un homme d'expérience*). Moreover, it is positive to have such experience – it is knowledge, if not wisdom.[8] This form is contrasted with an *experience₁ₐ*: still connected to knowledge, but now as a "doer's specialized skill," or deliberate practice. While many elements are the same (e.g., this experience can be observed and judged by outsiders), two new meanings emerge: Now, there is a subject, or "doer," who is conscious of the experience. And second, experience is no longer positive, but more or less neutral. Next, an *experience₂* combines the earlier meaning of "accumulated knowledge" with an "undergoer," and so does an *experience₃*, with an "observer."[9] These latter meanings seem to emerge during the 17th century. In these meanings, the word makes its appearance also as a plural (experiences). Another transformation – *experience₄* – took place with the newly established trait of an "experiencer's current, subjective awareness-cum-feeling": "The experiencers know, above all, how they felt."[10] Experience can now be an episodic event, and the experiencer knows that something is happening to her now, subjectively. A prominent point here is the fact that the person's knowledge only emerges from this experience – there is no accumulation, but a specific memory for the same,

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8   This form can be found in English language use increasingly from the 16th century onwards till today. Shakespeare's use of "experience," Wierzbicka argues, shows exactly these meanings, so that one may call it for the matter of simplicity "Shakespearean experience" – see Anna Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense: The Hidden Cultural Legacy of English (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 36. As such, it is an objectively accessible and verifiable, accumulated knowledge, gained by age, travel, and so forth. I may add here that the same shift can be demonstrated for German "Erfahrung."

9   Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 37–38. One can add that this concept, experience3, is also to be found in Montaigne, with a focus on inner observation – see Martin Jay, Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 78.

10   Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 40.

reoccurring experience. "Since the person is taking notice of what is happening, that person knows what it is like. As a result, this person can subsequently remember what it was like and thus has certain qualitative (experiential) knowledge."[11] In this use, one can speak of one's "own experience" not relying on others (cf. Robert Boyle in his *Christian Virtuoso*[12]). Finally, she identifies an ***experience₅*** which evolved with the "empiricist individualism" (Shapin) of the 17th century. In this use, a strong link to "natural/experimental philosophy" and its new view of empirical knowledge, perception, and experimentalism is prominent. Now, experience appears in the meaning of "an observer's repeated and replicable current perception."[13]

This latter meaning, Wierzbicka argues, is present in the work of John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, first published in 1690. In strong contrast to accumulative, objective Shakespearean experience, Lockean experience is sensory based (especially, to see and to feel), subjective but replicable by others, and repeatable as single events or perceptions. Significantly, Locke almost exchangeably uses "experiment," as in this example, where "experience" is explained with 'testing/experimenting': "*Experience here must teach me*, what reason cannot: and 'tis by trying alone, that I can certainly know, what other qualities co-exist with those of my complex idea, v.g. whether that *yellow* [...] body I call *gold*, be *malleable*, or no."[14] While "experience" used as mass noun is still the default use by Locke, referring to an identical, repeated observation, one can witness an increase of the use of "experience" as a count noun. In this sense, individual, often unusual episodes can be termed "experience(s)," for example, a "weird experience," a "mystical" or "frightening experience." Indeed, at the turn to the 17th century, to speak of "experiences" in the plural becomes common, which is, most important for our context, also the case with the increasing use of religion as a count noun (*x as a religion*; *religions*), reflecting the post-1700 century positive connotation of religious tolerance and the acceptance of a religious plurality.[15]

In sum, according to Wierzbicka's review, the dominant pre-seventeenth century meaning did comprise especially the accumulation of knowledge over a longer period, and experience(s) as objective facts about persons ("being

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11   Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 41.
12   Quoted in Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 50.
13   Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 51.
14   John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. (London: Penguin, 1997), 569.
15   Henri Krop, "From Religion in the Singular to Religions in the Plural: 1700, a Faultline in the Conceptual History of Religion," in *Enlightened Religion: From Confessional Churches to Polite Piety in the Dutch Republic*, eds. Joke Spaans and Jetze Touber (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2019), 21–59.

experienced"). But then major changes emerged. While the older meanings were still in use, "experience" became identifiable as "an experience" – that is, *countable*, and no longer only *accumulative*. Moreover, it became *introspective*, subjective, and therefore connected to an awareness not to "be gleaned from the outside."[16] Experiences, now in the plural, can be marvelous, frightening, and are registered by the "experiencer." Often conceptualized as "empirical," it can be remembered in its unique value. This group of usages can be defined in which experience is **current experience**, and **sensory-like**, which is either a perception, or a series of perceptions, or record of perception, and may refer to an experiencer's "limited but reliable knowledge of a place and time."[17] Significantly, it came along with the rise of the verb "to experience." In addition, the form "x had a y experience" became common, in which "y" can mean, for example, alarming, distressing, disturbing, exciting, horrifying, painful, or upsetting. Exactly this change in use of experience as subjective awareness, provides, I hold, the essential background of the new term "religious *experience*." It may not be wrong to even think that the use in religious contexts was paramount for the new use of the term "experience" as such. Probably, it was primarily the meaning in which Protestants speak of the "experience of conversion," or one's own and individual experience of God's grace, and the like, which effectuated the semantic change. Before I can reflect on the emergence of "religious experience" as a scholarly category, however, it is necessary to review also the changes in the term "religious" that happened at the same time.

2.3   *Historical Changes of Conceptualizing "Religious/Religion"*
In the 17th and 18th century, the term "religious experience" more properly occurs to be rare. Almost always, it denotes "Christian experience," or "experience of Christ," and this often in a Protestant confessional perspective. Typical contexts are, for example, the following: "[… H]ow can a suitable practice be supported, or even exist, without experience? And what sort of religious experience must that be, which is not founded on a gracious knowledge of divine truth?"[18] The story of the English language concept of religious experience "from Fox and Bunyan through Jonathan Edwards and Wesley to William James and then to the present day," Wierzbicka says, deserves a detailed study.[19] Such a work would certainly be enlightening.

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16   Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 39.

17   Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 31.

18   T. Chapman, "Self-Religion Dangerous," The Evangelical Magazine 3 (1795): 329–332, 331.

19   Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 67.

An even more complex situation, however, arises if one includes "spiritual experiences" as part of the conceptual history of "religious experience." Although emerging already in medieval sources, "spiritual experience" becomes a prominent concept in Protestant conversion narratives, combining "an intense moment of spiritual awareness, a recitation of promises taken from scripture, followed by a list of proofs of conversion."[20] As such, Protestant conversion narratives follow influential literary narratives such as John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666), or *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). "Spiritual experiences" were disseminated in anthologies such as Vavasor Powel's *Spirituall Experiences of Sundry Beleevers* (1653), collected by nonconformist English preachers and publishers. Such testimonies of battles against doubt and sin were seen as evidence for God's grace.[21] While these Christian "experiences" ("spiritual," i.e., workings of the Holy Spirit) were of utmost importance to preachers and believers, the modern use of "religious experience," which denotes one and the same experience in a variety of *religions* could not yet become prominent. Christianity being the dominant and often exclusively *true religion*, other religions were not yet seen as expressing similar (or the same) "experience." Thus, next to an underlying religious tolerance, a semantic shift had to be made that combined mass noun and count noun aspects of religion. Certainly, the plural "religions" (Latin *religiones*) has been in use for long time.[22] Yet, it appears plausible to assume that the reflected use of "religions," as a more neutral category referring to a collective category of similar phenomena with doctrinal, ethical, historical, cultural, and social aspects, started only in the seventeenth century.[23] An essential fundament for this new use had been the idea of a positive tolerance, in which Christianity became disentangled from being the exclusive expression of God, truth, or the normative socio-political order. The colonial encounter with non-European cultures, and the Enlightenment thinkers' newly developed extra-religious, or even non-religious, point of view on religion and religions were essential to

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20   Abigail Shinn, Conversion Narratives in Early Modern England: Tales of Turning (Cham: Springer/Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 11.

21   D. Bruce Hindmarsh, The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 45; Sarah Rivett, The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

22   See the studies by Ernst Feil, 1986–2001; cf. Guy G. Stroumsa, A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 27.

23   "Religions" in the plural made it already in 1614 in the title of Edward Brerewood's work Enquiries Touching the Diversity of Languages and Religions through the Chief Parts of the World, classifying religions as those four: idolatry, "mahumetanism," Judaism, and Christianity. (Stroumsa, A New Science, 31.)

this achievement. It did not only spread the plural use – actually, "religions" were discovered as objects of comparative scholarly study.[24] Alexander Ross's work *Pansebeia, or, A View of all Religions in the World* (1653) treated the known "religions" quite exhaustively, yet not with respective "experiences," but rites, sacrifices, ceremonies, etc. With the Enlightenment ideas of a unity in human-kind, tolerance, and of the desirable social functions of civil religion, it became increasingly plausible to ask for an essence in religions that might be true in all, even if present in different degrees.

But how can the general shift in the seventeenth century, that undoubt-edly occurred, be explained? Wierzbicka points to philosophers such as Locke, emphasizing the moment of sense experience and introspection. Only occa-sionally, she mentions the correlated concept of "(to) experiment." It offers, I will argue, an important clue for understanding the new shift in meaning.[25] Obviously, the intentional search for testing experiences as sense perceptions has a lot in common with the scientific spirit that developed experimentation as a research strategy. One may only reflect on these lines in a theological work around 1700: "*Inward Experimental Religion* is perceived by the Sense of them that have it, and cannot be so clearly demonstrated by Words. Who can see a Taste? [...]. And Doctrinal Professors, who owe their Religion to Tradition and Education [...] cannot understand and believe what the Saints really enjoy. [...] Because many are deceived with a false Light, and pleased with a Delusion, does it follow that those who have vital *Experience of Religion*, are deceived?"[26] (Italics mine). Indeed, already Kathleen Lynch pointed out how the eviden-tial quality of "experience" in scientific experimentalism has been invoked in

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24   Krop, "Religion in the Singular"; Stroumsa, A New Science.
25   Cf. Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 44–5, 53, 60. She observes, for example, that the retrospective perspective on experience did not correspond well with the new view that emphasized current (sense) experience as a source of knowledge, established by Francis Bacon and adepts of "experimental philosophy," that is, with the emergence of the scientific culture of experimentation: "Indeed, from the point of view of the seventeenth-century experimental science, this is what matters most: a particular sense of experience, replicable and repeated by others." In John Locke or Robert Boyle, too, she finds examples in which the authors present mental and bodily experiments with experi-ence. In other words, they "did certain things to find out what happens under such cir-cumstances" (49) – a famous example is the status of afterimages that appear after staring in the sun, discussed by Locke, Newton and others. (Wierzbicka Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 45, cf. 46, 49).
26   Preface, unnumbered, by a friend of the author, in Sir David Hamilton, The private Christian's witness for Christianity to the notional and erroneous apprehensions of the Arminian, Socinian, and Deist of the age (...). (Printed for Thomas Cockerill, 1697).

Protestant autobiographies of the seventeenth century.[27] Rivett, too, emphasized the verification of spiritual experiences by witnessing visible changes, e.g., as a criterion in Thomas Shepard's collection of conversion testimonies (1641, 1649).[28] A more encompassing review would therefore also be in need to include the history of the concept "experimental religion." I may only finally point to Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) here, who uses in *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746) the terms "religious affections," and "Christian experience(s)" thereof.[29] The latter is obviously again understood as a kind of "experimental philosophy," namely, to *test* Christian beliefs as experience: "This is properly Christian experience, wherein the saints have opportunity to see, by actual experience and trial, whether they have a heart to do the will of God [...]. As this called experimental philosophy, which brings opinions and notions to test of the fact, so it is properly called experimental religion, which brings religious affections and intentions to the test of fact."[30]

There would be much to say on the paradigm shift in the understanding of experimentation that evolved between the 16th and 18th century and strongly affected the discourse on "religious experiences." The historian of science Peter Dear points out that in earlier neo-Aristotelian "natural philosophy," experiments served the purpose to illustrate a common experience of nature.[31] In the 17th century, however, a new understanding of experimentation emerged. Now, specific propositions were in the center of experimentation, conveyed and justified by the experimenters through specific reports of "event experiments."[32] The unique *ordo* of nature was no longer taken for granted but irritated by anomalies of some single and crucial experiments. Therefore, it is no longer "experience" – as a summative account, or in the meaning of a mass noun – that serves as the unshaken foundation of experimental science, but

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27   Cf. Kathleen Lynch, Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 173–178.

28   Rivett, The Science of the Soul, 104.

29   See Jonathan Edwards, A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections, in Three Parts (Philadelphia: James Crissy, 1746 [1821]), 106, 287.

30   Edwards, Treatise Concerning Religious Affections, 421.

31   He notes: "An 'experience' in the Aristotelian sense was a statement of how things happen in nature, rather than a statement of how something had happened on a particular occasion" (Peter Dear, Discipline & Experience: The Mathematical Way in the Scientific Revolution (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), cf. 125). Experiments, for the neo-Aristotelian tradition, had their role in illustrating or "manifesting" nature. Thus, "experiments" could demonstrate a general "experience" of how things happen in nature, and this experience could be transformed in universal statements or propositions ("heavy bodies fall").

32   Dear, Discipline & Experience, 15.

"experimental experience" in form of situational, specific reports of observable historical "events," such as: 'On this day with a certain humidity, a prism broke up white light into these spectral colors.' Although there was still some way to go from the 17th century to the modern hypothetico-deductive view of experimentation, "experience" in the latter took a different position within the whole experimental procedure, as has been aptly summarized by Dear: Moderns "place experience, at least as regards its formal justificatory role, at the *end* of a logical structure of deduction from an initial hypothesis: the hypothesis yields conclusions regarding observable behavior in the world, and experiment or observation then steps in to confirm or falsify these prediction."[33] In the 17th century, the focus slowly shifted towards novelty of experimental experiences, even if deduction from principles remained central. The emerging idea of novelty, combined with scientific curiosity as a self-sufficient goal, broadened the focus to now include the extraordinary, the unusual, the anomalous. This, in turn, was of central importance to self-experimentation as becoming prominent in romanticism. Romanticism, finally, is an important background for the emergence of the concept of a "religious experience of nature."

So, what to deduce from Wierzbicka's apt observations on "experience" in regard to the configurative phase of the use of "religious experience"? I will review her genealogy of "experience" and will combine it with the denominator "religious" to distinguish certain *possible* uses as a preliminary for our analysis of *real* uses. Thus, we get, first, religious *experience$_1$* – in the sense of positive, objective-observable *accumulated (past) knowledge*. I did not encounter examples of such a use, but texts speak of an "*experience* of religion," meaning the specific "experience" of Christianity. The same holds true for *religious experience$_{2/3}$*, which seems absent, too. Moving on to a hypothetical *religious experience$_4$* – the experiencer's subjective awareness-cum-feeling, including "experiencing" current episodic events as religious. It is in this 17th century meaning that the term "religious experience" emerged. If I am not mistaken, it is predominantly the meaning of an 'experience of Christ in one's own heart' which is of relevance here. Finally, *religious experience$_5$* – Lockean experience of an observer's repeated and replicable current perception. It seems that, for example, Asprem and Taves's concept of a religious experience as "event cognition," or Tanya Luhrmann's "inner sense cultivation," reflect a use of the term that builds both on *experience$_4$* and *experience$_5$*. It is this use that was popularized by William James, whose title *The Varieties of Religious Experience* reflects both the mass noun and count noun perspective.

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33   Dear, Discipline & Experience, 45.

2.4   *The Final Emergence of "Religious Experience" as Concept*
            and Category

The idea of one, singular "religion" (mass noun) *experienced* in almost all "religions" (count noun) seems to be the achievement of Friedrich D. Schleiermacher. Indeed, many follow Wayne Proudfoot and other scholars in tracing the roots of the modern meaning of the concept of "religious experience" to Schleiermacher's *Reden über die Religion*.[34] Proudfoot argues that for Schleiermacher, it formed part of his attempt to justify religious belief beyond metaphysics disenchanted by Kant, Hume, and Descartes.[35] The "turn to religious experience," Proudfoot says, "was motivated in large measure by an interest in freeing religious doctrine […] from dependence on metaphysical beliefs and ecclesiastical institutions." According to this interpretation, it was Schleiermacher who first emphasized religious experience, pitting it against devalued metaphysics, morality, belief, or ritual practice. Interestingly, however, Schleiermacher himself did not use the concept "religious experience" (religiöse Erfahrung) but qualifies "experience" with other terms (e.g., internal and unmediated experience, "innere/unmittelbare Erfahrung," *Reden*, 2).[36] Nevertheless, instead of "experiences," he depicts religion as "Gefühl" (feeling), "sinnliche Anschauung" (sense perception), and even as "Geschmack" (taste). Religion, in sum, appears as a feeling of the infinite, a sense, a taste, a consciousness, etc.[37] The adjective "religious," in contrast, modifies for example the nouns "feelings, meaning/sense, views" (Gefühl/e, Anschauung/en, Sinn, Ansichten). Significantly, Schleiermacher also used the plural "religions," as well as "positive religions" ("positive Religionen") – obviously, it is the idea of the mass noun *religion* that governs his approach to *religions*. You should discover, he says, "(the) religion in the religions" ("in den Religionen sollt Ihr die Religion entdecken,"[38]). But still, Christianity hovers as *the* true religion in a kind of higher potency above all other "religions." "Religion," as essence, is understood by Schleiermacher as a kind of self-manifesting substance, a living

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34   Friedrich D.E. Schleiermacher, Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, [1799] 1958).

35   Jay, Songs of Experience, 78–130; Proudfoot, Religious Experience, xiii.

36   "Da hat der eine Anschauungen der Welt und Formeln […], und der andere hat Gefühle und innere Erfahrungen, wodurch er sie dokumentiert. Jener flicht seine Formeln übereinander, und dieser webt eine Heilsordnung aus seinen Erfahrungen," says Schleiermacher: "So die Religion; bei den unmittelbaren Erfahrungen vom Dasein und Handeln des Universums, bei den einzelnen Anschauungen und Gefühlen bleibt sie stehen." (Schleiermacher, Über die Religion, 41–2, 32).

37   See Proudfoot, Religious Experience, 2–3; 10–26.

38   Schleiermacher, Über die Religion, 131, cf. 134.

spirit, in all "positive religions."[39] Christianity enlightens with the "sacred torch of one's own experience" the "bedeviled heart" of "bad religion." Schleiermacher directed his apology of religion as feeling, emotion, and visionary apperception primarily against dogmatic metaphysics, against the identification of religion and ethics, and against secular criticism. Interestingly, however, his emphasis of religion as perceived by senses, as a taste for the infinite reflects to a certain extent the seventeenth-eighteenth century shift to "experiences" as testable, observable, repeatable events. While Schleiermacher does not speak of "religious experience" *strictu sensu*, he is indeed probably the most decisive protagonist preparing the ground for the later establishment of "religious experience" ("religiöse Erfahrung") as a technical category.

As mentioned, to our disadvantage, no study so far covers the development of the concept "religious experience" from 1800 to the present. In the English language, William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is certainly the work which made the term "religious experience" famous. But where did it become the technical category, to be applied to various different religions? James and others at the end of the 19th century, e.g., the psychologist of religion Edwin Starbuck used it still as a term for the "experience" of Protestant conversion, but also as a category applying to all religion/s.[40] Conversion, however, was the blueprint for James's use of "religious experience," yet, slowly opening up to other "mystical states of consciousness."[41] One can easily see that most accounts of the beginning of the 19th century speak of religious experience as Christian experience, even if they refer to "religious experiences" in their title.[42] Almost always the word remains undefined. Rare are comments such as by Edward Goulburn, who defines "religious experience" as naming "religious impressions made by various means upon our souls, the sentiments and reflections to which circumstances give

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39   Schleiermacher, Über die Religion, 162.

40   In the years from 1897 onwards, cf. Christopher White, "A Measured Faith: Edwin Starbuck, William James, and the Scientific Reform of Religious Experience," Harvard Theological Review 101, no. 3–4 (2008): 431–45.

41   "One may say truly […] that personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness; so for us, who in these lectures are treating personal experience as the exclusive subject of our study, such states of consciousness ought to form the vital chapter from which the other chapters get their light" (James, Varieties, 294).

42   To name just few examples here: James Gough, "Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experiences, and Labours in the Gospel," ed. John Gough (High Wycombe, London: Orger, 1802); Andrew Preston Peabody, Religious Experience (Concord: NH: Head and Butters Monitor Press, 1834), or Thomas Cogswell Upham, The Life and Religious Experiences of Madame de la Mothe Guyon. In two Volumes (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1847, quoted in James, Varieties).

rise within us, the personal dealings which we conceive Almighty God to have had with us in Providence or in Grace."[43]

More important steps represent scholars sympathizing with Unitarian views such as the American preacher and writer Samuel Johnson (1822–1882). In a series of books under the title *Oriental Religions* he speaks, for example, of "religious experience" (in *India*, 1873, 697) but also of the "Buddhist experience," the "Chinese" and the "oriental experience," or the "human experience" as expressed in various religions. Still, Johnson implicitly reflects on the earlier exclusive meaning of "Christian experience" by saying: "The special origin and connection of these various forms of personal worship are of less importance to universal religion than the fact that they combine in Buddhism to cover all those great demands of popular religious experience which Christianity has claimed exclusive power and authority to meet" (Johnson 1877, 823). In German works, it seems that Wilhelm Dilthey is one of the first to use "religiöse Erfahrung/en" (religious experience/s) as a category applied to Christian, Islamic, and "Heathen" ("Heidentum") religions.[44] Nevertheless, in the 19th century, the dominant paradigm for "religious experience" is still the feature of Protestant conversion. For characterizing this core within the 19th century concept "religious experience," I will now turn to a necessary corollary of "conversion," namely, the emergence of conversion narratives, which are indispensable to describe "conversion," and thus, to grasp a key meaning of the concept of "religious experience."

2.5 *Conversion and the Dominant Focus on "Religious Experience" as Distinct Event*

Michael Mascuch has advanced the thesis that the capacity to produce a retrospective autobiographical narrative has been a model for and model of the modern individualist self. In conclusion, Mascuch says, that even though unintentionally, the "nonconformist biography veered sharply towards the precipice of modernity by constituting the voice of an individual authoritative subject."[45] It was the early Protestant authors who first criticized the implausibility and artificialness of the lives of the saints spelled out in hagiographies. Writing the emerging genre of spiritual autobiography, they made themselves liable to this new criterion of truth: namely, to attest of an "experience" of an

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43   Edward Meyrick Goulburn, The Idle Word: Short Religious Essays upon the Gift of Speech and its Employment in Conversation, 2nd ed. (London: Rivingtons, 1864), 118.

44   Wilhelm Dilthey, Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften: Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte (Göttingen: V & R, [1883] 1990), 274–279.

45   Michael Mascuch, Origins of the Individualist Self: Autobiography and Self-Identity in England, 1591–1791 (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1997), 116.

"awakening." This conversion is now narrated with the claim to give testimony for the inner process of transformation. Surely, it is still the grace of God and providence in the first place that makes it happen.[46] This is the primary agency. However, the "radicals" introduced new forms of testimony, of witnessing the actions of "the Truth," the inner "Light of Christ," and multiplied their message in an increasing production of printed books. Mascuch holds that in England, this capacity to produce autobiographies of "the experience" was achieved in the final decade of the 18th century. It is indeed a well-established fact that the practice of writing modern autobiographies was popularized in protestant cultures, even if the underlying question of how to define "autobiography" is far from being settled. The individualist self, Mascuch argues, considers himself and other persons as autonomous units, which lead to persons as producer and consumer "of stories about himself and other selves which place the self at the center of the system of relations, discursive or otherwise." Experience, moreover, is the word that radical circles use to "denote the personal sense of the '*Call* to *Christ*' or 'the *work* of *grace* upon [the] *heart*'."[47] However, the narratives of these experiences were not yet fully individual life stories but followed the narrative necessities of being identifiable testimonies, although the direction towards individuality was clear. John Newton (1725–1807), captain of a slave-trade ship who converted and became the famous author of the song "amazing grace," explained in regard to his conversion experience in his autobiography (1764): "We must not therefore make the experience of others, in all respects, a rule to ourselves, nor our own a rule to others [...]. As to myself, every part of my case has been extraordinary."[48] In the 17th century collection by John Rogers, the autobiographical intention of attesting this central experience was classified (by side-notes in the text) in a threefold manner, answering

(1)   when and where the person received "the Call,"
(2)   how it happened, and
(3)   which were the aftereffects of that call.[49]

Instead of the complex list of topoi in medieval hagiographic accounts of Saints – beginning with the parents, miraculous signs surrounding their birth and youth; the vocation, renunciation, peregrination, temptation, visions, etc. – this threefold scheme simplifies a complex life story to a point where it conforms to the most basic pattern of a conversion: the Call, the life before,

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46   Cf. Burton's Certaine Qvestions and Answeres includes a chapter dealing with 'Experimental Evidences' (that is, experiences) for 'the work of Grace,' (cf. Shinn, Conversion Narratives, 81).

47   Mascuch, Origins, 21, 117.

48   Quoted in Hindmarsh, Evangelical Conversion Narrative, 269.

49   Cf. Mascuch, Origins, 118.

and its aftereffects. This is the basic pattern that will replace the summative account of experiences with the narration of "*The Experience.*" In contrast, in earlier Christian hagiography one could see that in a line with the divine order of the world "the protagonist of a *vita* is already predestined to be a saint"[50] with various elements of sainthood, while in Anglican or Pietist biography, there is an increasing focus on this central experience of "grace." I would also like to stress the importance of the element (3) above, the "aftereffects" of the central experience of the "Call." This element – the effects by which this experience becomes a life-changing experience in the first place – forms a most central part of "the experience," even if it is usually argued to be a distinct observation of the experience and later changes in life. But this is not the case, as I will aim to show below.

Sarah Rivett has shown how also the Puritan testimony of faith called for narratives in which the biographers of their own conversion reports "struggled to respond to the central question of the Protestant Reformation: 'How do I know if I am saved?'"[51] The necessity to give an authentic report of the witnesses' awareness came along with something that may be called a pressure on creativity: "Repeating what had already been said risked producing a form with a deeply suspect content; a replicable experience was a dangerous one, for it meant that conversion could be faked or imagined without divine sanction."[52] The emergence of a genre of collections of individual narratives evidencing this central experience of grace, or, as one occasionally read, of an "experience of religion," or "spiritual experiences," helped to popularize these expectations on most intense "experiences" of conversion. Examples are the above mentioned *Spirituall Experiences, of Sundry Beleevers* (1653), or John Eliot and Thomas Mayhew's *Tears of Repentance* (1653). Rivett, who uses the term "religious experience" as a technical term here – even if the word does not yet show up in the more recent (19th century) meaning in 17th century sources – adds an interesting comment pertaining to the role of the evidential role of experimental: "No less than scientific experiment or empirical observation, the experience of grace had to be intelligible and recognizable to witnessing audiences."[53]

In sum: In this latest meaning the term "religious experiences," as a count noun, disguises the inseparable relation to the individual's own life lived – a

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50   Ineke Van'T Spijker, "Impressed by Their Stamp: Hagiography and the Cultivation of the Self," in *Hagiography and the History of Latin Christendom, 500–1500*, ed. Samantha Kahn Herrick, (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019), 194.

51   Rivett, The Science of the Soul, 4.

52   Rivett, The Science of the Soul, 31.

53   Rivett, The Science of the Soul, 31.

relation that was, though stylized, still present in the earlier centuries of conversion narratives. However, this dimension of presupposing a whole life lived for conceptualizing the religious experience of conversion has lost momentum over time. Instead, religious experiences are distinct, and repeatable. They are as natural as experiencing tastes, and as emotionally intense as "frightening experiences." Individuals argue that they have immediate access to their "experience," which was, in the Protestant configuration phase, guaranteed by a relating to God.

Although religious conversion and conversion narratives are comparatively well researched, the biographical and autobiographical setting of reports of religious experience/s are rarely objects of scholarly studies. Lacking is also a complete discursive history of the concept of religious experience. Both are noteworthy *lacunae*, given that "religious experience" holds such a central role in the discourse of, and on, religion. Obviously, the concept is used to legitimize insights, doctrines, emotions, and behavior from a religious point of view. Yet, as said, it is particularly central to claims that depart and end with such experience – for example, if religious experience is declared from William James and Joachim Wach onwards to be the transhistorical core of religions. The same function may serve the cognate experience declared to be "unmediated," "mystical," or "pure."

As has been highlighted, Methodism, Puritanism, Pietism, and various Protestant strands referred to conversions as "experiences." Thus, "religious experience" and a "religious (auto-)biography" should be seen as mutually supporting concepts. Given the shift towards *experience*$_4$ and *experience*$_5$, which allows to identify an "experience" as an isolated event of an "awareness-cum-feeling" that will have a lasting effect on the "post-experiential" life, a problem arises for the "experiencer" *themselves*. They will need criteria to identify this experience as being "religious." But with the inaccessibility of "experience," these criteria can only be formulated in respect to their own lives lived. As has been argued for in sociological contributions on conversion, conversion stories were taken as evidencing a substantial change in the "universe of discourse" (George H. Mead). Conversion, in this way, consists of a change in the "socially constructed frame of reference of self-evident assumptions about mankind and the world in which individuals structure their actions and *experience* them as purposeful"[54] (italics mine). There is substantial research on the qualitative aspect of such self-transformative experience in conversion

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54   Ulrike Popp-Baier, "Narrating Embodied Aims: Self-transformation in Conversion
      Narratives – A Psychological Analysis," *Forum Qualitative Social Research* 2, no. 3 (http://
      www.qualitative-research.net/fqs), 2.

narratives – for example, the change of self-concepts and narrative identity. Here, I would join those who argue that in many cases it is *the conversion narrative itself* that constitutes the self-transformation of the narrator and their subsequent, path-dependent change in self-ascriptions.[55] However, instead of taking the transformative "experience" as *the root of spiritual autobiographies* (and, often, as *real element of biographies*), I will argue below that it is essential to understand the narrative of spiritual autobiographies as an indispensable context for a central plot, the life-changing "religious experience." To repeat again what I see as the core of the "religious experiencer's reference problem": If it is true what Ludwig Wittgenstein and other philosophers have argued for – that there are no direct, accessible ways to compare the essence of one's own inner experiences with inner experiences of others except through verbal or written testimony – a question becomes pertinent: How do individuals proceed in evidencing the authenticity of their own experience(s) deemed "religious"?[56] It seems, I will argue below, that almost always, individuals narrating their life-changing religious experience refer to earlier cognate experiences they made while they were young. These experiences were made in the constitutive phase of religious socialization in childhood and youth, in a phase of emotionally intense imagination of religious worlds. These experiences, internalized, perhaps intermittently forgotten, are now revived and used to identify "*the* experience." Thus, on various levels, these earlier experiences are indispensable, and constitutive for the life-changing religious experience to emerge. Before I will finally try to outline how this understanding can be made fruitful for the understanding of religious experiences, I will turn to the opposite model of "religious experiences" as distinct "experiential events" – as has been advocated more recently.

3   Part Two: "Religious Experience" in Scholarly Use: Experiential Events and Autobiographical Accounts of Experiences

3.1   *The Dominant Focus on a Distinct Experiential Event as "Religious Experience"*

In the more recent study of religious experiences, the dominant focus has been on religious experiences as distinct events – interestingly, also in cases

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55   See Popp-Baier, "Narrating Embodied Aims."

56   On the problems of a potential lack of veracity, or inauthenticity, more broadly, cf. Jens Schlieter, *How is it like to be Dead? Near-death Experiences, Christianity, and the Occult* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

in which individuals narrating or reporting their experiences underscored that the "life-changing" quality often consisted of a complex process comprising *not just one event.* Leo Tolstoy, for example, conveys in his autobiography *My Confession* (*Íspoved*, 1882, quoted in part by Moser and Meister in their recent handbook introduction on "religious experience") that he saw a powerful light shining within him.[57] He described this as returning to a "force" that had already guided him in childhood and youth. But neither was he able to say when the "experience" had started, nor, how it was accomplished.[58] Despite of many other such examples, there is still this dominant focus on a distinct, and often singular, event of a transformative religious experience. I will illustrate this paradigm of conceptualizing "religious experience" with just one – though prominent – recent approach, to namely, by Ann Taves.[59] In general, it is Taves' aim to describe the interpretive, attributional processes which come into play when certain experiences are understood as "religious." By which behavior, she asks, do people mark things as "special," and "set (them) apart" from things of the same category? This specialness (namely, the quality of being religious), she holds, can be attributed to virtually everything (things, persons, experiences, etc.).[60] Thus, she argues, the ontological question of whether there is an encounter with the "sacred," "holy" or "God" can remain open if one speaks of "things deemed religious," and, accordingly, of "experiences deemed religious."[61] Taves holds that even if some "might view the experience as (say) a hallucination," it is in many cases "the *feeling* of presence" which will be "attributed to the *actual* presence of an invisible agent"[62] (italics in orig.). Surely, the attributional framework leaves the ontological question open (see

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57   See Moser and Meister, Companion to Religious Experience, 2; Leo Tolstoy, My Confession
        and What I Believe (London: Oxford University Press, 1920 [1882]).

58   See Moser and Meister, *Companion to Religious Experience*, 2–3; see Tolstoy, *My Confes-
        sion*, 75.

59   Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of
        Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

60   Taves follows Durkheim in assuming that a religious group may protect the "sacred"
        against profanation, "with prohibitions against selling, trading, mixing, or comparing
        it with ordinary things" (Taves, Religious Experience, 34). While this description fits
        to things, it seems at best metaphorical in the case of experiences. – Indeed, I would
        side here with Sharf's Wittgensteinian move, discussed above experiences (as objects
        of ascriptions) do not fall in the same category as things. While things exist without
        being "deemed special," experiences are only what they are by exactly being "special." In
        other words, the ascription process and the experiences cannot be disentangled, which
        becomes even more prominent if one leaves a model of experience governed by "sense
        perception" of objects or "objectifiable" feelings.

61   Taves, Religious Experience, 14.

62   Taves, Religious Experience, 41.

the abstinence from questions of authenticity),[63] but it seems clear that the cognitive metaphors of "set-apartness," and "special things" will only work if there is an identifiable basis to which qualities can be attributed.[64]

Seemingly, Taves does not consider the biographical setting of experience to be a prominent factor. The uses of the word "experience" listed in her approach, cover, she argues, four respects: "(1) specific experiences of something ('I experienced something' [...], or 'the experience was special'); (2) experience as a cumulative abstraction ('my experience suggests' [...]); and (3) types of experience, some more abstract and some more concrete ('religious experience' [...] or 'life experience')," and, finally, a "synonym for 'consciousness.'"[65] "Life experience," to emphasize, is not meant here in a biographical or autobiographical sense (auto-/biographies are not mentioned in Taves' study). Moreover, explaining that she will only treat the meanings of "experiences of something" and of "consciousness" as relevant, the auto-/biographical setting of experiences seems in those respects unimportant anyway. Already in this work, Taves describes experiences emerging in the context of an "original event," even though she underscores that only emic observers will be able to say if the "sensory experience" of the original event is "real or imagined."[66] Certainly, the ascription model defies any attempt to speak of a "religious experience" *sui generis*, which would be the assumption of Perennialist approaches. However, the concept of an "original event" (in emic discourse) informs also the etic observation: Taves argues for neurological correlatives that can in principle be observed, which rests on the assumption of a meaningful, distinct event. Equally, in her discussion of "anomalous events" and in the ascription classification, in terms of ontology her model is indirectly referential.[67] In general, for psychological theories of experience, this assumption of "events" is not problematic. However, as I argue here, if one assumes that there is a trans-individual class of events that are "religious experiences" (or "experiences deemed religious," for that matter), a referential model becomes a problem – and not, primarily, because it is problematic to account for a "religious" experience-event, but because it seems problematic to focus exclusively on such an "event" if at the same time the biographical and autobiographical frames of such reported experiences are left unconsidered. The decisive framework to construe religious experience "event-like" has again been emphasized in a more recent

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63   Cf. Taves, Religious Experience, 158.
64   Taves, Religious Experience, 35.
65   Taves, Religious Experience, 57.
66   Cf. Taves, Religious Experience, 158.
67   Taves, Religious Experience, 39–45, 53–4, 69.

contribution by Taves together with Egil Asprem.[68] A feature of their elaborate model is to distinguish between such a distinct experiential "event" and the "event narrative." The latter implies an attempt to describe the event "publicly" (e.g., noting it down in a diary, or presenting it orally). In the case of reported "religious" experiences, however, one almost always deals with event narratives. This distinction seems helpful only if one argues that in experimental real-time settings there are "religious experiences" without any articulation, if not, untouched by internal inner articulation (the well-known "beyond language" feature of pure and "unmediated" experiences). Yet, of such an experience one may only know from a first-person perspective. This experimental setting, unfortunately, encounters various epistemic problems that shall not be discussed here. To turn to the question of how the "event (narrative)" is conceptualized as being part of a whole narrative autobiographical identity, I may once more state that this model does not offer much in this regard. Asprem and Taves discuss the Perennialist and the Constructivist model before finally adding their own, "Event Cognition," as the golden third option.[69] While the Perennialists presuppose an accessible, "universal core experience" encoded in narratives, the Constructivist will designate them as "experience narratives." Thus, Constructivists, Asprem and Taves argue, deny that there is any access to the experience, or the experiential event, itself – a radical option they consider unconvincing (as a side remark, I may add that the authors portray the Constructivist model as being based on "discourse" and "culture." There are no further subdivisions in "culture." For example, there is no explicit mention of other factors such as socialization and community). "Event Cognition," therefore, builds on experience narratives and "event models." The latter shall allow to construct a "working model" of the experience at hand. References to the "religious" aspect of experiences are astonishingly sparse and follow largely the Cognitive Science of Religion paradigm. Factors, that the event model will consider, include "real-time appraisals" of the unfolding (religious) experience, but also the impact of "prior knowledge." The latter is probably the most salient feature for the question pursued here. Asprem and Taves argue that "various forms of prior knowledge evolved and learned, event-schematic and referent-specific are tightly interwoven in real-time experience"[70] come into play. They invoke the example of 'seeing a ghost,' arguing that referent-specific knowledge that "a house is 'haunted' can trigger a ghost-seeing event schema,

68   Egil Asprem and Ann Taves, "Experience as Event: Event Cognition and the Study of (Religious) Experiences," *Religion, Brain, & Behaviour* 7, no. 1 (2017): 43–62.

69   See Table 2 in Asprem and Taves, "Experience as Event," 6.

70   Asprem and Taves, "Experience as Event," 8.

which will guide one's attention in certain ways. The script draws attention to particular perceptions or sensations […] and triggers evolved inference systems such as agent detection."[71] Instead of evaluating aspects of biography, socialization, or narrative identity (though mentioned), they point out that narratives of "what had happened" can be delivered much later in life, or may change over time, which may help to distinguish an "initial spontaneous appraisal of the event"[72] from later forms of "reworked," or repetitively "retold" versions. A second, to a certain extent 'biographical' aspect that Asprem and Taves discuss is the effect of continuous, repetitive cultivation practices, or the question of "skill" (cf. 13). In other words, religious experiences as events can be the outcome of specific training. Interestingly, in this context, the authors neither mention asceticism or Asian self-cultivation techniques such as meditation, but refer, in this context, most prominently to Tanya Luhrmann's work on "inner sense cultivation."[73] Luhrmann's example, drawn from field research in Charismatic evangelical congregations, pertains to a less systematic form of inner generation of mental images in prayer. For our context, the systematic training of "religious experiences" (in the way the word is used by Asprem and Taves), is a much more salient feature in Christian Orthodox and Catholic monasticism, in Buddhist traditions, Daoism, Yoga, and various other techniques that include bodily cultivation practices. So, why refer to Luhrmann's study of evangelicals? Because Luhrmann's description of "religious experience," extracted from present-day US charismatic congregations, shares basic features of Asprem's and Taves's approach discussed above.[74]

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71   Asprem and Taves, "Experience as Event," 8.

72   Asprem and Taves, "Experience as Event," 11.

73   Tanya M. Luhrmann, *When God talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012); Tanya M. Luhrmann, "Building on William James: The role of learning in religious experience," in *Mental Culture: Classical Social Theory and the Cognitive Science of Religion*, eds. D. Xygalatas and W.W. McCorkle, Jr (Durham: Acumen, 2013).

74   One may compare, for example, the following conclusions: "'Inner sense cultivation' seems to contribute to intense spiritual experience of God: the near-tangible sense of God's presence, an awareness of profound spiritual knowing […], and other unusual spiritual experiences. [… U]sing the imagination to know God at least allows people to attend to their minds in a way that makes these experiences more likely […] the manner we think that unusual sensory experiences are made possible: that potential breaks [… are] corrected below the level of awareness in most daily experience, but that when people attend to their mind with more care and more interest in the divine, the partial perceptions and fleeting thoughts […] are allowed to flower into meaning" (Tanya M. Luhrmann and R. Morgain, "Prayer as inner sense cultivation: An attentional learning theory of spiritual experience," *Ethos* 40, no. 4 (2012): 359–389).

In sum, this model highlights the narrowing down of "religious experience" as a kind of perception of *something* that may last as long as the "event" takes place. Asprem and Taves devote only few thoughts on how individual biography and models of individual narrative identity will influence if and how a (religious) person will describe certain "experiences" as "religious." But how react theorywise if individuals describe the experience not as religious, but as "aesthetic," "existential," "paranormal," "mystical," "meaningful"? Or, if they speak of a "religious experience" that a certain, protestant-biased scholar would rather name "conventional-ritualist," or the like? An "event cognition" model, thus, does not help in analyzing *what* attributing "religious," and by *whom*, to such an experience may mean – in contrast to, say, attributing a "spiritual," "transformative," or "transcendental" potency.

3.2   *How to Know One's Experience Is "Religious"? Some Perspectives on how to Study Religious Experiences in the Future*

In the following, I will argue that instead of focusing on an isolated experience "deemed religious," it is necessary to bring in the earlier meaning of experience – *experience$_{1–3}$*, the model of *past experience* as *accumulated knowledge of a doer and observer*: an "experience" that to my knowledge has never been designated as "religious." With this model in mind, I will argue that "religious experience" can only be addressed in the framework of the individuals' *entire autobiography* as "religiously" meaningful episode or event. The remaining pages will be used for explaining this perspective. To start with, I presuppose with certain strands of modern philosophy that there are no direct, accessible ways for individuals to compare the essence of their "experience" ("religious experience" in the meaning of "subjective awareness-cum-feeling," i.e. *experience$_4$*) with "the experience" of others – except through comparing verbal or written testimony. But in such testimonies, individuals are generally aware of the potential lack of veracity, of inauthenticity, of testimonies by others. Moreover, individuals themselves are in need of criteria in order to secure their descriptions of their "religious experiences." How do they conceive of such criteria, and how do they retrieve the relevant events from their memory? In sum, how do they identify and classify their subjective experiences as "religious," but also – as "experiences"? To me, it seems that individuals who narrate a certain more recent "religious" experience refer almost always to *earlier cognate experiences they have made while they were young*. These earlier experiences are usually part of the constitutive phase of their religious socialization in childhood and youth. In other words, they were made in a phase of emotionally intense imagination of religious worlds. Internalized, and perhaps intermittently forgotten or hidden, they will be revived and used to identify a religious experience – especially,

if it is an extremely meaning, life-changing (or transformative) experience. As such, these earlier experiences are not only constitutive for the primary, deep structure of religious socialization. Of equal importance is their indispensable and constitutive function as the individual's *internal criterion* for how to identify the more recent religious experiences.

To illustrate the hypothesis on how the individual will refer to the pre-experiential life in order to contextualize the more recent life-changing religious experience, I will start with a famous pre-modern case, namely autobiographical narrative of Siddhārtha Gautama, the historical Buddha. Certainly, the term "religious experience" is absent here.[75] However, there is a very prominent concept of transformative experience with emotional and cognitive aspects, namely "awakening" (*bodhi*), from a root which provides the basis for the respective *part. perf. pass.*, Sanskrit *buddha* – the honorific title "Awakened One." It refers in Buddhism first to the historical Buddha, the Buddhas, and subsequently, to Buddhism as a tradition itself. *Bodhi*, "awakening," one could say, denotes the central "experience," in which the Buddha, while meditating under the tree, achieved the knowledge of his own liberation from suffering and from future births. Interestingly, in the autobiographical sources in which the Buddha narrates his spiritual quest, he outlines his search as a linear sequence of attempts that were unsuccessful. First, he left the meditation practices of his two Yogic teachers that did not avail the bliss and awareness of full liberation. Neither were his radical ascetic practices hailed with salvific results. After almost starving himself to death, so the Buddha explains, he finally thought to himself: "'And whatever recluses and brahmins at present experience painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this. But by this racking practice of austerities I have not attained any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. Could there be another path to awakening? (*Siyā nu kho añño maggo bodhāyā*)?' I considered: 'I recall that when my father the Sakyan was occupied, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first *jhāna* [meditative state]. Could that be the path to awakening?' Then, following on that memory, came the realisation: 'That is

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75   There is no concept for "religious experience" in classical Indian languages that covers basic meanings of the term. Simply, there isn't. There are, of course, concepts of experience in the meaning of "sense perception," such as the Sanskrit/Pali term vedanā, but all of them lack the element "religious," because there is no equivalent to the modern Western term "religious" in early India, too, which shall not be discussed here.

the path to awakening.'"[76] In other words, the Buddha, as depicted here, already knows what to find! He knew it all the time. Moreover, it is the memory of this initial state that leads over to the other three meditative states that is invoked in order to serve as an additional criterion for the authenticity of the awakening – the *real* awakening. Sure, it would be overstretching the evidence to argue that the young Gautama did not enter this state of his "first meditation" spontaneously but did so intentionally. One could hypothesize that he was already as a teenager introduced into meditative practices by unnamed Yogic teachers, or that he picked up depictions of such practices and their intended states and goals in respective conversations by expert *virtuosi*.[77] Be this as it may: the take-home message of the Buddha is this: In his autobiographical narrative, the path to "awakening" is much less solitary than it seems. If one would – in some hermeneutic naivety – assume that the Buddha would have called it a "religious experience," he would probably say that he had already "experienced" the first or initial phase of awakening in his youth.

The Buddha's reference to an earlier biographical event is, I assume, not arbitrary. It is necessary for him to identify the track leading to his later experience (awakening), similar to modern Western individuals who aim to identify their transformative experience as "religious." On the one side, it solves specific epistemic problems of otherwise incommunicable events: Only repetition allows to identify something as something – given it is, as is "religious experience," not intersubjectively accessible, as is generally the case with experiences in the modern meaning (*experience$_4$* and *experience$_5$*). Only if it is a recurring event will an "experiencer" be able to say it belongs to a category – and "religious experience" is a category of experiences. But how does this problem play out – and I will now come to my second example – if the *category* "religious experience" is broadly in use by practitioners and scholars of religion?

I may now apply these observations to a case discussed by William James. In his *Varieties*, lecture IX, "conversion," he takes the example of Stephen H. Bradley, narrating in 1830 his conversion the year before.[78] Let me shortly outline

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76   Bhikkhu Bodhi and Bhikkhu Nanamoli, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Kandy: BPS, 1995). *Mahāsaccaka Sutta*, MN 36; M I.246; Bodhi 1995, 340, with terminological adaptation, https://suttacentral.net/mn36 /pli/ms.

77   Imagine, for a moment, the Buddha had failed in his quest for liberating knowledge and would reunite with his family, returning to his hometown. This he did, tradition holds, in his earlier life as the Bodhisattva Vessantara. A narrative of his spiritual travelogue would certainly look quite different.

78   James, Varieties, 150 on this case: "I choose the quaint case of an unlettered man, Stephen H. Bradley, whose experience is related in a scarce American pamphlet" [the footnote refers to: "A Sketch of the Life of Stephen H. Bradley, from the age of five to

his "remarkable experience," as the title has it. Bradly, 24 years old, alone, hears of a "revival of religion" with numerous conversions in his neighborhood. New converts ask him if he has "religion." He is not sure. Bradley narrates that he visits a Methodist preacher, invoking colorful pictures of the final Judgment just the day at which later his conversion happens. And in his unfolding experience, a memory which pertains to his religious socialization appears: He describes the effect of the "Holy Spirit" on his beating heart. His heartbeat increases, and he feels a stream of the Lord's Spirit that takes passion of his heart. He feels an incredible happiness, an inexpressible fullness with God's grace and love. In his words: "all at once [...] my memory became exceedingly clear, and it appeared to me as if the New Testament was placed open before me, eighth chapter of Romans, and as light as if some candle lighted was held for me [...] I read these words: 'The Spirit helpeth our infirmities with groanings which cannot be uttered'" (James 1982, 152). Later, the Bible is used to identify the passage again that played a major role in his conversion experience.

In this account conversion is obviously intimately interwoven with religious circles and contexts, both in his youth and his immediate actual environment. It is not a "solitude" (James) from which the experience emerges. James explains that he selected this case because it "shows how in these inner alterations one may find one unsuspected depth [...] of whose existence we have no premonitory knowledge. Bradley thought that he had been *already fully converted at the age of fourteen*" (James 1982, 150, quoting from Bradley narrating of his first conversion of 1820[italics mine]). This information is crucial. The teenage conversion allows to conclude that Bradly already had a conversion experience that could help him to identify his second conversion which renews or intensifies the first conversion. Finally, a public service in the name of religion follows, which shows the "life-changing quality" of the whole.[79] The case illustrates nicely the major point made here: "*the* experience" is part of a series of experiences that help the reporting individual to identify the most recent, "full" experience.

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twenty-four years, including his remarkable experience of the power of the Holy Spirit on the second evening of November, 1829. Madison, Connecticut, 1830"]. [This source, a 12 page pamphlet, is not available to me]. The case has often been discussed again.

79   "After breakfast I went round to converse with my neighbors on religion, which I could not have been hired to have done before this, and at their request I prayed with them, thought I had never prayed in public before" (quoted in James, Varieties, 153). Bradly speaks in various combinations of an "experience," but not of a "religious experience." In this regard, one should more precisely designate Bradley's experience as conversion (understood as a mass noun).

A third example, this time from the 20th century, shall help to further illustrate the point. This time, it is taken from the autobiography *The Center of the Cyclone. An Autobiography of Inner Space* by the American physician, inventor and 'psychonaut' John C. Lilly.[80] There, he explains of his first LSD experience: "I lay down on the bed between two stereo loudspeakers and went with Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The music entered into me and programmed me into a deeply religious experience. The whole experience had first been programmed and stored in my very early youth, when I was a member of the Catholic church serving at Mass and believing, with the intense faith of youth, in everything that I was learning in the church. I moved with the music into Heaven. I saw God on a tall throne as a giant, wise, ancient Man. He was surrounded by angel choruses, cherubim and seraphim, the saints were moving by his throne in a stately procession. I was there in Heaven, worshiping God, worshiping the angels, worshiping the saints in full and complete transport of religious ecstasy."[81] Lilly not only perfectly illustrates the modern meaning of a life-changing and at the same time repeatable "religious experience." He moves on to explain a second experience: "I was able to go back through memory and get to the period of my childhood when I believed in the Catholic church. Suddenly I began to remember that I had had visions very similar to the experience under LSD when I was a little boy preparing for confession in a darkened church."[82] Once again, it is the religious socialization of his youth that is used for identifying the true "religious" nature of the current experience. Once again, "*the* experience" is not only rendered plausible with the former one – it almost incorporates the earlier.[83]

Let me first recapitulate the historical genesis of the concept of "religious experience." It became obvious how a protestant self-understanding of a distinct moment of a spiritual conversion, of a "Call," led to the model of a Christian "religious experience" of grace. In combination with a turn towards experience as sense-perception, as repeatable, etc., and in parallel with the increasing importance of empirical, experimental-experiential techniques in

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80   John C. Lilly, *The Center of the Cyclone: An Autobiography of Inner Space* (New York: Julian Press, 1972).

81   Lilly, The Center of the Cyclone, 10.

82   Lilly, The Center of the Cyclone, 15–6.

83   A "generalization from my experiences," says Lilly: "Let me state this as simply as possible. What one believes to be true, either is true or becomes true in one's mind, within limits to be determined experimentally and experientially. These limits are beliefs to be transcended"; and ibid., 16: "Since I was only seven years old and had seen paintings of artistic concepts of God, this is what I saw in the visions. I also saw His love, His caring, and His creation of us" (Lilly, The Center of the Cyclone, 13).

the sciences of nature, "religious experience" became an prominent epistemic strategy for declaring religious truths to be authentic (in contrast to dogma, ritual, sacred objects, holy life, etc.). With the increasing acceptance of a plurality of religions, individuals were able to declare "religious experiences" to be at the heart of religion/s – Schleiermacher and others probably being the first. Thus, to speak of "religious experience" became common in a double meaning. It depicted a kind of solitary transformative experience in autobiographical testimony from a first-person perspective – construed, like sense perceptions, as a subjective awareness-cum-feeling. Secondly, it became a category for declaring – from a third-person perspective, with or without including first-person knowledge – such transformative including more moderate religious experiences to be present in certain or all religious traditions.[84]

It is, however, as argued above, indispensable for the "experiencer" to evaluate their life as a whole for bestowing meaning on the concept of a central "religious experience." If this in turn presupposes that the individual will have to refer to earlier, categorically similar "religious experiences" (usually from the most intense phase of early religious socialization), it will be necessary to consider in the study of "religious experiences" the respective *individual autobiographical frame*. Or, to put it differently, it will be necessary to include the earlier summative meaning of "experience" in the study of religious experience – the mass noun "experience," depicting a biography as a process of summing up earlier experience, if not, as a growth of "experiencedness" (I am referencing here the German "Erfahrenheit"). Instead of declaring "religious experience" to be a distinct experiential event, which has been done for almost 120 years now, studies sensitive for the methodological problems of studying first-person accounts of religious experience, should always ask for the individual system of reference the individual will bring into play if speaking of religious experience.[85]

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84   If I am not mistaken, however, in recent scholarship an affirmative use of the category of "religious experience" largely implies an equally affirmative view on religious meaning. The same seems to be the case with the concept of "transformative experience," which does not seem to know a negative mode, but implies only *positive* transformation (see, for example, Laurie A. Paul, *Transformative Experience*. New York: Oxford, 2014).

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Self-praise Hymns and Mystical Experiences

Ophira Gamliel

Abstract

The article argues that self-praise hymns (a.k.a. aretalogies or in Sanskrit *ātmastuti*) can be analyzed as an inventory of records of mystical experiences across religious traditions and over history, similar to inventories of mystical experiences gathered by way of structured questionnaires. The genre is characterized by linguistic features such as paradoxical predications, gnomic temporalities and deictic indexicalities. The paper compares case studies in Sanskrit, Hebrew, Coptic, and Tibetan whereby a deity or a 'culturally postulated supernatural agent' speaks in the first-person of its otherworldly nature. The article thus offers a novel analytic approach to the study of mystical experiences.

Keywords

1 Introduction: William James, Reality, Perception, and the Mystical

In the second season of a popular internet series *The Man at the High Castle*, the wise and elderly Japanese Pacific States trade minister Nobusuke Tagomi starts moving between two parallelly existing realities. He enters a library, looking at a pile of censored books just before shifting to an alternative reality.[1] The book cover that captures the eye is that of William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, possibly alluding to one of James' most frequently quoted paragraphs in relation to the mystical experience:

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1 For a blog on the series episode and an image of the frame with the books, see https://www.tor.com/2016/12/20/the-man-the-high-castle-season-two-series-review/ (accessed March 12, 2021).

It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. *No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.* How to regard them is the question, – for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. *At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality.*[2]

The idea that altered states of consciousness relate to parallel, alternative realities is reinforced in the above-mentioned scene referencing it back to William James and his association of the interdependency of perception and reality. This interdependency, according to James, is essential for his construal of the mystical experience as intrinsic to religious experience, for "with this we make connection with religious mysticism pure and simple."[3] Moreover, James implicitly, at least, assumes that mystical experiences are empirically accessible via experiencing altered states of consciousness induced by psychoactive substances, as he states right at the outset: "Some years ago I myself made some observations on this aspect of nitrous oxide intoxication and reported them in print. One conclusion was forced upon my mind at that time, and my impression of its truth has ever since remained unshaken."[4]

This formulation is, of course, highly problematic for various reasons, despite James' contribution in taking the first step towards situating the study of religious experience – with the mystical as its core – under the scrutiny of scholarly, scientific, and academic engagement. The two major problems with James' formulation are: a) that he ascribes truth claims to mystical experiences based on his own and his peers' experiences, and b) that he assumes these experiences of an altered state of consciousness are connected with religious mysticism and comparable to mystical experiences in a variety of religious

2   William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901–1902* (New York/London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902), 388 (my emphasis).

3   James, *The Varieties*, 393.

4   James, *The Varieties*, 387.

traditions. In other words, James' formulation is uncritically based on his own experience, on the one hand, and on a highly skewed understanding of what 'mysticism' means in diverse religious traditions, on the other hand. The combination of personal experience and cultural bias thus leads him to assume that every religious tradition has at its core a mystical experiential dimension.[5]

Ever since James' formulation of the mystical experience, scholars of religion, philosophers, and psychologists of religion revised, refined, debated, and reformulated the definition of mystical experiences and their significance to human cognition and to social and material realities.[6] Scholars of religion found the Jamesian 'common core thesis' extremely problematic, and formulated a constructivist approach to the topic, arguing that an unmediated experience of some 'Ultimate Reality' or 'Absolute Truth' is impossible. Thus, Steven Katz argues that it is highly problematic to view one's own experience as universal 'religious mysticism' and, perhaps more importantly, as identical to that of others, be they modern, rational 'experientialists', or premodern mystics like St. Theresa.[7] Moreover, the assumption that one's own experience constitutes the experiential core common to all religions, be it Yoga for Hindus or Sufism for Muslims, reeks of cultural biases, even when relating to Christian mysticism, as Grace Jantzen argues.[8] Indeed, James' ahistorical and orientalist depiction of 'world religions' seems naïve a century later, and his perennialism that reached its peak in the work of Walter T. Stace met the fierce opposition of constructivists, starting with Katz, arguing that assuming an unmediated experience – exalted and profoundly shaking as it may be – is a fallacy.[9] James' construal of the topic was further dismissed as a biased form of romanticism and post-Kantianism until, eventually, the whole idea

5   This formulation is known as the 'common core thesis', cf. Ralph W. Hood, "The Common Core Thesis in the Study of Mysticism," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (online, 2016).

6   For religious studies approaches, see Nelstrop and Magill, *Christian Mysticism*, 1–20. See also Richard King "Mysticism and Spirituality," in John Hinells (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (London/New York: Routledge 2009). For an extensive survey of the philosophical approaches to the study of mysticism, see Jerome Gellman, "Mysticism." The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2019 Edition). For an extensive survey of the approaches by psychologists of religion, see Taves, "Mystical and other Alternations," 669–82.

7   Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), 22–25.

8   Grace M. Jantzen, "Mysticism and Experience," Religious Studies 25, no. 3 (1989).

9   See Katz, "Language, Mysticism, and Epistemology," 27–30.

of exploring the experiential dimension of religion, in particular the mystical experience, was dismissed as an empty rhetorical exercise.[10]

But there are other scholars that while being critical of the Jamesian construal of mystical experiences further explore its implications on the comparative study of religion and, in particular, South and East Asian religions. Over the decades past Katz' fierce objection to the 'common core thesis', James' fourfold definition of the mystical experience as ineffable, noetic, passive, and transient, was problematized in relation to the formulations of the experiential dimensions in Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian traditions.[11] Sallie King and Richard King, scholars of Buddhism and South and East Asian religions, responded that in ruling out the possibility of an unmediated experience, Katz and other constructivists ignore the fact that Buddhist and Hindu philosophers and practitioners aim at achieving precisely that which is unmediated.[12] Such an achievement, it should be stressed, is directly related to the historical rigorous, argumentative logic developed in Indic traditions to analyze the interface between perception and reality. Whether monists, dualists, or phenomenologists, all belonging in the over-arching Indic intellectual tradition seem to agree that it is reality that is mediated by perception, and that reality – whatever that may mean – is disentangled from mediation only upon clearing up the mind of any mental constructions whatsoever. Indeed, meditational practices in many Indic traditions aim precisely at that. For example, the second *sūtra* of Patañjali's Yogasūtra succinctly formulates this idea in its second verse, explaining what yoga is: *yogaś cittavṛttinirodhaḥ* (yoga is the cessation of the mind's activities). Only then, the Yogasūtra continues, is the conscious subject, the *draṣṭṛ* (seer) stabilized in its own identity (*tadā draṣṭuḥ svarūpe 'vasthānaṃ*). In other words, reality *is* perception free of any perceptible objects to be experienced. This definition for the practice of Yoga and its end goal resonates with terms such as 'pure consciousness experience' and 'absolute unitary being', coined by psychologists of religion in their attempts to define and characterize mystical experiences.[13]

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10   For the criticism of James as culturally biased, see Jantzen, "Mysticism and Experience." For the criticism of the term 'experience' as an analytical category, see Sharf, "The Rhetoric of Experience."

11   For rejecting the Jamesian criterion of transiency, see King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 157. For rejecting the criterion of passivity, see Christine Overall, "The Nature of Mystical Experience," *Religious Studies* 18, no. 1 (1982). For deconstructing James' criterion of ineffability, see Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Mysticism and Reality: Ineffability." Journal of Indian Philosophy 3 no. 3–4 (1975).

12   King, "Two Epistemological Models"; King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 167–186.

13   Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterations," 670.

In what follows, I focus on critical approaches to the Jamesian construal of mystical experiences from the diachronic and hermeneutic perspective of religious studies, while integrating synchronic, empirical studies on mystical experiences from the perspective of the psychology of religion and cognitive psychology.

2   Altered Sense of Self and Otherworldly Entities

There is a problem, though, with the so-called 'pure consciousness event' in addressing the diverse and rich phenomena classified as mystical experiences, as it leaves us with nothing to experience, with no object of perception, let alone a conscious subject left to communicate their experience.[14] The Yogasūtra does address this problem in its third chapter dealing with *siddhi*s, or supernatural powers attributed to accomplished yogis, that seem like a mapping of mystical experience accounts, such as reading thoughts, moving between time dimensions, changing body size at will, etc.[15] The aim is, however, to attain 'seedless hyper-consciousness' (*nirbījasamādhi*), where only the conscious subject (*draṣṭṛ*) remains, while no perceptible object whatsoever is left at all. As Yohanan Grinshpon argues, the author of the Yogasūtra was in all likelihood documenting and studying yogic practices as a *philosopher* rather than a *practitioner*.[16] His research project as summarized in the text was embedded in a larger project of exploration into human perception and the nature of reality, as attested in the vibrant and sophisticated *philosophical* debates that circulated in ancient India between monist, dualist, materialists, and phenomenologists for over a millennium.[17]

But were all Buddhist and Hindu philosophers like Patañjali, Diṅṅāga, and Śaṅkara discussing the mystical experience in the Jamesian sense of the term? In many respects, construing their philosophical discourses about the nature of perception in relation to reality as an argument in favor of the 'common core thesis' and against the constructivist position is somewhat reductionist towards their rigorous, rational, and logical systems of argumentation. Were

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14   In terms of the theory and practice of Yoga, experience (*bhoga*) is conceptualized as constituting mental activities (*cittavṛtti*) that Yoga practitioners aim to silence in order to achieve a state of 'pure consciousness' (*nirbījasamādhi*). For a discussion on experience in this context, see Yohanan Grinshpon, *Silence Unheard: Deathly Otherness in Pātañjala-Yoga* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 79–90.

15   *Ibid.*, 53–64.

16   *Ibid.*, 10–11.

17   Matilal, *Perception*, 21–44, 69–93.

they aiming at mystical or religious experiences at all? Were they aiming at any experience of absolutist or unitary being whatsoever? At least in the case of Buddhism such monist assumptions would go against the basic Buddhist principles of impermanence (*anitya*) and non-essentialism (*anātman, asvabhāva*). Moreover, and as Sharf convincingly argues, unlike James, one's personal experience was insufficient for establishing truth claims about the nature of reality or the validity of extraordinary, otherworldly experiences.[18]

That said, there are, even in Buddhism, reports and accounts of *siddhi*s or altered states of consciousness, if you will. They may be, at best, *embedded in* philosophical discourse on the nature of reality, perception, and the relation between the two. They may, furthermore, be presented as an outcome of religious disciplines or practices, even if not the most desirable or perfected, as is the case with the *siddhi*s chapter in the Yogasūtra, where experience – any experience – is perceived as a mental activity (*cittavṛtti*) subject to cessation (*nirodha*). Ostensibly, the discursive textures of mystical experiences significantly differ from the textures of philosophical, scholarly argumentation, even if they are included within philosophical debates for demonstrating a point or voicing experiential accounts. Presumably, textual expressions of mystical experiences can be measured – at least to some extent – against existing typologies of mystical experiences such as the Mysticism Scale and the 5-dimensional altered states of consciousness scale.[19] Reading synchronic accounts of altered states of consciousness diachronically into premodern religious literature is neatly demonstrated by Benny Shanon, who has juxtaposed experiential expressions in Biblical passages with both explicit and implicit references to the presence or consumption of psychoactive substances such as harmaline, which he relates to as entheogens (i.e., generating religious enthusiasm or inspiration).[20]

Ann Taves points in this direction as well in her synchronic study of 'alterations in the sense of self'. To her empirical analysis of results in structured interviews and online questionnaires, she adds in passing that

> A multisensory approach to self-loss/ego dissolution dramatically expands the range of unusual self-experiences that can be considered alongside

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18   "[T]he authority of exegetes such as Kamalaśila, Buddhaghoṣa, and Chin-i, lay not in their access to exalted spiritual states, but in their mastery of, and rigorous adherence to, sacred scripture […] premodern Hinduism was similarly wary of claims to authority predicated on personal experience." Sharf, "The Rhetoric of Experience," 272.

19   Taves, "Mystical and Other Alternations," 674–77.

20   Benny Shanon, "Biblical Entheogens: A Speculative Hypothesis," *Time and Mind* 1 no. 1 (2008).

experiences in which the boundaries of the self are blurred or dissolve. *Changes in body ownership* allows [sic!] us to consider experiences in which it seems to the subjects as if their body, voice, or hand are not their own. Religious traditions have valorized such experiences as possession by positive or negative spirits, glossolalia (speaking in tongues), and automatic (spirit-controlled) writing. Psychiatry has characterized them as dissociative experiences. *Changes in self-location*, particularly out-of-body experiences, are associated with sleep paralysis and so-called near-death experiences. Various practice traditions cultivate out-of-body experiences as a means of journeying into other realms (e.g., astral travel; journeys to heaven) and containing spirits (e.g., shamanistic healing).[21]

The above quote is noteworthy as it relates Taves' analytical classification of mystical experiences to diverse religious traditions of experiences and practices.

Religious traditions and practices such as those associated with changes in body ownership and changes in self-location, as suggested by Taves, can be approached by scholars of religion, using *diachronic* analytic frameworks, such as textual studies, art history, archaeology, performance studies, social history etc. Presumably, inventories of experiential phenomena comparable to mystical experiences – such as the Yogasūtra's *siddhi*s chapter – exist in religious literature and can be identified as such by textual analysis even in the absence of explicit references to practices associated with 'alterations in the sense of self'. Such analytical frameworks do, however, require systematic analysis free – as much as possible – from cultural and religious biases, like those postulating experiences of 'pure consciousness' or 'unitary being' as of higher and more desirable quality than extraordinary sensorial experiences. In other words, developing a critically comparative framework for mystical experiences in the history of religion (rather than in the psychology of religion) requires examining textual and linguistic data for comparable patterns and features, aiming at modular or structural classification rather than qualifying criteria such as 'positive' or 'negative', 'introvert' or 'extravert', which necessarily involve judgmental evaluations and biases.

The analysis of first-hand accounts synchronically or diachronically should address, though, another noteworthy constructivist argument against the 'common core thesis'. A constructivist would argue that what may be construed as mystical experience in a specific religious context can only be studied as culturally conditioned and mediated by the language of that religion, only

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21 Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterations," 681.

seemingly comparable to another religious context. Steven Katz's argument is that no experience is ever unmediated (by language and culture), hence, assuming that mystical experiences are all the same is a fallacy. In favor of the 'common core thesis', though, Sallie King addresses Katz's argument with a neat allegory of coffee-drinking experience, arguing (and quite convincingly so) that: "The act of drinking coffee in its totality can by no means be said to be an unmediated experience. Nonetheless, before one drinks coffee one really has no idea what it tastes like; after one cup, one knows exactly. How far does the conditioning power of the coffee traditions extend? In the end, though drinking coffee is a mediated experience, that mediation is a relatively insignificant element of the experience itself."[22]

In other words, even if some coffee-drinking traditions mediate the actual experience of drinking coffee in various ways, the fact that there is an empirical object "out there" that induces coffee-drinking experiences cannot be denied. She then adds a reservation: "Granted, coffee is an empirical object with relatively constant physical and sensorial traits, while the content of a mystical experience is none of these."

Against King's caveat stands the fact that entheogens *are* empirical objects just like coffee. Moreover, cognitive and psychological studies of mystical experiences (in the Jamesian sense of the term) such as those by Taves and Shanon, effectively identify the referent of mystical experiences (or altered states of consciousness) that prompted William James to engage with the topic in the first place. Dismissing the validity of critical approaches to mystical experiences circumvents the challenges involved in empirical and comparative study of religions and their transmitted textual and performative traditions.[23] In contrast, a bold and straightforward engagement with the topic would a) acknowledge the fact that mystical experiences indeed have referents that can be mapped and researched synchronically, diachronically, or both ways, b) relate research on entheogens to the textual and historical study of mystical experiences, and c) clearly distinguish between intellectual, philosophical, and metaphysical discourses, on the one hand, and the experiential dimension of religion on the other hand. For so doing, we need a simple, working

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22   King, "Two Epistemological Models," 264–65.

23   The dismissive approach is eloquently and sharply expressed in Sharf (2000, 286): "The category of experience is, in essence, a mere place-holder that entails a substantive if indeterminate terminus for the relentless deferral of meaning. And this is precisely what makes the term experience so amenable to ideological appropriation [...] To put it another way, all attempts to signify 'inner experience' are destined to remain 'well-meaning squirms that get us nowhere'."

definition of mystical experiences to serve religious studies scholars rather than cognitive scientists.

Let me suggest a preliminary working definition for a mystical experience as a direct encounter with or a turning into an otherworldly entity. The notion of direct encounter in association with mystical experiences is a common trope in the scholarship on the topic,[24] to which I add the notion of 'turning into' to account for Taves' notion of 'alterations in the sense of self' as well as for phenomena such as possession, apotheosis, theurgy, and trance. Importantly, though, I would like to avoid categories such as 'divine' and 'absolute' for avoiding judgmental attributes in specifying an 'otherworldly entity' as the object of alteration. In this, I build to a certain extent on the concept of 'culturally postulated supernatural (CPS) agents' coined by Thomas E. Lawson and Robert N. McCauley in their attempt to differentiate between religious and secular rituals.[25] They aim at specifying a category of religious entities inclusive of non-monotheistic and non-classical religious rituals. Religious ritualistic actions, they argue, "inevitably connected sooner or later with actions in which CPS agents play a role."[26] In a similar manner, I differentiate between 'spiritual but not religious' (SBNR) accounts of mystical experiences (such as James' and his contemporaries) and religious expressions that can be identified as such.[27] The former, in my opinion, are less than useful in addressing the significance of mystical experiences in the context of religious traditions, as they may not necessarily identify the mystical encounter with an otherworldly entity, be it a demon or a god. The latter, presumably, will always involve an encounter with an 'otherworldly entity', comparable to a certain extent with Lawson and McCauley's 'culturally postulated supernatural agents'. The comparability ends with the caveat that where a CPS agent is religiously perceived as part of or as acting in the world as perceived by our waking, normal state of consciousness, an 'otherworldly entity' is suggestive of a radical change in the perceived reality.

Thus, tentatively defining mystical experiences as those *formulated* as an encounter with or turning into an otherworldly entity is a useful tool; it

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24   Cf. Sharf, "The Rhetoric of Experience," 269.

25   E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, "The Cognitive Representation of Religious Ritual Form: A Theory of Participants' Competence with Religious Ritual Systems," in *Current Approaches in the Cognitive Science of Religion*, ed. Ilka Pyysiäinen and Veikko Anttonen (London: Continuum, 2002), 155.

26   Lawson and McCauley, *Bringing Ritual to Mind*, 159.

27   For James' role in heralding the *zeitgeist* of 'spiritual but not religious', see Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 129–35.

enables us to focus on textual expressions of encounters with or turning into an otherworldly entity as denotative of mystical experiences. We can further typify and classify them for comparative analyses, like say, visionary literature as, for example, the otherworldly creatures described by Ezekiel,[28] or the otherworldly palaces (*kūṭāgāra*) of Buddha Maitreya described in the Gaṇḍavyūha.[29] For the present discussion, however, I wish to further narrow down the scope of such mystical expressions and specifically relate to those in which 'alterations in the sense of self', to use Taves' term, is suggested by referring a first-person pronoun to an otherworldly entity. In other words, the discussion from now onwards will focus on textual expressions where the speaker identifies as an otherworldly entity and, moreover, refers to oneself as such.

3   Self-Praise Hymns as Expressions of Mystical Experiences

Otherworldly entities speaking of themselves as such are, presumably, present in religious literature across cultures and since at least the late second century BCE. The generic term for such expressions, aretalogy (Ἀρεταλογία, 'virtue-speech'), is a bit limited in its scope, as it is most prominently associated with the divine speech of Isis.[30] A slightly more useful term, I believe, is the Sanskrit term *ātmastuti* composed of the reflexive pronoun (*ātman*) and the noun *stuti*, 'praise', which more significantly relates to self-proclamations and aretalogies where the 'self' is a deity.[31] Stephanie Jamison and Joel Brereton discuss *ātmastuti*s in a chapter on poetry and poetics in the Ṛgveda and refer the reader to Ṛgveda X, 125. This is a short self-praise hymn, with the first-person pronoun predicated by 'boasting' phrases of might and all-pervasiveness.[32]

28   Ezekiel 1.

29   Phyllis Granoff, "Maitreya's Jewelled World: Some Remarks on Gems and Visions in Buddhist Texts," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 26, no. 4 (1998), 353ff.

30   Andrew T. Glicksman, *Wisdom of Solomon 10: A Jewish Hellenistic Reinterpretation of Early Israelite History Through Sapiential Lenses* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2011), 89–90; cf. Hal Taussig, Jared Calaway, Maia Kotrosits, Celene Lillie, and Justin Lasser, *The Thunder: Perfect Mind: A New Translation and Introduction* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 57–60.

31   Notably, the term *ātmastuti* neatly translates into the terms 'self-proclamation' or 'ego-proclamation', used by modern scholars in relation to aretalogies. See Paul-Hubert Poirier, "Thunder: NHC VI,2," in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition*, ed Marvin Meyer (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 367. See also, George W. MacRae, "The Ego-Proclamation in Gnostic Sources," in *Studies in New Testament and Gnosticism*, ed George W. MacRae, Good News Studies 26 (Wilmington: M. Glazier, 1987).

32   Brereton and Jamison, *The Rigveda: A Guide*, 153, 163.

Some verses of this hymn demonstrate several comparable and prominent features of self-praise hymns. Thus, for example, the first verse introduces the otherworldly speaker as present (lit. roaming *carāmi*) within all the Vedic gods at once (*viśvadevaiḥ*), whereas the eighth verse predicates the speaker as an all-pervasive wind (*vāta*):

> I roam with the Rudras, Vasus, Adityas, I am indeed with all deities.
> [...]
> I blow like the wind, while reaching all the worlds.[33]

Such formulations, as demonstrated below, are commonly used across religious traditions for predicating otherworldly speakers or, in other words, for expressing mystical experiences of turning into an otherworldly entity (or 'alterations in the sense of self'). Another feature typical of self-praise hymns is oxymoronic or paradoxical self-predication, transgressing indexical categories of self and other, of space and time. See for example verse Ṛgveda x, 125:3, where the speaker transgresses the indices of the third person (*tām*) with the first person (*mā*), and verse 125:7, where she transgresses spatial categories of top (head, *mūrdhan*) and bottom (within, *antaḥ*). In verse 125:7, kinship categories are transgressed, where the speaker gives birth (*ahaṃ suve*) to her father (*pitaram*).[34]

> Her is me that gods had distributed everywhere,
> As I am of abundant places, causing [them] to abundantly enter [me].
> [...]
> I beget [my] father on his head; my womb is within the water, the
>   ocean.[35]

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33   *ahaṃ rudrebhir vasubhiś carāmy aham ādityair uta viśvadevaiḥ /1a/* [...] *aham eva vāta iva pra vāmy ārabhamāṇā bhuvanāni viśvā /8a/* Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations are mine. For a different (and recent) translation, see Joel Brereton and Stephanie Jamison (tr.), *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1601–604. For an older translation, see Ralph T.H. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rigveda translated with a Popular Commentary Vol 2* (Benares: E.J. Lazarus and Co., 1889), 571–72. For the Vedic text, see https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan /rv10125.htm (accessed September 2, 2021).

34   Cf. Taussig *et al.*, The Thunder, 108, 109: ⲀⲚⲞⲔ ⲦⲈⲦⲘⲀⲀⲨ ⲚⲦⲈ ⲠⲀⲈⲒⲰⲦ "I am the mother of my father."

35   *tāṃ mā devā vyadadhuḥ purutrā bhūristhātrāṃ bhūry āveśayantīm /3b/* [...] *ahaṃ suve pitaram asya mūrdhan mama yonir apsv antaḥ samudre /7a/.*

The term *ātman*, 'self', constituting the first element in the compound *ātmastuti*, 'self-praise', is a core metaphysical concept in Hindu monism and, as such, its significance in relation to religious expressions of 'alterations in the sense of self' cannot be understated. It is a few good centuries after the Vedic period and around the same time that Buddhism emerged in North India that the term *ātman* surfaces in Upaniṣadic prose (800–600 BCE). This period is considered the earliest phase in the evolution of Hindu monism, philosophy, and metaphysics.[36] The term *ātman* signifies an epistemological and metaphysical shift from ritual-centered to ascetic-oriented ideologies; *ātman* is a grammatical category, the reflexive pronoun, that at this period expands the range of its semiotic properties to include a noun deprived of any indexical denotations (*neti neti*, not this, not that), while implicitly including them all at the same time.

Leaving aside doctrinal issues, it is important to note how this notion of selfhood becomes associated with an otherworldly selfhood or mystical experience. It is also noteworthy that self-referential statements appear within narrative prose sections, as the mystical speaker may surface somewhat sporadically in genres that are not necessarily poetic or hymnic (*stuti*). An example for an embedded mystical speech is the first phrase of a creation myth narrated in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 1.4:

> This [world] was just self (*ātman*) in the beginning, shaped like a person (*puruṣa*). He examined all over and saw none other than himself. In the beginning, he uttered "I am he,"[37] and thus the noun 'I' came into being.[38]

This self-perception (*anuvīkṣya*) is notably formulated by an uttered expression (*vyāharat*) of selfhood. Both occur in association with the creation of the world when nothing else rather than selfhood exists. As such, this small

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36 Patrick Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), xlv–lvi.

37 Note that the third person pronoun *saḥ* can be understood as included in the quotation phrase marked by *iti*, as I did, or as the subject of the finite verb *vyāhart*, as Olivelle understands it (see footnote below). Later on, monist theology repeats this phrase, *so 'ham* (I am he), as a mantra attesting the divine entity (he) constituting the self (I). See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soham_(Sanskrit) (accessed September 2, 2021).

38 *ātmaivedam agra āsīt puruṣavidhaḥ | so 'nuvīkṣya nānyad ātmano 'paśyat | so 'ham asmīty agre vyāharat tato 'haṃ nāmābhavat|* For the text, see V.P. Limaye and R.D. Vadekar, *Eighteen Principal Upaniṣads* (Poona: Vaidika Samsodhana Mandala, 1958). Cf. Olivelle's translation (Olivelle, *Upaniṣads*, 13): In the beginning this world was just a single body (*ātman*) shaped like a man. He looked around and saw nothing but himself. The first thing he said was, 'Here I am!' and from that the name 'I' came into being.

segment constitutes an expression of an 'alteration in the sense of self' embedded in a larger narrative of a creation myth explaining, in mythological terms, the emergence of consciousness as a precursor of the emergence of the world of plurality and of matter, as the text proceeds to explain division and creation of the material, this-worldly reality.

The above miniscule formulation of selfhood as primordial wholeness is elaborated in tantric traditions as an achievement in turning into the deity, predominantly Śiva, as becomes evident upon examining the impressive inventory of such expressions termed by Lyne Bansat-Boudon 'Anthology of Spiritual Experience'.[39] In her study of an eleventh-century Tantric text, the Paramārthasāra, attributed to the Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta, Bansat-Boudon introduces verses 47–50 as follows:

> self-proclamation of the 'I' as ultimate principle, on the model of the Vedic 'self-praise' (*ātmastuti*). The realization of the absolute 'I' (*aham*), equally that of the yogin and that of the Lord, is characteristic of the 'way of Śaṃbhu' (*śāṃbhavopāya*), defined, as well, as the 'direct way' (*sākṣādupāya*). In consequence, the first-person pronoun expresses the 'undeniable' (*anapahvanīya* [...]) faculty of experience (or consciousness) present in all beings. This 'I', the mode of affirmation of the 'Great Lord that is the Self of each person' (*svātmamaheśvara*), reduces all the other modes of valid knowing (including revealed texts, Āgamas), to a position of externality and relativity.[40]

The verses discussed demonstrate features commonly found in aretalogies or self-praise hymns like phrases expressing all-pervasiveness, as in: "It is *I* who appear in each and every thing, just as the nature of light appears in all existent things (49b),"[41] and like oxymoronic phrases as: "Though devoid of corporeal sense-organs, it is *I* who am the one who sees, the one who hears, the one who smells (50a)."[42]

As is evident by the above examples, self-praise hymns can be embedded in different types of discursive literature, not necessarily poetic or ritual-oriented such as Ṛgveda x.125. It is possible, therefore, to employ the term 'self-praise hymns' in comparing and contrasting expressions of mystical experiences

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39   Bansat-Boudon and Tripati, *An Introduction to Tantric Philosophy*, 460–61.

40   *Ibid.*, 25–26.

41   *sarvasminn aham eva sphurāmi bhāveṣu bhāsvarūpam iva* (translated by Bansat-Boudon and Tripati, *Ibid.*, 211. For the text, see *Ibid.*, 380).

42   *draṣṭā śrotā ghrātā dehendriya-varjito 'py akartāpi* (translated by Bansat-Boudon and Tripati, *Ibid.*, 211. For the text, see *Ibid.*, 380).

across cultures and religious traditions regardless of their textual environment. To be sure, I am not arguing that turning into an otherworldly entity constitutes a singular experience of sorts, nor a necessarily desirable experiential achievement. As Benny Shanon demonstrates in his detailed mapping of the Ayahuasca experience, and as Ann Taves specifies in her list of 'self-related items in the inventory of non-ordinary experiences', mystical experiences are diverse and varied, as well as their expression, construal, and reception in community and society.[43] To return to Sallie King's coffee allegory, the diversity and variation in all that is mediated by cultural mediation and personal inclination can be also attributed to experiences induced by drinking coffee, or to any perception of any object, 'particular', in the world.[44] Yet, it would be awkward to argue that such 'ordinary' experiences significantly differ from 'mystical' experiences in being utterly devoid of any preconditioned, unmediated sensation, as implied by Katz in arguing for cultural and linguistic mediation of mystical experiences.[45]

Based on the working definition suggested above for mystical experiences, I propose to briefly test the hypothesis that a) the speech attributed to an otherworldly entity is *a linguistic expression* of a mystical experience, and b) *the linguistic structures* underlying these expressions constitute patterns and features that are comparable across religious traditions. Note, however, that in all likelihood and as stated above, we are dealing here with diverse experiential phenomena that can, at best, be categorized as a uniquely identified dimension of religious experience.[46]

To test this hypothesis, the following sections examine some linguistic entities and event structures characterizing a small selection of self-praise hymns as examples of otherworldly entities' speech. In the following sections the mystical speakers and their reflexive predications are compared across religious traditions for the strategies used to transgress categories of selfhood. Self-praise hymns will then be examined in relation to their environment – textual as opposed to performative – for examining the strategies employed for

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43   Benny Shanon, *The Antipodes of the Mind: Charting the Phenomenology of the Ayahuasca Experience* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2002); Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterantions," 684.

44   King, "Two Epistemological Models," 265; Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Mysticism and Reality," 275.

45   Katz, "Language, Mysticism, and Epistemology."

46   See, in this respect, Benny Shanon's (*Antipodes of the Mind*, 34–35) definition of "a natural cognitive domain." Cf. Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterations," 686n4 in relation to the *sui generis* nature of mystical experiences.

expressing all-pervasiveness in space and time, arguably indicative of mystical experiences (in the Jamesian sense of the term).

4   Transgression of Categories

Hypothetically speaking, an otherworldly entity in self-praise hymns presents itself as originating from anywhere beyond, below, or above the world as normally perceived by our senses, namely, the normal, waking state of consciousness. There may be human audience present, explicitly or implicitly, and the human addressee too may be depicted in an altered reality or state of being. A famous example for this is the speech of the Jewish God in Exodus 3, where the otherworldly entity speaks from within a bush burning without being consumed and identifies itself as 'I am that which (*ʾašer*) I am' (Ex. 3:14 אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה).[47] The use of the first-person pronoun in such circumstances involves a transgression of categories otherwise associated with the usage of the first-person pronoun in ordinary speech. This phrase, 'I am that which I am', in response to the human asking the name of the deity, has provoked numerous interpretations by its curious transgression of categories, which need not be repeated here.[48] It is, however, noteworthy that the Hebrew first-person pronoun is a prefix embedded in the verbal form, *ʾehyeh*, rather than an independent pronoun. As such, it is inseparable from the event structure, which is indexed as an all-pervasive temporality of being, namely, the imperfect/future form of the verb 'be'. Naturally, different strategies of categorical transgression are employed in accordance with the language medium. The first-person pronominal transgression of categories, though, is a notable feature of the 'mystical I' and, arguably, a common feature of self-praise hymns.

A particularly interesting case of a mystical speaker is in one of the most curious texts preserved in the Nag Hammadi Coptic corpus bearing the title

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47   See Ex. 3:2: וַיֵּרָא מַלְאַךְ יְהֹוָה אֵלָיו בְּלַבַּת אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסְּנֶה וַיַּרְא וְהִנֵּה הַסְּנֶה בֹּעֵר בָּאֵשׁ וְהַסְּנֶה אֵינֶנּוּ אֻכָּל/ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אָסֻרָה נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת הַמַּרְאֶה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מַדּוּעַ לֹא יִבְעַר הַסְּנֶה/ וַיַּרְא יְהֹוָה כִּי סָר לִרְאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסְּנֶה וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּנִי. "The Lord's messenger was revealed before him in the midst of the flames from within the bush. He realized that, indeed, as the bush is engulfed in flames, it remains unconsumed. Moses then thought to himself, let me get closer and examine this magnificent sight; how come the bush does not burn? When the Lord saw him approaching for a closer look, God called him from within the bush and said, 'Moses! Moses!' and he said, 'I am here'."

48   Jean-Pierre Sonnet, "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh (Exodus 3:14): God's 'Narrative Identity' Among Suspense, Curiosity, and Surprise," *Poetics Today* 31, no. 2 (2010); See also Saner Andrea D., *"Too Much to Grasp": Exodus 3:13–15 and the Reality of God* (Penn State University Press, 2015), 1–3.

The Thunder: The Perfect Mind (ⲧⲉⲃⲣⲟⲛⲧⲉ: ⲛⲟⲩⲥ ⲛ̅ⲧⲉⲗⲉⲓⲟⲥ).[49] As Hal Taussig *et al.* convincingly argue, this title is likely to be a later addition to a text that may have first existed orally and independently of other texts in the corpus before being transcribed and added to a collection of other texts.[50] It is, in any case, the only remaining papyrus copy of the text, and therefore, it is less than certain that the otherworldly entity is as abstract as the title suggests. The speaker in the so-called 'Thunder' may or may not be a deity; it is certainly 'otherworldly', as it opens with a strong statement emphasizing its origin in 'power' (ⲅ̅ⲟⲙ): "I, it is from the power that they sent me" (ⲛ̅ⲧⲁⲩⲧⲁⲟⲩⲟⲉⲓ ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲅ̅ⲛ̅ ⲅ̅ⲟⲙ). Notably, the event structure associated with the speaker here is an emphatic perfect, a verbal form (II perfect) that was used in spells with the first person, especially in mortuary texts.[51]

A peculiar feature of the speaker in this text is its shifting gender categories, as discussed in detail by Taussig *et al.*, highlighting the implications of the gender-shifting divine speaker on the overall understanding of the text. In many respects, their study redeems the text from the Greco-centric and Christian-centric approaches in previous studies.[52] They state that "[p]revious scholarship has scratched its head at what to make of *Thunder* in the ancient world. Thunder is indeed quite unusual for the ancient Mediterranean. There are few, if any, parallels. At first, the vocabulary can seem deracinated from the kind of social contexts exhibited in most literature of that time. Initial impressions that Thunder is about an otherworldly, divine realm are quite understandable, since the piece's 'I' speaks as a god(dess)."[53]

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49   I am indebted to the Egyptologist, the late Sarah I. Groll, who was my Coptic teacher (1999–2002) for introducing me to this text and encouraging me to conduct a comparative study of the *Thunder* and Sanskrit self-praise hymns (Ophira Gamliel, *The Language of Revealed Mysteries* (Unpublished M.A., Thesis, Jerusalem, 2001) [in Hebrew]). A preliminary comparison of the Thunder with Sanskrit literature was attempted already by George MacRae, the first Coptic scholar to have translated the text into English (George W. MacRae "The Thunder: Perfect Mind," in *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinesis 8501, 1 and 4*, ed Douglas M. Parrott (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 231–255). He noted a few passages from the Bhagavad-Gīta, where God Kṛṣṇa refers to himself in a similar, 'mystical' manner. I leave out the comparison with the Bhagavad-Gīta for the present study.

50   Taussig *et al.*, *The Thunder*, 83ff, 103n7–9.

51   For the use of the II perfect in coffin texts, see Harold M. Hays, "The Mutability of Tradition: The Old Kingdom Heritage and Middle Kingdom Significance of Coffin Texts Spell 343*," *Jaarbericht van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Genootschap Ex Oriente Lux* 40 (2006–2007), 57n111.

52   Taussig *et al.*, *The Thunder*, 93–97.

53   *Ibid.*, 95.

Taussig *et al.* also note that their "analysis has quite quickly found reason to place *Thunder* in the middle of important ancient Mediterranean social nego-tiations." This, however, may not be unique or peculiar but rather demonstrate another feature of mystical speakers as upon examining otherworldly entities in self-praise hymns, the dimension of 'social negotiations' is often evident. If indeed self-praise hymns carry linguistic expressions of encountering or turning into otherworldly entities, this should not come as a surprise. Claims to have transformed into or directly encountered an otherworldly entity are likely to involve tenuous social negotiations. Take for example the words of the twelfth-century poetess Mahādeviyakka of the South Indian Śaivite movement known as Vīraśaivism:[54]

> I have Māya for mother-in-law;
> The world for father-in-law;
> Three brothers-in-law like tigers;
>
> And the husband's thoughts
> are full of laughing women:
>   no god, this man.
>
>   And I cannot cross the sister-in-law.
>
> But I will
> give this wench the slip
> and go cuckold my husband with Hara, my lord.
>
>   My mind is my maid:
>   by her kindness, I join
>   my Lord,
>   my utterly beautiful Lord
>   from the mountain-peaks
>   my lord as white as jasmine
>
> and I will make Him
> my good husband.[55]

54   A.K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 19–54.
55   Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 49–50.

According to A.K. Ramanujan,

> A net of marriage rules and given relations binds her [Mahādeviyakka]. These are what you make and enter into, not what you are born with. This elaborate build-up of social bonds is shattered by the cuckolding climax of the poem, with the Lord as the adulterous lover. Here a vulgar Kannada word is used to speak of 'cuckolding', the 'fornication'. The whole poem, written in a colloquial, vigorous speaking style, moves toward the word *hādara* or fornication, enacting by linguistic shock the shock of her explosive desire to shatter the entire framework of so-called legitimacies. Elsewhere also Mahādeviyakka rejects outright all notions of modesty as a virtue. She is supposed to have thrown off her clothes at one point, in defiance of the indecent pruderies of the society around her.
>
> This stresses the view that love of God is not only an unconditional giving up of all, but it is necessarily anti-'structure', and anti-social 'unruly' relationship – unmaking, undoing, the man-made. It is an act of violation against ordinary expected loyalties, a breakdown of the predictable and the secure. Some such notion is at the heart of this complex of metaphoric action. The Lord is the illicit Lover; He will break up the world of Karma and normal relationships, the husband's family that must necessarily be violated and trespassed against, if one should have anything to do with God.[56]

The transgression of categories associated with the speaker in the *Thunder* as well as in the Vīraśaivite poem by Mahādeviyakka is strikingly comparable, as both transgress kinship categories in what can be construed as negotiating social tensions. For the sake of comparison, see the following lines from the *Thunder*:

> I am the whore and the holy woman
> I am the wife and the virgin
> I am the mother and the daughter
> I am the limbs of my mother
> I am a sterile woman and she who has many children
> I am she whose wedding is extravagant and I didn't have a husband
> I am the midwife and she who hasn't given birth
> I am the comfort of my labor pain
> I am the bride and the bridegroom
> And it is my husband who gave birth to me
> I am my father's mother,

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56   *Ibid.*, 50–51.

my husband's sister, and he is my child
I am the slavewoman of him who served me
I am she, the lord of my child.[57]

Whether the mystical speaker in the *Thunder* is a deity or a human-turned-divine is difficult if not outright impossible to tell. However, the linguistic entity constituting the mystical speaker in the *Thunder* is a remarkable example for transgression of categories. As Coptic enables gender marking for the first person in some of its verbal forms and pronominal categories, besides marking nouns for gender, the result is an often-bewildering transgression of gender categories. One particularly curious example for this is the phrase "I am he whose image (m.) is multiple in Egypt, and she whose image (f.) is none among the Barbarians" (16:6 ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ⲡⲉⲧⲛⲁϣⲉ ⲡⲉⲥⲉⲓⲛⲉ ϩⲛ ⲕⲏⲙⲉ/ ⲁⲩⲉ ⲧⲉⲧⲉ ⲙⲛⲧⲉ ⲟⲉⲓⲛⲉ ϩⲛ ⲛⲃⲁⲣⲃⲁⲣⲟⲥ), where the possessive pronouns are used in transgressing the gender categories of the noun 'image'.[58] Taussig *et al.* comment that "[t]he strong feminine voice (perhaps in itself a kind of contradiction of expectations in the ancient world, if not sometimes the modern world as well), the switching between feminine and masculine pronouns, and the unconventional clusters of masculine/feminine images work together to undo, challenge, and flex meanings and identities related to women and men."[59]

That the transgression of categories in relation to the mystical self is dangerous and even lethal for the mystical speaker, is poignantly exemplified by the story of the Sufi saint al-Hallāj, who was, according to the tradition, trialed and convicted in Baghdad for transgressing the categories of the human self with the divine in uttering the phrase 'I am the Truth' (أنا الحق).[60]

As already mentioned above in the previous section, some self-praise hymns are embedded within narrative or discursive textual environment, and somewhat encapsulated in brief statements or phrases. In the following section, I look into the textual versus the performative environments of self-praise hymns, while further examining the linguistic entities and event structures typical of the genre as expressed uniquely in each language. To recall, the first-person pronoun encountering or turning into an otherworldly entity tends to be associated with transgressed pronominal and nominal categories (e.g., gender, kinship) and with all-pervasiveness (e.g., gnomic temporalities, oxymoronic predication). These features are discernible in all the self-praise

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57   Translated by Taussig *et al.*, *The Thunder*, 107, 109.

58   *Ibid.*, 120n87, 121n90.

59   *Ibid.*, 10.

60   Louis Massignon and Herbert Mason, *The Passion of Al-Hallaj, Mystic and Martyr of Islam, Volume 1: The Life of Al-Hallaj* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 23.

hymns that I have examined as well as in embedded self-praise phrases. Their textual and performative environments, at least ostensibly so, show interestingly comparable patterns as well.

5   Textual and Performative Environments

Broadly speaking, self-praise hymns are found in two types of environments – textual as opposed to performative. Where self-praise hymns are stand-alone compositions like the *Thunder*, the Ṛgveda x.125, or Mahādeviyakka's poem, they can be analyzed for performative functions, such as recitations or rituals.[61] As already discussed in brief, self-praise hymns are more often than not embedded in larger texts, from narratives, like the creation myth in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 1.4 and the revelation in Exodus 3, to philosophical discourses like the self-praise verses in the Tantric treatise Paramārthasāra 47–50. It is quite possible that the embedded type of self-praise hymns and phrases emerges out of a process of incorporation from performative environments, even though it is difficult to determine this without in-depth research on several case studies and the religious traditions they represent. Ostensibly, stand-alone self-praise hymns are often appended to larger corpora of performative texts, such as the Ṛgveda, whereas embedded self-praise hymns emerge in specific types of textual environments. I can, at this stage, point at two major types of textual environments for embedded self-praise hymns – philosophical discourses and mythical narratives. This section focuses on two examples for embedded self-praise hymns, one in Tibetan and one in Sanskrit, with the former embedded in philosophical discourse of the Dzogchen school, and the latter embedded in a destruction/creation narrative, the Hindu flood myth.

The Tibetan text is included in an eleventh-century collection of Dzogchen teachings constituting the mind series.[62] Besides embedded self-praise segments, it is also framed as such, with each of its eighty-four chapters attributed

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61   For the Thunder, see Taussig *et al.*, *The Thunder*, 84–91; for the ritual context of the Ṛgveda in general, see Brereton and Jamison, *The Rigveda: A Guide*, 43–61; for the *vacana* poems see William McCormack, "Appendix II: On Lingayat Culture," in *Speaking of Śiva*, tr and ed A.K. Ramanujan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 182.

62   For the source, see Dingo Khyentse Rimpoche, *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* (*gting skyes*). 36 vols (bdr.MW21518, Thimbu, 1975), i.9–174. For studies of the text, see Eva Dargyay, "A Rñiṅ-ma Text: The Kun Byed yRgal Po'i Mdo," in *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization* ed Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew Kapstein (New Delhi: Manohar); David Germano, "Architecture and Absence in the Secret Tantric History of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*)," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 17 no. 2 (1994), 207–209, 235–43, 263–66; Dylan Esler, "The Origins and Early History of rDzogs chen," *The Tibet Journal* 30 no. 3 (2005), 46–47.

to an otherworldly speaker, the All-Creating Bodhi Mind, personified as Buddha Samantabhadra who teaches his Bodhisattva disciple, Vajrasattva.[63] The text is titled *The All-Creating King: The Bodhicitta in which All Dharmas Are the Great Perfection* (*chos thams cad rdzogs pa chen po byang chub kyi sems kun byed rgyal po*).[64] Buddhist traditions engaged in rationalizing a state of consciousness that may be construed as a 'pure consciousness event' or an 'unmediated state of consciousness' are found in many philosophical treatises in South and East Asian Buddhist texts,[65] but it is less common to find this very state of mind speaking up in praise of itself.[66] Examples abound throughout this text, however, and I focus here on chapter fourteen as it is relatively short and depictive of performative language strategies underlying its composition.[67]

The fourteenth chapter starts with a recurring prose section framing the self-praise hymn embedded in the larger discourse: "Then, the Bodhicitta, the All-Creating King, told this supreme instruction, his own secret, 'Hey, Mahāsattva!'"[68] This is followed by phrases of nine syllables each, suggestive of the performative function underlying the textual transmission. The feature of all-pervasiveness is evident throughout this text and right at the outset in the speaker's name, *kun byed rgyal po*, All-Creating King, and in the first metrical verse of the chapter: "I, 'All-Creating', am the secret in everything."[69] The next verses are constructed of couplets structured as four prohibitive sentences, with each preceded by a complex noun phrase marked by the dative (*la*) as the

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63   Bodhi Mind is *bodhicitta* in Sanskrit (lit. the mind of realization) and *byang chub kyi sems* in Tibetan (lit. the mind of purely perfected, or enlightenment).

64   Rimpoche, *rNying ma rgyud*, i.9.

65   King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 177–82; Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Mysticism and Reality: Ineffability." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 3 no. 3–4 (1975), 235–36; Yaroslav Komarovski, *Tibetan Buddhism and Mystical Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 44–80.

66   Cathy Cantwell (personal communication, May 2021) drew my attention to self-praise speech in Dzogchen aspiration prayers with Samantabhadra as the speaker. See, for example, Rigdzin Gödem, "Prayer of Kuntuzangpo (Kunzang Mönlam)," tr Adam Pearcey, *Lotsawa House*, 2019 (accessed August 17, 2021).

67   I am indebted to Cathy Cantwell for guiding me in reading this chapter as well as looking into other sections of this text. I have previously translated into Hebrew sections of this text under the guidance of Yael Bentor (Gamliel, *Language of Revealed Mysteries*). The whole text has been translated into English by Christopher Wilkinson (2019), but his choices for words and syntactic structures seem to be quite loose, and less than useful for the present, comparative discussion.

68   *de nas byang chub kyi sems kun byed rgyal pos/ nyid kyi gsang ba dam pa'i gdams dag 'di gsums so// kye sems dpa' chen po//* Rimpoche, *rNying ma rgyud*, i.62. Note that these phrases are in prose, perhaps an indication incorporating a stand-alone performative text into the larger discursive textual environment.

69   *kun byed nga ni kun du gsang ba 'o//* Rimpoche, *rNying ma rgyud*, i.62. The term *gsang ba*, 'secret', indicates intimacy rather than esotericism according to Cathy Cantwell (personal communication).

target of the prohibition. The verb phrase too is a complex formation, *mi bstan gsang par bya*, 'don't reveal' (lit. do as secret without revealing).

> To the teacher who is three bodies that emerged from me –
> [Don't] reveal the three aspects of my own self nature.
> To the Buddhas of the three times who dwell within me –
> Don't reveal [the three aspects of] my own self nature.
> To the entourages who gathered within me –
> Don't reveal [the three aspects of] my own self nature.
> To the sentient beings of the three worlds created by me –
> Don't reveal [the three aspects of] my own self nature.[70]

These four prohibitions are mirrored by an irrealis conditional formation (*ma gsang bstan byas na*, 'had [you] revealed') that branches into a sequence of irrealis conditional sentences, constituting a parallel realm of (im)possible worlds.[71]

> *Had [you] revealed* my own self nature
> To the teacher that is the three bodies, [which is] my own self nature,
> The teacher [who is] the three bodies *would not have arisen* from me.
> *Had* the teacher [who is] the three bodies *not arisen* from me,
> The three teachings, the three vehicles, and the three entourages *would
>   not have gathered.*
> *Had* the three teachings, three vehicles, and three entourages[72] *not*
>   gathered –
> There *would not have* been Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, namely, the
>   Three Jewels,
> Nor the unsurpassable mind of realization [which is] the all-knowing.[73]

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70 *nga las byung ba'i sku gsum ston pa la/ nga yi rang bzhin rnam gsum mi bstan gsang// nga la gnas pa'i dus gsum sangs rgyas la/ nga yi rang bzhin mi bstan gsang bar bya// nga la 'dus pa'i 'khor tshogs thams cad la/ nga yi rang bzhin mi bstan gsang bar bya// nga yis byas pa'i khams gsum sems can la/ nga yi rang bzhin mi bstan gsang bar bya//* Rimpoche, *rNying ma rgyud*, i.63.

71 The irrealis conditional sentences are comprised of past forms in the if-clause (ending in *na*) and negated future/present forms (*mi 'gyur*) in the main clause.

72 The *gtings sgyes* text has *phun* (precious) here, which seems to be a scribal error; the Darge text repeats *'khor* (entourages) as would be expected.

73 *nga yi rang bzhin sku gsum ston pa la/ nga yi rang bzhin ma gsang bstan byas na/ sku gsum ston pa nga las 'byung mi 'gyur// sku gsum ston pa nga las ma byung na/ bstan gsum theg gsum 'khor gsum 'tshogs mi 'gyur// bstan gsum theg gsum phun ('khor) sum ma 'tshogs na/ sangs rgyas chos dang dge 'dun dkon mchog gsum/ bla med byang chub kun gyis rig pa med//* Rimpoche, *rNying ma rgyud*, i.63.

The transgression of categories typical of self-praise hymns is expressed in transgressed temporalities, where the past and future collapse into non-existence present, negating all possible modalities of existence. The effect is a reversed creation of an (im)possible world of teaching non-teaching:

> *Had* my own self nature been compassionately explained
> To the sentient beings of the three worlds created by me,
> There *would be no* object for the teachings of the three teachers.[74]

The oxymoronic temporalities and (un)fulfilled negations culminate in recursive and all-encompassing selfhood emerging out of and back into the other-worldly speaker:

> Therefore, I, the All-Creating,
> Having externalized my own self nature,
> I reveal my own self nature to myself.[75]

Thus, while Buddhist philosophy and metaphysics negate the notion of self, the experiential dimension of otherworldly, altered selfhood finds its expression in this tradition as well, possibly more so in the Dzogchen tradition than in other schools, and possibly more so in relation to Buddha Samantabhadra than to other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.[76] This expression of a mystical self even in a non-theistic religion based on the precept of non-self (*anātman/ anatta*) bears implications on questions around the 'common core thesis' and the applicability of the psychological/cognitive category of 'alterations in the sense of self' discussed above.

The narrative environment of self-praise hymns tends to reflect an alteration in the sense of the physical, objective reality. It is often one of crisis or

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74 *nga yis byas pa'i khams gsum sems can la/ nga yi rang bzhin thugs rje bstan gyur na/ ston pa gsum gyi bstan pa gnas med 'gyur//* Rimpoche, *rNying ma rgyud*, i.63.

75 *de nas kun byed rgyal po nga yis ni/ nga yi rang bzhin nga yis phyung nas ni/ nga la nga yi rang bzhin nga yis bstan//* Rimpoche, *rNying ma rgyud*, i.63.

76 Dylan Esler (personal communication, June 2021) drew my attention to his work on Dzogchen manuscripts and texts, where several examples for expressions associating a first-person speaker with all-pervasiveness and transgression of categories. See Dylan Esler, *The Lamp for the Eye of Contemplation, The bSam-gtan mig-sgron by gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes: Hermeneutical Study with English Translation and Critical Edition of a Tibetan Buddhist Text on Contemplation* (PhD thesis, Louvain-la-Neuve: Université catholique de Louvain, 2018), 190, 266, 268. A self-praise hymn uttered by Guru Padma-sambhava can be found in the tenth chapter of the *Zang Yes Ling Ma* (see Gamliel, *Language of Revealed Mysteries*).

radical transformation accounting for 'alterations' not only in the 'sense of self' but in the whole world. An example for a self-praise hymn embedded in such a narrative is the Mahābhārata III.187. This self-praise hymn is tied to a narrative of crisis and change; the whole world is flooded, everything disappears, and only the immortal sage Mārkaṇḍeya is left, floating lonely and dejected in an endless ocean, when he suddenly sees a Banyan tree. A little child is seated on the tree in the midst of the apocalyptic flood. The child swallows the sage, and Mārkaṇḍeya sees the whole world within the belly of the child. He is then vomited out and, realizing that the child is otherworldly, he asks for the child's identity. The self-praise hymn is uttered in response to the question, in a dialogue form similar to the one uttered by the All-Creating King addressing his disciple, Vajrasattva.[77]

Some verses of the Mahābhārata III.187 are especially noteworthy for demonstrating the recurring features discussed so far in relation to transgression of categories and expressions of all-pervasiveness in both spatial and temporal terms. The child first identifies as Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa, and then proceeds to boast his all-pervasive, 'unitary being' characteristics, inclusive of all the deities, and indeed, constituting the whole universe:

> I am the eternal origin, unchanging, called Nārāyaṇa,
> the creator of all creatures and their destroyer.
> I am Viṣṇu, I am Brahma, I am also Śakra, the king of gods.
> I am King Kubera, and I am Yama, the king of the dead.[78]
> Fire is my mouth, the earth is my legs, the sun and the moon are my eyes.
> The sky and the horizons are my body, the wind dwells in my heart.[79]

In a similar manner to the Coptic *Thunder* and the Tibetan *All-Creating King*, Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa too encompasses the widest possible range of the conceptual categories constituting the Hindu worldview, from cosmogeny, to myth, to society, to religion and so on. Notably, all the finite verb forms are inflected in the present, gnomic, tense: *dhārayāmi*, 'I carry', *pibāmi*, 'I drink', *visṛjāmi*, 'I emit', etc., as if to portray the all-pervasiveness of the speaker over time as well as over space.

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77 The Mahābhārata as a whole is structured as a dialogue within a dialogue.

78 *ahaṃ nārāyaṇo nāma prabhavaḥ śāśvato 'vyayaḥ/ vidhātā sarvabhūtānāṃ saṃhartā ca dvijottama//4// ahaṃ viṣṇur ahaṃ brahmā śakraś cāhaṃ surādhipaḥ/ ahaṃ vaiśravaṇo rājā yamaḥ pretādhipas tathā//5//.*

79 *agnir āsyaṃ kṣitiḥ pādau candrādityau ca locane/ sadiśaṃ ca nabho kāyo vāyur manasi me sthitaḥ//7//.*

Turning into the primordial snake, I carry (*dhārayāmi*) the earth,
Surrounded by the four seas, adorned by Mt. Meru and Mt. Mandara.
Ages ago in the form of a wild boar
I have heroically salvaged (*uddhṛtā*) the earth that was submerged under
    water.
I become the mare-faced fire; I drink up (*pibāmi*) the waters
And I always emit (*visṛjāmi*) them out.
Brahmins (priests) are my mouth, warriors are my arms,
*Vaiśya*s (farmers) are my thighs, *śūdra*s (laborers) are my feet.
All are ordered according to [social] hierarchy.
The [four scriptures], the Ṛg, the Sāma, the Yajur and the Atharva Vedas
Emerge out (*prādurbhavanti*) of me and enter (*praviśanti*) back into me.
Ascetics engaged in subduing, aspiring for redemption (*mokṣa*) while dis-
    ciplining themselves
Free of desire, anger, and hatred, free of attachment, and done with faults,
Selfish and steady in purity, acquainted with their higher Self –
These wise people get close to me (*upāsate*), as they continuously con-
    template me.[80]

Another feature these self-praise hymns have in common is their tendency to
swiftly shift into a sermon-like register with imperative and modal forms, often
of verbs of perception, as the recurring imperative form *viddhi*, 'know', in the
following verses:

These stars that are seen in the sky,
Know that they are my forms.
All the gem-producing oceans in all directions –
Know that they are my garment, my bed, and my dwelling place.
Know that desire and anger, fear and ignorance
Are all my own forms.[81]

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80   *catuḥ-samudra-paryantām meru-mandara-bhūṣaṇām/ śeṣo bhūtvāham evaitām dhāra-
    yāmi vasuṃdharām//10// vārāham rūpam āsthāya mayeyaṃ jagatī purā/ majjamānā
    jale vipra vīryeṇāsīt samuddhṛtā//11// agniś ca vaḍavā vaktro bhūtvāhaṃ dvijasattama/
    pibāmy apaḥ samāviddhās tāś caiva visṛjāmy aham//12//brahma vaktraṃ bhujau kṣatram
    ūrū me saṃśritā viśaḥ/ pādau śūdrā bhajante me vikrameṇa krameṇa ca//13// ṛgvedaḥ
    sāma vedaś ca yajurvedo 'py atharvaṇaḥ/ mattaḥ prādurbhavanty ete mām eva praviśanti
    ca//14// yatayaḥ śānti paramā yatātmāno mumukṣavaḥ/ kāma-krodha-dveṣa-muktā
    niḥsaṅgā vītakalmaṣāḥ//15//sattva sthā nirahaṃkāra nityam adhyātmakovidāḥ/ mām eva
    satataṃ viprāś cintayanta upāsate//16//.*
81   *tārā rūpāṇi dṛśyante yāny etāni nabhastale/ mama rūpāṇy athaitāni viddhi tvaṃ dvija
    sattama//18// ratnākarāḥ samudrāś ca sarva eva caturdiśam/ vasanaṃ śayanaṃ caiva*

This knowledge imperative requires the transgression of categories differentiating the material world and the human experience from the body (*rūpa*, 'form') of the deity. Similar to the All-Creating King, Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa too has the whole religious universe emerging out of himself; *phyung* in Tibetan and *visṛjāmi* in Sanskrit, both verbs suggest a notion of externalization and emission of the phenomenal world out of core, essential selfhood (*ātman* in Sanskrit, *rang bzhin* in Tibetan).

> I am the self of all, treading the three paths, granting bliss to all.
> I am above all while existing everywhere, the eternal mind with wide
>   strides.[82]
> I alone drive the wheel of Time, I am the Absolute, the formless,
> The subduer of all creatures, reviver of all the worlds.
> Thus, my entire self is deposited by me in all living creatures,
> But there is no one who knows me.[83]

As already mentioned in passing, it is quite possible that many of the instances of embedded self-praise hymns rely on the appropriation of performative, stand-alone texts into their textual environments. The discussion is incomplete without demonstrating the performative environment of such stand-alone self-praise hymns, where they have a life of their own in a living tradition. While it is possible to imagine performative contexts for ancient texts that are no longer performed, a better place to start is in demonstrating performative environments of self-praise hymns such as the popular self-praise hymn attributed to the ninth-century monist philosopher Śaṅkara. This hymn is known as Ātma Ṣaṭkam or Nirvāṇa Ṣaṭkam, namely, the *Six Verses of the Self* or *of Yogic Realization*.[84] It equates the speaker, the 'I' (*aham*), with Śiva in a line

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nilayaṃ caiva viddhi me//19// kāmaṃ krodhaṃ ca harṣaṃ ca bhayaṃ mohaṃ tathaiva ca/ mamaiva viddhi rūpāṇi sarvāṇy etāni sattama//20//.

82 This verse involves a paronomasia in the terms *ananta, hṛṣīkeśa* and *urukrama*, each can either function as an attribute (eternal, mental, and strong respectively) or to Viṣṇu-related entities (the thousand-hooded serpent of the deity, his Kṛṣṇa incarnation, and his dwarf incarnation).

83 *ahaṃ trivartmā sarvātmā sarvalokasukhāvahaḥ/ abhibhūḥ sarvago 'nanto hṛṣīkeśa urukramaḥ//33// kālacakraṃ nayāmy eko brahmann aham arūpi vai/ śamanaṃ sarva bhūtānāṃ sarva lokakṛtodyamam//34// evaṃ praṇihitaḥ samyaṅ mayātmā munisattama/ sarvabhūteṣu viprendra na ca māṃ vetti kaścana//35//.*

84 The alternative titles suggest that the hymn is associated with both monist (*advaita*) and dualist (*sāṃkhya*) traditions, by way of referencing the former by the *advaita* key term *ātman* and the latter by the term *nirvāṇa*, mentioned in the Yogasūtra (and synonymous with *nirodha*). This doctrinal integration is typical of Tantric Śaivite traditions. The

repeated at the end of each verse, preceded by three lines listing out negated categories of different sorts in an apophatic language, thus demonstrating the transgression of categories typical of self-praise hymns. In the fourth and fifth verses, the negation, even transgression, of socioreligious categories such as merit, sacrifice, caste, and parents is especially evident, demonstrating the social negotiations and tensions that characterize expressions of altered selfhood, even when the altered self is venerated as a deity or a deity-turned-yogi practitioner.

> No merit, no guilt, no pleasure, no pain,
> no council, no sacred places, no Veda, no sacrifice,
> I am not the experiencing, nor the experience, or the experiencer.
> I am Śiva, I am Śiva, identical with Bliss, the Brahman (*cit*).
> I have no fear of death; I have no caste divisions,
> I have no father; I have no mother, not even birth,
> no relative, no friend, no guru or disciple,
> I am Śiva, I am Śiva, identical with Bliss, the Brahman (*cit*).[85]

Especially striking is the negation of experience: I am not the experiencing, nor the experience or the experiencer (*ahaṃ bhojanaṃ naiva bhojyaṃ na bhoktā*), transgressing the categories of selfhood and being and transcending experience altogether.

This self-praise hymn is, in fact, so popular, that it is performed by contemporary, modern musicians in South India such as Smita[86] and the duo Lipsika and Remya,[87] besides more orthodox, devotional performances, such as the one performed in February 2020 at an Isha Yoga Centre in South India for the occasion of the annual festival honoring Śiva (*śivarātri*), with a yogi known as Sadguru seated on a raised platformed and venerated as the deity-turned-yogi.[88]

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oscillation between Hindu monist and Buddhist phenomenalist approaches is evident also in the Mahābhārata and in the Dzogchen textual traditions. Regretfully, a thorough investigation of the issue is beyond the scope of the present contribution.

85   *na puṇyaṃ na pāpaṃ na saukhyaṃ na duḥkhaṃ /na mantro na tīrthaṃ na vedā na yajña /ahaṃ bhojanaṃ naiva bhojyaṃ na bhoktā /cidānandarūpaḥ śivo 'ham śivo 'ham// na me mṛtyuśaṅkā na me jātibhedaḥ/pitā naiva me naiva mātā na janmaḥ /na bandhur na mitraṃ gurur naiva śiṣyaḥ/ cidānandarūpaḥ śivo 'ham śivo 'ham//.* The text is adapted from "Atma Shatkam," Wikipedia (accessed August 18, 2021).

86   with English subtitles: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QW2nQzDPXng (accessed March 7, 2021).

87   Produced by Ameya Records: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yq9WPkuLdbc (accessed March 7, 2021).

88   See here: https://youtu.be/8wab6ZjHWY0 (accessed March 7, 2021).

6 Conclusion

The study of mystical experiences in the Jamesian sense of the term focuses on altered states of consciousness that a cognitive psychologist like Benny Shanon would approach as a natural cognitive domain to explore within the broader 'geography of the mind'.[89] A psychologist of religion like Ann Taves would approach mystical experiences as a *sui generis* phenomenon within the broader typology of experiences involving 'alterations in the sense of self'.[90] Both psychological perspectives are based, on the one hand, on verbal accounts by 'mystically experienced' informants (such as William James, Aldous Huxley, or interviewees). On the other hand, they draw upon empirical studies of the material effects of entheogens on the mind and of neuroscientific evidence. These cognitive and psychological approaches to the study of mystical experiences are synchronic. Contrarily, scholars of religions approach mystical experiences from a diachronic perspective relying on comparative textual, cultural, and historical analysis. Nevertheless, both approaches reveal certain phenomenological consistencies underlying and manifesting in mystical experiences across cultures and religious traditions. In synchronic analyses, verbal accounts can be classified into types (the Mysticism Scale and the 5-dimensional altered states of consciousness scale), as shown by Taves, that can be corroborated by material, empirical neuroscientific evidence of 'alterations in the sense of self'. In the present discussion, I aimed at a diachronic analysis to identify consistent patterns analogous to Taves' categorical type of 'alterations in the sense of self' by focusing on self-praise hymns.

The focus on self-praise hymns as a generic formulation of mystical experiences was guided by the notion that "mystical experience is generally construed as a direct encounter with the divine or the absolute."[91] For the sake of inclusivity and in consideration of religious doctrinal, ideological, and practical diversity, I suggested to replace the terms 'divine' and 'absolute' with the term 'otherworldly entities', inspired by Lawson and McCauley's concept of CPS agents in relation to religious rituals. Further, I also suggested to add to the notion of an otherworldly encounter the notion of turning into an otherworldly entity, as many of the self-praise hymns seem to convey. Thus, the suggested working definition of mystical experience facilitates the analysis of self-praise hymns

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89 Shanon, *Antipodes of the Mind*, 34–35; see also Benny Shanon, *The Representational and the Presentational: An Essay on Cognition and the Study of Mind* (Luton, Bedfordshire: Andrews UK Ltd, 1993 [2008]), 500–505.

90 Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterations," 686.

91 Sharf, "The Rhetoric of Experience," 269; cf. Nelstrop *et al.*, Christian Mysticism, 8–9.

as expressions or formulations of mystical experiences, whether as brief first-person utterances by otherworldly entities embedded in discursive or narrative textual environments or as full-fledged hymns designed for performative purposes. In one case, I have examined also the self-referential poem by a mystic in her *encounter with* an otherworldly entity (Mahādeviyakka addressing Śiva), which is, most probably, as intensely and profoundly transformative as *turning into* an otherworldly entity (a god or a deity) or even (imagining) *being* one to be begin with.

A comparative analysis across languages and religious traditions reveals two recurring features of self-praise hymns, namely, transgression of categories and all-pervasiveness. These patterns seem to underlie different strategies in the formation of entities and structuring of events as affordable by the specific language of each hymn. Thus, an imperfective/future form in Biblical Hebrew transgresses the nominal category of names and divine identity, while demonstrating, simultaneously, the feature of all-pervasiveness. Similarly, the Tibetan self-praise hymn transgresses the categories of pronominal indexicality by attributing the first-person pronoun to an abstract notion of the mind of realization (*bodhicitta*), which is further identified as an All-Creating King. This unexpected selfhood is predicated by a series of negated irrealis conditional clauses demonstrating the pattern of all-pervasiveness, collapsing existence and non-existence, past and future into the event structure dominating the fourteenth chapter. Similarly, an Old Egyptian emphatic construction is used in the Coptic self-praise hymn to index the transcendent source of the speaker, while transgressing gender and kinship categories in association to the speaker's selfhood.

Such strategies in ancient texts resonate with at least some of the 'experience' questions related to alterations in the sense of self that Ann Taves has been exploring.[92] For example, event structures demonstrating all-pervasiveness resonate with Taves' categories of 'Connectedness: I have had an experience in which my sense of time was altered and it was impossible to tell where my body ended and the rest of the world began' and 'Absorbed: I have had an experience in which I was completely absorbed in what I was doing and unaware of the passage of time'. Self-praise hymns thus attest to a long history of formulating alterations in selfhood. It seems to me, therefore, that mystical experiences or altered states of consciousness, if you will, do after all occupy a prominent place in quite a few religious traditions regardless of the 'personal discovery' by William James of his own experience with an altered state of consciousness.

It is, after all, approximately four millennia earlier than James that a strikingly similar account of an altered state of consciousness induced by

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92   Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterations," 684.

entheogens was recorded in the Ṛgveda. One remarkable difference is that the first-person pronoun switches from the singular to the plural back and forth.[93] This example, thus, is suggestive of the mystical landscape as a common, rather than private, personal state of consciousness.[94] I conclude with two lines of the hymn to demonstrate the features discussed above of categorical transgression and all-pervasiveness, while explicitly connecting the sensation to the consumption of an entheogen, *soma* (who is also the god Soma, an object of worship). The categories of mortals and immortals, 'I' and 'we', are transgressed in just these two lines. The pattern of all-pervasiveness is evident in shifts from the past forms related to 'normal' time denoting the event of consumption (*abhakṣi, apāma*) to an immediate, immanent present in addressing the brew with rhetorical questions (*kiṃ nūnam … kim u …*).

> Wisely, I drank the sweet, powerful, attentive, utmost pathfinder,
> which all gods and mortals inquire of for its sweetness.
> […]
> We drank Soma, we became immortal, we reached light, we found gods.
> Can adversity affect us now, or even the harm of a mortal, Oh Immortal![95]

To paraphrase William James' famous words, self-praise hymns forbid a premature closing of accounts with experience.

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93   Could this be a case of 'connectedness with others' ("I have had an experience in which I became one with everyone at a large group event and lost my sense of individuality," see Taves, "Mystical and other Alterations")?

94   This experiential 'we' interchanging with the 'I' stands in sharp contrast to Sharf's construal of the Jamesian mystical experience as private (see Sharf, "The Rhetoric of Experience," 267, 283, 285).

95   RV VIII.48:1, 3: *svādor abhakṣi vayasaḥ sumedhāḥ svādhyo varivovittarasya | viśve yaṃ devā uta martyāso madhu bruvanto abhi saṃcaranti //1// […] apāma somam amṛtā abhūmāghanma jyotir avidāma devān | kiṃ nūnam asmān kṛṇavad arātiḥ kimu dhūrtir amṛta martyasya //3//.* For other translations, see Griffith, *The Hymns*, 198–99; see also Brereton and Jamison, *The Rigveda*, 1128–30. For the Vedic source, see https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv08048.htm (accessed September 4, 2021).

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The Dynamic Future of Digital Religion Studies

Heidi A. Campbell

Abstract

Digital Religion Studies is an approach to the study of religion that focuses on the how religious belief and practices, from established offline institutions and communities, intersect with expressions of spirituality and religiosity found online or other in technologically-mediated contexts. This chapter provides an overview of the development of Digital Religion Studies by considering how scholars have framed the relationship between religion and technology. This leads to an overview of the themes and perspectives engaged within the study of digital religion over the last two decades. By surveying and evaluating these approaches, the chapter shows Digital Religion studies offers a promising area of inquiry of what constitutes religion in a digital, network society.

1   Introduction

Digital religion studies began at the end of the twentieth century amidst the rise and societal embrace of internet technology. This has led to three decades of varied experimentation with digital media for religious purposes by individuals and groups, as well as debates concerning the impact of how computer-mediated technologies may pose ethical and missional challenges to religious institutions. Digital religion studies is an approach to studying religion focused on how the religious perceptions, beliefs, and practices of established offline institutions and communities intersect with dynamic expressions of spirituality and religiosity found online or within other technologically mediated contexts. This aim of this contribution is to provide an overview of the development of digital religion studies and its relationship to the study of religion

in the twenty-first century. Here, I draw on work presented by myself and Giulia Evolvi on how we can contextualize this growing field of digital religion studies.[1] This will be done by first providing an overview of the emergence of digital religion studies and how it has sought to contextualize itself in relation to religious studies. This begins by outlining the focus and assumptions about the relationship between religion and technology that underlie digital religion studies. From there we will proceed to a discussion of how digital religion research has been received by Religious Studies scholars and the academy in general. Next, a brief overview of digital religion research in terms of different, yet consecutive waves of research is presented to show how scholars have refined their investigations of the study of religion and the digital over time. This allows for the presentation of the most common narratives about how religion and technology are embraced by religious communities. Here four sets of assumptions about religious groups' preferred relationship to digital technology are described. Finally, the future of digital religion studies is considered, as well as where the investigation of religious intersections with emerging technologies might lead.

2   Defining the Study of Digital Religion

Before we explore the terrain digital religion studies has covered, some definitional work is needed. Digital religion studies emerged in the mid-1990s, when scholars in both media and religious studies began to take note of the fact that the new technology of computer internetworking created a unique space for people to re-present the religious in a technological setting. Researchers noted that early technologies such as the World Wide Web, email, newsgroups, and discussion forums were becoming spaces facilitating religious conversations and experimentation with new manifestations of religious rituals. Over the next three decades, an emerging study of religion and internet technologies was born. This has been referred to by many names, including studies of e-religions (focused on the assumption that the internet would give birth to new forms of religion), religion online (focused on how traditional religious groups and their members sought to use and adapt to the internet), and virtual religion (focused on exploring ethical and moral concerns about doing religion in an 'unreal' or disembodied environment). In the past decade, the

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1 Campbell, Heidi A., and Giulia Evolvi. "Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies." *Journal of Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies* 1, no. 3 (2019): 1–13.

term 'digital religion' has emerged as the preferred description of studies of religion and digital media. However, digital religion is not just the new label used to describe how people practice religion online; it represents a particular approach to the study of digital media and religion and the perceived relationship between digital technologies and contemporary religion.

Digital religion studies began with scholars interested in the ways the internet was transforming, and potentially could transform, religious practice. These scholars began to take seriously the need for critical evaluation of the extent to which religion practiced online may encourage certain transformations or could be related to broader trends in how religious culture was performed and adapted within contemporary society. Digital religion as a term was first cohesively defined in the introduction to the edited volume *Digital Religion, Understanding Religion in New Media Worlds*.[2] The term was used to describe the understanding that contemporary religion is being practiced in both online and offline contexts, and these religious contexts intersect with one another in interesting and important ways worthy of further scrutiny. This means scholars engaged in digital religion studies recognize that religion, as practiced within our current social and cultural milieu, is increasingly influenced and informed by interactions with computer-mediated digital technologies. Religion in an era of digital media cannot avoid this engagement. This means religious individuals, institutions, and understandings are all impacted by the social-technical infrastructure and ethos of the network society. Religion has become embedded in and reliant on this environment that offers a diverse continuum of technological-religious engagement options. Digital religion recognizes the fact that the social-technical infrastructure of society has created a hybrid reality and a sphere of interaction that is online and in mediated contexts. This intersects now with traditional or embodied offline contexts. In other words, the online and offline environments and realities are becoming increasingly interconnected with, even interdependent on, one another to varying degrees.

As one of the founders of digital religion studies, I described it as a new area of research that explores how religious beliefs and practices are performed and understood online and offline within digital culture. Specifically, I described digital religion as a "framework for articulating and investigating the evolution of religious practices online which are linked to online and offline contexts simultaneously."[3] For me, digital religion studies is an area that "investigates

2   Campbell, Heidi A. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religion in New Media Worlds*. New London: Routledge, 2013.

3   Campbell, *Digital religion*, 1.

the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended and integrated."[4]

Over the past two and a half decades, my research has explored a variety of intersections in relation to how new media technologies, different expressions of traditional and nontraditional religion, and our emerging digital cultures have interacted and come together. The majority of my work has focused on Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities' technological decision-making processes and the social-cultural implications of their choices. My early scholarship sought to draw attention to what exploring manifestations of religion in internet technologies and environments could offer scholars in terms of insights on how distinctive user communities use technologies and seek to shape them in light of their core values and moral economies. Some twenty-five years later, I still maintain this argument that studying religious practice online offers scholars an important focal point for learning how people conceive of and position themselves in relation to postmodernity and the idea of a technological society.

From the very beginning, my work has been interdisciplinary – my PhD work on online Christian communities as new expressions of church brought together the fields of theology, ethics, media studies, and sociology of technology. I was eventually hired as a media studies scholar teaching courses in media history, theory, and technology, yet my research required me to regularly engage with work from the fields of religious studies and sociology of religion. Much of my early academic work focused on not just describing and analyzing the different manifestations of how religion and media technologies interact via the internet, but on creating an academic apologetic for this work. To my colleagues in communication and media studies, I had to explain why religious groups provided a fertile and valid context for studying people's technological decision-making processes. This involved explaining how religious communities provided a rich and viable microcosm for studying the motivations behind people's media choices. I had to argue that studying focused groups of religious technology users' social and cultural adaptation processes provided concrete insights into people's perceptions of new media environments. This apologetic work led me to strategically publish articles in top media journals such as *New Media & Society* and *The Information Society*, showing how this work echoed and extended current internet studies research on how people practice and frame community and identity online. By arguing that media scholars should

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4   Campbell, *Digital religion*, 3–4.

"[Consider] spiritual dimensions within computer-mediated communication studies,"[5] I sought to "make space for religion in internet studies."[6]

Doing similar explanatory and apologetics work within the fields of religious studies and sociology of religion also proved necessary. Each time I presented my research in religious studies environments – whether work on how online groups functioned as religious community or on religious identity negotiation within Islamogaming – I had to spend half my presentation and much of the question-and-answer time justifying why focusing on a religious group's engagement with media technology could provide strategic insights into how religion was performed in contemporary culture. By publishing studies in such journals as *Studies in World Christianity*, *Reviews in Religion and Theology*, and the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, I sought to prove how studying religious negotiations with digital technology highlights important aspects of how religious people and institutions adapt and translate their beliefs to new environments and generations.

This apologetic work, I believe, not only helped me demonstrate the strategic importance of this kind of interdisciplinary work, it also helped create a platform from which digital religion studies could emerge. In 2020, students or junior scholars in media or religious studies rarely have to argue why studying religious digital media use is a valid way to investigate contemporary religiosity or explain why studying manifestations of religious groups' practices in digital spaces might provide insights into current media technology practices. This means a new generation of scholars is able to approach studies of the digital with the assumption that there is a valuable and inherent connection between online and offline religious communities and culture. This is due to the efforts of scholars like me who have shown how patterns of religious belief and ritual tied to historically-grounded communities are transferred and still engaged, though often modified, within digital culture. Digital religion studies is an interdisciplinary area of inquiry that encourages scholars not only to look at how religion is practiced online, but at how online and offline spaces and discourses are being bridged, blended, and blurred by religious groups in an increasingly global, networked world.

In the past decade, I have continued to explore religious communities' unique decision-making processes and how they enact socially and theologically informed strategies in relation to the features of new media they accept,

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5   Campbell, Heidi A. "Considering Spiritual Dimensions within Computer-Mediated Communication Studies." *New Media and Society* 7, no. 1 (2005): 111–135.

6   Campbell, Heidi A. "Making Space for Religion in Internet Studies." *The Information Society* 21, no. 4 (2005): 309–315.

reject, and/or innovate. Here, my work has focused on identifying the patterns used by religious communities, especially within Judaism and Christianity, to leverage the internet to communicate in ways not possible within their offline communities. Such work demonstrates the fact that digital religion studies helps us understand new ethical and moral challenges technology poses to these communities.

3 Digital Religion in the Context of Religious Studies

Over the last two decades, the interest in religious practices online and how these influence offline perceptions of religion has grown in leaps and bounds within the field of religious studies. This is especially seen in the rising attention given to American Academy of Religion (AAR) studies of religion and the internet. This new phenomenon of religion being transported onto the internet first came to the attention of the AAR in 1996 via a special issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* on "Religion and American Popular Culture." In one article, Stephen O'Leary described how the then-new technology of the internet was helping to establish a new form of sacred space, as both traditional religious groups and new forms of religion engaged online, and cyberspace gave rise to both Christian discussion groups and the creation of technopagan rituals.[7] In another article, Brenda Brasher wrote about the cyborg as a religious concept helpful to religious studies scholars, enabling them talk about the nature of humanity in an increasingly technologized society. Together, these articles raised awareness of how the internet and emerging technologies might potentially impact religious practices in the twenty-first century. Yet over the next ten years, only a handful of scholars noted in passing in various JAAR articles the fact that the internet created new possibilities for religious discourse and heightened public awareness of various aspects of religion that could potentially have cultural and institutional impact. Also, during this same period, very few papers at the annual meeting of the AAR focused on trends related to religion and the internet. Those that did appear were typically found in the Science and Technology or Religion and Popular Culture divisions, or the newly formed Media, Religion, and Culture subsection. In 2005, the first year I attended the AAR convention, my paper "Studying Religious Community,

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7   O'Leary, Stephen D. "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks." *Journal of The American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 4, 781–808.

Identity, & Online Rituals"[8] was one of five papers taking seriously the rise of religion on the internet and its broader implications.

However, from 2006 onwards, a steady increase could be noted in the number of scholars paying attention to what Christopher Helland had described as "religion online," the importing of traditional religious practices and discourse online, and "online religion," which highlighted new forms of religiosity emerging from spiritual experimentation in cyberspace.[9] In 2007, the Religion and Media group hosted an entire Preconference on Religion and New Media in San Diego, where scholars reported on their current research on religious representation in video games, websites as new sources of religious teaching, and religious debates in online discussion forums. My own keynote at this preconference focused on how bloggers were emerging as new forms of religious authority online.[10] This marked an attempt by media-focused religion scholars to draw attention to how the study of religious digital media rituals has far-reaching implications for helping scholars understand religious practice in the twenty-first century.

By 2010, AAR convention papers and discussions about the internet, digital technologies, and religion began to move beyond the Religion and Media and Religion and Popular Culture divisions to be included in a number of areas and religion-specific divisions including Islam, Buddhism, and Ritual Studies. Articles in JAAR such as Robert Geraci's (2008) study of religious and apocalyptic imagery in AI technologies and sci-fi movies, and several reviews of books focused on digital Islam, Hinduism online, and religious discourse on the web helped further raise the profile of the study of religion and the internet within the discipline.

For me, 2012 marked a key moment within the American Academy of Religion, not only in the number of conference papers and panels focused on religion and the internet, but in what seemed to be a general recognition that studying contemporary religion required paying serious attention to the role digital media played in the performance and publicizing of religion. A number of panels in 2012 also raised attention to how digital media were shaping public discourse about religion. This included the panel I organized to celebrate the launch of the book *Digital Religion, Understanding Religion in New Media*

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8   Campbell, *Studying Religious Community*.

9   Helland, Christopher. "Online Religion/Religion Online and Virtual Communitas." In *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, edited by Jeffrey Hadden, and Douglas Cowan, pp. 205–224. New York: JAI Press, 2000.

10   Campbell, Heidi A. "God, Bible and the Blogosphere: How Online Communities & Bloggers Respond to Religious Authority Online." Keynote presented at the American Academy of Religion Preconference on Religion & New Media, San Diego, CA, USA, 2007.

Worlds. The session, held in a room that could seat seventy-five, was standing room only as key scholars featured in the collection described how the concepts of religious ritual, community, and identity were being transformed, understood, and studied within an age of internet.

It was here where I also publicly introduced and defined for the first time the idea of "digital religion studies" as illustrative of the case studies and critical literature review chapters in the book. Digital religion studies, I suggested, offered a new framework for understanding research that not only sought to document, define, and analyze the variety of religious practices taking place online or being facilitated by various new technologies such as mobile phones, gaming platforms, or augmented reality. Digital religion studies also recognizes the fact that religious groups and communities in traditional or offline contexts are also being impacted by the pervasiveness of the internet and the social-technical structures that undergird contemporary society.

After this panel, a number of the attendees and panel members commented that this panel was an important moment for the field of religious studies. It demonstrated scholarly recognition of the importance of investigating religion as it is communicated and transformed in digital media spaces and how broader religious and cultural structures were also being impacted. For me, the positive reception of this panel by scholars from a dozen or more divisions also felt like a marker of the validity and legitimacy of digital religion studies as an area of inquiry that has something to contribute to religious studies scholars' understanding of religiosity in the contemporary moment.

This perception has seemed to prove true over time, especially in relation to my own work and its audience within religious studies. In 2012, I also published the article "Understanding the Relationship between Religious Practice Online and Offline in a Networked Society" in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, taking stock of fifteen years of interdisciplinary scholarship on religion and digital media and the common findings scholars noted about how the digital reflected and encouraged certain distinctive notions about the nature religion in the twenty-first century.[11] This became one of the most cited and most read articles in JAAR over the next three years. Also, at the 2013 convention, I organized a panel on "Reflections on Playing with Religion in Digital Gaming" that led to a heated, yet enthusiastic discussion about what studying religion in digital and video games could teach religious studies scholars about popular perceptions of religion. This led to a published roundtable

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11   Campbell, Heidi A. "Understanding the Relationship between Religious Practice Online
      and Offline in a Networked Society." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1
      (2012): 64–93.

article, "Gaming Religionworlds: Why Religious Studies Should Pay Attention to Religion in Gaming," in JAAR and helped launch the exploratory study of the formation of a new division on Religion and Gaming in the AAE.[12]

Now, some twenty-three years after the first journal articles were published in JAAR and fourteen years since the first presentation on digital religion at AAR, the studies of digital media and religion have become pervasive throughout the AAR-SBL convention program. Discussions of digital religion studies at the 2019 convention could be found in a variety of units and divisions, including Contemporary Islam, Ethics, African Religions, Yoga in Theory and Practice, Jain Studies, Tantric Studies, Religion and Cities, and others. Over the last ten years, many new units and seminars have been introduced at AAR-SBL focusing on new and innovative themes of religion and emerging technology such as Religion and Human Enhancement, and Transhumanism, Digital Theology, Video Gaming and Religion, and Digital Humanities and the Bible. The prevalence of such diverse themes shows a growing recognition of how digital media studies has come to inform religious practice and discourse and gained the attention of religious studies scholars. Digital religion studies itself has evolved from being seen as a specialist topic to now being referred to as a distinct area of interdisciplinary research, or even, by some, as a subfield within religious studies. Several senior scholars at this past AAR also admitted to me that digital religion has become a central conversation area for religious studies, and a space all scholars need to consider in order to fully understand and communicate the role and perception of religion in a global society.

In an exploratory session on digital theology at the 2019 convention, Stephen Garner reflected upon digital religion studies – what it has contributed to scholars' understanding of religion and technology and how it might be used by scholars studying religion for other perspectives. He stated:

> Digital religion is primarily concerned with how religion in its various forms engages with, is shaped by, and is located in digital culture and media. As such, its primary modes of study tend to be shaped by anthropology, sociology and communications and media studies, as well as religious studies. While those involved in digital religion may have particular faith commitments, the primary location for studying religion in digital spaces is from the outside looking in. That said, the insights brought by this area of inquiry can inform and shape other forms of reflection,

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12   Campbell, Heidi A., Gregory Price Grieve, Rabia Gregory, Shanny Lufts, Rachel Wagner, and Xenia Zeiler. "Gaming Religionworlds: Why Religious Studies Should Pay Attention to Religion in Gaming." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 3 (2016): 641–664.

such as theological engagement with digital cultures from those on the inside of a particular religious community or tradition. Digital religion provides groups such as theologians and their communities with helpful tools for self-reflection on the use of digital and media culture in those communities.[13]

Thus, digital religion studies has gained a growing and diverse audience of scholars and notable attention within various field of religious studies and theology.

4   Four (or Five?) Waves of Digital Religion Research: Where We Have Been

The past three decades of research on digital religion have been referred to as different waves of scholarly inquiry, each bringing a unique focus, approach, and set of questions.

Morten Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg were the first scholars to identify these waves of scholarly inquiry, beginning with the first wave as one focused on identifying and documenting trends in religious use of the internet.[14] Early work focused on examining the new manifestation of religious community and discourse on email discussion forums and message boards and asking questions about how and why religious individuals sought to use the internet for specific spiritual practices. In this wave, scholars were also prone to over-celebratory proclamations of how the internet would promote religion or how digitally mediated communication would destroy religious groups as an offline reality.

In the second wave of scholarship, researchers recognized the fact that expressions of religion on the internet were growing, rather than diminishing. Therefore, focus was turned to identifying key trends and typologies of religious practice online. This work offered a more realistic assessment of how religion was being transformed by technology and religious users' ability to shape digital media by their presence online. Here, we see questions about religious identity, community, and authenticity taking center stage in research

13   Garner, Stephen. "Digital Theology: A Modest, Inclusive Proposal." Paper presented at the Digital Theology-Wild Card Session, American Academy of Religion Annual Conference, San Diego, 2019.

14   Hojsgaard, Morten T., and Margit Warburg. *Religion and Cyberspace*. London: Routledge, 2005.

inquiry. Mia Lövheim and I described the third wave of research as the theoretical turn.[15] Here scholars saw the importance of applying previous knowledge about the workings of media, as well as the application of theories from sociology and religious studies to investigate what was really new in the various manifestations of religion online. It was in this wave that 'digital religion studies' began to firmly take shape, as increased attention was given to the interconnectedness of online and offline settings and the theoretical implications of these intersections. While waves one and two mostly focused on internet-based religions and religious activities, third-wave scholarship recognized the embeddedness of the internet in everyday life and sought to consider the impact of the digital on non-digital religious venues.

In fourth-wave scholarship, scholars have turned their attention to how digital media practices have become a seamless part of religious groups' and individuals' everyday lives. This wave continues to emphasize the connections between online and offline aspects of life and practice, considering how this new era of hypermediation, where there is no distinction between mediated and non-mediated spaces, shapes our outlook and humanity. The online-offline context is no longer described in a terms of space distinction, but as a continuum of experience which all humans, even the religious, must engage. Increased attention is given in digital religion studies to existential, ethical, and political aspects and questions, as well as issues of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality.[16] In this fourth wave, the book *Digital Religion, Understanding Religion in New Media Worlds* appeared highlighting the work of established researchers, as well as up-and-coming scholars in the field of digital religion studies.[17] This has become the foundational text in the field of digital religion studies, defining the area and serving as a core introductory guide for scholars interested in this area of study. Due to the text's popularity, the publisher, Routledge, commissioned a second, updated version: *Digital Religion 2.0* will be out in 2021. My co-editor Ruth Tsuria and I have brought together new essays that look how the recognized themes of religious ritual, identity, community, authority, and authenticity are being addressed in studies of religion in digital gaming worlds, social media, app culture and emerging internet platforms in a variety of religious contexts.

From these four waves of digital religion studies we can see a progressive development of the study of religion and technology that has growing in its

15   Campbell, Heidi A., and Mia Lövheim, eds. *Religion and the Internet: The Online-Offline Connection*. Special Issue of *Information, Communication & Society* 14, no. 8 (2011).

16   Campbell and Evolvi, "Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research."

17   Campbell, *Digital Religion*.

sophistication in considering the complex intersections that have emerged and technology users have brought their spiritual passion online with them. Research has moved from a simplistic focus on utopian and dystopian assessments of these interrelationships, to recognizing their increasing embeddedness and dependence on mainstream and religious cultures on a global social-technical infrastructure. Increasingly scholars have drawn toward the development of theoretical models and more nuanced frameworks to explain how religion and religious groups adapt and respond to our technological environment.

5   Current Views on Religion and the Digital: Bounding, Bridging, Blending, and Blurring

From these four waves of scholarship within digital religion studies, a distinct range of relationships can be identified as to how religious groups engage with technology and describe their connection to it. This continuum was first described in detail in my book on *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority*,[18] which provides an overview of the dominant perceptions of religious individuals and communities towards digital technology. Religious groups and individuals typically take one of four approaches towards digital media and their integration into their systems of belief and ways of life. I also describe this as a negotiation between conceptions of the online and offline, referring to how offline-based religious institutions and leaders relate to or understand their relationship with digital or online media and platforms. I have come to refer to this as the bounding, blending, bridging, or blurring of church and digital media contexts.

BOUNDED: Online and offline are separate from each other, seen to be in competition.
BRIDGING: Online and offline are distinct, can be linked.
BLENDING: Online and offline are interconnected, allow a flow between contexts.
BLURRING: Online and offline contexts are embedded in one another, new context created.

18   Campbell, Heidi A. *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority*. London: Routledge, 2020.

In my research studying religious groups' choices and responses to digital media, I have observed groups typically taking one of these four stances toward media. Some religious communities see themselves as BOUNDED, in that media technologies represent a culture foreign to their way of life, one from which they seek to distance themselves. They see digital or online contexts as separate from their own offline reality. This is because they perceive online spaces as driven by divergent values or creating patterns that challenge or are in competition with their beliefs. Therefore, they draw strong boundaries between religious, offline and the internet, or online contexts, in attempts to separate themselves from the influence of digital culture. While this perspective was not expressed by any of the religious digital creatives in this study, it is mentioned as one point on a continuum of responses to digital media. This response highlights the fact that there are still some religious groups that are strongly resistant to and critical of digital media and seek to distance themselves from them and their influences.

Other religious communities see their relationship to digital media as one of BRIDGING. Here, the internet and the church are described as distinct contexts, each with its own set of values and priorities. Some of the online aspects are seen as contradictory to the religious communities' patterns. Yet other features and affordances of digital media are seen as useful to religious groups' work and aims. So religious groups see that a bridge can be established between their predominately offline institutional culture and the online culture of the internet. This involves building tangible and rhetorical connections between religious and digital culture to highlight specific purposes and aims they share. Such groups emphasize the idea that digital media offer religious groups new opportunities for communication, which are critical for them engage in order for their message to be heard and appear relevant to digitally mediated culture. Digital media are framed as a conduit for relaying religious beliefs in current cultural discourse. Framing digital media as useful for internal and public communication and helping religious organizations maintain a presence in the twenty-four seven news cycle creates a bridge, thus highlighting the embrace of technology for focused purposes to build the reputation and visibility of their religious community.

Increasingly, many religious groups are recognizing their dependence on digital media and online platforms to conduct their ministry work and communication. This means that while they may find some aspects of the internet problematic, they acknowledge the fact that they are interconnected with online culture due to their members' engagement with and investment in the internet. Therefore, these religious communities see online and offline contexts as BLENDED. This enables them to develop resources that utilize digital tools

and adapt established religious practices to this new communication environment, in order to create a seamless flow of interactions and shared experiences between the two. In this context, religious groups' aim is to cultivate patterns of use that complement their mission and religious outlook. Such groups contend the church should see the internet as a helpmate and asset, rather than as a competitor or distraction to religious mission. This emphasis on seeing technology as blending well with religious instructional aims enables religious groups to experiment with forms of religious engagement online and offline.

Finally, some religious groups see their relationship with digital media as hypermediated, a relationship in which religious culture and structures are highly mediated and embedded within the social-technical infrastructure of global society. I describe this as seeing the online and offline contexts BLURRING into one another. In this way, a hybrid context is created, informed both by traits of traditional religious structures and patterns of life that have become infused and shaped by digital techniques and affordances. This blurred context is not always seen in a positive light. Some religious groups argue the church has been co-opted or seduced by the bells and whistles of digital culture, which is modifying the work and identity of Christianity in significant ways. Other groups present this blending as a unique opportunity to experiment and reimagine the life, work, and calling of the church as this new context takes shape.

6   A Fifth Wave: Where Are We Going and Emerging Conversations

Recently, some scholars argue that digital religion studies is on the cusp of a fifth wave[19] informed by ethical tensions surrounding the humanity-machine question brought on by the robotic turn and an increasing movement towards the mainstreaming of augmented and virtual reality, as well as a purported movement in the western world from a culture of religiosity to more secular outlooks. Giulia Evolvi and I spotlight these three important issues in a recent critical analysis of current digital religion research.[20] In this work, we point out the ethical and cultural challenges posed by the rise of a posthuman ideal of the human-machine relationship, debates concerning the emergence of a post-secular society, and technology being framed as an implicit form of

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19   Hutchings, Tim. "Defining Digital Theology: Digital Humanities, Digital Religion and the Particular Work of the CODEC Research Centre and Network." *Open Theology* 5, no. 1 (2018): 29–43.

20   Campbell and Evolvi, "Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research."

religion as issues that capture the attention of both religious studies and digital media scholars.

The rise of nanotechnologies, immersive technologies, and augmented reality, which blur the boundaries between the human and technological spheres, have captured the imagination of many scholars. What once was science fiction – the world of cyborgs, sentient artificial intelligence, and virtual reality – is becoming the new reality, with the emergence of many new integrated and implanted networked technologies. These developments raise important questions central to religious studies scholars about the nature of life, death, and time, as well as how our increasingly technology-infused twenty-first century is informing popular and philosophical notions of human being-ness. Scholars such as Amanda Lagerkvist explore the idea of human existential existence in a digital age, when our notions and lived realities of gender, race, and personhood are being reframed through our technology.[21] Others, such as Charles Ess,[22] question how our moral frameworks might have to shift to accommodate the emergence of the enhanced posthuman, the technological other that is more than human due to self-imposed machine enhancements, and the religious implications of such robotic others living amongst us. Questions of what religion will look like and what role it will play when the blurring of human and technology become the norm also need to be asked. Posthuman discourse raises interesting debates about the nature of humanity in a technological world that can provide both exciting and threatening narratives for religious communities.[23,24]

Also, in the past two decades, the movement towards a more globalized and technologically driven society also raises questions about whether hotly debated secularization theses might become a lived reality in the western world. For example, recent Pew religion studies show that the fastest growing religious groups in America are the 'nones,' individuals who ascribe to no religious category or affiliation, and the 'dones,' individuals who consider themselves religious but are done with being part of specific religious institutions and official communities. The move towards secularization or a post-secular society is an area of keen interest to many religious studies scholars, and there

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21   Lagerkvist, Amanda. "Existential Media: Toward a Theorization of Digital Thrownness." *New Media and Society* 1, no. 1 (2017): 96–110.

22   Ess, Charles. "Phronesis for Machine Ethics? Can Robots Perform Ethical Judgments?" In *What Social Robots Can and Should Do*, edited by Johanna Seibt, Marco Nørskov, and Søren Schack Andersen, pp. 386–389. Amsterdam: IOS Press EBooks, 2016.

23   Campbell, Heidi A. "Framing the Human-Technology Relationship: How Religious Digital Creatives Engage Posthuman Narratives." *Social Compass* 63, no. 3 (2016): 302–318.

24   Lagerkvist, "Existential Media."

is a growing recognition that technology developments and cultural dominance may have important links to this phenomenon. Many scholars of digital religion have highlighted the tendency of religion online to be more personally driven and less institutionally associated in many of its expressions,[25] which some suggest may be precursors of the move toward secularity.[26] Yet alongside this, the scholars of religion and digital religion suggest post-secular discourses that highlight the moral failings of modern society and science have also led to a resurgence of religion in the public sphere in new forms. Post-secularity empowers certain religious groups to assert their influence alongside new postmodern spiritual sensibilities, with digital media playing an important role in the promotion of these views. This is echoed by work such as Guilia Evolvi's study of religious bloggers in Europe, which found religious internet engagement plays an important role in influencing political and social discourses about religion and how it is framed within competing publics.[27]

Also, as technology has come to play such a central part within contemporary society, scholars have noted how technology functions as a religion for many – from tech-prophets describing the internet as a religion to the Silicon Valley Wisdom 2.0 movement that has remixed and branded Buddhist-inspired mindfulness practices as key to spiritual and technological development. Implicit religion is a category coming out of religious studies that suggests some forms of contemporary practice or meaning making can take on religious-like qualities, to the extent that certain beliefs and practices can be defined as exhibiting a family resemblance to religion. Many digital religion scholars have begun to explore the ways this is lived out by individuals within digital spaces and practices, whether by studying technological fandom as religious-like behavior,[28] or by describing how our devotion to these devices could be seen as creating a new sense of spiritual self.[29] Another area of exploration is the extent to which technology use encourages religious-like practice that changes individuals' understanding not only of the technology, but of themselves. For example,

25   Campbell, Heidi A. "Understanding the Relationship between Religious Practice Online and Offline in a Networked Society." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2012): 64–93.

26   Lövheim, Mia. *Media, Religion and Gender: Key Issues and New Challenges*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

27   Evolvi, Giulia. "Is the Pope Judging You? Internet Negotiations of Religious Values by LGBTQ Communities in Italy." In *LGTBQs, Media and Culture in Europe*, edited by Alexander Dhoest, Lukasz Szulc, and Bart Eeckhout, pp. 135–152. London: Routledge, 2019.

28   Campbell, Heidi A., and La Pastina, Antonio C. "How the iPhone Became Divine: Blogging, Religion and Intertextuality." *New Media and Society* 12, no. 7 (2010): 1191–1207.

29   Hutchings, Tim. "Design and the Digital Bible: Persuasive Technology and Religious Reading." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 32, no. 2 (2017): 205–219.

Wendi Bellar's research on Catholic and Muslim prayer apps showed that even when technologies enable people to reshape their religious practice through certain technological features, religious users often rely on traditional notions of religiosity and beliefs to inform their technology use.[30]

Furthermore, my own work on the idea of "networked religion" suggests digital media increasingly inform our understandings of religion in a global, media-focused culture.[31] I assert that religious internet use not only encourages innovations in religious culture, but it also correlates to broader cultural shifts, based on how religion is perceived in contemporary society. I show that these online trends, such as the loosening of traditional religious affiliations and a tendency towards individualized religious practice, are also observed offline by many sociologists of religion. This shows digital religion uses religious symbols and technological narratives as tools for reconstructing spiritual meaning in everyday life. Considering the religious-like role technologies play in individuals' and groups' lives, transcendent meaning making is an important area for religious studies and digital religion scholars to consider, as technological artifacts take on increasingly spiritual meaning in contemporary discourses and experiences.

The current and emerging generation of technology will continue to raise interesting and crucial issues for scholars of religion, as technological and religious spheres of modern life continue to increasingly intersect. Continuing to look not only at how religious groups have responded to digital media, but considering how these integrations shape offline religious practices in religious institutions, is crucial. Also, attention needs to be paid to new trends towards secularity post-secularity, the posthuman world view, and the religious impulse of technology and how they will inform the perceived and actual relationship between religion and technology in the public sphere.

Overall, this chapter has sought to define digital religion, highlight key research exploring the study of religion online/offline, and their integration in the first three waves of research, and the current fourth and potential fifth waves of research on religious engagement with developing digital media technologies. As a young interdisciplinary area of inquiry, digital religion studies continues to grow and develop with each new form and generation of digital

30 Bellar, Wendi. "iPray: Understanding the Relationship between Design and Use in Catholic and Islamic Prayer Applications." Doctoral dissertation. Texas A&M University, College Station, TX. https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/165835 (assessed September 28, 2021).

31 Campbell, Heidi A. "Understanding the Relationship between Religious Practice Online and Offline in a Networked Society." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2012): 64–93.

technology that is introduced. Questions about how our immersion in increasingly digitally mediated realities will further shape people's search for the spiritual in everyday lifeworlds remains to be seen. Yet, even as religion is now pursued via increasingly technologized forms – such as via virtual and augmented reality and with the help of robotic priests – age old questions of what it means to be human, to seek out the transcendent in this world and engage the spiritual side of life still remain at the core of these inquiries.

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How to Cope with Transcendence: A Question for the Historical Sciences? First Approaches of a Historian

Tim Weitzel

Abstract

In numerous contemporary sources, God is described or pictured as a communication partner of human beings. Although the historian must refrain from asking whether this communication is possible per se, he or she can (and should) contribute to a historicization of divine-human communication. This article aims to contribute to this explanation by examining historical aspects of divine-human communication in medieval Christianity. It is the article's basic methodological axiom that irritation represents an observation opportunity for such an approach: wherever communication with God was contested, disputed or even fought over, the form of communication in question became the object of communication itself – and can thus be observed from the perspective of cultural studies.

Keywords

1   Introduction

In the Engelberg Prayer Book, dated back to the second half of the 14th century,[1] there is a remarkable passage that reveals insights into one, if not

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[1] For the compilation and dating of the text, which has been unedited to this day, see Peter Ochsenbein, "Mystische Spuren im Engelberger Gebetbuch," in *Homo Medietas: Aufsätze zu Religiosität, Literatur und Denkformen des Menschen vom Mittelalter bis in die Neuzeit. Festschrift für Alois Maria Haas zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Claudia Brinker-von der Heyde, Niklaus Largier (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999), 276; Johanna Thali, "Regionalität als Paradigma literarhistorischer Forschung zur Vormoderne. Das Beispiel des Benediktinerinnenklosters

the most central aspect of religion: the text tells of a believer (*gůter mensch*), who worshipped the Mother of God daily with 700 Ave Maria and as many prostrations. In a vision, however, the adored one reveals to the diligent prayer that she would prefer a shorter but more devout (*andechteklich*) prayer with only seven Ave Maria and prostrations. Subsequently to this story, this revealed prayer is listed verbatim in the manuscript.[2]

The text makes sense of a central characteristic of religion: Religious actors communicate not only *about* God, the divine, or more generally: transcendence, but also *with* these entities.[3] And that peculiar communication with the divine is by no means conceived as one-dimensional, but as a dialogical, reciprocal event. More specifically: People not only pray to God and the saints, but at times these transcendent entities also respond.

Apparently, this is not only the case in Engelberg. In his inspiring work Thomas Lentes has shown that the sequence of *lectio* and *oratio* in medieval liturgy was conceived as a dialogue *with* the divine: in the reading of scripture and psalmody, man is addressed – in the sense of the theologumenon of

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St. Andreas in Engelberg." in *Kulturtopographie des deutschsprachigen Südwestens im späteren Mittelalter. Studien und Texte*, ed. Barbara Fleith, René Wetzel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 259. An edition of the text is currently being prepared by Johanna Thali, https://editionsbericht.de/?n=E_Thali (accessed June 10, 2022).

2   *Ein gůter mensch sůcht alle abent ein venie vnd bettet, e daz er nider gieng, ünser frôwen siben hundert Aue Maria vnd als menig venie. Vnd ze einem mal do erschein im ünser frôw sant Maria vnd sprach zů im: ‚So du mir über stat dienest, daz ist mir nüt geneme.‘ Do sprach der mensche: ‚Frôw sant Maria, wie sol ich dir dienen, daz dir geneme si?‘ Do entwürt im ünser frôw vnd sprach: ‚Du solt mir siben Aue Maria sprechen mit siben venien andechteklich vnd sprich also: ‚Frôw sant Maria, ich loben vnd manen dich der luterkeit: daz du die lutrest creatur bist die got ie geschůf Aue Maria. Frôw sant Maria, ich loben vnd manen dich daz dich got erwalt ze einer můter us aller welt. Aue Maria.* Stiftsbibl. Engelberg, Cod. 155, fol. 63ᵛ–64ᵛ. Digital copy available at: https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/de/bke/0155/63v/0/ (accessed June 10, 2022). Cf. Peter Ochsenbein, "Privates Beten in mündlicher und schriftlicher Form. Notizen zur Geschichte der abendländischen Frömmigkeit," in *Viva vox und ratio scripta. Mündliche und schriftliche Kommunikationsformen im Mönchtum des Mittelalters*, ed. Clemens M. Kasper (Münster i. W.: Lit, 1997), 135. The text in question is also found in the Hermetschwiler Prayer Book, written in the first two decades of the 15th century. Cf. *Das Hermetschwiler Gebetbuch: Studien zu deutschsprachiger Gebetbuchliteratur der Nord- und Zentralschweiz im Spätmittelalter, mit einer Edition*, ed. Ruth Wiederkehr (Berlin: De Gruyter 2013), 353. In addition, the text is also found in a similar form in a Berlin manuscript. Cf. Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, mgo 224, fol. 47ʳ.

3   See Jörg Rüpke, *Historische Religionsforschung. Eine Einführung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007), 35; Andreas Holzem, "Die Wissensgesellschaft der Vormoderne. Die Transfer- und Transformationsdynamik des 'religiösen Wissens,'" in *Die Aktualität der Vormoderne: Epochenentwürfe zwischen Alterität und Kontinuität*, ed. Klaus Ridder, Steffen Patzold (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 257.

scripture inspiration – by the Word of God, to which he (or she) answers in prayer.[4] In medieval literature, too, communication with and to God is fundamentally dialogical, as linguistic research has recently pointed out.[5]

As Hans-Werner Goetz recently noted, such communication was almost omnipresent in medieval Christianity: "Afterall, communication with God is also constantly taking place: through rituals (such as baptism, consecration and the Eucharist), prayers, dream visions, signs and miracles. The climax is the vision of God, which according to medieval conception even remains the goal of man and will be realized after the Last Judgment."[6] The German historian has thus uncovered two characteristics of the communication in question, the implications of which can hardly be overestimated: The phenomenon is omnipresent in medieval Christianity and actualizes or materializes in manifold forms, in other words, is characterized by an enormous complexity.

As relevant as this (almost incidental) observation of Goetz may be, it must be added immediately that the communication in question was anything but harmless, despite or precisely because of its ordinariness. Quite the opposite. Rather, the Engelberg example shows that communication with the divine places the religious actor in a delicate, indeed downright precarious, position. Obviously, not every ritual form, habitual gesture or emotional state is pleasing to transcendence.[7] This idea can not only be traced in the medium of scripture, but it was also visualized in Engelberg: In another codex of the monastery Library, also dated to the 14th century,[8] the oldest known form of a rare image genre is to be found: the image of the good and bad prayer.[9] The depiction

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4   See Thomas Lentes, *Gebetbuch und Gebärde. Religiöses Ausdrucksverhalten in Gebetbüchern aus dem Dominikanerinnen-Kloster St. Nikolaus in undis zu Straßburg (1350–1550)*, 2 vols. (Münster, 1996), 28. On the dialogical structure of prayer, see also Edmund Arens, "Liturgisches Handeln als performativer Vollzug und religiöse Praxis: Die Perspektive einer kommunikativen Religionstheologie," in *Liturgisches Handeln als soziale Praxis: kirchliche Rituale in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Jan Brademann, Kristina Brode-Thies (Münster i. W.: Rhema, 2014), 84.

5   See Nine Miedema, Angela Schrott, and Monika Unzeitig eds. *Sprechen mit Gott. Redeszenen in mittelalterlicher Bibeldichtung und Legende*, (Berlin: De Gruyter 2012).

6   Hans-Werner Goetz, *Gott und die Welt: Religiöse Vorstellungen des frühen und hohen Mittelalters. Vol. 1, 1: Das Gottesbild*, (Berlin: De Gruyter 2011), 284.

7   In the said introduction to the seven-part Marian prayer it is literally said: ‚*So du mir über stat dienest, daz ist mir nüt geneme.*' Stiftsbibl. Engelberg, Cod. 155, fol. 63ᵛ.

8   According to Susan Marti, the codex has to be dated to the year 1330 and was probably made at least partially in Engelberg. Cf. Susan Marti, *Malen, schreiben und beten. Die spätmittelalterliche Handschriftenproduktion im Doppelkloster Engelberg*, (Zürich: Zurich InterPublishers, 2002), 130–132, 265–267.

9   Stiftsbibl. Engelberg, Cod. 62, fol. 17ʳ. On the image of the good and bad prayer cf. Robert Wildhaber, "Das gute und das schlechte Gebet. Ein Beitrag zum Thema der Mahnbilder," in *Europäische Kulturverflechtungen im Bereich der volkstümlichen Überlieferung: Festschrift*

shows two antithetical prayers. The prayer of the good one aims at the miracles of Jesus Christ, who forms the center of the picture, whereas the bad prayer is dedicated to worldly things. While previous research has focused primarily on the representational technique by which the image visualizes prayer or communication – namely, the prayer lines[10] – it is more decisive here that the picture also shows limits of what can be said and communicated in prayer.[11]

And this limit is particularly virulent. For in many medieval texts, the idea of offending God through a ritual lapse, an inappropriate medial and material form, a wrong intention or emotional state becomes evident.[12] Consequently, prayer in the Middle Ages was also referred to as *oratio periculosa*.[13] Indeed, it could be said that the question of how man can communicate with God is one of the most virulent questions in the history of Abrahamic religion, if not *the* most virulent.

2   Communication with God

Although, or precisely because communication with God happens incessantly in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the mode of this communication is highly controversial: among religious specialists, it is by no means clear which ritual form, which habitual gesture, which prayer content or which emotional state is appropriate for addressing God.

Even in the supposedly disenchanted modernity, the topic has hardly lost its relevance. In a recent newspaper interview, Pope Francis broadly defined the limits of prayer in a way that has remarkable parallels with the late medieval

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      zum 65. Geburtstag Bruno Schiers, ed. Gerhard Heilfurth (Göttingen: Schwartz, 1967),
      63–72; Johanna Thali, "Strategien der Heilsvermittlung in der spätmittelalterlichen
      Gebetskultur," in *Medialität des Heils im späten Mittelalter*, ed. Carla Dauven-van
      Knippenberg, Cornelia Herberichs, Christian Kiening (Zürich: Chronos, 2009), 244–248;
      Marti, *Malen, schreiben und beten*, 213–215; Wiederkehr, Hermetschwiler Gebetbuch, 129.

10   Stiftbibl. Engelberg, Cod. 62, fol. 17ʳ. According to Johanna Thali, the text must be dated to
      1330. Cf. Thali, "Strategien der Heilsvermittlung," 244.

11   Thali, "Strategien der Heilsvermittlung," 244–248. See Wiederkehr, *Hermetschwiler
      Gebetbuch*, 129.

12   This aspect of the history of religion has so far only been the subject of incidental research
      but has not yet been systematically explored. This cannot be done here either, but will
      be the subject of more comprehensive research. Cf. for instance Arnold Angenendt,
      Geschichte der Religiosität im Mittelalter, (Darmstadt: Primus ³2009), 40.

13   The term *oratio periculosa* was used in the medieval penitential books studied by
      Raymund Kottje primarily to refer to the Lord's Prayer and parts of the canon (Te igi-
      tur). Cf. Raymund Kottje, "Oratio periculosa – eine frühmittelalterliche Bezeichnung des
      Kanons?," in *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 10 (1967), 165–168.

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prayer book. (ZEIT Nr. 11/2017). Theologians continue to discuss controversially to what extent God can be presupposed as a communication partner and how one can communicate with him.[14]

But this question is not only discussed in theology. One of the most influential sociologists of the last century, Niklas Luhmann, also asked himself whether communication with God is possible in principle – and his answer was clearly negative.: "And to come right away with the bad message, the Dysangelium: There is no communication with God. One cannot imagine God as someone who speaks to Noah, Abraham, Jacob, or others; nor can one think of him as someone who can be called (if only one knows his name). And finally, this means that neither revelation nor prayer can be thought of as communication."[15]

As appealing as it may seem to react to Luhmann's assertion, which is neither in conciseness nor in provocativeness inferior to Nietzsche's famous dictum of the death of God, cultural scientists must nevertheless abstain from this question. For with their set of methods it will hardly be possible to clarify the – ultimately essentialist – question whether communication with God is possible *in and for itself*.[16] Rather, it is important to heed a principle that Clifford Geertz established half a century ago and that has lost hardly anything of its validity for cultural studies in general and for the study of religion in particular: "There remains, of course, the hardly unimportant questions of whether this or that religious assertion is true, this or that religious experience genuine, or whether true religious assertions and genuine religious experiences are possible at all. But such questions cannot even be asked, much less answered, within the self-imposed limitations of the scientific perspective."[17]

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14   Cf. Bernd J. Hilberath, Matthias Scharer: *Kommunikative Theologie. Grundlagen – Erfahrungen – Klärungen* (Kommunikative Theologie 15), Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2012, 152f.

15   "Und um nun gleich mit der schlimmen Botschaft, dem Dysangelium, zu kommen: Es gibt also keine Kommunikation mit Gott. Weder kann man sich Gott vorstellen als jemanden, der zu Noah, Abraham, Jakob oder anderen spricht; noch kann man ihn denken als jemanden, der angerufen werden kann (wenn man nur seinen Namen weiß). Und in letzter Konsequenz heißt dies schließlich, daß weder Offenbarung nach Gebet als Kommunikation zu denken sind." Niklas Luhmann, "Läßt unsere Gesellschaft Kommunikation mit Gott zu?," in *Grammatik des Glaubens*, ed. Hugo Bogensberger, Reinhard Kögerler (St. Pölten: Niederösterreichisches Pressehaus, 1985), 43.

16   Cf. Michael Stolz, "Aufeinandertreffen. Die Wahrnehmung göttlichen Wirkens im interreligiösen Kontakt," in *Gottes Werk und Adams Beitrag: Formen der Interaktion zwischen Mensch und Gott im Mittelalter*, eds. Thomas Honegger, Gerlinde Huber-Rebenich, Volker Leppin (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 56.

17   Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a cultural system," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, ed. Clifford Geertz, (London: Fontana Press, 1993), 123.

The same applies to all normative approaches to the subject. Which form of liturgy, prayer, mysticism etc. is appropriate – or inappropriate – to address God does not belong to the range of cultural studies. This applies, for example, to the question of whether the mysticism of Dominican nuns is a "decline"[18] compared to other forms of (medieval) mysticism, or even had to be judged as "naiveté."[19] Equally unanswerable is the question whether the liturgy of the Burgundian reform abbey of Cluny bore the characteristics of a mere "Kultkloster." All these attempts must be confronted with the basic scientific law of the freedom of moral judgment, as, for example, a well-known medievalist has done: "To say that the Cluniac liturgy was long is an historically ascertainable statement, but to say that it was too long is a value judgment based on personal liturgical preferences, which should have no influence on the study of liturgical history."[20] Nevertheless, such a methodological understanding of science, which is in the tradition of Max Weber, by no means implies that the cultural scientist must – or even can – completely abstain from the subject matter.

Rather, he – or she – has to start at a different point. For what can be observed from a cultural-scientific point of view – hence a second-order mode of observation – are "forms of symbolization, are forms of literary or artistic design, in which man imagines God's action and thus also his interaction with the divine."[21] In other words, the researcher of religion must leave the question of whether – and if so, how – communication with God is possible

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18   Otto Langer, *Mystische Erfahrung und spirituelle Theologie: zu Meister Eckharts Auseinandersetzung mit der Frauenfrömmigkeit seiner Zeit* (München: Artemis Verlag, 1987), 123.

19   Langer. *Mystische Erfahrung und spirituelle Theologie*, 123.

20   Giles Constable, "The Monastic Policy of Peter the Venerable," in *The Abbey of Cluny: a collection of essays to mark the eleven-hundredth anniversary of its foundation*, ed. Giles Constable (Münster i. W.: Lit, 2010), 285–306, 292.

21   Stolz, "Aufeinandertreffen," 56. Historical Theology has also recognized that the researcher must start with the "cultural form" in order to observe and describe the phenomenon in question. According to one of its best-known German representatives, Andreas Holzem, the historical study of religion must turn to the representations of religious communication: "[…] nämlich jene kanonisierte, gelehrte, medialisierte, ins Bild gebrachte, gespielte, ritualisierte, implizit praktizierte Kommunikation, die von den Akteuren als Repräsentation des Verhältnisses und der Bezeichnung von Mensch und Welt zum Göttlichen (et vice versa) aufgefasst wurde – das ist Gegenstand jener Wissensbereiche, die als ‚religiös' zu klassifizieren sind." Holzem, "Die Wissensgesellschaft der Vormoderne," 257.

to contemporaries and focus on their answers and how these answers have changed over time.[22]

Ultimately, the researcher of religion makes use of a classical dilemma, even an aporia of religion for his research. For religion has to cope with the fundamental problem that it is inevitably communication about (and with) empirically unverifiable things.[23] In the sociology of religion, this basic problem of all religions or religious communication is called the incommunicability of transcendence[24] or described as the "immediate non-givenness"[25] of the divine communication partner. Although communication with God is based on our everyday understanding of communication, as recent linguistic studies have shown, the form of communication in question differs significantly from face-to-face communication.[26] Communication with God is only

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22 Significantly, this point was also strongly made by Luhmann's successor Hartmann Tyrell: "Andererseits kann (und will) die Luhmannsche Exkommunikation Gottes die Religionssoziologie nicht abhalten, nun erst recht danach zu fragen, wie denn in den ,varieties of religious communication' (um den Jamesschen Titel zu variieren) die ,Kommunikation Gottes' und die ,Kommunikation mit Gott' jeweils konzipiert, vorgestellt und gesellschaftlich möglich (und folgenwirksam) gemacht wird." Hartmann Tyrell, "Religiöse Kommunikation. Auge, Ohr und Medienvielfalt," in *Frömmigkeit im Mittelalter. Politisch-soziale Kontexte, visuelle Praxis, körperliche Ausdrucksformen*, ed. Klaus Schreiner (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2002), 46.

Another researcher has therefore also rightly objected that it is not sufficient to state, "d a s s alle Transzendenz immer von der Immanenz her gedacht ist, es kommt darauf an zu beschreiben, w i e Transzendentes im Modus der Vermittlung und zugleich als dessen Grenze erscheint." Christian Kiening, "Einleitung," in: *Medialität des Heils im späten Mittelalter*, eds. Dauven-van Knippenberg, Herberichs, Kiening, 9 (emphasis in original). See also Stolz, "Aufeinandertreffen," 56.

23 Cf. Rüpke, *Historische Religionsforschung*, 35f.; Holzem, "Die Wissensgesellschaft der Vormoderne," 257.

24 Volkhard Krech, following Luhmann, has described the basic religious dilemma as follows: "Religion hat es mit dem Problem zu tun, wie man *prinzipiell nicht darstellbare* Transzendenz mit immanenten Mitteln symbolisieren, also Unverfügbares in Verfügbares transformieren kann. [...] Deshalb muss Religion auf andere Modi des Transzendierens zurückgreifen – und so ist sie auf Kultur verwiesen." Volkhard Krech, "Über Sinn und Unsinn religionsgeschichtlicher Prozessbegriffe," in *Umstrittene Säkularisierung: soziologische und historische Analysen zur Differenzierung von Religion und Politik*, eds. Karl Gabriel, Christel Gärtner, Detlef Pollack (Berlin: Verlagshaus Römerweg, 2012), 576f. (emphasis in original). Cf. Volkhard Krech, "Dynamics in the History of Religions. Preliminary Considerations on Aspects of a Research Programme," in: *Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe. Encounters, Notions, and Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Volkhard Krech, Marion Steinicke (Leiden: Brill, 2012), S. 24.

25 Holzem, "Die Wissensgesellschaft der Vormoderne," 257.

26 Cf. Nine Miedema, Angela Schrott, and Monika Unzeitig, "Einleitung." in *Sprechen mit Gott. Redeszenen in mittelalterlicher Bibeldichtung und Legende*, eds. Nine Miedema, Angela Schrott, and Monika Unzeitig (Berlin, De Gruyter 2012), 3–7; Mirko Breitenstein,

possible indirectly – at least that is what the canon says. As is well known, the Bible categorically excludes any intercourse with God from "face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12) – at least in the period after Jesus' death and before the Eschaton. This results in a special need for mediation.[27] In other words, those who want to communicate with God are dependent on media. In the words of Jörg Rüpke, religions are particularly "communication-intensive" (kommunikationsintensiv) and "communication-sensitive" (kommunikationssensibel) because of the need to represent the divine.[28] This means that they are particularly dependent on communication media.

It could be phrased as a thesis that mysticism is the attempt to break through this communicative situation and to enter into an unmediated, purely transcendental contact with God. Something that in the world is only situational possible, as generations of theologians, mystics were not exhausted to clarify. Mystics saw and see themselves in their quest for an immediate experience of God, a "direct contact with God"[29] exposed to the paradox that there are "no transcendence-appropriate immanent means of expression."[30] Mysticism is therefore not a case of incommunicability.[31] But what presents itself to the mystic as an ultimately inescapable dilemma, presents itself to the researcher as a gain. For communication with God becomes observable for him – or them – precisely because of this fundamental mediality.

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and Christian Schmidt, "Einleitung. Medialität und Praxis des Gebets," in *Medialität und Praxis des*, eds. Mirko Breitenstein, Christian Schmidt (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 279.

27   Following Hepp, mediation can be defined as "Vermittlung sozialer Kommunikation." Andreas Hepp, *Medienkultur: Die Kultur mediatisierter Welten.* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2013), 30. Religious studies has also grasped mediation as a core element of religion: "Positing a distance between human beings and the transcendental, religion offers practices of mediation to bridge that distance and make it possible to experience – from a more distanced perspective one could say produce – the transcendental." Birgit Meyer, "Religious Sensations. Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion," in *Religion. Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham, 2008), 710. As a result, mediation has become the focus in the study of religions: "Understanding religion as a practice of mediation that organizes the relationship between experiencing subjects and the transcendental via particular sensational forms requires that the material and sensory dimension of religious mediation become a focal point of attention." Ibid. 714.

28   Rüpke, *Historische Religionsforschung*, 36.

29   Niklas Luhmann, Peter Fuchs "Von der Beobachtung des Unbeobachtbaren: Ist Mystik ein Fall von Inkommunikabilität?," in *Reden und Schweigen*, (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a. M., 1989), 84.

30   Ibid. 92.

31   Ibid. 93.

It (almost) goes without saying that such a leading question as developed here is not equally relevant for all religions. Firstly, by far not all religions practice such a kind of communication, i.e. interact with the divine – an insight we owe to comparative religious studies. But even if one limits the observation "only" to those religions for which communication with God is undeniably of central relevance, namely the Abrahamic religions, it is still important to differentiate. As is well known, Jews, Christians and Muslims are describing revelation differently, and each of these religions have developed distinct ways of communicating with God: their own prayers, their own rituals, and so on.

The mode in question, however, not only oscillates between the different religions and denominations, but also gains in complexity in the temporal dimension. Although the traditional modes are often presented by the religious actors as something God-given – here we can recall the introductory case study from the Engelberg Prayer Book – from a historical perspective the fundamental historicity and variability of God-human communication must be stated: Which ritual practice, which habitual gesture, or which emotional state is considered acceptable and appropriate in each case in order to address God is decided on and changes with the historical context and is thus in need of historical explanation – this is the guiding thesis of the following considerations.

In the following, this can only be pointed out by means of a case study from medieval history. In the late Middle Ages, the emotional authenticity of the prayer was apparently regarded as a central condition for the success of the prayer, of which the Engelberg Prayer Book mentioned at the beginning bears witness. At the beginning of the Middle Ages, however, this disposition was apparently not the decisive criterion for reaching God's ear. In those times, the correct, i.e. error-free recitation of the Latin prayer text was much more decisive. In comparison, the mental or emotional comprehension was felt as secondary. Until the 13th century, theologians considered the understanding of the text on the part of the praying person to be irrelevant for the success of the prayer, as Thomas Lentes has shown.[32] For instance, William of Auvergne († 1249) argues that God does not care whether the person praying understands what he is asking for in the (Latin) prayer.[33] In contrast to Engelberg, this understanding of prayer is not concerned with the most authentic possible appropriation of the prayer text by the praying person – something that in linguistics is called "immersive reading of the prayer text" or, in short,

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32   Cf. Lentes, *Gebetbuch und Gebärde*, 34–36.
33   Cf. William of Auvergne. Rhetorica divina. XXXVIII. In: Opera omnia, Vol. 1, Paris 1674, 380.

immersion[34] – but rather with a recitation that is as formally correct as possible. Or, in the fine words of Mayke de Jong: "Obviously, the Carolingian God liked to be addressed only in correct Latin."[35]

The case study illustrates that the conditions for the success of prayer obviously changed in the course of the Middle Ages. This, in turn, shows that communication with God, just like communication in general, is a "historically concrete, context-dependent event."[36] Consequently, nothing timeless or contextless can be said about communication with God. In other words, the phenomenon in question will not be approached on a theoretical level, so to speak sub specie aeternitatis, to take up a famous formula of Spinoza. Rather, the postulate of the historicization also applies to this particular communication. At this point *historische Tiefenschärfe* is necessary, in other words, the various disciplines of the historical study of religion are required.

3   A Desideratum and Its Reasoning

While comparative religious studies, as well as historical theology and liturgical sciences, have recognized the relevance of the question for some time and have taken up the phenomenon in question in several studies, the same cannot apply to the historical sciences. Even today, the finding of a well-known ethnologist, Marcel Mauss, is largely true: "Moreover, it must be added that historians have not always given our subject [sc. Prayer] the interest it deserves."[37]

In fact, the subject was and is not perceived by many historians as a potential subject, but as a matter of theologians. The reason for this lack of interest on part of historians is complex. On the one hand, the disinterest of many historians is due to a general reservation. Is the phenomenon in question, i.e. communication with God, not ultimately something that is impossible when measured by scientific criteria? At least the already mentioned dictum of Niklas

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34   Björn Klaus Buschbeck, "Sprechen mit dem Heiligen und Eintauchen in den Text: Zur Wirkungsästhetik eines Passionsgebets aus dem 'Engelberger Gebetbuch'," in *Medialität und Praxis des Gebets*, eds. Mirko Breitenstein, Christian Schmidt (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 399.

35   Mayke de Jong, "Carolingian Monasticism. The Power of Prayer," in *The New Cambridge Medieval History. Vol 2: C. 700–c. 900*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge Uni. Press, 1995), 630.

36   Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft. Erster und Zweiter Teilband.* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 2015), 70.

37   Marcel Mauss, "Das Gebet," in *Schriften zur Religionssoziologie*, eds. Stephan Moebius, Frithjof Nungesser and Christian Papilloud (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012), 479.

Luhmann seems to suggest such a view.[38] And why should we pay attention to a phenomenon that has already been debunked as a myth and then spend time on its errand? Or, in the words of Aleida and Jan Assmann: "If one […] believes to have unmasked the described phenomena as myth, i.e. as fraud or illusion, then often the object of research is already liquidated. What has once been unmasked loses its interest as an object of investigation."[39] Although this conclusion seems to be the exact opposite of what Luhmann intended with his provocative statement, which was avowedly intended to stimulate interdisciplinary discourse,[40] the study of communication with God does indeed seem to have fallen victim to the very logic the Assmanns describe in the quote.[41] Nevertheless, the declaration outlined here alone is not sufficient to explain the desideratum, as Luhmann's excommunication of God was hardly noticed in historical science.[42]

In addition to fundamental concerns, the failure of historical scholarship to explore communication with God is likely to be structural in nature. Even though since the 1970s the calls for an independent history of religion have not ceased, it must be admitted with Helmut Zander that the historical sciences still largely leave the field of religion to other disciplines. This does not only refer to the field of liturgy, as Brademann has recently pointed out rightly, but the religious sphere as a whole falls out of the view of many historians.[43]

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38   See above p. 241.

39   "Wenn man […] glaubt, die beschriebenen Phänomene als Mythos, d. h. als Betrug oder Illusion durchschaut zu haben, dann ist damit oft auch schon der Forschungsgegenstand liquidiert. Was man erst einmal entlarvt hat, das verliert sein Interesse als Untersuchungsobjekt." Aleida and Jan Assmann, "Kanon und Zensur," in *Kanon und Zensur: Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation II: Beiträge zur Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation II*, eds. Aleida and Jan Assmann (München: Fink, 1987), 7–27, 8.

40   Cf. Luhmann, "Läßt unsere Gesellschaft Kommunikation mit Gott zu?," 43ff; Tyrell "Religiöse Kommunikation," 46.

41   This is at least suggested by the statements of a German historian, who in a letter dated August 12, 2017, expressed to the author his fundamental reservations about the research of communication with God. It states: "Tatsächlich hat (aus meiner agnostischen Sicht) Luhmann ja recht, wenn er meint, dass eine Kommunikation mit Gott schlicht nicht möglich ist, sondern bestenfalls ‚an Gott' (und das ist für ihn ja keine Kommunikation). Warum also sollte man sich um Praktiken, die auf rein eingebildeten Dingen beruhen, nähere Gedanken machen – und warum sollte diese Arbeit dann eigentlich ‚Interdisziplinarität' erfordern?"

42   I am aware of only two references to Luhmann's text in medievalist works. Cf. Kiening, "Einleitung," 9; Breitenstein, and Schmidt, "Einleitung. Medialität und Praxis des Gebets," 278.

43   Cf. Jan Brademann "Anstelle einer Einleitung: Liturgisches Handeln als soziale Praxis – Konfessionalisierung als ritueller Prozess?," in *Liturgisches Handeln als soziale*

In fact, the theological disciplines deal with the research object in question "almost monopolistically."[44]

This monopolistic claim of many theologians to the religious sphere is also evident in the term "Profanhistoriker." Their research interest is directed, or rather: is content – at least this is what the description would have us believe – with the secular, the profane, whereas the historically working theologian has his eye on everything that lies beyond the "great frontier" (Luhmann). The fact that this is a gross simplification and that by no means all historians turn their backs on the religious sphere does not really need a separate explanation.[45] It is sufficient to look at the recent titles of some "profane historians." Nevertheless, it must be admitted that most historians probably abstain from questions of religious history. It has already been speculated whether and to what extent this "religious-historical abstinence"[46] of historians goes hand in hand with the increasing dissolution of denominational church ties in German society – i.e. with the process that Thomas Luckmann coined as "invisible religion."[47] In other words, the disinterest of many researchers toward the religious sphere also has something to do with their biography. It has already been recognized that such a distance of younger historians from the "christlichen Kulturtradition" also holds a chance of insight for modern cultural history.[48] Admittedly, this can only be credited to the historical study of religion if historical science does not turn its back on the subject 'religion', but rediscovers it for itself from a different perspective.

But apart from the classical division of tasks between history and historical theology, the reservation of many historians against the topic 'communication with God' might also be of a methodical nature.

Praxis: kirchliche Rituale in der Frühen Neuzeit, ed. Jan Brademann, Kristina Thies (Münster i. W.: Rhema 2014), 11–58.

44   Helmut Zander, "Geschichtswissenschaft und Religionsgeschichte. Systematische Über-legungen zur Deutungskonkurrenz zwischen allgemeiner Geschichte, Kirchengeschichte und Religionswissenschaft," in *Die ethnologische Konstruktion des Christentums. Fremd-perspektiven auf eine bekannte Religion*, eds. Gregor Maria Hoff, Hans Waldenfels (Stutt-gart: Kohlhammer 2008), 24.

45   Zander also makes this clear, listing medieval studies in particular as an exception, which has not outsourced the sphere of religion to other disciplines. Cf. Zander, "Geschichts-wissenschaft und Religionsgeschichte," 24.

46   Brademann, "Anstelle einer Einleitung," 22.

47   Thomas Luckmann, *Die unsichtbare Religion* (Berlin: Suhrkamp 1991).

48   Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, "Einleitung: Was heißt Kulturgeschichte des Politischen?," in *Was heißt Kulturgeschichte des Politischen?*, ed. Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2005), 13.

In fact, there are sometimes voices within the historical sciences that may have encouraged the scepticism of many historians about communication with God as a subject of research.

The American medievalist Rachel Fulton Brown opted not long ago for an experiential approach to the topic. In her opinion, the basic prerequisite for an understanding of medieval prayer culture is to have acquired the experience of what it means to pray: "to experience, and so to understand, prayer, one has to practice making it oneself."[49] Statements such as those made by Fulton Brown have probably kept more than a few 'profane historians' from turning to prayer as a research subject. Fulton Brown herself seems to meet the epistomological requirements she has set herself, as she is writing in the preface to her most recent monograph: "I am grateful to Mary, for choosing me to write this book on her behalf and trusting me, a cradle Presbyterian, with the recovery of the devotion with which medieval Christians prayed to her."[50]

As Marcel Mauss already pointed out very clearly, such a premise is hardly tenable from a methodological perspective.: "Under these conditions, prayer becomes an incomprehensible phenomenon that can only be understood by questioning oneself or by questioning those who pray. There is no other possible method left than introspection."[51]

In opposition to this, Mauss holds a principle that has hardly lost any of its validity for the comparative study of religions as well as for the historical study of religion: "A prayer is not just the outpouring of a soul, the cry of a feeling. It is part of a religion. [...] This means that prayer is above all a social phenomenon."[52] While this insight is not really new – Mauss already adopted it from Émile Durkheim – it seems to be only gradually gaining acceptance in the historical study of religion, as Fulton Brown's statements makes clear.

Though the phenomenon in question has largely eked out a shadowy existence in historical scholarship, there are also some voices that are suggesting a rethink. Thus, it has already been postulated by a well-known researcher – not a historian, but a philologist, it should be noted – that the study of communication with God is not only a theological and religious-sociological challenge, "but also a cultural-scientific, media-historical, even aesthetic-historical one."[53]

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49   Rachel Fulton Brown, "Praying with Anselm at Admont: A Meditation on Practice," in: *Speculum* 81 (2006), 708.
50   Rachel Fulton Brown: *Mary and the Art of Prayer: The Hours of the Virgin in Medieval Christian Life and Thought*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), XIII.
51   Mauss: "Gebet," 486f.
52   Ibid., 488.
53   Kiening, "Einleitung," 9.

Since Christian Kiening's postulate, it has been increasingly recognized that it would be promising to approach prayer not only from a theological but also from a cultural studies perspective. An anthology has recently brought together different disciplinary approaches from cultural studies, all of which share a medievalist focus and the goal of bringing prayer into the focus of cultural studies research.[54] This is certainly the right approach – in spite of the fact that contributions from historical studies still remain underrepresented.[55]

What has been missing so far, however, are methodological reflections on how communication with God can be observed and described as a phenomenon of cultural studies. Given the complexity and diversity of the phenomenon, it hardly needs to be mentioned that an exhaustive approach to the topic is impossible.[56] But this insight raises more questions than it answers. At once, the problem arises what methodological and thematic focus is promising to approach the topic.

Most of the works that have addressed the topic have set their focus on a very specific medial form of the communication in question. Thus, there is a wide range of monographs, anthologies, and essays on 'prayer', 'the liturgy', 'the judgment of God', 'mysticism', etc.[57] However, such an approach does not appear to be very fruitful for future work. This is not only due to the fact that there are plenty of such studies, so that it would hardly be possible to find out anything really new in this way. More decisive might be the objection that the different forms of God-human communication such as prayer, reading, psalmody, contemplation, etc. often intertwine in the perception of contemporaries and form a communicative unity only in their interaction. Thus, for example, research has already recognized that it is often only the reception of the Eucharist that stimulates or arouses a mystical vision.[58] Ultimately, this means that the reception of the Eucharist and mysticism form a communicative unity. The same could be stated for the sequence of lectio and oratio, which describe a communication process only in their interaction or sequence.[59] In

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54   Cf. Breitenstein, Schmidt, "Einleitung. Medialität und Praxis des Gebets," 277.

55   Cf. Ibid.

56   Similar arguments are made by Breitenstein, Schmidt, "Einleitung. Medialität und Praxis des Gebets," 277.

57   The number of such studies is so large and so well known that it is not necessary to provide evidence here.

58   On the reception of the Eucharist as the "prominent place of encounter with God" see Volker Leppin, *Geschichte des mittelalterlichen Christentums*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 339.

59   Cf. Lentes, *Gebetbuch und Gebärde*, 28; Angenendt, *Geschichte der Religiosität im Mittelalter*, 477; Thali, "Strategien der Heilsvermittlung in der spätmittelalterlichen Gebetskultur" 241f.

this respect, it seems hardly advisable to focus on the various medial forms of communication with God in isolation (as has been the case up to now).

Instead, a more promising approach seems to be a systematic aspect-oriented one that observes and describes the phenomenon in question from a communication-historical perspective. Such a project promises not only a heuristic surplus value or gain in knowledge for the historical study of religion. After all, communication studies have also largely left the phenomenon out of the equation. And this, it is worth noting, despite the fact that perhaps the most central question of all sociological theories of communication is how communication is possible.[60] Nevertheless, most communication scholars – Luhmann might be rather the exception in this respect – have abstained from the question whether – and if so – how communication with God is possible. Hence, this aspect of communication is almost completely absent in the classical overviews of sociological communication theory.[61] This explains why central research questions are still open. For example, what does the principle of double contingency, which already burdens, or more correctly shapes, every face-to-face communication, mean for communication with God? What role does "Kommunikationsmacht" (Reichertz), which has recently come into the focus of communication studies, play in God-human-communication? At the current state of research, all these questions are still completely open.

The question remains how communication with God can be considered as a phenomenon of cultural studies. It is the basic methodological axiomatic of this work that especially *irritation* represents an observation chance for such questions. For it can be assumed that where communication is irritating, controversial, contested, even fought over, it not only condenses, but also becomes the object of communication itself – in other words, reflexive communication or metacommunication emerges.[62] At this level of reflection, much becomes observable that otherwise remains obscured in the normal and undisturbed

60 Vgl. Rainer Schützeichel, *Soziologische Kommunikationstheorien* (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft: München ²2015), 16.

61 At this point, only three well-known works from the broad field of communication theory should be mentioned as an example. Cf. Schützeichel, *Soziologische Kommunikationstheorien*, passim; Hubert Knoblauch *Die kommunikative Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2017) passim; Jo Reichertz, *Kommunikationsmacht, Was ist Kommunikation und was vermag sie? Und weshalb vermag sie das?*, (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2009).

62 Metacommunication could be defined, following Gregory Bateson, as the ability "to communicate about communication and to comment on the meaning of one's own actions and actions toward others." Gregory Bateson, "The message 'This is play'," in *Group Processes*, ed. Bertram Schaffner (New York: Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation Publications, 1956), 145–242, 208.

processing of communication. The efficiency of this approach has been demonstrated in particular by historical ritual research.[63] The historian Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger has recently elaborated the heuristic opportunity that the borderline case provides for the study of rituals: "Only the exception makes the rule recognizable at all. In many cases, it is only when rules are broken that the actors address the underlying rule, which is otherwise unspoken and taken for granted. Only a mistake leads the actors to reflect on the extent to which the effect of the ritual might have been endangered or nullified as a result."[64] This applies *mutatis mutandis* to God-human communication as well. It can be assumed that this view of the liminal case also provides central insights regarding the practices, structures, and perceptions of God-human communication. With this attitude of analysis, therefore, it is not primarily the everyday, smooth and thus unreflected performance of God-human communication that is of interest; what is decisive are those situations in which the religious actors reflect on the communication with God itself. In other words, it is necessary to direct the analytical focus to those situations and constellations in which the modi of God-human communication were at stake.

Although these moments are by no means rare in the Middle Ages – indeed, it could be hypothesized that the question of how to get in contact with God was one of, if not *the* most, controversial aspect of medieval Christianity – they have not yet been systematically explored. Thus, the historical study of religion has missed something essential. Conflicts, for example, show that the way medieval Christianity communicated with God was by no means decided only at the shrines of theologians, canonists, and popes, but was significantly negotiated *in praxi*. Consequently, the analytical view ought not to be narrowed to the theological discourse, but must take communicative practice seriously as the constitutional level of social reality. However, it is precisely this aspect that remains unconsidered in many previous studies.

The heuristic potential of such an approach focusing on the conflict case and practice will be demonstrated in the following by means of a first case study – which, admittedly, can only serve as a first "test bore" for further research.

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63   Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, *Rituale* (Historische Einführungen 16), (Frankfurt a. M: Campus Verlag, 2013), 211–218.

64   "Erst die Ausnahme macht die Regel überhaupt erkennbar. Oft veranlassen erst Regelverstöße die Akteure dazu, die zugrundeliegende Regel zu thematisieren, die sonst unausgesprochen und selbstverständlich ist. Erst ein Fehler bringt die Akteure dazu zu reflektieren, inwiefern dadurch die Wirkung des Rituals gefährdet oder zunichte gemacht worden sein könnte." Stollberg-Rilinger, *Rituale*, 211.

4   The Liturgical Dispute of Worms (1053)

In the World Chronicle of Frutolf of Michelsberg there is a noteworthy scene that gives the historian interesting insights in terms of our leading question. According to this text, there was an argument in Worms Cathedral at Christmas 1053 between the Roman entourage of Pope Leo IX and the local church elite – and the occasion was, significantly, the liturgy. This is significant in so far as, according to contemporary perceptions, the liturgy is the "primary place for encountering God," as recent studies have shown.[65]

Referring to Frutolf's account, the scandal was ignited by the reading, which a deacon named Humbert took over in the course of the Christmas service in Worms Cathedral in the presence of the Pope and the Archbishop of Mainz, Luitpold. When Humbert intoned the reading according to local custom, some of the pope's Roman assistants (*quidam ex Romanis papae assistentibus*) became indignant and complained to the pope because the Roman rite was not being followed (*quia Romano more non ageretur*).[66] At their instigation the pope intervened against the lector by summarily forbidding the deacon to continue reading, or at least that is how the chronicler puts it. However, the young deacon ignored this papal admonition and finished the reading in a proper manner (*decenter*), as the chronicler notes. In Frutolf's report, therefore, the lector's actions do not appear to be illegitimate at all, even if he regards disobeying the apostolic command as an act of youthful recklessness. The deacon celebrated the rite in the customary manner, as the chronicler expressly points out, which is why the continuation of the reading is then also judged by him to be proper or *decenter*.[67] Apparently, however, the pope or his assistants judged

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65   Thomas Honegger, Gerlinde Huber-Rebenich, Volker Leppin, "Einleitung" in *Gottes Werk und Adams Beitrag: Formen der Interaktion zwischen Mensch und Gott im Mittelalter*, eds. Thomas Honegger, Gerlinde Huber-Rebenich, Volker Leppin, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), XI. See also Arens: "Liturgisches Handeln," 80; Thali, "Strategien der Heilsvermittlung," 250.

66   *Qui peracta processione, et ubi ad hoc ventum est dicta oratione, postquam se in sua sede locavit, quidam ex diaconibus suis, Humbertus nomine, sicut multi ob illius festi venerationem solent, lectionem decantavit. Quod quidam ex Romanis papae assistentibus vituperantes, et contra papam, quia Romano more non ageretur, obiurgantes, persuaserunt ei, ut ad eundem diaconum mitteret et decantationem interdiceret.* Frutolf of Michelsberg, *Chronica*, ed. Georg Waitz (MGH SS 6), Hannover, 1844, 196f. Cf. *Frutolfs und Ekkehards Chroniken und die Anonyme Kaiserchronik*, ed. Franz-Josef Schmale, (Darmstadt: wbg Academic 1972), 68.

67   *Quod quidam ex Romanis papae assistentibus vituperantes, et contra papam, quia Romano more non ageretur, obiurgantes, persuaserunt ei, ut ad eundem diaconum mitteret et decantationem interdiceret. Quod cum ille iuvenum more contempneret, iterum mittendo papa interdixit; qui mox eadem vocis sonoritate qua prius cantavit, legendo decenter lectionem*

things decidedly differently. The disobedient lector was relieved of his digni-
ties by the pope. According to Frutolf's account, however, this degradation of
his servant in turn provoked the courageous intervention of the archbishop,
who interceded on behalf of his deacon with the pope. At first, this request
was rejected by the pope, but this did not dissuade the archbishop from his
plan. Quite the contrary. When the central moment of the mass, namely the
sancti sacrificii tempus, had arrived, the archbishop is said to have demonstra-
tively interrupted the mass by taking his seat in the choir loft, declaring that
he would not continue the mass under any circumstances if he did not get
his servant back. If Frutolf's report is to be accepted on this point, then the
archbishop of Mainz knew how to use the most precarious moment of the
divine service for his own interests. Especially the high prayer was considered
extremely virulent in the Middle Ages, which is why it was also called *oratio
periculosa*, as we have already seen above.[68] This explains why the behavior of
the risk-taking archbishop in Frutolf's story is ultimately successful. Only the
concern about the continuation of the mass, i.e. the successful execution of the
God-human communication, moves the pope to give in in the scene: In fact,
the pope is said to have re-instated the disobedient deacon, as Frutolf portrays
it. But there is not only one winner in the scene. Only through the prudent
behavior of the pope the situation was resolved, which was – as the final punch
line of the scene reads – to the advantage of both actors: The bishop preserved
his authority and the pope showed his humility, as the chronicler writes.[69]
Thus, Pope Leo appears in the scene as the ideal-typical embodiment of a con-
sensual principle of rule. The impulse to take action against the local form of
worship, more precisely *lectio*, does not come from him, but he becomes active
in the matter only at the instigation of his Roman companions.[70] In short, the

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      usque ad finem perduxit. Frutolf of Michelsberg, *Chronica*, ed. Waitz, 197. See also Julia
      Exarchos, "Identität, Wahrheit und Liturgie," in *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 52 (2019), 167.

68   See above p. 178.

69   *Qua finita, papa illum ad se vocavit et quasi pro inoboedientiae contumacia degradavit.
      Archiepiscopus vero misit ad illum, ut suum sibi redderet ministrum. Quod ubi papa abnuit,
      pontifex, ut erat antiquae disciplinae, licet egre patienter tamen interim tacendo sustinuit.
      Perlecto autem euangelio et decantato offertorio ubi sancti sacrificii tempus advenit, ponti-
      fex in sede sua resedit, vere contestans, nec se nec alium quempiam completurum illud offi-
      cium, nisi reciperet processionis suae ministrum. Quod ubi apostolicus intellexit, pontifici
      cessit, reindutumque ministrum continuo remisit. Quo recepto, debito se presul iniunxit offi-
      cio.* Frutolf of Michelsberg, Chronica, ed. Waitz, 197.

70   However, whether Leo was not "bothered" by local special rites, as Julia Exarchos recently
      stated, because he was familiar with just such a special rite due to his many years as
      bishop of Toul, is an open question – at least the scene does not allow for such an inter-
      pretation. Cf. Exarchos, "Identität, Wahrheit und Liturgie," 165.

pope listens to his advisors and acts accordingly. However – and this is probably the crucial point for the historiographer – Leo by no means enforces this Roman interest against all resistance, but his authoritative action definitely knows limits and is therefore well-measured. When the divine service threatens to fail and the episcopal dignity to be damaged, Leo gives in and proves greatness for the historiographer just in this flexibility. The historiographer comments on the action as follows: "What is noteworthy in this event is both the authority of the bishop and the humility of the pope; for the former was anxious to preserve the dignity of his office, but the latter, although he himself possessed the higher dignity, felt that he must nevertheless yield to the metropolitan in his own diocese."[71] This last sentence is the real punch line of the story. Thus, in the pope's yielding, the chronicler sees the humility of Pope Leo IX. It is likely that the story also has a hidden thrust against Leo's successor in office, as Thomas McCarthy has recently made plausible. In fact, the scene is recognizably aimed at emphasizing the conciliarity of the German reform pope and thus contrasting him with his successor in office, Pope Gregory VII (1073–1085).[72] For in the eyes of his opponents, Gregory's behavior appeared to be the exact opposite of what Frutolf wants us to believe in the scene about the character and style of leadership of Leo IX. To Archbishop Liemar of Bremen, for example, Gregory was considered a dangerous man (*periculosus homo*), who dealt with his fellow bishops as if they were staff, or more precisely *villici*, by which high administrative positions such as bailiffs but also simple servants such as gardeners were designated.[73] At the same time, the scene makes evident that during Leo's pontificate there was already a demonstrable effort at the Curia and in the papal environment to standardize the liturgy according to the Roman model. And these standardization efforts by no means emanated from the pope himself. The driving force behind the liturgical standardization and unification are the Roman assistants of the pope, or so it seems in Frutolf's account. This passage has already been read as a veiled reference to and criticism against Gregory VII, who was said to have been one of the most

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71   *Qua in re et pontificis auctoritas et apostolici consideranda est humilitas, dum et ille officii sui dignitatem defendere contendebat, et iste, licet maioris dignitatis, metropolitano tamen in sua diocesi cedendum perpendebat.* Frutolf of Michelsberg, *Chronica*, ed. Waitz, 197.

72   Cf. Thomas J.H. McCarthy, *Chronicles of the Investiture Contest: Frutolf of Michelsberg and his continuators. Selected sources* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 39.

73   *Periculosus homo vult iubere, quę vult, episcopis ut villicis suis*; […]. L(iemar of Bremen) and H(ezilo of Hildesheim), in *Briefsammlung der Zeit Heinrichs IV.*, ed. Carl Erdmann, Nobert Fickermann (MGH Briefe der deutschen Kaiserzeit 5), (Weimar: Böhlau, 1950), No. 15, 34. See also McCarthy, *Chronicles of the Investiture Contest: Frutolf of Michelsberg and his continuators*, 39.

leading men at Leo's court during the time Frutolf was writing his history.[74] In fact, as Pope Gregory VII, Hildebrand became a staunch promoter of liturgical reform along Roman lines, which, while not a real success story, did produce some lasting results.[75] Under Gregory's rule, for example, the old Spanish rite was replaced by the Roman liturgy, which cannot be discussed in detail here.[76] Whether Gregor, however, was already the driving force or mastermind behind the said event in Worms, must remain speculation in the end.[77] On the one hand, Carl Erdmann has already historically deconstructed the supposed influence of Gregory VII on his predecessor Leo, and on the other hand, Gregory is not mentioned in the scene at all.[78] What Frutolf's account of the events at Christmas 1053 in Worms shows beyond doubt, however, is that the liturgy was not only defined by writing theologians, but was significantly negotiated *in praxi* – here in Worms Cathedral – and this has little or nothing to do with the idealized picture of communicative action – at least if one takes Habermas as the model of communication.[79] Which position prevails often depends not on the power of persuasion or the genius of the better argument, but rather – as at Christmas 1053 – on the question which party has the longer breath. In Worms, apparently, it was the young deacon. This shows at the same time that in praxi not always or even usually the formally greater authority would have to prevail – that would have been Pope Leo IX, of course, as Frutolf also clearly points out. As demonstrated, for the chronicler, the pope's humility is thus evident – which sets him apart positively from his successor in office.

For the historian, however, something different becomes evident: On the one hand, there is the insight that researchers cannot restrict themselves to looking at normative texts, such as the Libri Ordinarii, when it comes to clarifying the question of what form of communication was considered opportune in

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74   The great influence of Hildebrand on his predecessor Leo is emphasized by Bonizo of Sutri and is also described in the Liber pontificalis. Cf. Bonizo of Sutri, *Liber ad amicum*, VII, ed. Ernst Dümmler (MGH Ldl 1), Hannover 1891, 601; *Le Liber Pontificalis. Texte, Introduction et Commentaire*, ed. Louis Duchesne, 2 Vols., Paris 1892, here Vol. 2, 275.

75   On this question, see Reinhard Elze, "Gregor VII. und die römische Liturgie," in: *La Riforma Gregoriana e l'Europa. Vol. 1: Congresso Internazionale, Salerno, 20–25 maggio 1985* (Studi gregoriani 13), ed. Alphons Maria Stickler (Rome: LAS, 1989), 181ff.

76   This aspect, too, will be the subject of a later work.

77   Cf. Exarchos, "Identität, Wahrheit und Liturgie," 166.

78   Cf. Carl Erdmann, *Die Entstehung des Kreuzzugsgedankens*, (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1935), 136; See also Michel Parisse, "L'entourage de Léon IX," in *Léon IX et son temps. Actes du colloque international organisé par l'Institut d'Histoire Médiévale de l'Université Marc-Bloch*, ed. Georges Bischoff, Benoît-Michel Tock (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 441f.

79   Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1988), Vol. 2, 218.

a given time and place in order to address God. For this question is not decided solely by the persuasiveness of the arguments and the plausibility of the legitimations, but also depends on the strategic actions of the actors. In addition, the case study emphasizes the narrow limits that were obviously still set for the implementation of a Roman liturgy in the 11th century. It would last until the Council of Trent (1545–1563) before such a unified liturgy could be realized or, more correctly, enforced in the Catholic Church.[80]

5   Summary

Religious actors communicate not only *about* God, the saints, or more generally: transcendence, but also *with* these transcendent entities. Although this typical communication is by no means equally relevant for all religions, it is at least so for medieval Christianity.

In numerous contemporary sources, God is described or pictured as a communicator of human beings. While the historian must refrain from asking whether that communication is possible per se, he – or she – can (and should) contribute to a historicization of God-human-communication. Despite the fact that the traditional forms are often presented by the religious actors as something God-given, the fundamental historicity of the communication in question must be stated from a cultural studies perspective: Which ritual practice, which habitual gesture or which emotional state is considered acceptable and appropriate in order to address God is decided on and changes with the historical context – and is thereby in need of historical explanation.

To this end, this article aims to make a contribution by asking about historical aspects of God-human communication in medieval Christianity. It is the basic methodological axioma that irritation in particular provides a chance for such an approach. For wherever communication with God was contested, disputed, even embattled, the communication in question itself became the object of communication – and can thus be observed from the perspective of cultural studies.

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80   However, it must be assumed with Benedikt Kranemann that even after the Council of Trent the Catholic liturgy was by no means free of tensions caused by the opposition of supra-regional unity and local diversity. Cf. Benedikt Kranemann, "In omnibus universi orbis ecclesiis, monasteriis, ordinibus. Nachtridentinisches Liturgieverständnis zwischen Programm und Praxis," in *Liturgisches Handeln als soziale Praxis. Kirchliche Rituale in der Frühen Neuzeit*, eds. Jan Brademann, Kristina Thies (Münster i. W.: Rhema 2014), 141–160.

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SECTION 4

Materiality

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Religion and Materiality: Food, 'Fetish' and Other Matters

Birgit Meyer

Abstract

Why is it rewarding to analyse religion from a material angle and which future research directions emerge? This chapter firstly conceptualizes materiality in dialogue with incentives offered by new materialism and, secondly, assesses which forms of material religion have so far received too little attention. Thirdly, inspired by Feuerbach's gastro-philosophy, I argue that food is an existential material form through which humans are enveloped into a grounded exchange with the world. Finally, introducing a collection of "hungry" legba-figures in the Übersee-Museum Bremen, Germany, I call attention to feeding spirits as a prime religious practice. Religion should be rethought from the stomach.

Keywords

materiality – food – fetish – Feuerbach – gastro-philosophy – feedings spirits

1   Introduction

Over the past twenty years, the empirical, conceptual and methodological possibilities that arise by taking a material approach to religion have become apparent. Turning to the material culture of various religious traditions has opened our eyes to modes of 'lived' religion, beyond a text-centred focus on doctrines and beliefs.[1] Appraising the material dimensions of religion is not limited to a focus on things as such, but takes them as perceived, sensed, interpreted, made and used by, as well as having effects on humans. Hence the attribute material refers to the physical and corporeal dimensions of religious

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1   Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

practice.[2] The material turn went along with a rising awareness that religions entail multiple material media – other than texts alone – that are distinctive for and authorized within particular religious traditions and inform religious ideas and practices.[3] Broadening the theoretical and methodological scope of the study of religion by embracing materiality has facilitated fresh interdisciplinary conversations with scholars in, for instance, anthropology, archaeology and art history, and participation in broader debates about actor-network-theories, object-oriented ontologies and new materialisms.

Conducted by a wide range of scholars from various backgrounds and with different interests, the study of religion from a material angle is a thriving field.[4] My own interest in the material turn was triggered by facing conceptual limitations in my research on colonization and evangelization in West Africa, when trying to grasp the stakes of clashes between Africans and Europeans over the nature, role and value of things[5] – including the use of the categories of the 'fetish' and 'idol.' Gradually, I realized that a focus on things challenges conventional frameworks and offers an exciting entry point for remapping our scholarly mindsets and de-centring knowledge production about religion.[6]

In line with the aims of this volume, in this contribution I want to 'step back' from the research on material religion I witnessed so far – both as a researcher

2 E.g. Birgit Meyer, David Morgan, Crispin Paine, and S. Brent Plate, "The Origin and Mission of Material Religion," *Religion* 40 (3) (2010): 207–211; David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012); Manuel A. Vázquez, *More than Belief. A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford [Eng.]; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

3 Birgit Meyer, "Religion as Mediation," *Entangled Religions* 11 (3) (2020a).

4 For important overviews, see Peter J. Bräunlein, "Thinking Religion Through Things: Reflections on the Material Turn in the Scientific Study of Religion\s," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 28 (4/5) (2016): 365–399; Sonia Hazard, "The Material Turn in the Study of Religion," *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 4 (2013): 58–78; Inken Prohl, "Material Religion," in *Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2012).

5 I employ the term thing to unhinge the subject-object binary that defines objects in terms of their use and utility. Things, as pointed out by Bill Brown, exist in excess of this binary, and call attention to "their force as a sensuous presence" (Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28 (1) (2001): 5, see Birgit Meyer, "'There is a Spirit in That Image:' Mass-Produced Jesus Pictures and Protestant-Pentecostal Animation in Ghana," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52 (1) (2010): 103–104; see also Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman, "Material Religion – How Things Matter," in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 16; David Morgan, *The Thing about Religion: An Introduction to the Material Study of Religion* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2021)).

6 Meyer and Houtman, "Material Religion," 15–23; Birgit Meyer, "Remapping our Mindset: Towards a Transregional and Pluralistic Outlook," *Religion* 50 (1) (2020b): 113–121.

and long-time (2006–2019) co-editor of *Material Religion* – and 'look beyond' it so as to identify some issues to pursue for the future. Why is it at all necessary and rewarding to thematise religion and materiality? Certainly, the 'and' between these terms does not signal an addition of the latter to the former, but spotlights the conceptual problem that religion and materiality have long been conceptualized as being antagonistic.[7] This conceptualization is grounded in the fierce nineteenth-century debates triggered by the rise of scientific and dialectical materialism, which launched a critique of idealism. Religion was criticized by materialists as being a domain of misguided illusions about an unseen spiritual sphere that would have to be replaced by rational insights into the real material nature of things.

And yet, it is obvious that religion cannot exist outside of or beyond material forms and bodies.[8] Invoking the relation between religion and materiality therefore should be seen as a productive provocation with the aim to drive home the obvious point that 'material religion' is not an oxymoron. The point is to engage in a thorough rethinking of how we understand religion by taking seriously its physical and corporeal dimensions – the "other side of religion"[9] – that have long been pushed to the margins of scholarly attention and reflection. In other words, while it is productive to think about religion *and* materiality at this point in time, ultimately the aim is to fold materiality back into a new understanding of religion, making it unnecessary to mark materiality explicitly any longer because material analysis has finally become part of the default.

This is the background against which the religion-materiality nexus is explored in this chapter, which proceeds in four steps. Firstly, I address the question of how to conceptualize materiality, in dialogue with incentives offered by new materialism, especially regarding its emphasis on connectivity and relationality. Secondly, the concept materiality is further unpacked and operationalized, noting that images, objects and buildings, in particular, have gained a lot of attention, while other material forms – including food – have been relatively neglected. Thirdly, addressing Feuerbach's ideas about the stomach as the basis for his materialist philosophy, I argue that food is a material form that allows us to throw new light on the physical and corporeal dimensions of religion. Lastly, I explore the possibilities for research that arise from a focus on food by turning to a collection of *legba*-figures that were taken from their site

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7   Meyer and Houtman, "Material Religion."

8   Matthew E. Engelke, "Material Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 209.

9   Bräunlein, "Studying Material Religion," 370.

of origin among the Ewe in Ghana and Togo to the Übersee-Museum Bremen, Germany. So, step by step, the questions I am raising will be narrowed down, fleshing out what a material approach to religion offers both conceptually and empirically, and showing how food – as a material form at the core of how humans relate to and are part of the world – is a key focus for future research aiming to fold materiality back into our understanding of religion.

2   Conceptualizing Materiality

Though in principle the term material has a number of opposites, in the framework of the material turn in the study of religion its privileged counterpoints are 'mental' (used as a container term for processes in the mind and epitome of the Cartesian 'cogito') and 'spiritual' (used to refer to the imagination of invisible entities and spheres). One of the main assets of the material turn is to approach religion as a mundane and practical endeavour, emphasizing that it is humans who *do* religion with their bodies and senses and by using all sorts of things to evoke a sense of the presence and reality of the divine. Thinking along this materialist line, of course, does not imply that religion is to be reduced to sheer matter, so that the imaginary that is left after such stripping could be unmasked as a mere illusion. Religion is to be analysed as a social-cultural phenomenon that 'matters' in the world because it assembles people around a shared imaginary, which points beyond the here and now towards the transcendent, and yet is present through all sorts of material forms which are perceived, sensed, acted with and thought about in the immanent.[10] These material forms are at the heart of 'religious matters' arising in this ever more entangled world.[11]

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10   I do not employ the binary immanent/transcendent in the sense of two categories pertaining to distinct realms, but understand the transcendent to be called upon within the immanent and with immanent means. For me, this binary does not involve a theological or metaphysical distinction between two separate realms. This binary is part of an understanding of religion as a layered phenomenon that mediates between the 'world' and a professed 'beyond.' This means that scholars of religion are to take the professed transcendent into account, without taking it as existent ontologically (see for a more extensive exposé Meyer, "Religion as Mediation," 18–20).

11   Religious Matters in an Entangled World is the title of a research program directed by me at Utrecht University (www.religiousmatters.nl). Grounded in a material approach to religion, this project takes the presence of material religious forms, and the matters of debate and concern arising around them as entry points into the dynamics of co-existence in plural societies (especially in Northern Europe and West Africa).

   The attribute 'material' has proved to be well suited to develop new possibilities for research. But if it were merely employed as a permanent opposite to 'mental,' the binary into which both terms are trapped would be reproduced, only switching 'material' to the privileged side. The point rather is a dialectical understanding of 'material' that signals the need to transcend (or sublate, in the sense of *aufheben*) the material-mental binary (and related binaries such as matter-spirit, object-subject).[12] Taking as a starting point the concrete study of material forms in religious settings, the aim is to unhinge the mental-material binary through a critical reflexion about religion and materiality that ultimately recaptures materiality as intrinsic to religion.[13] Such a dialectical process of moving, via a focus on concrete material religious forms, to an understanding of materiality as intrinsic to a revised, broadened concept of religion, raises complex conceptual issues that often remain implicit. In the following I will explicate some of them.

   What makes the material turn in the study of religion timely and intriguing is that it challenges a dualistic, old-fashioned idea about matter, and the

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12   See Peter J. Pels, "The Modern Fear of Matter: Reflections on the Protestantism of Victorian Science," in *Things: Material Religion and the Topography of Divine Spaces*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012). For an illuminating discussion of the debates about historical materialism and the use of dialectics as a method among Marxists in the early 1920s and 1930s, and Walter Benjamin's engagement with materiality, see Jan Loheit, "Benjamins Material. Oder der Stoff, aus dem die Wunschbilder sind," in *Material und Begriff. Arbeitsverfahren und theoretische Beziehungen Walter Benjamins*, ed. Frank Voigt, Nicos Tzanakis Papadakis, Jan Loheit & Konstantin Baehrens (Hamburg: Argument, 2019). In my view, the material turn in the study of religion could have benefited – and still benefit – from the insights developed in this sophisticated historical materialist line.

13   Recapturing materiality as intrinsic to religion does not imply that I would deny that the spirit-matter and the related mind-body distinction is mobilized by many religious traditions, including Christianity and Buddhism. But as scholars we should take some distance from these binaries so as to avoid that academic epistemologies are predetermined by them, while at the same time studying how these binaries play out in certain theological conceptions and religious practices. My point is that materiality can also be found in what is framed as spirit or mind, in that these are embodied phenomena. It may be impossible to fully get rid of such binaries (as also argued by Jojada Verrips, "Body and Mind: Material for a Never-ending Intellectual Odyssey," in *Religion and Material Culture. The Matter of Belief,* ed. David Morgan (London and New York: Routledge, 2010)) so as to express and imagine a state before the distinctions on which the binaries rest, have been made. And yet, I think that indigenous religious traditions, such as the one I encountered among the Ewe, may not contain these same binaries. The idea that this is the case may rather be a product of problematic translations. It is exactly for this reason that research on such traditions may offer illuminating insights into how a notion of spirit – such as the Ewe term gbɔgbɔ, which means 'breath' – challenges scholarly mindsets and conventional translations, opening up new possibilities.

concomitant hubris about modern humans' capacity to arrange the world according to their will. As David Morgan explains succinctly:

> We cannot understand the relevance of materiality to the study of religion unless we learn to look beyond the idea that matter is a dead, passive neutral substance manipulated by the sovereign subject of the human mind. Materiality is not like pliable clay or cookie dough in which we impress our will. It is how the world pushes back against us, needs or shatters our ideas, joins with us to make something bigger or longer lasting than our bodies. Agency does not belong only to human beings, but is shared by all kinds of things. Tools are things people make to extend the efforts of their bodies. But everything that composes our worlds exerts influence on us by interacting with our bodies, whether it was fashioned to do so or not.[14]

Morgan's plastic phrasing asserts the need to develop a more synthetic and materially grounded understanding of humans and religion in the world that challenges the long held modernist idea of humans as mastering matter.[15] He offers fresh methods for material analysis that situate religious objects in the midst of assemblages.[16]

While the material turn in the study of religion converges to some extent with the thriving current of new materialism, so far there have been few explicit and extensive exchanges between new materialists and scholars working on 'material religion.'[17] Both are rather separate fields, with different matters of

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14   Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, 9.

15   This concern has become ever more pressing through climate change and the realization that human interventions have triggered the onset of the Anthropocene, as well as through the unsettling exposure to the Coronavirus pandemic. It reminds us of the basic entanglement of humans with each other and other species which offers a viral highway for the spread of the Sars-CoV-2 across the globe (Birgit Meyer, "Religion und Pandemie," in *Jenseits von Corona. Unsere Welt nach Der Pandemie – Perspektiven aus der Wissenschaft*, ed. Bernd Kortmann & Günther Schulze (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020c)); there is much to focus on here for the study of religion.

16   David Morgan, "Assembling Interferences in Material Analysis," in Religion and Materiality, ed. Vasudha Narayanan (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2020a); Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, 101–180.

17   Important authors discussing intersections between these strands and pleading for more synergy are Hazard (Hazard, "The Material Turn") and Ioannides (George Ioannides, "Vibrant Sacralities and Nonhuman Animacies: The Matter of New Materialism and Material Religion," *JASR* 26 (3) (2013): 234–253; George Ioannides, "The Matter of Meaning and the Meaning of Matter: Explorations for the Material and Discursive Study of Religion," in *Making Religion: Theory and Practice in the Discursive Study of Religion*, ed.

concern and thematic foci. Scholars in the study of religion, as noted, seek to develop a materially grounded understanding for their research that, in contrast to nineteenth-century scientific and historical materialism, does not dismiss religion as a mere illusion or ideology. Grosso modo they are interested in new conceptual tools and methods for concrete empirical research on religion as a double-layered phenomenon that gestures towards an unseen sphere with material means. New materialists seek to articulate a new realist ontology that resonates with insights from contemporary natural sciences, especially the new understanding of matter in theoretical physics (e.g. particle theory, chaos theory, quantum theory), and draws out its consequences for the social and cultural sciences, and ethics.[18] In this sense, this new materialism re-negotiates parameters for knowledge construction and the relations

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Kocku von Stuckrad & Frans Wijsen (Leiden: Brill, 2016)); this is discussed critically by Bräunlein (Bräunlein, "Thinking Religion Through Things"). See also works on religion from a theological or philosophical angle that embrace new materialism (Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubinstein, "Introduction: Tangled Matters," in *Entangled Worlds: Religions, Science, and New Materialisms*, ed. Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubinstein (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); Joerg Rieger and Edward Waggoner, *Religious Experience and New Materialism: Movement Matters* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan Us Imprint: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), with an excellent introduction by Tamsin Jones). See also the contributions by Bräunlein (2019), Burchardt (2019), Hazard (2019) and Tamimi Arab (2019) to an In Conversation of *Material Religion* titled "'Material Approaches to Religion' Meet 'New Materialism'" (Birgit Meyer, 2019a), and Bräunlein's response (Peter J. Bräunlein, "The Moral Narratives of New Materialism and Posthumanism," *Religious Studies Project*, 2021) to an interview with Paul-François Tremlett on the site of the Religious Studies Project.

18   As Coole and Frost point out in their much-quoted introduction, the key concern of the emergent field of new materialisms is a new understanding of matter as agentive and vibrant. This understanding is grounded in the critique that in the history of philosophy, materialism and matter tended to be marginalized in favour of various permutations of idealism that privileged language, the subject, and the mind. Such idealist remnants, Coole and Frost argue, still inform the critical intellectual project of constructivism, with its strong emphasis on the power of language and discourse and its "allergy to 'the real'" (Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialism," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2010, 6)). By contrast, stating that matter is all there is, new materialists strive for "an ontological reorientation that is resonant with, and to some extent informed by, developments in the natural sciences; an orientation that is posthumanist in the sense that it conceived of matter itself as lively or as exhibiting agency" (Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialism," 6–7). I do not see it as a task for scholarship in the study of religion to work towards stating how things are and how matter matters, but see a great potential for new materialism on the level of method (Bräunlein, "Thinking Religion Through Things," 373–382).

between the disciplines in the early twenty-first century. These concern first and foremost the striving for a new, realist ontology with its own vocabulary.

New materialism offers stimulating insights for the study of religion from a material angle, but I also see some problems with regard to its implementation. One concerns the issue of ontology, especially regarding the presumed existence of God. Stressing the entangled nature of the universe, new materialists see connections and "intra-action"[19] between all sorts of elements that are usually kept apart due to the use of binaries (of subjects and objects, organic and non-organic matter, nature and society, and even matter and spirit). In the introduction to their volume *Entangled Worlds* Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein, a theologian and a philosopher,[20] appreciate new materialist theorists (such as Karen Barad and Jane Bennett) for breaking down "the very subject-object, observer-observed binary that constitutes 'religion' as a mere object, and which renders any form of religion objectionable."[21] The new materialism in their view is non-reductive towards religion and thus can speak about God as an entity: "Relieved of impassive transcendence and immateriality, what sort of body might 'God' signify?"[22] The issue how "God" matters from a scholarly perspective inspired by the new materialism is up to further reflection and debate,[23] but in my view Keller's and Rubenstein's appraisal may easily slide into a theological or religionist stance according to which these entities are taken to exist. As we can only study how humans imagine, act upon, perceive, sense, and communicate with such entities, these entities should not be taken as given.[24] Even though my own material turn is grounded in a wish to understand how figures of God, gods and spirits become present and real for people and how their realness shapes their being in the world, I would avoid

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19   Karen Michelle Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2007).

20   Grounded in Spinoza and Deleuze, new materialists embrace a monist, non-dialectical materialism that is close to pantheism (as is also the case with Keller und Rubinstein, who advocate a "new religious materialism" (Keller and Rubinstein, "Introduction: Tangled Matters," 5)).

21   Keller and Rubinstein, "Introduction: Tangled Matters," 5.

22   Keller and Rubinstein, "Introduction: Tangled Matters," 10.

23   See also Ioannides, "Vibrant Sacralities and Nonhuman Animacies."

24   Of course, the difference between a religionist and a distanced stance towards religion, and the negotiation of insiders' and outsiders' perspectives, is a permanent theme in the study of religion (e.g. Till Mostowlansky and Andrea Rota, "A Matter of Perspective? Disentangling the Emic – Etic Debate in the Scientific Study of Religion\s," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 28 (4/5) (2016): 317–336).

switching sides (except as by way of method during the research) and writing 'with' these entities, and rather focus on the humans for whom they are real.

This brings me to the second issue: anti-anthropocentrism. I agree that it is mistaken to attribute to humans a special mastery over matter and sovereignty over the world. Hence I appreciate the concept of assemblage, although I am more interested in the relative stability and historical transformation of "groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts," than in their "ad hoc" emergence.[25] Religion may well be understood as a set of practices and ideas that organize ways of being in the world through which humans are enveloped into assemblages which involve relations – on the level of the human imagination and experience – between human and non-human actors, including gods and other spiritual entities. In fact, the study of religion offers a fascinating archive of pre-modern, non-Western assemblages. What makes religion special and intriguing is that it calls forth a sense of the existence of transcendent entities such as gods and spirits *in* the immanent and *with* immanent means.[26] In other words, concrete material forms are employed to evoke a sense of presence of such entities.[27] To grasp the making and operation of material portals that open up – in an authorized manner – to a professed beyond, I coined the concept sensational form.[28] Pointing at the more or less intensely experienced bonds between people and such a professed beyond that arise by gathering different kinds of 'agents' and practices in one authorized form, the concept of sensational form to some extent covers the same ground as the concept of assemblage. As a concept, sensational form refers to those assemblages that are made to operate as portals and generate a sense of presence of the transcendent for its human actors.

A salient difference between new materialists' understanding of assemblage and my own take on sensational forms concerns the vantage point taken for research. Of course, new materialists are right to foreground the complex entanglements of humans in and with the world, and their mutual influences and effects, and to unhinge the idea of the human by thinking of human beings

25 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 23. The point is to locate assemblages historically and spatially. See Janeja (Manpreet Janeja, *Transactions in Taste. The Collaborative Lives of Everyday Bengali Food* (New Delhi, London: Routledge, 2010)) for an inspiring take on assemblages and networks of diverse elements around food that are embedded in specific historical and regional biographies and their (post)colonial transformations.

26 Meyer, "Religion as Mediation," 19; see also Volkhard Krech, *Die Evolution der Religion: ein soziologischer Grundriss* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2021).

27 See also Diana Espírito Santo and Jack Hunter (eds.), *Mattering the Inivisible. Technologies, Bodies and the Realm of the Spectral* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2021).

28 Meyer, "Religion as Mediation," 7.

on the level of bacteria or as part of machines. And yet, a critique of anthropo-centrism along this line should not make us think that we can analyse assem-blages 'from within' or 'as such,' that is, from beyond a human perspective.[29] This pertains to both the (emic) perspective of humans participating in assemblages we study, and our scholarly analysis thereof. Acknowledging the embeddedness of humans in wider assemblages does not imply that one should pursue an extreme anti-anthropocentrism, certainly not on the level of research. Being part *of* matter, humans still sense, think, speak and feel *about* matter and thus about themselves in the world, and it is this human existential endeavour and the role of religion therein that I still want to grasp.[30]

My basic point here is that, in contrast to new materialists, I do not think that focusing on entanglements and assemblages would allow us, as scholars, to at long last get hold of the 'real' ground of existence that is taken as ontologi-cally 'there.'[31] The material world of which humans are part by virtue of their embodied being can only be grasped (in the sense of the German *begreifen*) through socially and culturally constituted forms (signs, categories, concepts). These forms – on the levels of everyday life and of academic knowledge – are at the base of the social and cultural construction of reality in which reli-gion partakes, and which scholars in the social sciences and humanities try to understand. As explained elaborately by Volkhard Krech, who developed a full-fledged materialist semiotic approach to religious sign systems, the forms employed are themselves material.[32] And yet, the ensuing construction of

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29 See also Bräunlein, "The Moral Narratives."

30 Transcending the subject-object dualism and analysing humans' being in the world from the angle of embodiment in the footsteps of Merleau-Ponty (see also Vásquez, *More Than Belief*), phenomenology offers a suitable conceptual framework that may well be further developed from a material angle. I do not agree with Hazard (Hazard, "The Material Turn") and Ioannides (Ioannides, "Vibrant Sacralities and Nonhuman Animacies") that phenomenology is too human-centred to account for the ways in which material forms shape human existence.

31 Jane Bennett distinguishes her thinking from that of Hent de Vries, whose "formulations give priority to humans as knowing bodies, while tending to overlook things and what they can do," and states that instead she "will shift from the language of epistemology to that of ontology, from a focus on an elusive recalcitrance hovering between imma-nence and transcendence (the absolute) to an active, earthy, not-quite-human capa-ciousness (vibrant matter)" (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 3). Here I would rather side with de Vries (see also Birgit Meyer, "Picturing the Invisible: Visual Culture and the Study of Religion," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 27 (4–5) (2015): 337) and stay with the language of epistemology. As one as the architects of the research program The Future of the Religious Past, De Vries took things as one of the concrete "singulars" or "particulars" to study religion from a "deeply pragmatic attitude" (see Meyer & Houtman, "Material Religion," 3–4).

32 Krech, *Die Evolution der Religion*, 45. Integrating semiotics and system theory, Krech holds the basic assumption that signs break the continuum of matter-energy and bridge the

reality differs from what one may call sheer matter or "matter-energy."[33] Our human approach to matter (with which we are enmeshed *and* which we perceive and sense as an object to be understood and acted upon) is always mediated through material forms.[34]

Matter exists in excess of human possibilities to deal with, sense, act upon and think about it. Reality is constructed out of and with matter, but differentiated from it through language and embodied practices and thereby sensed and rendered meaningful.[35] Hence, as a concept, materiality is not congruous with what is referred to as 'matter' in a broad, all-encompassing sense. Materiality is *about* matter and seeks to *approximate* it conceptually, but ultimately matter in the broad sense cannot be fully captured by (and thus not be congruous with) human modes of sensation and signification. So there remains a gap.

The fact that humans may long for bridging this gap while never being able to do so in full, offers a fruitful entry point for analysis. This sense of a gap – and a sense of being at a loss with regard to a professed unknown, what Mattijs van de Port calls "the Rest-of-what-is"[36] – is a prime scenario mobilized by religions in past and present, albeit in varying ways. As scholars, we can study (and feel attracted to) such scenarios, but still cannot help but 'mind the gap' that remains between matter and signs (as recognized in semiotics) or the symbolic

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breaks within a sign system through which reality is constituted. He argues that both the signifier and the signified are material: "that to which a material sign refers is also a material state of affairs, that is, an object. Objects can be things, states of affairs, concepts ort persons. They, too, are part of the continuum of matter and energy. However, in semiosis – that is, in the process 'in which something acts as a sign' (…) only certain aspects of those objects to which the signs refer gain relevance" (translation BM). Original: "das, worauf ein materielles Zeichen hinweist, ist ebenfalls ein materieller Sachverhalt, nämlich ein Objekt. Bei Objekten kann es sich um Dinge, Sachverhalte, Begriffe oder Personen handeln. Auch sie sind Teil des Kontinuums von Materie und Energie. Jedoch werden in der Semiose – das heißt innerhalb des Prozesses, 'in dem etwas als Zeichen fungiert' (…) nur bestimmte Aspekte jener Objekte relevant, auf die Zeichen verweisen" (Krech, *Die Evolution der Religion*, 45). The point here is that matter exists in excess of signs. Conversely, signs themselves are material, but only refer those aspects of matter that are foregrounded in communication. See Keane (Webb Keane, "Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things," *Language & Communication* 23 (2003): 409–425) for a similar argument, also grounded in Peirce.

33   Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

34   In principle, this also pertains to the natural sciences, where methods and procedures take part in producing empirical outcomes (Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993)), but unlike scholars in the humanities and social sciences, natural scientists are not expected to undertake such critical epistemological reflexions.

35   Krech, *Die Evolution der Religion*, 18–19.

36   Mattijs van de Port, "Dat wat rest…: over sacralisering en de ongerijmdheden van het bestaan," Inaugural Lecture, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2010.

order and the 'really real' (as recognized in psychoanalytical approaches). It would be a scholarly illusion to think that religionism or new materialism would transport us to the side of 'real' matter, however conceived. The most we can do is to dwell, conceptually, at the edge where thought and understanding vis-à-vis matter in the broad sense reaches its limits, and try to rethink our being in the world from there. This is what makes notions as entanglement and assemblage exciting and useful for the study of religion from a material angle and in comparative manner.

3   Unpacking Materiality

The concern of the material turn in the study of religion is to allow for fresh, detailed and conceptually challenging empirical research that lends itself to comparison. As a concept, materiality signals the importance to situate humans in their relations to a broad set of material forms, with which they engage through their bodies and senses when 'doing' religion and through the use of which they are shaped and develop a particular habitus. So far, our understanding of materiality in the study of religion has been mainly developed through the study of material culture, taken as entry point into assemblages and entanglements. The prominent focus on human-things relations has yielded important insights into a broad array of possible modes of agency and relational dynamics that move beyond a conventional idea of humans as subjects dominating the object world. Following Latour,[37] networks of different kinds of actors can be identified, while Hodder calls attention to the path-dependency of human-things entanglements and entrapments across time.[38] The category of things, and the possibilities for agency entailed by them in multiple assemblages,[39] is subdivided into artefacts, buildings and images as prominent sub-categories. In the framework of the material turn in the study of religion, each of these sub-categories has generated original research, interdisciplinary conversations and, conversely, helped to develop and refine the concept of materiality.

In my own research, which has been much inspired by Morgan, I have extensively worked on religious images and visual regimes. This was of special

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37   Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

38   Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2012).

39   Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, 9.

interest so as to correct the text-focus that long dominated the study of religion empirically and conceptually. Echoing a Calvinist-Protestant appraisal of aniconism as a normative default, the study of religion offered little room for a thorough analysis of images and visual culture. Conversations with scholars in art history and, especially, German *Bildwissenschaft*, made me think about images as media employed to imagine and picture an invisible realm. The image itself, as pointed out by Hans Belting, is a material form with an intrinsic property of generating presence in and through a pictorial medium.[40] Such a take on images as material media to achieve iconic presence ensues a deeper understanding of the figuration and sensation of the unseen in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and beyond.[41] The work on religious images and visual culture has been important in re-conceptualizing religion from a material angle. Similarly, a focus on buildings and objects has allowed for new empirical foci for research, and instigated a deeper understanding of how religion matters, for believers and outsiders, by virtue of being present in the world through concrete material forms.[42]

As a concept intended to approximate matter, materiality ultimately is about everything. This somewhat dazzling realization may be the reason why materiality is often referred to in an abstract sense. At the same time, we can only get the material dimension of religion into the picture via a pragmatic stance that focuses on certain categories of material forms – with material culture forming an obvious focus to begin with – for the sake of empirical insights

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40 Hans Belting, "Iconic Presence. Images in Religious Traditions," *Material Religion* 12 (2) (2016): 235–237.

41 Birgit Meyer and Terje Stordalen (eds.), *Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Contested Desires* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

42 E.g. Uta Karstein and Thomas Schmidt-Lux, *Architekturen und Artefakte. Zur Materialität des Religiösen* (Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 2016). Our research programme *Religious Matters in an Entangled World* shows that taking images, objects and buildings as foci for research contributes to a deeper analysis of tensions about the presence and representation of religion in public spaces in our increasingly plural societies (Daan Beekers, "Sakrale Residuen/Sacred Residue," in *The Urban Sacred – Städtisch-Religiöse Arrangements in Amsterdam, Berlin und London/How Religion Makes and Takes Place in Amsterdam, Berlin and London. Ausstellungskatalog/Exhibition Catalogue*, ed. Ed Susanne Lanwerd (Berlin: Metropol, 2016), Pooyan Tamimi Arab, *Amplifying Islam in the European Soundscape: Religious Pluralism and Secularism in the Netherlands* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017); see also Marian Burchardt, *Regulating Difference: Religious Diversity and Nationhood in the Secular West* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2020)). At this moment we focus on food, while the final phase of the programme will look at texts from a material angle, with the aim to synthesize their material and hermeneutic dimensions (see also James W. Watts, "Books as Sacred Beings," *Postscripts* 10 (1–2) (2019): 144–157).

and grounded conceptual reflexion.[43] However, materiality encompasses more material forms than the strong focus on images, artefacts and buildings might suggest. Scholarly work inspired by the material turn should take into account a broader array of material forms than those that gained prominence so far, so as to be able to unpack more and different facets of materiality, and ensuing assemblages and sensational forms, in relation to religion.[44]

Materiality is an umbrella concept[45] that must be further unpacked for the sake of empirically and conceptually innovative work. Materiality refers to a range of categories that differentiate the domain of things (artefacts, images, buildings, as well as, for instance, stones, machines, texts, dress, food), substances (water, light, air, blood, milk, alcohol, etc), flora, fauna, micro-organisms (viruses, bacteria) and digital forms. These intersecting categories group certain material forms that consist of natural or human-made materials, or composites thereof, which have their specific affordances.

Despite this, material forms should not be reduced to the materials of which they consist. Tim Ingold criticizes anthropologists talking about materiality for being unable to say what it actually means,[46] asking "What academic perversion leads us to speak not of *materials and their properties* but of *the materiality of objects*?"[47] I would retort that rather than playing off materials against materiality, the latter is important as a concept to think about matter and materials. Materials, in my view, do not offer privileged access to matter.[48] Taking materiality as a concept, rather than as matter as such, it is important to be alert to the fact that people apprehend, use and assign value to material forms through "semiotic ideologies," i.e. "basic assumptions about what signs are

43   Hent de Vries, "Introduction: Why Still 'Religion'?," in *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 5–6.

44   For instance, recently Jeremy Stolow and I have called attention to the nexus of religion and light (Birgit Meyer and Jeremy Stolow, "Light Mediations: Introduction," *Material Religion* 16 (1) (2020): 1–8; Jeremy Stolow and Birgit Meyer, "Enlightening Religion: Light and Darkness in Religious Knowledge and Knowledge about Religion," *Critical Research on Religion* 9 (2) (2021): 119–125). We can also think about viruses, animals, plants and, crucially, air (see Maria José de Abreu, "On Twisted Logics and the Pandemic," *Religious Matters*, 2 January 2021), as foci for research on religion from a material angle.

45   Beinhauer-Köhler (Bärbel Beinhauer-Köhler, "Religionen greifbar machen? – Der *material turn* in der Religionswissenschaft," *Pastoraltheologie* 104 (6) (2015): 255–265) rightly stresses that materiality should be employed as an umbrella term (*Oberbegriff*) that covers a broad field of medial signs (*mediale Repräsentationen*).

46   Tim Ingold, "Materials against Materiality," *Archeological Dialogues* 14 (1) (2007): 2.

47   Ingold, "Materials against Materiality," 3.

48   See also Birgit Meyer, "How to Capture the 'Wow': R.R. Marett's Notion of Awe and the Study of Religion," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22 (2016): 12–13.

and how they function in the world."[49] The categories and semiotic ideologies employed by scholars are predominantly grounded in Western classification systems; hence the need to be alert to the intricacies and fallacies of intercultural translation.[50] Material forms are also assigned value through appreciative categories, which may be positive (art, devotional object, heritage) or dismissive, as is the case with categories of "bad objecthood" such as 'totem,' 'fetish' and 'idol' that have been employed to pinpoint problematic human-things relations in which the former are under the spell of the latter.[51] This is particularly important for scholars working on former frontier zones of European colonial outreach. What may at first sight intuitively be qualified as an artefact – or even as a 'fetish' – may be approached quite differently by its original users, and thus crack the framework of material culture. I see it as a prime task of scholars studying religion to engage in translation across different cultural settings, so as to question and possibly broaden existing categories around thingness[52] and other material forms, thereby surpassing a modernist idea of material culture in terms of dead, non-animate objecthood that still resuscitate an obsolete subject-object binary according to which the former are in control of the latter.

Studying religion from a material angle, it is time to extend our analytical scope of material forms. The point is not to include as many as possible, but to focus on categories of material forms that foreground modes of corporeal and sensorial engagement which have so far received little attention. One especially promising category is food. As I will show in the next section, a focus on food can substantially expand our understanding of the religion and materiality nexus by spotlighting ingestion/digestion as a prime mode of corporeal and sensorial engagement.

49   Keane, "Semiotics," 419; see also Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 16–17.

50   William F. Hanks and Carlo Severi, "Translating Worlds: The Epistemological Space of Translation," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (2) (2014): 1–16; Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

51   W.J. Thomas Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 188.

52   Amira J. Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, "Thinking through Things," in *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, ed. Amiria J. Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell (London: Routledge, 2007).

4   Food: Feuerbach's Gastro-philosophy

Of course, in the study of religion there has always been an interest in food, yielding studies of taboos and dietary laws, sacred animals and plants, fasting, sacrifice, communal meals, and so on. Across the vast field of Food Studies, food has also been increasingly highlighted as a prism to study the potentials for conflicts and conviviality in plural religious environments.[53] My concern in this section is not to survey this growing field, which partly overlaps with the anthropology of food,[54] but to think about food as a central domain of material religion.[55] A focus on food can help us understand how humans, in their practices of cooking, feeding, eating, drinking, digesting, and so on, are part of the material world. Against this backdrop, I appreciate David Chidester's remark that "religion is often more like cooking than like philosophy."[56] But we could go a step further, as a focus on cooking may yield a philosophy that sets off from the stomach.

Here it is compelling to turn to Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1874), whose work as a prime advocate of nineteenth-century materialism shows intriguing parallels with current debates about materiality.[57] He made the well-known

53   Rashida Alhassan Adum-Atta, "The Politics of Purity, Disgust, and Contamination: Com- munal Identity of Trotter (Pig) Sellers in Madina Zongo (Accra)," *Religions* 11(8) (2020): 421; Rachel Brown, "How Gelatin Becomes an Essential Symbol of Muslim Identity: Food Prac- tice as a Lens into the Study of Religion and Migration," *Religious Studies and Theology* 35 (2) (2016): 185–205; Manpreet Janeja, *Food, Feeding, and Eating in Plural School Environ- ments: Conundrums, Contestations, Negotiations*, Presentations at the Religious Matters Workshop, KNIR Rome (May) and the conference Gastro-Politics & Gastro-Ethics of the Sacred & Secular Conference, Meertens Institute Amsterdam (November), 2019; Man- preet Janeja, "Food Matters in an Entangled World," Religious Matters, 13 February 2020; James Staples, *Sacred Cows and Chicken Machurian* (Washington: Washington University Press, 2020); Shaheed Tayob, "Islam as a Lived Tradition: Ethical Constellations of Mus- lim Food Practice in Mumbai," Utrecht University, Dissertation, 2017; Margreet van Es, "Roasting a Pig in Front of a Mosque: How Pork Matters in Pegida's Anti-Islam Protest in Eindhoven," *Religions* 11 (7) (2020): 359–375.

54   Janeja, *Transactions in Taste*; Jakob Klein and James L Watson (eds.), *The Handbook of Food and Anthropology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

55   Food has received relatively little attention in *Material Religion*, a digital search (conducted in June 2021) via the journal site shows that there are only 3 articles that have food as a keyword: https://www.tandfonline.com/action/doSearch?field1=Keyword&text1=food &SeriesKey=rfmr20&SeriesKey=rfmr20.

56   David Chidester, *Religion: Material Dynamics* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 53.

57   Interestingly, in her chapter "Edible Matter," Jane Bennett investigates food as "conative body" and "actant" inside a person's body, and their grouping in an assemblage she calls "American consumption" (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 39). Stating that in the nineteenth

statement that "the human being is what he/she eats" ("der Mensch ist, was er isst"). Behind this statement lies Feuerbach's less well-known anti-idealist philosophy which takes the stomach as its anchor point, or, as German philosopher Harald Lemke called it poignantly: his "gastro-philosophy,"[58] so as to build a 'new' philosophy. Feuerbach articulated this new philosophy in his polemical essay "Die Naturwissenschaft und die Revolution" (*Natural Science and the Revolution*, 1850),[59] in which he discussed the book *Lehre der Nahrungsmittel für das Volk* by Jakob Moleschott (1850).[60] Born in the Netherlands and trained in Germany, Moleschott (1822–1893) was a materialist philosopher and physicist who mobilized the natural sciences to criticize religion (and its uses by the establishment).

For his part, Moleschott was influenced by Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1841, English version 1854),[61] a work that proposes a human-centred rather than God-centred understanding of religion. Taking God as a human creation, Feuerbach viewed God as mirror of the human ("Gott ist der Spiegel des Menschen"). As a materialist grounded in Spinoza, he strove to think through and demystify religion in such a way that it would become obsolete: "Religion is abolished where the idea of the world, of so-called second causes (*Mittelursachen*, BM), intrudes itself between God and man."[62] He argued that the idea of second causes as developed in Christian theology betrays an ambivalent relation to matter (*Materie*), understood as that what is in-between humans and God:

> Religion derives the idea of the existence of second causes, that is, of things which are interposed between God and man, only from the

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century "it was fairly easy to find a philosopher who believed that food had the power to shape the dispositions of persons and nations" (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 43), she introduces Nietzsche, but not Feuerbach and Moleschott who preceded him. As I will show, Feuerbach is a new materialist *avant la lettre*.

58   Harald Lemke, "Feuerbachs Stammtischthese oder zum Ursprung des Satzes: ,Der Mensch ist, was er isst," *Aufklärung und Kritik* 1 (2004): 117–140.

59   Ludwig Feuerbach, "Die Naturwissenschaft und die Revolution.," in *Ludwig Feuerbachs Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. Wilhelm Bolin and Friedrich Jodl (Stuttgart: 1903–1910; original 1850), X. Band, 3–24. New Adaptation by Werner Schuffenhauer in a Publication of the Akademie-Verlags: Ludwig Feuerbach, *Gesammelte Werke* (Berlin, 1971), Kleinere Schriften III, Bd. 10, 347–368.

60   Jacob Moleschott, *Lehre der Nahrungsmittel für das Volk* (Erlangen: Verlag von Ferdinand Enke, 1850).

61   Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, translated by George Eliot (1854); English translation of *Das Wesen des Christentums. Gesammelte Werke*, first published in 1841.

62   Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, chapter XIX.

physical, natural, and hence the irreligious or at least non-religious theory of the universe: a theory which it nevertheless immediately subverts by making the operations of Nature operations of God. But this religious idea is in contradiction with the natural sense and understanding, which concedes a real, spontaneous activity to natural things. And this contradiction of the physical view with the religious theory, religion resolves by converting the undeniable activity of things into an activity of God. Thus, on this view, the positive idea is God; the negative, the world.[63]

Nature and matter can only be known through the senses. But this is denied from a Christian viewpoint that takes God as the ultimate operating force in the world, from which He, however, is held to be removed at the same time, implying that for believers the world, and matter, become secondary. In this idealist construct, the trouble faced by nineteenth-century theology with regard to matter and the world – undeniably present and yet to be tuned down so as to maintain an idea of God as all-transcending spirit -, comes to the fore clearly. The secret of religion for Feuerbach, however, is that the nature of the divine is identical with the nature of humans. According to his materialist analysis, which exposes his impressive theological expertise, religion knows about world and matter, albeit in a mystified manner. For this reason, the study of religion from an anthropological rather than theological angle is able to lay bare *human* needs, affects, and perceptions as grounded in matter. Proposing to analyse religion from the middle ground, the world, Feuerbach scrutinizes religious beliefs and doctrines for the truths they contain with regard to matter. His materialist stance does not simply demystify religion so as to break it down, but takes the material engagement with the world in between God and humans as a starting point. From this material approach, he also thought about the Eucharist as a sensorial religious act, through which food was valued as divine and sacralised, and ingested. The Host becomes the flesh of Christ in the imagination, but the Host or bread, once eaten, is transformed into human flesh. So, in a way, the Eucharist affirms the truth of chemistry, in that the bread humans eat becomes their flesh.[64]

This take on religion stimulated Moleschott. He and other scientific materialists strove for a societal reform program based on insights from the

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63   Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, chapter XIX.

64   See also John Hymers, "In Defence of Feuerbach's Moleschott Reception: Feuerbach's Open Dialectic," previously published in German as "Verteidigung von Feuerbachs Moleschott Rezeption: Feuerbachs offene Dialektik.," in *Identität und Pluralismus in der globalen Gesellschaft. Ludwig Feuerbach zum 200. Geburtstag*, ed. U. Reitemeyer, T. Shibata, and F. Tomasoni (Muenster/New York: Waxmann Verlag, 2006).

natural sciences. Scientific materialism rejected the assumption of congruence between the laws of being and the laws of thought that underpinned Hegelian metaphysics. Asserting that human strength and vitality depend on the materiality of food, Moleschott criticized that the right to eat good food – for him this had to include meat, as provider of protein – was denied to the poor. Metabolic processes have impact on human behaviour and thought. Hence his famous dictum: "Ohne Phosphor kein Gedanke" ("without phosphor no thought") (1850: 110).[65] Inspired by Moleschott, Feuerbach further developed a materialist philosophy that takes the stomach as its anchor point.

His essay *Natural Science and the Revolution* (1850), published at a time when in Prussia philosophical works that criticized religion and politics were repressed while the natural sciences were not subject to such censorship, praises Moleschott's book.[66] Seeing the revolutionary potential in the natural sciences, as a materialist Feuerbach was interested in the study of nutrition and metabolism. As mentioned, he draws a difference between an "old philosophy" that "started with thought" and left people without bread, and a "new philosophy" that "begins with food and eating."[67] This is how he challenged the old idealist philosophy:[68]

> How much have the philosophers puzzled their heads over the question about the relation between the body and the soul! Now we know on scientific grounds what the people long knew from experience, that eating and drinking hold the body and the soul together, that hence the relation looked for is food. How has one fought over native ideas or ideas coming from outside, and how contemptuous has one looked down at those who derive the origin of ideas from the senses (this and subsequent translations BM).[69]

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65 Moleschott, *Lehre der Nahrungsmittel*, 110.

66 Feuerbach notes that the Prussian state curtailed and censored critical philosophy (especially with regard to religion and politics), while the natural sciences were promoted. And yet, according to Feuerbach the latter have a strong revolutionary potential, as was shown exemplarily in Jakob Moleschott's book.

67 Orig.: "Die alte Philosophie begann mit dem Denken, sie 'wusste nur die Geister zu vergnügen und liess darum die Menschen ohne Brod;' die neue beginnt mit Essen und Trinken."

68 For a short version of this section see my blog "Der Mensch ist was er isst" (Birgit Meyer, "Der Mensch ist was er isst," *Religious Matters*, 24 August 2019 (2019c)).

69 Orig: "Was haben sich nicht sonst die Philosophen den Kopf zerbrochen mit der Frage von dem Bande zwischen dem Leib und der Seele! Jetzt wissen wir aus wissenschaftlichen Gründen, was längst das Volk aus der Erfahrung wusste, dass Essen und Trinken Leib und Seele zusammenhält, dass das gesuchte Band also die Nahrung ist. Wie hat man sich nicht

And:

> How did not the concept of substance vex philosophy? What is it? Me or non-me, mind or nature, or the unity of both? Yes, the unity. But what does this say? *The food only is the substance*; the food is the identity of mind and nature. Where there is no fat, there is no meat; but where there is no fat, there is no brain, no spirit: and the fat comes only from food. The food is the Spinozistic Hen kaì pân, the all-embracing, the essence of the beings. Everything depends on eating and drinking (emphasis in the original).[70]

He approvingly cites Moleschott's statement "Das Leben is Stoffwechsel,"[71] which can be either translated as "life is metabolism," but also, more radically yet true to his argument, as "life is material exchange."[72] Finally, towards the end of his essay he makes the well-known statement already cited above:

> The food becomes blood, the blood becomes heart and brain, and thoughts and ethos. Human food is the foundation of human education and ethos. If you want to improve the people, give them better food instead of declamations against sin. *The human being is what he/she eats.* Who enjoys only vegetable-diet is also only a vegetating being, has no energy (italics ʙᴍ).[73]

Feuerbach pursued and refined his idea that humans are what they eat in subsequent works, also in relation to religion. In his essay "The Mystery of Sacrifice or Man is What He Eats" he stressed that he has "made an object of gastrology

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    sonst über eingeborene oder von aussen gekommene Ideen gezankt und wie verächtlich auf die herabgeblickt, welche den Ursprung der Ideen aus den Sinnen ableiteten!"

70   Orig.: "Wie hat nicht der Begriff der Substanz die Philosophie vexirt! Was ist sie? Ich oder Nicht-Ich, Geist oder Natur, oder die Einheit von beiden? Ja, die Einheit. Aber was ist denn damit gesagt? *Die Nahrung nur ist die Substanz*; die Nahrung die Identität von Geist und Natur. Wo kein Fett, ist kein Fleisch; aber wo kein Fett, da ist auch kein Hirn, kein Geist: und das Fett kommt nur aus der Nahrung. Die Nahrung ist das Spinozistische Hen kaì pân, das Allesumfassende, das Wesen der Wesen. Alles hängt vom Essen und Trinken ab."

71   Moleschott, *Lehre der Nahrungsmittel*, 6.

72   Hymers, "In Defence of Feuerbach's Moleschott Reception," 11.

73   Orig.: "Die Speisen werden zu Blut, das Blut zu Herz und Hirn, zu Gedanken und Gesinnungsstoff. Menschliche Kost ist die Grundlage menschlicher Bildung und Gesinnung. Wollt ihr das Volk bessern, so gebt ihm statt Deklamationen gegen die Sünde bessere Speisen. Der Mensch ist was er isst. Wer nur Pflanzenkost geniesst, ist auch nur ein vegetirendes Wesen, hat keine Thatkraft."

(theory of the stomach, of the palate) straightaway into an object of theology, and admittedly, an object of theology, on the other hand, into an object of gastrology."[74] In this essay he analyses religion from the angle of nourishment as that which is life,[75] and extends his idea of eating as the basic life activity to seeing ("eating with the eyes") and hearing ("eating with the ears").[76]

While he was derided for his take on food by his contemporaries and subsequent philosophers, who saw him advocate a crude materialism, presently his approach is rediscovered as a powerful statement against the Cartesian body-mind binary and a reappraisal of Spinoza's thesis of unity of body and mind, that prefigured the "core theoretical points made by (Robertson, BM) Smith and taken up by Durkheim, Freud, many of their contemporaries and students of sacrifice down to the present."[77] As mentioned, the German philosopher and historian Harald Lemke[78] appraises Feuerbach for developing a gastrosophic anthropology of existence.[79] I find these gastro-philosophical openings of great relevance for a conceptual valuation of food from the angle of a material approach to religion. Feuerbach's materialism, with its somewhat reductionist idea of religion, may to some extent appear old-fashioned. But a closer reading, especially of his work on food outside of religion, shows remarkable resonance with current debates about materiality. I agree with the point made by the American philosopher John Hymers that "Feuerbach's position is not the reduction of thought or human activity to matter, but rather an interesting discussion of the fundamental unity between the human being and the objects from which he lives."[80] In thinking humans' relation to the world through the stomach, Hymers argues, Feuerbach's ideas about food prefigure Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and I would add, resonate with new materialism:

> We exist as an opening to the world. The open dialectic of mutual influence thoroughly permeates our being. Breathing, eating, and drinking best illustrate this porous promiscuity: breathing is the mixing of air with

74 Ludwig Feuerbach, "The Mystery of Sacrifice or Man is what he Eats," translated by Cyril Levitt (2007), 7; English translation of "Das Geheimnis des Opfers oder der Mensch ist was er isst," in *Gesammelte Werke*, first published in 1862.

75 Feuerbach, "The Mystery of Sacrifice," 24.

76 Feuerbach, "The Mystery of Sacrifice," 25. See here the translation and introduction by Cyril Levitt: http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.456.2161&rep=rep1&type=pdf.

77 Feuerbach, "The Mystery of Sacrifice," 4.

78 See Harald Lemke, https://www.haraldlemke.de (accessed 19 August 2021).

79 Lemke, "Feuerbachs Stammtischthese," 119.

80 Hymers, "In Defence of Feuerbach's Moleschott Reception," 1.

our bodies; eating is the mixing of solids with our bodies; drinking is the mixture of fluids with our bodies. But what we breath, eat, and drink also flows from our bodies and re-enters the objective world.[81]

I offered this extensive discussion of Feuerbach's gastro-philosophy because in my view it is of great use as a conceptual ground for future research on food, as a specific sub-category of material forms, in the study of religion. Its attraction lies in the fact that food (next to breathing)[82] is related to being in the most basic, existential sense that can be imagined. There are many possibilities to relate his idea about food as being at the centre of the material exchange that defines life (*Stoffwechsel*), from the angle of a material approach to religion. As the basic material form that people must ingest and digest to live, food involves detailed classifications and serves as a symbolic marker of identity and belonging. Religion plays a central role in shaping what and how people eat, while food also plays a crucial role in human exchanges with the divine, whether this concerns sacrifices and other ways of feeding the gods[83] or, for example, the Eucharist as an act through which Christian believers ingest the divine[84] or Islamic medicine to ingest the holy Qur'an.[85] The study of religion from a material angle can certainly be enriched empirically and pushed conceptually, by thinking through the domain of eating and drinking from the standpoint of "religion in the kitchen,"[86] or more broadly, the relation between religion and agriculture.[87] But food need not necessarily come in as a new focus per se, it

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81   Hymers, "In Defence of Feuerbach's Moleschott Reception," 11–12.

82   See Abreu, "On Twisted Logics."

83   Gertrud Hüwelmeier, "Feeding the Spirits: Cooking, Offering and Reclaiming lộc in late Socialist Vietnam," *South East Asia Research* 29 (1) (2021): 108–125; Elizabeth Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Jojada Verrips, "Ik kan je wel opvreten. En(i)ge noties over het thema kannibalisme in westerse samenlevingen," *Etnofoor* 4 (1) (1991): 36.

84   Heike Behrend, *Resurrecting Cannibals: The Catholic Church, Witch-Hunts, and the Production of Pagans in Western Uganda* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd., 2011); Anselm Schubert, *Gott essen: eine kulinarische Geschichte des Abendmahls* (München: C.H. Beck, 2018); Mirella Klomp, Peter-Ben Smit, and Iris Speckmann (eds)., *Rond de tafel maaltijd vieren in liturgische contexten* (Berne: Berne Media, 2018).

85   Hanna Nieber, "Drinking the Written Qu'ran: Healing with Kombe in Zanzibar Town," Dissertation, Utrecht University, 2020; "About Ingestion: Drinking the Qur'an, Annemarie Mol's 'Eating in Theory,' and Fusion Cooking as Method," *Religious Matters*, 20 August 2021.

86   Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen*.

87   David Morgan, "Religion, Food and Agriculture," in *Religion and Materiality*, ed. Vasudha Narayanan (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2020b).

may also offer a new angle to the study of religious practices such as prayer and worship, making us realize the extent to which such practices involve food in manifold ways. Many possibilities for research arise, and I hope that my line of reasoning so far will trigger more research that will bring home the relevance of a focus on food for fleshing out the concept of materiality in the study of religion. As I will exemplify in the final section of this essay, attention to food also offers a fresh look at the vexing phenomenon of the so-called 'fetish' and has gained strong relevance in my own future research.

5   The Spirits Are Hungry

As pointed out, my own interest in the material turn was triggered by feeling at a loss with regard to the figure of the 'fetish' or 'idol' that was applied to Ewe *legba* (pl. *legbawo*) figures in the West African frontier zone. These are categories of judgment employed to dismiss and classify as inferior African modes of dealing with the spirit world through matter. Employing these terms betrays an ideological standpoint that affirms a mentalistic stance with regard to religion that is grounded in Calvinism and rejects the worship of human-made gods in the name of the Second Commandment.[88] The critique of semiotic ideologies that misconstrue certain human-made things as 'fetishes' and 'idols' was of crucial importance in claiming more conceptual space for materiality in the study of religion and played a central role in triggering the material turn.[89] At the same time, the strong focus on deconstructing the categories of "bad objecthood,"[90] into which were put human-made things held to be wrongly attributed with a will, risks a neglect of the things themselves. This, at least, pertains to my own attempts to understand how the mapping of the category 'fetish' on figures called *legbawo* by the Ewe distorted these figures in

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88   Birgit Meyer, "Idolatry Beyond the Second Commandment. Conflicting Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen.," in *Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Birgit Meyer & Terje Stordalen (London: Bloomsbury, 2019b).

89   Keane, *Christian Moderns*; Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Patricia Spyer (ed.), *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Places* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998); Peter J. Pels, "The Spirit of Matter: On Fetish, Rarity, Fact and Fancy," in *Border Fetishisms. Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, ed. Patricia Spyer (New York/London: Routledge, 1997).

90   Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 188.

the Christian and scholarly imagination.[91] But, to paraphrase W.J.T. Mitchell,[92] what do the *legbawo* want?[93]

This question became pressing through my new research project on a missionary collection of *legba* figures assembled by missionaries of the *Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft* during their activities among the Ewe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in particular by the missionary Carl Spiess (1867–1936). The *legba*-figures are kept in the museum's depot, with some on display in the *Schaumagazin*.[94] I approach these objects as 'religious matters' that enshrine colonial and post-colonial entanglements of people, objects and ideas in Africa and Europe. The idea is to track and unpack these entanglements by following the stations of their trajectory,[95] from their origin and use among the Ewe in what is now Southern Togo and South-eastern Ghana, to their dismissal as 'fetishes,' 'idols' and 'charms' by the missionaries and early Ewe converts, and their valuation as ethnographic objects that exemplify religion at a low stage by scholars, to the conditions of their acquisition and provenance, their shipping from Africa to Bremen, to their being put 'at rest' in the depot.

In January 2020, together with Angelantonio Grossi, I spoke to the Ewe priest Christopher Voncujovi.[96] I showed the priest some photographs of these

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91 So far, I paid much attention to missionary preaching among the Ewe, which exposed a downrightly negative stance towards 'fetishes' and 'idols.' These terms have different genealogies, but both were used as synonyms and made to refer to *legbawo*: figures manly consisting of clay that were placed in public spaces and private homes, and employed as sites where spirits dwell and can be summoned. My earlier work (Meyer, *Translating the Devil*) on the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century activities of missionaries of the NMG among the Ewe in colonized Togo and Gold Coast, tracked how the *categories* of 'fetish' and 'idol' have continued to live on in African Independent and Pentecostal churches up to our time.

92 Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*

93 I like this tongue-in-cheek question, with which Mitchell does not want to indulge in some kind of animism, but get close enough to the objects and images vested with a certain power to understand their spell on humans. This is exactly the position anthropologists (of religion) adopt in their research. Taking this position does not imply conceptual animism.

94 I am thankful to Silke Seybold, curator Africa at the Übersee-Museum Bremen, for participating in and opening up the depot for this collaborative research, which also includes Kodzo Gavua, Sela Adjei, Malika Kraamer, Kokou Azamede, Mawussé Ohini Toffa and Angelantonio Grossi.

95 See also David Morgan, "Place and the Instrumentality of Religious Artifacts.," *Kunst og Kultur* 3 (99) (2016): 122–131.

96 Angelantonio Grossi conducts research on the use of new media by traditionals including Voncojuvi, in Ghana (see Angelantonio Grossi, "Vodu and Social Media in Ghana," Religious Matters, 30 July 2017).

figures and objects in the depot. He has similar *legba* figures in his own shrine. We discussed all the pictures of *legbawo* in the collection I had with me. For him, the items were not mere things that had moved through a long trajectory in the course of which they transited from being religious objects that harbour spirit power to mere museum objects. For him, the *legbawo* in the museum were alive and likely to be hungry, eagerly awaiting to be called by a priest and fed.

Let me quote from our conversation:

> Christopher (C): And these things, honestly, they are hungry, ooo.
> Angelantonio (A): hungry
> Birgit (B): Hungry? Hungry?
> C: Yeah, they have not been fed for ages.
> B: No, more than 100 years
> C: even some are inside baskets.
> B: more than 100 years
> C: yes, but we need to do a simple reading (a summoning of the spirits, BM) to find out whether they are still active.
> B: but how do you find out?
> C: we can
> B: how?
> C: even by looking at the picture, we can connect

Christopher Voncujovi pursued his point by suggesting that the museum should call in an African to feed the spirits. I retorted that, as a secular institution, the museum might not be prepared to do that. For Christopher this is still a necessity, as he was concerned about the spirits being hungry:

> C: No, no, they (the museum people, BM) have to call some African, invite someone to come over there, pray to the spirits and feed them. They can keep them. But just to feed them to be active. Because spirit is spirit, it is not going to die, but it is going to be there.
> B: But I think that in their thinking they don't see them as spirits, they see them as objects. You see? (laughs)
> C: The point is that someone has to let them understand that these things were not just objects for Africans, they were spiritual objects.

So, the answer to the question what the *legbawo* want is: being fed. That the *legbawo* might be hungry was an amazing realization for me. All I had been concerned about in my scholarly imagination were the *category* transitions the

legba figures underwent during their trajectory. In so doing, I did not think about the limits of the object-category as such, other than criticizing their categorization as 'fetish' or 'idol.' Christopher Voncujovi's remark that the spirits that are in and part of the *legba*-figures are hungry and await being fed, opened my mind to the importance of feeding as a central religious practice. Feeding the spirits involves particular forms of food – such as mashed jam mixed with red oil, fowls or goats, and certain forms of alcohol (which Voncojovi did not specify), that would have to be administered in a ritual setting. Looking at the pictures with Voncujovi I started to notice that the figures themselves have absorbed the food that has been put there as part of their regular feeding, and annual sacrifices. In a way, the food offered to a *legba* becomes inextricably connected with it, and this can be seen as indicating how materially spirits are constituted as parts of the world through clay and food.

Scholars have paid much attention to the 'fetish' as a thing-with-a-will – and hence the messing up of the distinction between objects and subjects, dead matter and humans. This deconstruction is of course important, but my encounter with Voncujovi alerted me to the crucial importance of food and feeding as a basic practice through which humans relate to the spirit realm. In retrospect I am surprised that I managed to overlook this obvious point for so long. With hindsight, as the conversations with Voncujovi affirm, traditional priests feed the spirits with specific food stuffs,[97] so as to ensure that they are active and can be summoned to work (such as, heal and protect people, find stolen things, take revenge). With increasing Christianization many traditional shrines have been abandoned, implying that the spirits would not be fed any longer, thus going hungry and getting angry. Voncujovi told us about various cases in which families were struck by mishap, which he attributed to a neglected, starving spirit. Peace could only be regained by offering food. While throughout the twentieth century, in Ghana many indigenous spirits on

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[97]   What exactly is fed to a spirit depends on its preferences, which are known by the priests. As I noticed during my research in Peki (in the period between 1989 and 1991), there are different occasions of feeding the spirits, from the annual jam festival celebrated to honour the spirits, to day-to-day offerings, to special sacrifices (sheep, goat, dog, snake) made for certain ends (such as achieving protection, or appeasing pollution). See Montgomery (Eric J. Montgomery, "They Died in Blood: Morality and Communitas in Ewe Ritual," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 32 (1) (2018): 25–40) for a compelling list of sacrificial offerings for Ewe *vodun* (gods), and Adjei (Sela Kodjo Adjei, "Philosophy of Art in Ewe Vodu Religion," University of Ghana, Dissertation, 2019: 147–148) for the feeding of Ewe gods. The issue of feeding the spirits will be explored in more detail in my future research, taking particular inspiration here from Hüwelmeier's work on feeding the spirits in Vietnam (Hüwelmeier, "Feeding the Spirits"), thereby aiming at sound comparison.

the village and family level were abandoned,[98] the practice of feeding spirits did not cease; it was extended to cars, in analogy to canoes.[99] Offering food is found necessary to make a car or canoe pass safely through all sorts of dangers in Ghana's traffic jungle or at sea.

So, my point here is that while the deconstruction of the figure of the 'fetish' has been crucial for rethinking a presumed dominance of humans over 'mere objects,' it is time to take another step. The 'fetish' forms an entry point into a complex sensational form, in which the relation between humans and spirits, as they are held to dwell in for instance a *legba*-figure, is maintained through an exchange of food. Humans are to feed the spirits, and spirits in turn are to ensure the growth of crops, rain, and good harvests – a cycle. I think that Ewe uses of food point to what Feuerbach, citing Moleschott, described as life being material exchange. In this metabolism religion is a crucial player, organizing this material-spiritual exchange through worship, rituals and performances. Ewe religion, and similar indigenous religious traditions, is grounded in the relationality of and exchange between humans, natural forces and spirits (which, for Christopher Voncujovi *are* energy) that is organized around food.[100] This exchange involves exchange and sharing along vertical and horizontal lines. As Feuerbach remarks, in the Old Testament idols are dismissed as "the manufactured, dead gods" – a view that was certainly repeated in the preaching of the NMG missionaries to the Ewe whose gods and spirits were dismissed as idols, and that is still reiterated up until today by Christian preachers, who also recur to New Testament passages that dismiss the food offerings made to 'idols' (e.g. 1 Corinthians 8: 1–7).[101] But indigenous Ewe certainly knew better

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98   Meyer, *Translating the Devil*.

99   Jojada Verrips, "Ghanaian Canoe Decorations," *Maritime Anthropological Studies* (*MAST*) 1(1) (2002): 49.

100   The term for food in Ewe is *nuḏuḏu* (something to eat). It is employed to refer to food both in a concrete sense and figuratively, as something to be ingested. In this sense eating (*ḏu*) may also refer to being in the world, as in *Me-ḏu agbe kpo*, meaning "I ate life before. (I have once enjoyed life)" (Gladys Sevor, "A Linguistic Analysis of Ewe Metaphorical Expressions," University of Ghana, M. Phil. Thesis, 2015). There is a rich field of food-related terms, such as pot (*ze*) and stomach (*ḏome*), that are employed in proverbs about life and death (also understood as something that is ultimately swallowed; Sevor, "A Linguistic Analysis," 77–78) and employed to express strong sensations and emotions (of which the stomach is the seat; Sevor, "A Linguistic Analysis," 111–112). Food is also key to how witchcraft is held to operate among the Ewe, and more broadly in West- and Central Africa as an aggressive eating of the life energy of the victim in a witchcraft 'in the spiritual' (see also Peter L. Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997)).

101   See Adjei, "Philosophy of Art," 121.

that, as "eating is thus the sign of a true, living god,"[102] the *legbawo* too are *alive*, thereby unhinging the typical missionary binary according to which idols were dead, whereas only the Christian God would be alive.

This relationality established through feeding was challenged by Christian missions in the course of colonization, and traditional exchanges that involved food – feeding the spirits, sacrificial offerings, pouring libation – were banned for Christian converts. The gods were to be starved. While this process is, of course, irreversible, echoes of indigenous Ewe uses of food as prime religious material form to relate to spirits and other humans still can be heard today. A focus on food and the practices around it offers exceptional insights into the operation of indigenous assemblages and their being in the world, and thus also opens up alternative possibilities for imagining religion as a material presence in the world, grounded and enmeshed with life itself. This, in turn, has repercussions for inquiries into colonial collections of figures such as the *legbawo* in the museum and debates about their provenance and future. According to people from their communities of origin such figures may prove resilient to being 'fetishized' (in the sense of being turned into an ethnographic artefact that displays a 'fetish' or power object) and thus have not been transformed into mere museum objects. Bursting out of the secular frame of the museum, they simply are hungry and want to be fed and taken care of.

6   To Conclude: Food for Thought

With this contribution, I sought to *step back* to assess the potential and limitations of the material turn as it has been unfolded so far. Spelling out that the study of religion from a material angle does not involve a mere focus on material culture and does not imply an understanding of materiality as congruous with matter, I advocated a dialectical approach that employs materiality as a concept. Its use is a necessary requirement to transcend a mentalistic approach to religion which is still indebted to idealism. So far, however, research inspired by the material turn (including my own) mainly focused on particular forms of material culture, especially images, objects and buildings.

Looking beyond and ahead, I find that it is time to further unpack materiality so as to spot material forms related to the reproduction of life itself – especially food, flora, fauna, earth, air, light, and water. These require more systematic attention as aspects of material religion in future research. In this chapter I foregrounded food, which I see as a basic, existential material form through

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102   Feuerbach, "The Mystery of Sacrifice," 24.

which humans are enveloped into a grounded, material exchange with the world. Taking Feuerbach's gastro-philosophy as a source of inspiration offers food for thought for including the incorporation of food, and practices of eating, drinking, feeding, fasting, starving, into our understanding of the religion and materiality nexus.

While ultimately it is my aim to fold materiality back into our understanding of religion, for the near future I opt for a further unpacking of materiality into multiple material forms beyond the category of things, that has already received so much attention. Depending on their affordances and authorized religious use, material forms are employed and embodied in the habitus in different ways. Food is not only subject to signification, but also ingested as a substance, and hence fundamental to existence not only in a symbolic but also in an existential sense. A focus on basic matters such as food will further a deeper understanding of the qualities and intensities of the relations between humans and material forms in all sorts of assemblages and sensational forms.

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The Future Is Female? Religion, Bodies, and Digital Discourse

Ruth Tsuria

Abstract

This paper examines how digital religion serves theoretically to examine the connection between the abstract and the material, two concepts that underline the understandings of digital media and religion. By making the abstract materially present, digital religion allows users to deal with the disconnect between the sacred and the profane, by using profane technologies towards sacred goals. This is further examined through the exploration of practices as they relate to gender and religiosity. I suggest that by focusing on practice, or more concretely, discourse of practice, digital religion researchers can contribute to Religious Studies what was difficult to do before: a nonbinary, comprehensive and wholesome look at the flow of religious ideas, practices, rituals, communities, and identities.

Keywords

sacred and profane – materiality – feminism – discourse – digital religion

1 Introduction: Material and Abstract, Religion and Digital Media

In her book *Zeros + ones: digital women + the new technoculture* Sadie Plant suggests that it is not by accident that computer networks, sexual liberation, and feminist thought were becoming commonplace at the same time and place (the 1990s in the West). Advancements in computer networks, her claim goes, were inherently tied to advances in human rights, and specifically, women's rights. According to Plant: "the new machines, media, and means of telecommunication [...] which have emerged within the last two decades have played an enormous and fascinating role in the emergence of this new culture."[1] In

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1   Plant, S. *Zeros and ones: Digital women and the new technoculture*. (London, UK: Doubleday, 1997), 38.

other words, Plant proposed that telecommunication might encourage shifts in culture. I suggest, following Plant and other cyberfeminists, that digital media has the ability to normalize certain ways of being and thinking. But unlike Plant, I question if those ways of thinking are necessarily feminist. In fact, I argue that they are not. That is because digital media, currently, still adheres to a binary way of thinking. And in binaries, there is always the potential for discrimination.

What is the binary that digital media assumes? Aside from binary language itself, digital media prey on the tension, the binary, between the unseen, the untouchable, the Sacred; and the observed, the physical, the mundane.[2] Digital media is both inaccessible, because you cannot hold the internet, and very accessible, as the uses of digital media pervade everyday objects and tasks. This tension between the Sacred and the profane is, according to Durkheim, the tension that defines religion itself.[3] Religion thrives on separating and maintain the tension between holy and mundane.

In other words, religion and digital media share an understudied dissonance: they connect the sky (or the Cloud) with the daily, material reality in which we live in. In religion that manifests in how abstract ideas construct our daily life: How our belief in sin, for example, might prevent us from masturbation. In digital media, this can be thought of as the *Simulacra*[4] – always accessing and understanding our reality only through the *representation* of reality: "Selfie or It didn't happen."

At the heart of this intersection we find digital religion: the 'space' where both digital media and religion's obsession with the abstract cross. In digital religion, the *Simulacra* has to deal with the ultimate unreal: the Sacred itself. But, as I suggest in this article, representations of communication through digital media are not left in the realm of the abstract. In fact, it is through communication, however abstract, that we construct our real world.[5] This becomes very potent in the study of digital religion. While traditional study of religion tended to focus on texts and rituals, more recent scholarship suggests that when studying religion, we should be paying attention to *lived religion* – the ways people actually understand and practice their religion; not just the dogmas and theological texts.[6] Digital media, because it is used by 'everybody'

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2   Tsuria, Ruth. "Digital Media: When God Becomes Everybody – The Blurring of Sacred and Profane." *Religions* 12(2) (2021): 110.

3   Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. (UK: Oxford's World Classics, 2008 [1912]).

4   Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and simulation*. (MI, USA: University of Michigan press, 1994).

5   Kern, Richard. *Language, literacy, and technology*. (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

6   See: McGuire, Meredith. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008); Ammerman, Nancy. "Introduction: Observing Modern

and not only the elite population, provides a unique opportunity to observe the ways in which 'regular' people think and practice religion. That is, digital religion offers us a *representational lived religion*.[7] Through the study of digital religion, we can see how people understand their religion through their communicative actions online.

Furthermore, digital religion also gives scholars a glimpse into how religious norms, rituals, and practices are crafted and negotiated.[8] I call this type of communication "Discourse of Practice" – discourses that frame and make sense of practices.[9] These are discourses that are about practices – i.e., discourses that construct the meaning of a specific practice, such as bathing or eating. This term emerged while I was collecting online materials from Jewish websites on the topic of gender and sexuality. I noted that while some discussions were about concepts (e.g., "what does it mean to be a woman?"), other discussions were about practices – how to do them and what do they mean (e.g., "is it ok to have premarital sex?"). These second type of discourses represent ideas about practices, not the practices themselves. Thus, studying them can only shed light on the abstract beliefs that communities share surrounding what is considered normal behavior, not what the community members actually do, their actual behaviors. But, as suggested above, the abstract and the real are intrinsically connected: how we talk about behaviors reflects and constructs how we understand those behaviors (as good/bad, polite/rude, etc.). Therefore, studying the discourse of practice – what people say about a social behavior – highlights the ideas they have about these practices, the point were the abstract and the real intersect. And digital media gives us a unique access to these discourses because they are archived and accessible: frozen in time and space for us to inspect. Therefore, this article suggests that the future of digital religion scholarship is in examining the tension, the space between the abstract and the real, the ways in which discourses frame practice. I suggest that this tension is especially potent when it come to the regulation of female bodies, as will be shown in this article.

Religious Lives." In *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, ed. N. Ammerman, pp. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3–20.

7   Bellar, Wendi, Campbell, Heidi, Cho, James, Terry, Andrea, Tsuria, Ruth, Yadlin-Segal, Aya, and Ziemer, Jordan. "Reading religion in internet memes." *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, 2(2) (2013): 1–39.

8   Helland, Chris. "Ritual." In *Digital Religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*, ed. H. Campbell, (NY, USA: Routledge, 2012), 25–40.

9   Tsuria, Ruth. "The Discourse of Practice – Online Q&A as normalizing gender and sexual behaviors." *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020): 3595–3613.

In this article I expand and exemplify the argument set forth. First, I explain how digital media and religion maintain both the sacred and the profane by positioning the profane as scared. Then, I highlight how digital religion shapes ideas about practices through what I call 'Discourse of Practice.' Finally, I exemplify how this process occurs on the most holy and profane object – the female body.

2   Digital Media: Real and Unreal, Sacred and Profane

Digital media is the latest iteration in a long history of communication technologies, beginning with, perhaps, language itself.[10] And, like with other technologies, humans are so fascinated by our own tools that we tend to glorify them, making the technology sacred, holy.[11] For example, writing on modern technologies, Jeffery Alexander noted that: "Major inventions like the steam engine, railroad, telegraph and telephone [...] were hailed by elites and masses as vehicles for secular transcendence. Their speed and power, it was widely proclaimed, would undermine the earthly constraints of time, space, and scarcity ... The technicians and engineers who understood this new technology were elevated to the status of worldly priests."[12] According to Alexander, this fascination with seeing modern technology as a tool for transcendence was clear also in regards to the computer. He provides journalistic descriptions of computers in the 1940s and 1960s that refer to them as "all-power," yet mysterious, machines which are kept "unseen from the public."[13] Alexander stresses that the computer is an object that is "sacred and sealed off from the profane world ..."[14]

This type of discourse tends to be similar in regard to digital media. Stahl analyzed 175 articles from *Time Magazine* on digital media and concluded that 36% of them used explicit magical terminology.[15] Other scholars have compared the internet to a godly object because it "emulates a divine trait, being

10   Changizi, Mark. *Harnessed: How language and music mimicked nature and transformed ape to man.* (TX, USA: BenBella Books, 2011).

11   Tsuria, *Digital Media: When God Becomes Everybody*, 5.

12   Alexander, Jeffrey. "The sacred and profane information machine: Discourse about the computer as ideology." *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 69 (1990): 164.

13   Ibid, p. 165.

14   Ibid, p. 166.

15   Stahl, William. *God and the Chip: Religion and the Culture of Technology*. (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1999).

a distributed, decentralized, self-organizing system."[16] As a result, as I have written elsewhere: "Because these machines are seen as both powerful and mysterious, they fit the category of magic. Additionally, if technology is indistinguishable from magic, and magic is synonymous with religion, then technology becomes indistinguishable from religion."[17] Thus, it seems that digital media occupies, at least at the level of discourse, the place of the magical or even, of the Sacred.

However, digital media is clearly not only sacred – it is used for profane activities, such as banking, and in profane spaces, such as, the toilet. As access to the internet grow in the last few decades, so did its mundanity. And this access also highlighted the internet's democratizing abilities, its 'participatory culture.'[18] How could digital media be sacred if it belongs to everyone? How could it be holy if it is used for profanity? The answer, I argue, requires attention to another important assumption in hypermodern societies of the twenty-first century: the assumption that the human, the profane, is the sacred.

Another equally powerful assumption is that the profane, the material, is Sacred because there is nothing else – no divine paradise in the end, only earth. That is, it is not technology that has become sacred, it is *we*, the human, that is sacred. The internet is only sacred because it is used to reflect human experience and consciousness. The internet, if you will, is the Holy Spirit, and humanity is God (and the Son, perhaps?). I've expanded on this: "It is therefore the human – human needs and wants, menial as they might be – that is viewed as sacred in hypermodernity. [...] and what is a better representation of mundane human activities than the internet? While other modern technologies have always been far, kept apart, or in the control of someone else (some higher power like, for example, programmers or TV personalities), the internet feels like it belongs to *everybody*. The internet is especially human (and therefore divine, sacred) because it seems to reflect all human experiences and voices."[19]

I suggest therefore that, for digital media, the tension between the 'unreal' and the 'real' – the sacred/profane, abstract/material – is mitigated by making the real unreal, the material sacred. One way that this is done in the digital age is by emphasizing the role of communication. Hypermodernity is often referred to as an information economy, and that information is accessible through communication technology. That means that areas like data and

16   Chama, Joshua Cooper Ramo. "Finding God on the web." *Time* 149: 52–59, (1996), 54.

17   Tsuria, *Digital Media: When God Becomes Everybody*, 5.

18   Jenkins, Henry. *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: Exploring participatory culture*. (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2006).

19   Tsuria, *Digital Media: When God Becomes Everybody*, 8–9.

advertisements – the gathering and spreading of information – grew dramatically over the last few decades. For example, in the 1980 TV ads spending was around 20 billion US Dollars (globally) while in the 2010s it was closer to 250 billion US Dollars.[20] New professionals dedicated to sorting and researching information have been created: such as big data analysts and social media marketing researchers. These exemplify the importance hypermodern society pays to communication – to what people say, write, post, like, and share online. Thus, the abstractions, the communication of ideas, becomes the main event, and has real meaning and material consequences. And, as I noted above, the communication of ideas online belongs to 'everybody' – it is not only gatekeepers, experts, rabbis, or priests that communicate what is right and wrong, but through forums, comments, and social media, every person is part of this communicative space. This adds another layer of abstraction to the internet because there is no author. The 'truth' is in the hands of 'everybody.' Therefore, as I suggest in the next section, one helpful way to theorize this process is to understand digital communication as a discourse in a Foucauldian way – a site of struggle in which norms are negotiated.

3 Online Shaping of Religious Norms: The Discourse of Practice

One of the common questions in digital media studies is about the 'nature' and/or effects of digital media. Similarly, in Digital Religion studies, scholars have considered how digital media impacts religious traditions, as well as how religion impacts digital media.[21] One way to explain this is theorized as the mediatization of religion. Mediatization theory claims that specifically in hypermodern societies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, media play a role as a social institution.[22] That is, media industries are organizations that inform or establish norms of social behavior. Hjarvard's theory about the Mediatization of Religion, therefore, claims that these media institutions are replacing religious institutions, or that existing religious institutions begin to function using "media logics."[23] According to Hjarvard: "The overall outcome

20 Wood, Therese. Visualizing the evolution of global advertising Spend (1980–2020). *Visual-Capitalist.com*, (November 2020).

21 Campbell, Heidi (Ed.). *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*. (NY, USA: Routledge, 2012).

22 Hjarvard, Stig. *The mediatization of culture and society*. (NY, USA: Routledge, 2013).

23 Hand, Martin, and Sandywell, Barry. "E-topia as Cosmopolis or Citadel: On the Democratizing and De-democratizing Logics of the Internet, or, Toward a Critique of the New Technological Fetishism." *Theory, Culture & Society*, 19(1–2) (2002): 197–225.

of the mediatization of religion is not a new kind of religion as such, but rather a new social condition in which the power to define and practice religion has changed."[24] The way we understand religion, according to Hjarvard, is preconditioned by media logics. Media logics are the scripts and ways of behavior that media creates and promotes (for example, online media logic "invite" interactivity). Mediatization of religion thus shows how through media logics and affordances, religion is being re-defined. While this theory is helpful in some ways, it tends to underscore the importance of existing religious ideologies, behaviors, and norms. But digital media does not operate in a vacuum – we tend to come to the internet with pre-conceived notions about the world.[25] We then use online information and interactions to formulate or negotiate these norms. That is, our interactions with others online help us further make sense of the world. This happened through what I consider a Foucauldian discourse.

According to Foucault, discourses are "ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them."[26] In other words, discourses are the practices through which knowledge is created and maintained. This is a complex process, in which power plays out as well: those with more social capital, for example, tend to hold more knowledge, and as a result, have a stronger claim in deciding what is right or wrong. We call these people 'experts.' However, online, expertise is many times weighed against popularity; or dismissed based on one's echo-chamber. Furthermore, digital media logic is participatory[27] – knowledge is produced by 'everybody.' Through blogging, posting, sharing, and reacting, every internet user partakes in this discourse.

Therefore, participation in online discourses means shaping norms.[28] This is because "discourses are social cognitions, socially specific ways of knowing social practices, they can be, and are, used as resources for representing social practices in text."[29] Online communication enables discourses and empowers different people to participate in these knowledge creation process. For those who were previously barred from participating in these religious discourses – for example, women – this is a power and important change in their religious lives.

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24   Hjarvard, *The mediatization of culture and society*, 10.
25   Campbell, Heidi. *When religion meets new media*. (NY, USA: Routledge, 2010).
26   Weedon, Chris. *Feminist practice and poststructuralist Theory*. (NJ, USA: Blackwell, 1987), 108.
27   Jenkins, *Fans, bloggers, and gamers*, 2006.
28   Stahl, Bernd Carsten. "Whose discourse? A comparison of the Foucauldian and Habermasian concepts of discourse in critical IS research." *AMCIS 2004 Proceedings*, (2004): 538.
29   Van Leeuwen, Theo. *Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6.

In other words, "Online media too can be theorized as a type of discourse, or a tool that enables discourses in various communities." By understanding communication technology as a tool for power and resistance, we can think of the "digital as a 'space' in which people negotiate social practices."[30] It is important to stress that this is a negotiation process. Digital media does not magically empower women or changes religious norms. In fact, it is sometimes used to normalize traditional or even oppressive gender/sexual norms.[31] Therefore, the notion of online media as a Foucauldian discourse is helpful because it allows for the push-and-pull that we find in online discourses about practice.

In sum, I suggest that online religious communication should be studied as a discourse in which religious norms are negotiated. This requires us to pay attention to the religious background, the media logics, and the written (or visual) digital discourse itself. Through online, abstract, communication, offline 'real' practices are constructed, negotiated, and normalized. I suggest we think of these as 'online discourses of practice' – the communicative process in which religious practices are negotiated and understood. This process happens in regard to multiple elements of religious lives: authority, ritual, community, etc. In the rest of this article, I examine how this process happens as it relates to female bodies: in topics like modesty, sexuality, and motherhood.

4   Female Bodies: The Policed Material

Online discourses of practice are especially potent when female bodies are concerned. This is true for all cultural systems, and especially for religious systems, that tend to be very interested in policing female bodies. The female body particularly plays an important role for this research, since it is through the female body – always imagined as an inherently material body – that religious boundaries and norms are dictated. In religious traditions, female bodies are mystified, theologized, berated, controlled, and always seen as the Other: either benevolent or dangerous: a goddess or a witch. As Elizabeth Castelli note, for those hoping to understand religious discourses and practices, gender is both "the interpretation of perceived sexual difference and a primary means for talking about power."[32] In other words, women's bodies tend to serve as the canvas upon which religion is presented. In the streets of Jerusalem,

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30   Tsuria, The Discourse of Practice, 3597.

31   Irshai, Ronit. "Toward a gender critical approach to the philosophy of Jewish law (*Halakhah*)." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 26(2) (2010): 55–77.

32   Castelli, Elizabeth. Women, Gender, Religion: Troubling Categories and transforming Knowledge. In *Women, gender, religion: A reader*, ed. E. Castelli, and R. Rodman, (NY, USA: Springer, 2001), 4.

where I grow up, you could tell a husband's level of religiosity by his wife's level of modesty.

Furthermore, gender seems to be an area that continuously disturbs the tension between the sacred, abstract, and the profane, material. Castelli suggests that "as soon as the divide is analogized to the human realm, gender emerges as a problem of both difference and power. Once that analogy has been mobilized, the two realms seem to oscillate endlessly back and forth, each reflecting and reinscribing the other's claims."[33] In other words, gender/sex problematizes the relationship between abstract and material, because for many years, at least in Western religions, the 'second sex' was consider the more material form of human bodies.[34] According to Lövheim: "gender highlights the complexities of bodies, social relations, cultural conversations, and individual agency in mediations of religion."[35] Indeed, gender plays on the sensitivities of deeply ingrained cultural norms: our sense of belief about who we are, and who the other is. And religion is an importance force in this sense-making process: it informs us about the world and about ourselves. Therefore, the place where religion and gender intersect is a highly volatile topic; one that touches on the core of our understanding of ourselves.

I suggest we think of gender as the habitus, the *implicit*, unconscious framework for understanding our body; and religion is the *explicit*, the conscious framework for understanding our body. Gender works at the level of the abstract but society relies on social systems to implement real practices to maintain 'correct' gendered behaviors. Religion is one of the systems "by which 'women' becomes an ever-more marked and differentiated category."[36] Religious traditions have texts and practices that impose gendered differences, such as head covering (in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), special purity rules (in Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism), etc.

As such, gender is the abstract, the unreal concept that is tied to the material, the real: the body. Religious traditions use the abstract – the idea of gender, or holiness, or other abstractions – to control the material – the body. While religion does this to both male and female bodies, since females were historically, and still are in many ways, in subordinate positions, it is easier – and much more important! – to control their bodies. In order for males to maintain power, they must hold on to that control over the Other's body.

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33   Ibid.

34   See, for example: Boyarin, Daniel. "Paul and the Genealogy of Gender." *Representations*, 41 (1993): 1–33.

35   Lövheim, Mia. *Media, religion and gender: Key issues and new challenges*. (NY, USA: Routledge, 2013), 2–3.

36   Castelli, *Women, Gender, Religion*, 5.

To maintain a religious worldview (the abstract), the real (female bodies) must continue to be controlled. This is done in many ways in different societies, but one way that I explore in this article, is controlling the body through the abstract: policing bodies through online religious discourse. The tensions between abstract and material is thus played out in a complicated dance: using abstract-yet-material tools (digital media) and abstract ideas (religious norms) the material-yet-abstract female body is regulated. This complicated dance is best understood, I suggest, through what I call the discourse of practice.

5 Applying the Discourse of Practice: How the Abstract Polices the Material

So far I have suggested that digital religion has the potential to shape human experience through 'a discourse of practice'. Discourse of practice refers to the ways words construct our worlds. More specifically, in this presentation I examine how online utterances play a special role in shaping religious social norms, practices, and futures. Influenced by Foucault, I understand digital media as a regulatory discourse, in which the negotiation of norms by 'everybody' happens constantly.

This is especially apparent and important for my research focus: the intersection of religion and feminism in online contexts. I argue that digital religion allows for the negotiation, the push-and-pull of religious gender and sexual norms. In these abstract, online discourses, users attempt to both liberate and regulate their bodies. As my prime example I look at Orthodox Jewish online discussions in Q&A, videos, and forums. In this section I provide two short examples for how the discourse of practice plays out.

In order to better understand these examples, some contextual information is important. My research is on Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews websites in English and Hebrew. Unlike some ultra-Orthodox communities that oppose internet use, the communities that I study have embraced the internet early on.[37] For example, the Chabad website was created in 1990s and the Israeli website Kipa.co.il in 2000. These communities tend to use digital media for religious purposes, with a tendency to stay within their 'digital enclaves.'[38] That means that these websites become fertile ground for internal communal discussion and negotiation of norms. In addition, because of digital media

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37   Campbell, *When religion meets new media*.
38   Campbell, Heidi and Golan, Oren. "Creating digital enclaves: Negotiation of the Internet among bounded religious communities." *Media, Culture & Society*, 33(5) (2011): 709–724.

affordances such as anonymity and increased accessibility, topics that were previously taboo – like homosexuality or female masturbation – are openly discussed in these religious spaces.[39] However, as will be shown in the following examples, the discussion of these issues does not mean that the traditional approaches to gender and sexuality are erased. Instead, it is better to conceptualized these discussions not as simply "resisting" or "affirming" but as a more complicated negotiation of norms though the discourse of practice.

5.1   *Example 1: Female Masturbation*

In a popular religious website in Israel, kipa.co.il, users are invited to send questions to Rabbis, in what is known as 'ask-the-rabbi' sections or digital *Responsa*.[40] The questions found in these websites can be roughly divided into three areas of rabbinical expertise: legal, theological, and leadership.[41] As a praxis-based religion, much of what it means to be religiously Jewish is to be *halachically* adherent: to follow a set of religious rules. Not surprisingly, therefore, about 53% of the questions in Tsuria and Campbell's sample were under the category of legal concerns.[42] These included questions about keeping Kosher, actions permitted on Sabbath and Holidays, prayers and ritual related questions, etc. There were also a substantial number of questions related to modesty and sexuality. This is a unique characteristic of online Q&As: in offline and printed texts, such matters are usually left unmentioned.[43] There are two main reasons why these topics are discussed online: anonymity helps with the uncomfortableness of asking about taboo issues; and easy access allows for women's voices to be heard.[44]

While the topic of sexuality is taboo, sexuality itself is in no way forbidden. In fact, having intercourse is very much encouraged in Judaism, but there are multiple rules related to intimacy, which by-and-large limit sexuality to be

39   Pitkowsky, Michael. "'Dear Rabbi, I Am a Woman Who…:' Women asking rabbis questions, from Rabbi Moshe Feinstein to the internet." *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, 21(1) (2011): 134–159.

40   Steinitz, Oren. "Responsa 2.0. Are Q&A websites creating a new type of *Halachic* discourse?" *Modern Judaism*, 31(1) (2011): 85–102.

41   Tsuria, Ruth & Campbell, Heidi. (2021). "'In My Own Opinion': Negotiation of Rabbinical Authority Online in Responsa Within Kipa.co.il." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, Vol. 45 (1) (2021): 65–84.

42   Ibid, p. 74.

43   Theobald, Simon. "'It's a tefillin date:' Alternative narratives of Orthodox Jewish sexuality in the digital age." In *Ashgate research companions: The Ashgate research companion to contemporary religion and sexuality*, ed. S. Hunt and A. Yip, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 289–304.

44   Pitkowsky, *Dear Rabbi, I Am a Woman Who …*

practiced only within a heterosexual marriage and not during the woman's menstruation. Aside from homosexuality, masturbation is a serious sin for males. But for females, since female sexuality was not really recognized by the sages of old, female masturbation is not explicitly outlawed.

It is within this context that we find a question posted to the rabbis by a young woman, who actually asks the rabbi: Is female masturbation allowed?[45] The rabbi's answer, when summarized, is: No. So far in this example, we see how the power of accessibility allows for minority voices, such as this young woman, to be heard. Furthermore, the woman is able to ask about a very real, very practical question and receive a practical, clear, answer. The discourse of practice is thus enacted in so far as it takes abstract ideas (such as sin, body, sexuality) and translates them into a material, factual reality, in which she should not masturbate.

But this discourse of practice has another layer of power and negotiation because it takes place in the digital sphere, in which the media logics dictate that everybody has a part of the discourse. To put simply, it is not only the Rabbi's reaction which provides truth – but also the users' interaction through sharing and commenting on this Q&A. In the comment sections, many of the users *thank* the rabbi for this ruling. Out of the n = 16 comments reacting to this Q&A, n = 12 support the rabbi's ruling either explicitly or implicitly.[46] For example, one user wrote:

> Wow, thank you so much. For a long time, I'm feeling bad about [doing it]. I've experienced this phenomenon and didn't know what was the Torah ruling on it. I didn't dare tell someone or ask since I didn't know there were more like me! Thank you so much!!! You helped me a lot.[47]

Not only is the user thanking the Rabbi, she is also accepting his ruling as the Torah's ruling – a discursive practice that is not usual in traditional Judaism. In traditional Judaism, while Rabbis are the Torah's interpreters, they do not represent the Torah itself, which then allows for multiple and even contradicting interpretations and rulings. It could be said that while rabbinical rulings have always dealt with the material, because it was a closed conversation between elite members, it sometimes had a tendency towards the abstract.[48] However,

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45 Eliyahu, Uziel. (2004, December 16). "*Onanot Nashim – LaBanot Bilvad* [Female masturbation – For girls only]." *Kipa.co.il*, December 2004. http://www.kipa.co.il/ask /show/52832-תונבל-דבל---תישנ-תונגוא (accessed on 7 February 2021).

46 Tsuria, *The Discourse of Practice*, 3607.

47 Eliyahu, *Female masturbation – For girls only*, comment #4.

48 Steinitz, *Responsa 2.0*.

in the online rabbinical interactions – in these online Q&A – the discussion becomes very real very quickly, as it is immediately translated into a ruling, a practice. However, the tradition of Jewish discourse, which is to allow for disagreements, coupled with the participatory logic of digital media, does give voice to a few users who disagree with the rabbi. One user writes that: "I've discovered [how to masturbate] by accident at a young age and for years my conscience was killing me. [...] Today I am married, and I am so not sorry for my experience with this because this is how I've learned what feels good for me and could reach pleasure also with my partner. [...] I'm not saying you must, but if you have this experience, it is for sure not bad."[49]

In these ways, the discourse of practice allows for push-and-pull; for negotiation. Not only does digital media creates a space where such taboo practices are asked about – it also allow for the production of truth, of knowledge, to be altered. The truth is not only in the hands of the rabbi, but also in the experience of this married woman. The logic of digital media, however, dictates that the imagined community (yet another abstraction) – the 'majority' voices – play a significant role in the regulation of practices. Thus, many of the users reject the married woman's assertions, and affirm the rabbi's instead. Practice, than, is shaped in this online discourse through power: be it the traditional authority or the imagined community. As a whole, this case exemplifies how something that is very real, very material: the way we touch and relate to our bodies, becomes altered through this abstract communication.

5.2   *Example 2: Motherhood – The Works*

The second example I provide has to do with the discourse around the material aspects of motherhood. In public lectures, programs, and the general religious-Jewish cultural 'feel,' motherhood is depicted as the goal and the path to Jewish womanhood. This is also true online, where a flora of online material by religious leaders: articles, videos, advice columns, podcasts, and recorded lectures – highlight the importance of parenthood. For example, each of the popular Jewish websites, Chabad, Aish and Kipa, have sections dedicated to parenthood. However, the gap between the promise of motherhood and the reality of motherhood is voiced throughout the online discourse. On social media and in comment sections, users – especially women – push back. They share their struggles with parenting, ask for help, and debate the meaning of their sacrifices. Online, through digital discourses in websites, forums, and social media, women are able to deconstruct the abstract, idealized concept of motherhood and instead express its real, material price.

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49   Eliyahu, *Female masturbation – For girls only*, comment #5.

For example, in the blog IamMother.com, dedicated to Jewish motherhood, one user polled the blog participants to see if they believe that the work of caring for children and the household is spiritual. Answering this poll, 81% of the users agree – they do think it is spiritual.[50] However, reacting to this poll one women comments: "My impression is that most women do not think that diapering, bathing, feeding and shopping for their children are spiritual activities."[51] Similarly, in the comment section of websites like Chabad.org and Aish.com, two mainstream Jewish websites, the idealization of motherhood is negotiated. For example, reacting to an article on the topic of respect which should be given by wives to their husbands, one user resists by making the following argument: "Let me tell you. Men need to respect us women more. We are out working too. Its [sic] not just a man's world. I am a VERY DEDICATED mother to my kids. I drive from sport to sport, watching their games, taking them to their friends [sic] houses, etc. I do it all. I work, too."[52]

Motherhood in this article is mostly presented in an ideal fashion, but the nitty-gritty aspects of it (such as housework, driving kids, etc.) are discussed in the comment section. The material and psychical aspects – the **work** – associated with motherhood are commented on by several women, but with different attitudes. Some, like the user above, see it as a reality and a sign of dedication, but one that deserves more respect and appreciation from men. The want the discourse around the practices related to motherhood to change; to reflect more (abstract) respect to it. These women are not necessarily trying to change the practices (like in the previous example); rather, they are aspiring to change the discourse around these practices.

In a different article which mocks women's "constant complaining" about their rights, the author suggests that if women were obliged to go to the synagogue, they would complain about that too.[53] A discussion then takes place in the comment section about women's commitment to prayer – private or in the synagogue (or in a *minyan*, a prayer-group). One of the users then asks:

> Yes, times have changed since then, but women still do the lion share of household chores and child-rearing. Even if women were allowed to

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50   Iammother. "Taking care of children – a spiritual activity?" *Iammother.com*, n.a. https://www.imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=11211 (accessed March 30, 2021).

51   Ibid.

52   Braverman, Emuna. "What men really want." *Aish.com*, March 2004. http://www.aish.com/f/m/48950326.html (accessed August 5, 2021). Comment #53.

53   Crispe, Sara Esther. "If women were men." *Chabad.org*, n.d. http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/632330/jewish/If-Women-Were-Men.htm (accessed on February 7, 2021).

participate in a *minyan* [prayer-service], how many would actually do so? Most of us struggle to get our kids to school on time, go to work, cook dinner, and do a myriad of other things until bedtime. So where does this really leave women? Still somewhat underappreciated, because it's not about having the time to pray, but about counting as much as a man.[54]

Here too what is highlighted is the wish to change the discourse, as the user expresses it: "to count as much as a man." As you can see in these comments, here women use the liminal space, use anonymity and 'the cover of the internet' to voice their pain, their discrimination. While they focus on the *material* aspects of motherhood: feeding, cleaning, driving, etc. – what they write about is the *abstract* perception of motherhood – one that lacks appreciation. The distinctions of abstract and material, of sacred and profane (is motherhood sacred or profane?), continue to be blurred in this discourse. While these users want to change the discourse related to this practice, they also use the abstract communication technology to resist the abstraction of motherhood as wonderful and sacred, and instead point to the material, the real, their lived religion.

6   Digital Religion: Between Sacred and Profane, Abstract and Real

In these examples we have seen how very real objects interacted with imagined realms: specifically, how the female body invades the abstract realm of communication, of religion, of "the cloud" – the intangible digital media. As state above, the need to control the material, the female body, is an important tenant of religion. In the case of Digital Religion, in the examples above, that control is complicated, because it happens in an abstract 'space' in which ideas, authority, and practices are all negotiated by 'everybody.' As I have written elsewhere "while we use digital media *individually*, we are taking part in a *social* space […] Online, you converse with 'everyone.'"[55] This shift in authority means that our discursive practices are changing online, from discourse that emphasize expertise, to a discourse that emphasize participation.[56] These online discourses – or to be more explicit, the users who participate in

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54   Ibid.

55   Tsuria, Ruth. (September 26th, 2018). "Power Online: the internet as a discourse." *Cyborgoloy*, September 2018. https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2018/09/26/power-online-the-internet-as-a-discourse/ (accessed March 30, 2021).

56   Jenkins, *Fans, bloggers, and gamers*, 2006/.

them – are then active in shaping normative understandings of practices. The abstract (online communication) shapes our material reality (female bodies).

How does that work? It might be helpful to break down this process between abstract and material into six layers:

1. Layer one: Material reality. At this layer we find form and psychical reality. In the case of the example provided for this article, this is the layer of a human body with female reproductive organs.

2. Layer two: Communication. The main access humans have to material reality is through language, which is an abstraction. For example, a pen is only a pen because humans call it a pen – for a dog it would be a chaw toy, not a pen. While the word 'pen' is just a symbol, it does help us relate to a tube with ink in a certain way. But the word itself "pen" is just an abstract idea. The entire science of semiotics is based on the tension between these two first layers.[57]

3. Layer three: in this layer this tension translates into changes in the material because of the abstract. Here, the 'real' transforms *because* of our 'abstract' interactions with it. This layer relates to how abstract ideas shape human relationship to material reality. For example, a territory, a piece of land, becomes a Holy Land because of abstractions. This has 'real' consequences, such as very real wars. Similarly, a female body transforms into a 'woman' – or in the case of the examples in this article, a Jewish woman – which demands certain behaviors, such as dressing modestly and avoiding masturbation.

4 / 5. Layers four and five: Digital media. These first three layers have existed since the invention of language itself.[58] But in the last few decades, they become more complicated because of the new communication technologies. First, we note digital media as a real, material hardware (Layer four). Then, this hardware allows for further abstraction: instant communication between (many) humans across space and time. In that sense, digital media abstract even communication itself – unlike previous media, through digital media you communicate 1) across time, 2) across space, and 3) with 'everybody.' As mentioned in the first sections of this article, this makes communication via digital media 'sacred' because it means that the discourses we engage in online happen beyond context and with everybody within our community. In the case of the examples

57   Eco, Umberto. *A Theory of Semiotics*. (IN, USA: Indiana University Press, 1979).
58   Kern, *Language, literacy, and technology*, 2015.

> here, it means that discussion of the female body happens simul-
> taneously with ancient texts, rabbinical authority, and lay people
> (men and women). These different powers than are combined in
> the discursive negotiation of practice.
>
> 6. Layer six: This layer reflects the third layer, as it deals with the way
>   abstract communication influences real practices. However, here
>   we pay attention to the discourse of practice in its online format:
>   the power of participatory affordances, together with pre-existing
>   notions, to shape our understanding of material reality. For exam-
>   ple, through the online discourse of practice, female masturbation
>   is negotiated in Orthodox Jewish context: presented as something
>   that is prohibited by the rabbinical authority as well as lay people;
>   but also as something that can be "for sure not bad."[59]

This attempt to 'map' the layers throughout which digital religion operates is difficult because the distinctions between real and abstract, between material and transcendental, are more complicated. The unreal, the virtual, surrounds, informs and dictates our real experiences. We live in a virtual reality. And I suggest that future study of digital religion must pay attention to this complexity because the material and the abstract will continue to become intertwined in more complex ways as we raise a generation of people who know their world mostly through pixels.

By understanding the ways in which digital media is both material and abstract, an object (the phone) and a nonconcrete happening (the chat), and how this abstraction influences the way people understand their real and imagined world, we can better understand the future of digital religion. I suggest that by focusing on the material, on the real: on practice, on lived religion – we become informed about what digital religion really is: the online space in which the abstract of religion becomes real: real debates, real communities, real rituals, and real people. While digital media might have abstract elements in it, it also has an extremely unique quality, of making the abstract tangible. It freezes and archives conversations; and it allows us to feel a real connection to people who are "actually" just pixels (as in, when we talk to our family on Skype, for example). By making the abstract real, digital media allows researchers of human behavior to 'see' humans as we never saw them before: in all of their mundane glory. And for researchers of religion, it allows us access to see the process of religious conceptions and negotiations. We can follow

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59   Eliyahu, *Female Masturbation*.

the development and debates over concepts and practices, as in the examples I supplied above. Therefore, I suggest that by focusing on practice, or more concretely, *discourse of practice*, digital religion researchers can contribute to Religious Studies what was difficult to do before: a non-binary, comprehensive and wholesome look at the flow of religious ideas, practices, rituals, communities, and identities. Not only analyzing the Sacred Texts, the observed behaviors, or the religious artifacts: in digital religion, we can get a glimpse into how religious participants feel and believe. How they communicate their own practices and beliefs: how they make the abstract, real.

Additionally, digital religion scholars can also theorize about how the use of this abstract and yet real technology might be shifting human relationship with the physical and metaphysical world. We could think of Mircea Eliade's theory of the *axis mundi*:[60] The basic feature of many religious traditions that there is some kind of physical, man-made edifice that connects the spiritual world and the human world (e.g. a temple). Can we consider digital media our current *axis mundi*?

In sum, I suggest that the relationship between the abstract and the material is an important and useful exercise when considering the future of digital religion. When the Internet was born, it was imagined by scholars as 'the cyberspace' – the unreal place beyond place. To scholars of digital religion back then, we asked questions like "is online religion real religion?" Today, we know the internet is real – we carry it with us all day. It is not some far away land: it holds our emails and our connection to family and friends, our shopping lists, and our bank account. Similarly, for religion participants it offers real 'reality': a tool for ritual, for prayer, for community, for questions, and for details on practices. Online communication dictates to many what are the ways in which they should live their lives. We learn online how to fix a leak, how to write a paper, and how to relate to our bodies. The internet is real. And it is full of discourses – abstractions – that inform religious users how to connect the Sacred to their Mundane life. Studying these discourses of practice helps researchers understand contemporary practices and note future trends in religion. Therefore, it is understanding this complex marriage – the union of material and abstract – that should be the base upon which we structure our study of digital religion.

60   Eliade, Mircea. *A History of Religious Ideas: From the Stone age to the Eleusinian mysteries.* (IL, USA: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

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SECTION 5

Methodological Outlook

∴

A Computational Future? Distant Reading in the Historical Study of Religion

Katrine Frøkjær Baunvig

Abstract

Within the last two decades we have witnessed an explosive growth in born digital data as well as analogue material transformed into digital formats. This development calls for a computational reorientation within the Humanities in general and within the Studies of Religion specifically. In this paper I will offer a sketch of trends in the Digital Humanities, zooming in on the ones most likely to find their way into the research of mainstream scholars of religion primarily dealing with literary, textual objects: Distant reading strategies falling under the category of *text mining*.

Keywords

1 Introduction

Every academic field of inquiry is defined by the character and format of its data. As data-types and formats change, new methodologies become relevant. Within the last two decades we have witnessed an explosive growth in born digital data as well as analogue material transformed into digital formats. This development calls for a computational reorientation within the Humanities in general and within the Studies of Religion specifically. In this chapter, I will offer a sketch of trends in the Digital or (as I prefer) the Computational Humanities, zooming in on those most likely to find their way into the research of mainstream scholars of religion dealing primarily with literary, textual objects: Distant reading strategies such as *text mining*. This contribution, however, holds no detailed presentations of individual methods and methodologies. Instead, my ambition is to offer a guide to what lies beyond the digital horizon. That is: I wish to offer a compass for colleagues who are unacquainted

with the field so as to make easier the first steps in navigating the new methods and new types of material in research question-calibrated ways. In order to do so, I follow the show-it-don't-tell-it principle and point to some of my own work as illustrations. Because my work deals with nineteenth-century Danish religiosity, mainly through explorations of the digitized writings of 'cultural saint', founding father of Danish democracy and modern church father of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), I find it constructive to give a brief introduction to Grundtvig's time, life and work, as well as to the (ascribed) cultural imprints hereof. In addition, I find it instructive to outline the political and scholarly aspects of the process of digitizing Grundtvig's works. The logic behind delving into this case is that a programmatic contribution dealing with the rise of computational studies of religion must rely on what is tangible and discernable in order to be persuasive – at least more so than would be the case for programmatic papers on procedures already well-known and integrated in this field.

Finally, I will (briefly) venture two prognoses as to which subdisciplines and subfields will be the first to systematically add computational methodologies to the know-how portfolio of the Study of Religion. My predictions are perhaps surprisingly concrete and delineated: 1) Text mining will invite a growth in the study of nineteenth-century religiosity. This prediction does not (only) spring from the fact that this happens to be my own research field; it builds on hard fact – on accessibility and quality evaluations of the available material. 2) Text mining will bring about the return of the philologist – an academic profile essential to the emergence of the historical Study of Religion as a modern discipline in the nineteenth century but also one that, with regional differences, nevertheless has been waning for decades. However, soon Vedic, Avestan, Sanskrit, Sumerian, Hittite, Arabic, Greek, Latin, Norse and other scholars will be in high demand; the growing landscape of digitized corpora will call for exploration rooted in solid linguistic skills.

Thus, this chapter differs from others I have ever written in containing scholarly prognoses as well as pieces of academic advice. I have even included my personal programmatic conceptualizations of the emergent field of Computational Humanities. These conceptualizations constitute my point of departure.

2   Computational Humanities

Let me be clear from the outset. In this chapter, my interest lies with the mainstream (text-based, historical) Study of Religion and the consequences for these that arise from the developments in the growth of computational

methods and in the expanding quantity of digital text material. It does *not* lie with measuring sedimentations in the religious landscapes of what may be regarded as a 'Digital Age'. Thus, I will not focus on digitization as a cultural process – nor for that matter on related labels that try to capture aspects of the postmodern condition: 'mediatization', 'acceleration culture', 'epidemics of loneliness' or 'Gegenwartsschrumfung'. Within recent years Quran, Bibles, hymnals etc. have acquired digital alternatives (mainly software applications) to their traditional book-based versions and this could be said to be changing devotional-ritual practices for certain religious groups.[1] Similarly, within the last couple of decades, social media have gathered ever-growing virtual communities around fiction-based religions.[2] These are just a couple of interesting religious phenomena connected to digitization as a cultural trajectory. These are indeed valid research subjects; but they are not the interest of this contribution. In order to signal a focus on methods and on 'data quality' – above subject matter – I therefor prefer the somewhat delimited 'Computational Humanities' (CH) over the more common but also more diffuse and open-ended 'Digital Humanities' (DH).[3] By CH I mean research on human culture and society – that is: subjects deemed relevant for scholars of Humanities – that in a significant way relies on digital data *and* on computational power in the analysis hereof. In other words, I mean to refer to explorations into 'the human condition' (in the broadest possible sense) that import insights and routines from fields such as Computer Science and Statistics.[4]

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1 Cf. e.g. Johanne Louise Christiansen and Katrine Boserup Jensen, "Da Koranen blev en app … En genforhandling af Koranens status som helligt objekt." *Religionsvidenskabeligt Tidsskrift*, nr. 70 (2020): 112–129.

2 Cf. e.g. Markus Davidsen, *The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu: A Study of Fiction-based Religion*, PhD thesis (University of Leiden, 2014).

3 Digital Humanities came into general usage in the first decade of the 2000s. Terminologically it surpassed 'Humanities Computing'. In introductions to and readers on Digital Humanities, such as for instance *A New Companion to Digital Humanities* edited by Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens and John Unsworth (London: Blackwell, 2016), this change is deemed necessary in order to "shift the emphasis from 'computing' to 'humanities'." This is necessary particularly if one wishes to include into the field studies "of digital technologies, their creative possibilities, and their social impact" (Schreibman et al., *A New Companion*, xvii). I do not, however, find this broadening of the field helpful at a practical-didactic level.

4 The human condition' is not an unchallenged scope. In fact, the anthropocentrism of the *Human*ities seems to be under growing pressure. Philosophers are leading the way in the post- and transhumanistic field and anthropologists foresee an 'ontological turn' (cf. Martin Holbraad and Morten A. Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)) and engage themselves in 'non-human' and 'rewilding' perspectives (cf. Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. English translation of *Par-delà nature et culture* in 2005)). Outside

Moreover, I see neither DH nor CH as disciplines in their own right. They are better construed as hyper-disciplinary attitudes, trends, experience, and interest aggregations etc. Accordingly, I do not foresee DH or CH coming to life as bachelor or master programs at universities around the world; at least I do not see them attaining any longevity in such formats. Often the best CH results come from the iterative workflow of a close-knit, cooperative unit consisting of, on the one hand, scholars versed in relevant computer science theories and procedures and, on the other, scholars trained in the subject domain in question. Most likely this is the reason that the tendency these years in terms of infrastructure seems to be to establish hub- or center-like constructions based on a group of technically skilled scholars supporting and collaborating with scholars from a variety of humanities disciplines. Obviously, this situation might change. When the bulk of cultural material is born digital, when the bodies of analogue cultural heritage material have all been digitized, and when digitally native generations enroll at university, then CH will most likely become seamlessly integrated into the Humanities. The need for the 'computational' prefix will then dissolve. But for the time being and for the immediate future, we have to accept the need for 'leaps' of interdisciplinary-collaborative trust, for inspiration from first-movers, and for concrete bridging in co-authored publications, if we as traditional scholars of religion want to join the team of early computational adaptors. At least, the acceptance hereof has been a vital step for me – one that has allowed me to solidify, broaden and deepen my studies of the religious landscape of nineteenth-century Denmark in ways I could never have imagined. I will return to this work. Not as a chance for me to showcase it, but springing from the wish to demonstrate the potential of CH methods – and what better way to do this than by presenting what I have done myself?

Since most of these studies gravitate towards the digitized writings of N.F.S. Grundtvig, a brief sketch of this central figure in Danish national and religious history and of the ongoing process of digitizing his published writings is required. This sketch also tells the tale of an emergent digital cultural heritage infrastructure.

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academia one finds popular versions of the latter trend. Veterinarian and natural historian Charles A. Foster who has conducted 'fieldwork' as a badger, an otter, a fox, a deer etc., described in his monography *Being a Beast* (2016), is a bestselling example.

3   The Spotless Saints and the Dirty Masses

In Danish public discourse poet, pastor, politician, and romanticist N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872) is regarded as one of the most (if not *the*) central figure in the nineteenth-century Danish nation building process, as well as in the construction of a modern Danish Christianity: In short, he is regarded as a cultural saint.[5] In scholarly literature it is widely acknowledged that Grundtvig sought to stimulate the process of assembling a collective Danish emotional consciousness based on 1) a horizontal-contemporary axis incorporating the different strata within the socially heterogeneous "Folk" and on 2) a vertical-historical axis connecting present-day Danes with forefathers and legendary characters. In social historian Benedict Anderson's words, the emotional fabric intended by this attempted interlacing was an 'imagined community'.[6] Nowadays, Grundtvig's cultural imprints are acknowledged by most Danes: "N.F.S. Grundtvig founded Danish democracy"; "N.F.S. Grundtvig established the Church of Denmark (*folkekirken*)"; "N.F.S. Grundtvig is the founder of the Danish school system"; "N.F.S. Grundtvig revived the pre-Christian Nordic tradition"; "N.F.S. Grundtvig is the most important writer of Christian hymns in Denmark." These are surprisingly recurrent statements in Danish public media, deeming his intellectual activity more culturally important than the work of his world-famous contemporaries Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875).

Considering Grundtvig's cultural status, it is perhaps no surprise that a consortium including members of the Danish parliament in the late 2000s decided to pave the way for the creation of a scholarly edited, digital version of Grundtvig's 1073 published writings, making them available to Danish citizens free of charge.[7] The writings, published within a period of 68 years

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5   This 'sainthood' is not a banal, cosmetic analogy. Reverence and quasi-ritual structures have been built around Grundtvig as a Great Dead (cf. Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013)). Grundtvig has a cathedral named after him: the Copenhagen Grundtvigs Kirke; every year his birthday (almost coinciding with the day of his death) is celebrated in Grundtvig-relevant institutions; one such celebration entails the opening of his crypt at the small cemetery Clara's Kirkegård on the outskirts of the Sealandic town of Køge. Moreover, *Grundtvig's Death* (Grundtvigs død) is a commodity – at least it is a recent title in a popular book series by Aarhus University Press written by Grundtvig scholar Jes Fabricius Møller (2019).

6   Cf. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

7   As such this is a typical so-called first-generation Digital Humanities project, digitally preserving a canonic element of a given cultural heritage. For an introduction to the theme of

(1804–1872), amount to approximately 37 000 standard pages of 2400 units per page. The data set has a median document size of four pages and contains 3 968 841 word tokens distributed over 115 240 word-types.[8] This is not an impossible amount of words to read one's way through; it is, nevertheless, an overwhelmingly time-consuming job, especially if one sets out to tweak out semantic and sub-semantic structures, as I have done. For such purposes a digitized version of the corpus is a prerequisite.[9]

By way of OCR (Optical Character Recognition) technology, first editions of each text have been 'translated' from a TIF-format (Tagged Image File Format) into an XML (Extensible Markup Language) document, manually annotated and following TEI (Text Encoding Initiative) standards.[10] A crucial step in producing an accurate digital corpus is thus the labor-intensive cleansing and annotation of the raw and oftentimes somewhat dirty OCR results. This work is undertaken by a group of ten Grundtvig-specialized scholarly editors – philologists trained in fields relevant for the domestication of Grundtvig's prose, such as (obviously) nineteenth-century Danish but also Old Norse, Greek, Bible Studies, hymnology, romantic philosophy, eighteenth century historiography etc. Furthermore, this *équipe* furnishes the individual texts with contextualizing introductions and glossaries. Their work, piling up on www.grundtvigsvaerker.dk, was initially estimated to consume 200 man-years. This prognosis seems to hold: 10 years and 70 million DKR (app. 10 million Euro) later, the ten scholarly editors are half way through the project.

Such details are highly relevant when drawing up the contours of the computational future of the Study of Religion, because poor OCR quality is what is keeping the major digital archive projects from significantly changing the game of traditional humanities. In other words: the well-known Google Books, the HathiTrust Digital Library, the Project Gutenberg and the ever-increasing amount of national digital archives based primarily on ORC technology will

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digital preservation, see William Kilbride "Saving the Bits: Digital Humanities Forever?" In *A New Companion to Digital Humanities*, edited by Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens and John Unsworth (London: Blackwell, 2016), 408–419.

8   In comparison, Grundtvig beats Charles Dickens. A small win, but a win: 3 859 231 is the total amount of word tokens in Dickens' writings. A level significantly above other canonic writers, 835 997 is the total amount in William Shakespeare's plays; Jane Austen's novels contain 744 318 word tokens.

9   The data are available at: https://github.com/centre-for-humanities-computing/grundt vig-data. Furthermore, a custom XML parser to facilitate third-party data exploration is available at: https://github.com/centre-for-humanities-computing/GrundtvigParser.

10   Cf. Elena Pierazzo, *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, Volume 31, Issue 3, September (2016): 513–516.

not be the ones to push the CH into the center of humanistic scholarship.[11] They do and will continue to pave the way for easy-access to historical documents. For this they must be applauded and appreciated. But the most likely scenario is that small, curated digital editions, strenuously enriched by philologists, will be the key player in the process of integrating CH into traditional scholarship; first and foremost because this material is clean, reliable, and flexible: Thorough markup leaves it open to comprehensive, fine-grained, hermeneutically complex explorations.

Clean, reliable, and flexible but also exclusive. High quality data is, as I have indicated, burdensome to create in terms of time and funding. Not every type of material will move politicians and research foundations to cover the expenses.[12] So, in order to bypass the inherent centripetal force of canonical corpora,[13] computationally ambitious scholars of religion who are more interested in marginal phenomena than in 'doxa' will most likely have to be creative and to compensate for the dirt in the big data corpora. (At least for now. Who knows what the algorithmic future of rampant machine learning will bring?) I will return to the subject of hacking the cultural canon below. But first a note on scope.

4   Nothing New under the Sun

The tension between the available and the wished-for empirical material is as old as the academic vocation itself. Furthermore, a wide range of concerns within text-based CH seems to be echoing considerations ingrained in historical disciplines, such the historical study of religions. In fact, a long line of CH studies are perhaps best construed as traditional manual strategies in a new computational key. Four such strategies are worth emphasizing. Firstly,

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11   A main problem for historical texts predating the late nineteenth century is that of typography. For European material 'Fraktur' and other types of 'gothic' typesetting pose significant challenges to the OCR 'translations'. For non-European languages and for non-Latin alphabets the situation is even more unsettled and the material reliant on human curation.

12   The Great Unread vs. The Canon has long been a topic in Literary History (Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), Franco Moretti, "The Slaughterhouse of Literature." *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013)).

13   Cf. Péter Hadju, "Digital editions of canonic texts: do such projects affect the canon?" *Texto Digital 6* (2010): 85–95.

scholars accustomed to traditional text survey tools such as concordances[14] –
e.g. classic, philologically based scholars of religion – are obvious forerunners
of the emergent CH distant readers. Secondly, the question of stylometric pro-
filing and authorship attribution, for so long recurrent in a variety of historical
fields such as Bible studies, are now converted into ponderings over statistic
similarities between documents or pools of documents. Thirdly, the focus
maintained by Annales School, the structuralists, and the post-structuralists
on collective mentalities, on the stability of *la longue durée*, on the synchronic,
on discourse, on nodal points etc. seems relatively easily translated into the
research designs of CH based studies.[15] Fourthly, the diachronic ambition of
conceptual and emotional history is a suitable theoretical underpinning of the
ever-increasing volume of studies tracing the rise, fall, or dispersion of given
concepts and clusters of concepts in a multitude of digital corpora.

In addition: Awareness of how the scope of a given study is situated on
the synchronic-diachronic axis is always relevant; within CH it is, however,
an acutely important step that secures the basis for choosing the appropri-
ate frames, tools, and strategies. If one combines the aforementioned question
of archive quality and size (as noted: perspectives that seem to be inversely
proportionate) – that is: If one combines the question of homogenous vs. het-
erogenous digital material with the logically opposite research scopes, the syn-
chronic and the diachronic, one ends up with the following matrix:

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14   A concordance is a cross-indexing 'tool' – that is: an alphabetical list of the keywords of a
      given book or a body of works, listing every occurrence of each keyword in its immediate
      semantic context.

15   A dedication to semiotic patterns, in fact, made cultural anthropologist and father of
      structuralism Claude Lévi-Strauss long for a computational-like machinery to aid him
      in his categorizations of Native American myths. In his mind's eye he saw a machine:
      "Consisting of a series of two-metre-long, and one-and-a-half-metre-high upright boards,
      on which cards containing mythic elements could be 'pigeon holed and moved at will'. As
      the analysis moved into three dimensions, the cards would need to be perforated and fed
      through IMB equipment. The whole operation would require a substantial atelier, along
      with a team of dedicated technicians working to divine 'the generic law of the myth'"
      (Patrick Wilcken, *Claude Levi-Strauss: The Father of Modern Anthropology* (London, 2010),
      265). Now, such a machine sits on my desk.
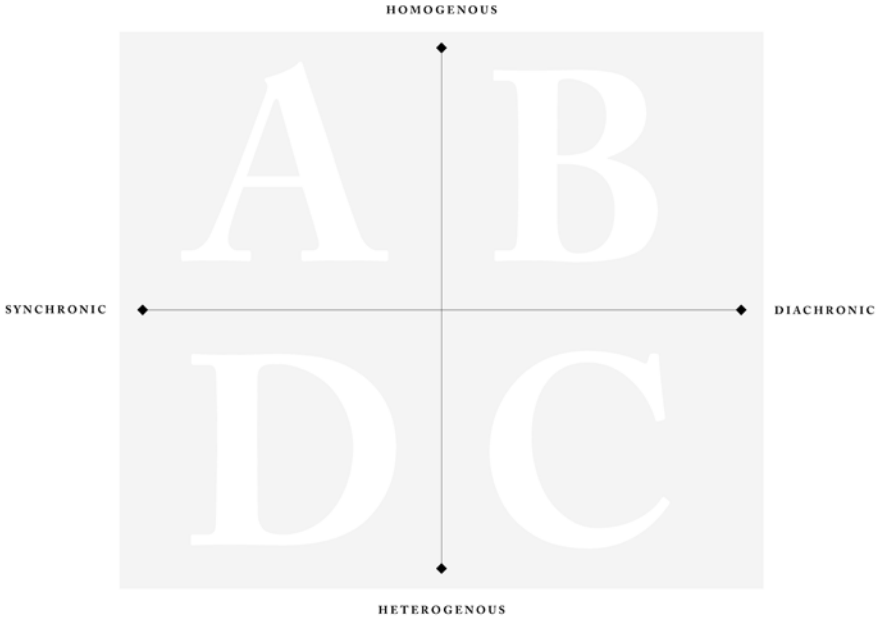
FIGURE 11.1 Methodological matrix
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In all its simplicity, this matrix may be helpful for scholars of religion who embark on computational endeavors for the first time. It may tease out reflections on material accessibility, the condition of a given archive, the scope of the underlying research questions – all necessary reflections when seeking to align subject matter, empirical material, and methodology into a robust research design. At least it has done so for me. In the following, by way of brief examples drawn from my own work with numeric representations of large corpora of texts, I will illustrate the four systematically different 'ideal types' of approaches suggested by the matrix – bearing in mind that reality is always messy and that actual studies will always engage differently with these ideals.

4.1 *Spiritual and Earthly Structures in Grundtvig's Writings* [A1]

In the first series of studies I would like to present, a group of colleagues and I have sought to draw the contours of Grundtvig's world-view, as well as to map focal points in his conceptual landscape. In one of these, I have used the text mining strategy of Word2Vec to plot the semantic embedding of the central terms *Aand* (Spirit) and *aandelig* (spiritual) within the Grundtvig corpus. Based on the computer linguistic paradigm NLP (Natural Language Processing), the Word2Vec-procedure, in a manner of speaking, 'trains' an

algorithm that allows you to plot associative structures within a given body of texts.[16] In this particular case, lists of the 20 words most common in structure to *Aand* and *aandelig* allowed me to demonstrate that, to Grundtvig, "the

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16   The procedure is based on so-called 'unsupervised machine learning'. As indicated by the
      name, Word2Vec-analyses map the multidimensional vector-space by which a given term
      is nested within a given corpus; this space is annotated as a cosine similarity (cf. Kishore
      Ayyadevara, *Pro Machine Learning Algorithms: A Hands-On Approach to Implementing
      Algorithms in Python and R* (Apress, 2018), 167–178).

'Spirit' can be described by two kinds of metaphors; on the one hand it is a solid container, on the other hand it is a fierce and dynamic force."[17] Introducing a diachronic sensitivity within the synchronic mainframe, a division of the main corpus into seven sub-corpora divided by publication decade showed that this fundamental metaphorical split is a constant in Grundtvig's writings. These insights affirm, pin-point and systematize hunches in the existing Grundtvig research literature.

In another of these studies expanding the relatively simple Word2Vec embedding procedures, a colleague and I trained an algorithm – or a so-called 'neural network' – that enabled us to plot the density between three crucial semantic centers of gravitation within Grundtvig's writings: *Jorden* ((the) Earth), *Himmel* (Heaven), and *Helvede* (Hell). Simply put, this procedure allows for the combination of several word embeddings. In this particular case – and to some surprise in terms of the strength of the findings – it teased out Grundtvig's fundamentally orientalist world-view: The dense center of his semantic universe is *Sol/Soel* (Sun), *skinner* (shines/shining), *stiger* (rises/rising): The radiant, rising sun.

In these two studies, the main focus is on synchronic relations – semantic structures within the Grundtvig corpus as such. I will now turn to studies calling for a slightly more diachronic approach and for the subtraction of two different types of sub-corpora from the full Grundtvig corpus.

4.2 *Emotional Imprints in Grundtvig's Writings* [A2]

Less is more. That was the lesson I drew from the next of my illustrations: A distant reading of letter-s p a c i n g s and exclamation marks in the Grundtvig data. Letter-spacings, also known as 'trackings', was a common tool of emphasis in nineteenth-century Fraktur typesetting used in the vast majority of the 1073 publications by Grundtvig. But where mainstream usage would confine letter-spacings to introductions of names and titles, Grundtvig's usage was idiosyncratically expansive. Also, his usage of exclamation marks was unusually extensive. Seeking to target what we deemed two traits of a general romanticist stylistic trend introducing oral features into printed matter and saturating typography with emotion, a group of colleagues and I sketched the (synchronic) semantic context of the spacings and the exclamation marks. In

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17   Katrine F. Baunvig, "Fictional Realities of Modernity: The Fantastic Life of the Demi-Goddess Dana in the Emerging Nation State of Denmark." In *Mythology and Nation Building in the Nineteenth Century: N.F.S. Grundtvig and His European Contemporaries*, edited by Lone Kølle Martinsen, Sophie Bønding, and Pierre-Briece Stahl (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2021), 97–134.

order to eradicate possible 'distortion' from editors and printers we also made a (diachronic) outline of the temporal distribution plotting of spacings and exclamation marks in Grundtvig's six main publishing houses. We found no signs of distortion. Instead, what we found in both studies was two concurrent, robust semantic clusters confirming the mainstream Grundtvig reception: Grundtvig soaked Christian terms and Danish-Nordic-national terms in emotion. At least he was considerably more prone to making use of spacings and exclamations when writing on these issues.

Simple fetch elements by tag operation, made possible by the high-quality markup of the Grundtvig files, helped us extract a letter-spacing sub-corpus;[18] simple parser features allowed us to split the corpus into sentences and thus to extract sentences that ended in exclamation marks to establish a sub-corpus on which we did a so-called topic modelling procedure that helped us to determine the semantic content of the sub-corpus.[19]

Relatively simple procedures, but by no means trivial findings. This twofold distant reading rooted a duality dominant in the mainstream Grundtvig reception in Grundtvig's own writings. A highly interesting finding, which makes it possible to suggest a limit to the implications of the notion, held by current Grundtvig scholars such as J.F. Møller, that legacy and reception have distorted the core-content of Grundtvig's work. At least, this is not evident from our explorations at scale. In fact, they indicate quite the contrary: that Grundtvig's emotional imprints, his signals of core-content, are very much consistent with the 'Grundtvig myth' and with public reception.

The relationship between the myth and the man, reception and writings, I have further explored in a study even more diachronically sensitive – that is: sensitive to developments within Grundtvig's writings.

4.3   *Sub-Semantic Validation of a Grundtvig Fault-line* [B]

As a consequence of Grundtvig's status as a cultural saint, a large proportion of Grundtvig research has been preoccupied with biographical issues. Sometimes to the point of hagiography. A recurrent theme is that of dating one or several significant reorientations in his religious mindset – moments of repentance, existential crisis and dogmatic re-calibration: 1810, 1824–1826, 1832, 1838. Time and again, dates and noteworthy events have been put forth. In a 'neo-biographical' study my colleague and I scrutinized the sub-semantic tectonics

18   Katrine F. Baunvig, Oliver Jarvis, and Kristoffer L. Nielbo, "Emotional Imprints: Letter-Spacings in N.F.S. Grundtvig's Writings." *Digital Humanities in the Nordic Countries Proceeding* (2020): 192–202.

19   Katrine F. Baunvig, Oliver Jarvis, and Kristoffer L. Nielbo, "Emotional Imprints: Exclamation Marks in N.F.S. Grundtvig's Writings." *Digital Humanities in the Nordic Countries Post Proceeding* (2021): 156–169.
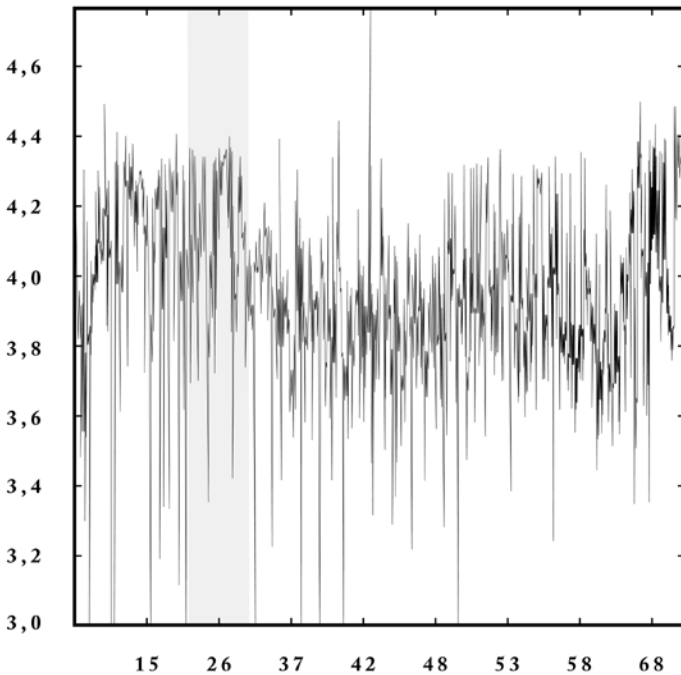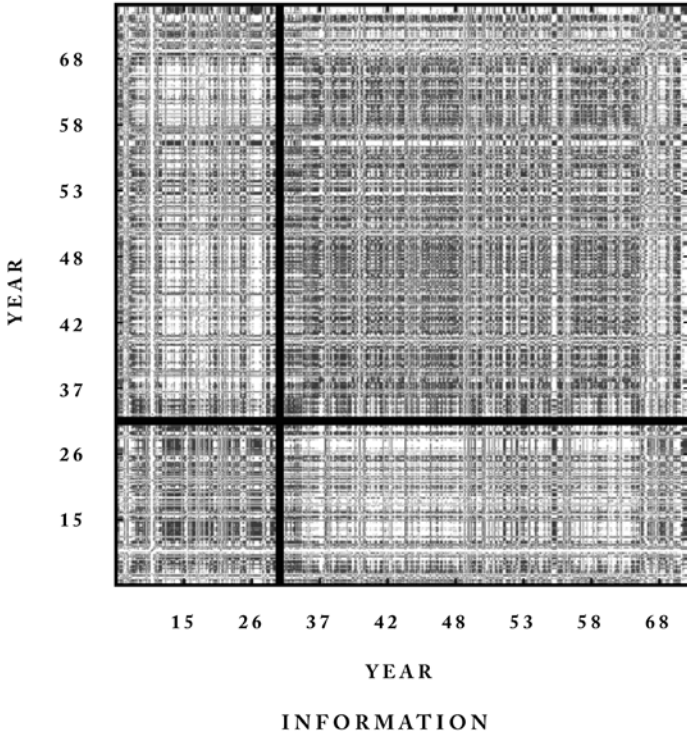
INFORMATION

FIGURES 11.3 A–B
Level of information
and auto-recurrence
plot in N.F.S.
Grundtvig's
published writings
© FRØKJÆR
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of Grundtvig's writings, searching for faultline(s).[20] Using American mathematician Claude Shannon's (1916–2001) relatively simple information theoretical metric, the so-called 'Shannon entropy' (H)[21] (in our case as a measure for 'informational recurrence'), we sought to measure the uncertainty or 'predictability' of a given Grundtvig-piece. Confirming to consensus in the computational linguistic field, which holds that H is a valid measure for lexical diversity or 'richness',[22] we tested whether significant shifts in the informational density of Grundtvig's texts could be used as an indication of a possible *Kehre*. Adding to our entropic map we introduced the chaos theoretical feature of a so-called 'recurrence plot' (in this case an 'auto recurrence plot') in order to identify the possible faultlines in Grundtvig's oeuvre.

What we found might be seen as the contours of Grundtvig's consolidation as a writer: A) Early writings are markedly more unpredictable than later writings and B) in terms of lexical richness Grundtvig underwent a volatile and unstable period from 1824 and onwards, with a climax in 1832.

This development makes it relevant to regard especially 1832 as a faultline. If this finding has not definitively settled a long line of biographical considerations, it has at least qualified them significantly.

Turning from a single oeuvre to cultural mentality – from the relatively homogenous Grundtvig material to a vaster and more diverse corpus of nineteenth-century Danish newspapers – the next illustration poses ideas on how to circumvent the centripetal forces of cultural heritage management.

4.4   *The Rise of the Demi-Goddess 'Dana' in Danish Nineteenth-Century Newspapers* [C1]

In a study of the rise of an allegorical-poetic personification of Denmark – the demi-goddess Dana – in Danish newspapers 1800–1870, I accepted OCR dirt and, with considerable help from my astute student assistant Stine Kylsø Pedersen, compensated with hours of manual cleaning, annotation and coding.[23] This study was based on data made available through the Danish Royal Library's digital archive *Mediestream*.[24] The Danish Royal Library

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20   Katrine F. Baunvig and Kristoffer L. Nielbo, "Kan man validere et selvopgør?" In *Textkritik som analysmetod*, edited by Paula Henrikson, Mats Malm, and Petra Söderlund (Stockholm: Svenske Vitterhetssamfund, 2017): 45–67.

21   C.E. Shannon, "A mathematical theory of communication." *The Bell System Technical Journal 27* (1948): 379–423, 623–656.

22   Philippe Thoiron, "Diversity Index and Entropy as Measures of Lexical Richness." *Computers and the Humanities 20:3* (1986): 197–202, Yang Zhang, "Entropic Evolution of Lexical Richness of Homogeneous Texts over Time: A Dynamic Complexity Perspective." *Journal of Language Modelling 3:2* (2015): 569–599.

23   Baunvig, "Fictional Realities of Modernity" (2021).

24   http://www2.statsbiblioteket.dk/mediestream/avis [accessed 29 January 2021].

have scanned 35 464 209 Danish newspaper and periodical pages published between 1666 and 2013; by way of OCR software this material is made searchable in an interface allowing for date delineations. This enabled a straightforward list-generation conveying the total number of occurrences of 'Dana' in Danish newspapers within the period from 1 January 1800 through to 31 December 1869. A distant reading of the distribution showed a significant and steady increase in occurrences of the name up until the 1850s and a boom in the 1860s:
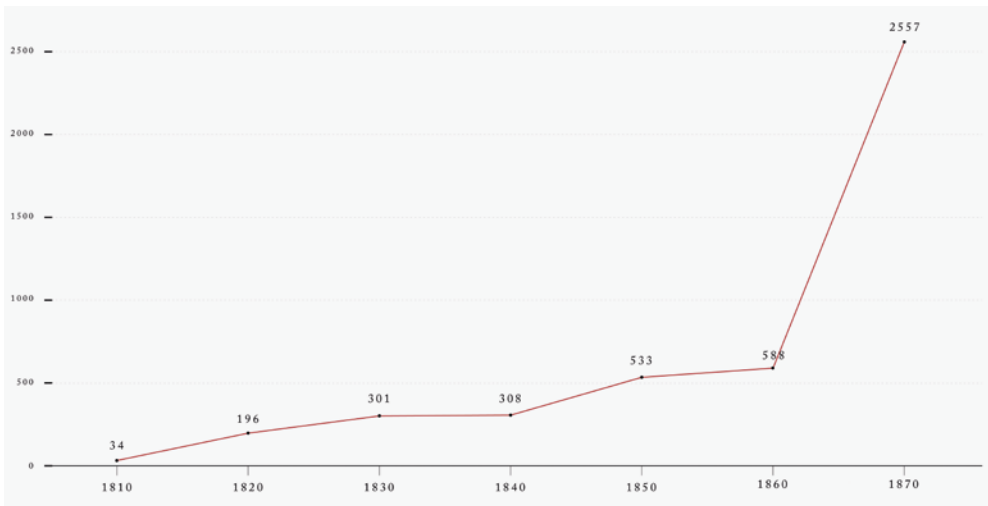
FIGURE 11.4   'Dana' on the rise in Danish nineteenth-century newspaper material
                 © FRØKJÆR BAUNVIG

Close reading controls of the Dana-hits allowed us to drop false positives (not included in the table above). *Mediestream* provides a facsimile display permitting such control. Using this feature, we have rejected false hits. But more importantly, reading our way through the 'true Danas' we systematically coded each of them to gain an overview of their genre and semantic context.[25] This was a time-consuming but rewarding procedure. It made it possible to outline the 'coming of age' of a national spirit: Dana began her life in Danish *conscience collective* – that is, in the nineteenth-century *Öffentlichkeit*-material par excellence: newspapers – as a young nymph-like creature in the first decades

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25   A list of the 4517 individual Danas furnished with weblinks as well as the table containing our coding is available as a data repository online (Katrine Frøkjær Baunvig and Stine Kylsø Pedersen, "The Dana Repository." In *The Grundtvig eStudies Pamphlets #1* (2021)).

of the nineteenth century, when the reading public was still thoroughly familiar with the fantastic creatures of antiquity. Gradually, however, she became ever more associated with the landscape and climate of Denmark. In times of the national crisis that culminated in the First Schleswig War in the late 1840s and early 1850s, she changed into a stern motherly-martial character and grew in popularity. This was her heyday in national poems and songs printed in the papers. From hereon she broadened her activities and morphed into steamboats, tonics and even potato-grading machines. In other words, she was thrown into the murky commercial waters. The main observation here is that Dana's figurative contours began to blur at exactly the point in time when the imagined social conception of 'Denmark' had become reasonably robust and widespread.

An important appendix: This procedure has an inbuilt, self-evident blind spot: False positives are relatively easily detected. But there is no way of telling how many Danas the OCR dirt made us miss. Here we must simply take comfort in the assurance that quantity can give – in the assumption that the size of the corpus secures an acceptable statistical significance – as the CH analogy to a Social Science and Humanities survey, perhaps? When it comes to hacking the structures of cultural heritage formations that make it difficult to find digital material suited for the exploration of mainstream (as opposed to elitist-canonical) mentalities and discourses, this procedure is simply the one that seems to be the best and most feasible at the moment (and in the near future).

4.5 *Measuring Fluctuations in Grundtvig's Posthumous 'Relevance Level' [C2]*

In a series of investigations, I have relied on the Danish Royal Library's digital archive *Mediestream* for yet another diachronic task: I have sought to locate a proxy for what one could refer to as Grundtvig's 'posthumous relevance level', his 'cultural imprint' or his 'reception history' in the years between his death in 1872 and today. All Danish newspapers taken together allow us to indicate fluctuations in the interest payed to Grundtvig in Danish public opinion. Due to copyright regulations, it is not possible to access facsimile versions of newspapers published after January 1 1921.[26] One can, however, search the corpus as a whole. This affords evaluations of the frequency and distribution of 'Grundtvig' compared to other prominent nineteenth-century personalities,

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26   Though EU copyright regulations protect intellectual property until 70 years after the death of a given author, in the Danish Mediestream case a uniform solution for the material has been reached and the line is (for the time being) drawn at 1921: cf. https://www2.statsbiblioteket.dk/mediestream/info/2.

NUMBER OF ARTICLES (%)   ■ - GRUNDTVIG   ■ - KIERKEGAARD
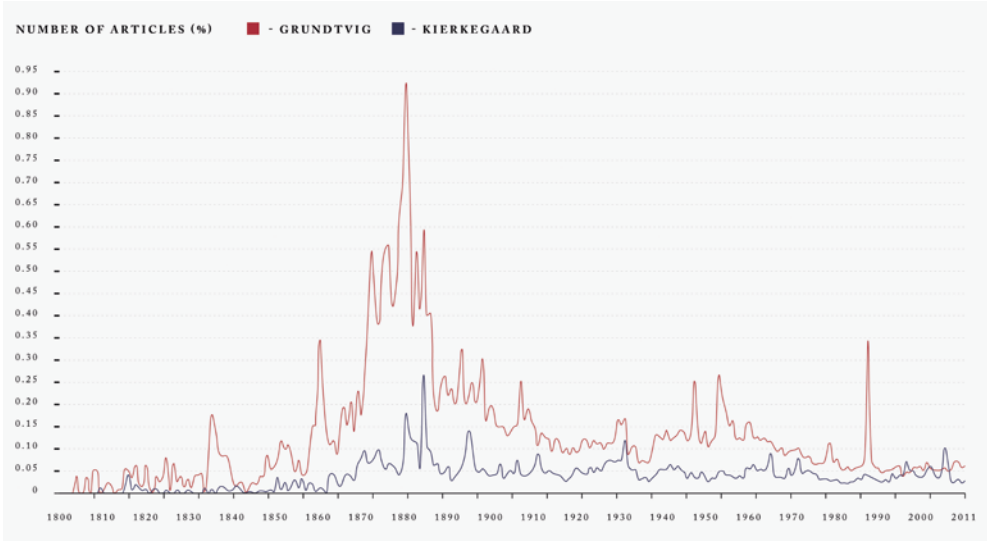
FIGURE 11.5   Distribution of 'Grundtvig' and 'Kierkegaard' in Danish newspaper material
ACCESSED AT: HTTP://LABS.STATSBIBLIOTEKET.DK/SMURF/
NOTE: MEDIESTREAM COVERS MATERIAL FROM 1666 TO 2013; THE SO-CALLED
'SMURF' SEARCH TOOL AT THE DANISH ROYAL LIBRARY'S KB LABS COVERS MATERIAL
PUBLISHED FROM 1750 TO 2011

such as e.g. (Søren) 'Kierkegaard' (1813–1855). Luckily both surnames are relatively infrequent, so one can assume that the main bulk of occurrences will in fact refer to *the* Grundtvig and *the* Kierkegaard.

Following the spike marking the bicentennial anniversary of Grundtvig's birth in 1983, from the mid-1980s through to 2011 Grundtvig and Kierkegaard take turns to receive the most attention in Danish newspapers. Historically, however, Grundtvig have dominated the material. In his life and day, Grundtvig was (among a variety of other things) a politically engaged writer of newspaper columns and a public character, whereas Kierkegaard was decidedly not politically interested. To a certain extent, this explains the significant differences in the representations of Grundtvig and Kierkegaard in newspapers in the mid-1800s – that is: before Kierkegaard's death in 1855. Peaks of interest and relevance are evident in years marking jubilees of birth or death: For Kierkegaard 1913 (marking his 100th birthday) and 1955 (marking the 100th anniversary of his death) represent modest crests; an increase in public attention in the years of Grundtvig's birthday anniversaries (1883, 1933, 1983) is evident, as it is detectable in the years of anniversaries of his death (1922, 1972). A Grundtvig revival during the Second World War is furthermore apparent, whereas Kierkegaard's relevance seems relatively stable from the 1920s onwards.
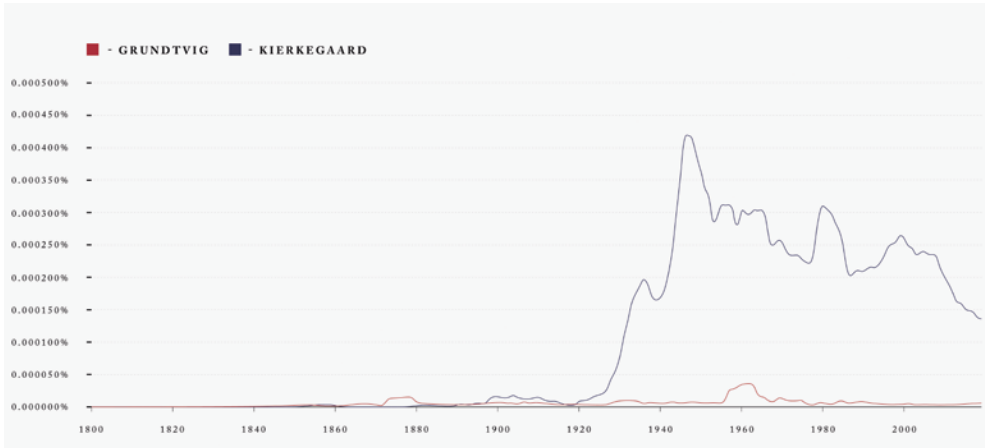
FIGURE 11.6   Distribution of 'Grundtvig' and 'Kierkegaard' in Google Books 'French (2019)' Corpus
                ACCESSED AT: HTTP://BOOKS.GOOGLE.COM/NGRAMS
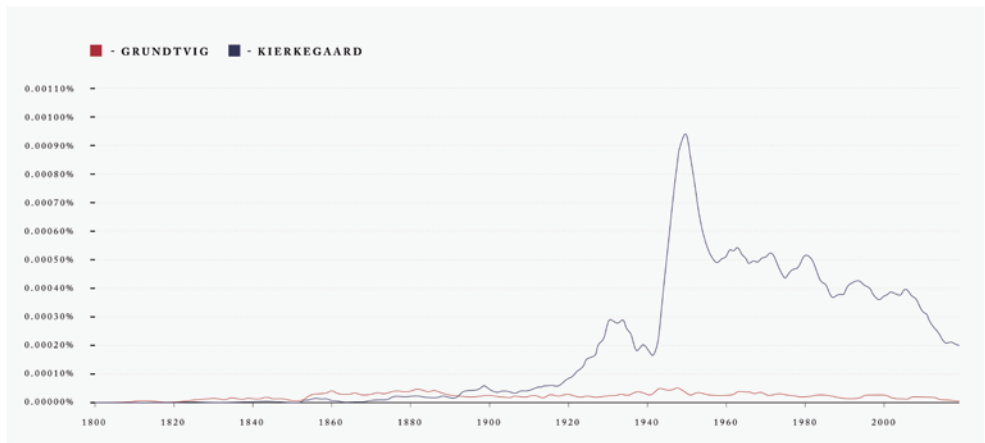
FIGURE 11.7   Distribution of 'Grundtvig' and 'Kierkegaard' in Google Books 'German (2019)' Corpus
                ACCESSED AT: HTTP://BOOKS.GOOGLE.COM/NGRAMS

It is no great surprise that the tables turn when searching through the 40 million books scanned by Google Books (so far).[27] Kierkegaard, on his part, experiences a breakthrough in the first third of the 20th century in the English, German and French 2019-corpora (Tables 6, 7 and 8). This turns into a general, accelerating interest in the 1940s and 1950s. Overall, Kierkegaard seems to

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27   Cf. Haimin Lee, "15 Years of Google Books" (2019). https://www.blog.google/products
       /search/15-years-google-books/.
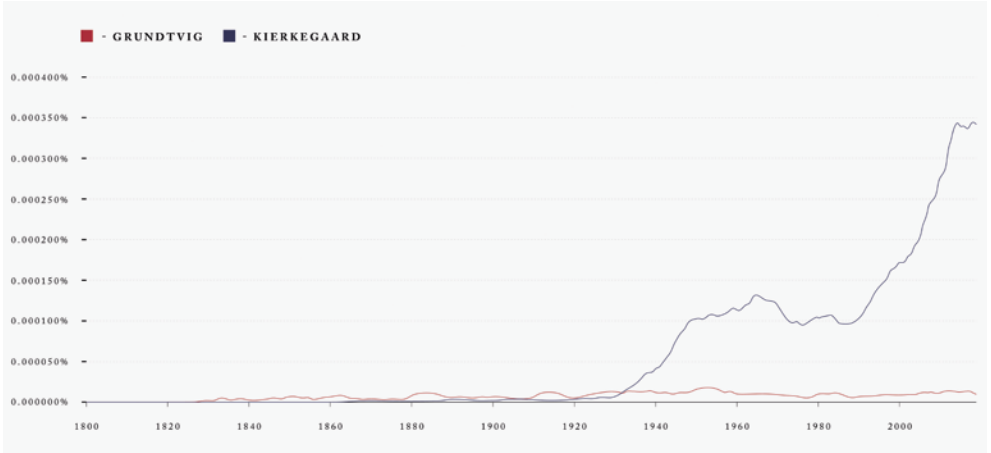
FIGURE 11.8   Distribution of 'Grundtvig' and 'Kierkegaard' in Google Books 'English (2019)' Corpus
               ACCESSED AT: HTTP://BOOKS.GOOGLE.COM/NGRAMS

be least relevant in the German corpus; his earliest peak occurs in the French corpus; in the French as well as the German corpus he suffers a significant decrease from the 1950s onwards. Kierkegaard's relevance level has, however, increased remarkably in the English corpus since the late 1980s. In these respective heterogenous digital text corpora, Grundtvig, however, is virtually absent (Tables 6, 7 and 8).

Such corpus material combined with the ready-made display tools they offer are seductively easy to use. With no access to the back-end – to the underlying text-material of the datasets – in effect, they are black boxes suited only for heuristic purposes and must be handled with a great deal of hermeneutic caution. But when one is disciplined in terms of limiting the stakes of the search (when one does not rely on them for answers to central research questions), these big, dirty and obscure datasets can be the foundation of quite indicative sketches, as I will argue in the next section.

4.6   *The Acceptable Reference Corpus* [D]

"Searches with Google Books Ngram's German/English/French sub-corpus will testify to this claim"; "searches with the Danish Royal Library's Mediestream newspaper corpus will testify to this claim." Reports from my different explorations of trends in nineteenth-century religiosity are full of such statements. Oftentimes the trend in focus will be operationalized linguistically, and often it is found in the Grundtvig corpus. My reason for consulting large and somewhat dirty corpora such as Google Books or any other given OCR-based archive of a considerable volume, such as Mediestream, is that they by virtue of their

'big data' nature offer acceptable material for backdrop analyses – for straight-forward checks of overall trends in the distribution of given terms or clusters of terms.[28]

Allow for a brief interlude concerning the concept of 'big data': "Data used to mean documents and papers, with maybe a few photos, but it now means much more than that."[29] Now, it means the accumulation of unfathomable points of information on commercial, healthcare and social issues, changing how we conceptualize societal infrastructure and the conditions for analyz-ing it. Dawn E. Holmes' "Big Data. A Very Short Introduction" (2017) invites reflections on what data is as a concept and as a phenomenon, its history and its future applications.[30] As a computationally dedicated scholar of religion it is, however, important to emphasize that such underlying triumphalism is difficult to maintain when confronted with ever thickening barriers of data access regulations: Commercial data (including social media data), on the one hand, is hard for non-corporate, university researchers to access due to copy-right regulations; healthcare and social security data, on the other, is extremely difficult (for humanist scholars in particular) to access due to GDPR directives.

But back to the main point, which is that I have often found it helpful (enlightening, informative) to consult big data archives as reference corpora in order to tease out a reasonably reliable insight in whether a given trend I am investigating conforms to main developments or whether it differs from them. For instance, when seeking to evaluate Grundtvig's usage of the term 'Spirit' (Aand), I have found it valuable to consult Danish nineteenth-century

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28   cf. Jens Willkomm, Christoph Schmidt-Petre, Martin Schäler and Michael Schefczyk, "Using Ngrams to Develop a Query Algebra for Conceptual History." *Digital Humanities Conference Proceedings* (2019), https://staticweb.hum.uu.nl/dh2019/dh2019.adho.org/index.html.

29   Dawn E. Holmes, *Big Data: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), xv.

30   The explosive data growth and the development within the area of machine learning has turned futuristic, technological enthusiasm into a tangible, cultural phenomenon in itself. The public interest in the (controversial) business incubator and consultant service 'Singularity University' is one among many examples hereof. In their own words, they have "a massive transformative purpose" and their mission is to prepare corporations and the general public for "exponential opportunities" (cf. https://su.org/about/). Others speak with joy of the so-called 'internet of things' (cf. e.g. Finn Arne Jørgensen, "The Internet of Things," in *A New Companion to Digital Humanities*, edited by Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth (London: Blackwell, 2016), 42–53). But overall dystopic reac-tions to the data and technological developments are visible as well. The Home Box Office series *Westworld* (2016–) is just one popular instantiation of a general caution and scepti-cal attitude towards developments within artificial intelligence.

newspapers in order to answer questions such as: Does the frequency of the term in the Grundtvig corpus map onto or diverge from a general linguistic trend? Does the semantic distribution in the two corpora converge? For tentative use, such backdrop sketches with OCR-based, big data corpora represent acceptable sources of information.

Through the above examples of work with numeric representations of large corpora of texts, I believe that I have indicated future contours of research designs – future approaches that will find their ways into the mainstream historical study of religions. From these demonstrations of procedures oriented towards digital material and to varying degrees driven by computational methods, I will move on to the concluding paragraphs of this chapter – to my predictions of what CH will encourage in the historical study of religions.

5 Prediction 1: Nineteenth-Century Religiosity

Data quality and copyright regulations: These are the Scylla and Charybdis of any Computational Humanist. As a scholar of nineteenth-century religiosity, I cannot help but take comfort in the fact that material from the long nineteenth century represents a sweet spot between the two. Too old to be covered by (most) copyright regulations, the material already digitized is unburdened by access restrictions. Most twenty-first-century material, born digital data and a large proportion of twentieth-century digitized material is covered by a variety of regulations, making the accessibility process tiring and often unsuccessful.[31] This is not the case with material of the long nineteenth century. Moreover, typographically similar to contemporary texts, nineteenth-century print is easier to manage than e.g. early-modern print or medieval and antique manuscript material.[32] Furthermore, produced in a historical epoch considered critical in the formation of modern nation-states, public authorities and private foundations around the world seem to take pride in funding digitization projects dedicated to nineteenth-century material: There is simply more of it available in digital formats than material from other historical periods.

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31   Cf. Niels Brügger, "Digital Humanities in the 21st Century: Digital Material as a Driving Force." *Digital Humanities Quarterly* Vol. 10, No. 2 (2016) http://www.digitalhumanities .org/dhq/vol/10/3/000256/000256.html.

32   Cf. Greta Franzini, Melissa Terras, and Simon Mahony. "A Catalogue of Digital Editions." In *Digital Scholarly Editing. Theories and Practices*, edited by Matthew James Driscoll and Elena Pierazzo (OpenBook Publishers, 2016), 178.

As mentioned, this trend is strongest among canonical works and oeuvres of persons deemed culturally significant, such as e.g. N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872) in Denmark,[33] Henrik Ibsen in Norway (1828–1906),[34] and Rabindranath Tagore in India (1861–1941).[35] Gradually, however, pulp fiction and pamphlets but first and foremost newspapers are emerging digital archives as well.[36] I predict that the growth in richly annotated, small corpora combined with the growth of acceptable, big data archives eligible as reference corpora will change the conditions for text-based studies of cultural and religious developments in the nineteenth century before it changes the conditions for text-based studies of drifts within other periods.[37]

As I hope will have become clear by know, I consider the careful quality evaluation of a given digital text corpus essential in order to assess which computational tasks would be safe to demand of it and in order to assess the appropriate emphases one can ascribe to results. But the main point here is that, in terms of available material, the long nineteenth century is privileged. Not least when it comes to European and North American material. Based on these simple facts, I predict that the next decade will witness a variety of studies of nineteenth-century representations of lay and elite Christianity, qualifying, nuancing, or contesting theoretical claims such as, for instance, Linda Woodhead's neo-classic description of the nineteenth century as the onset of two social processes that conditions present-day Christianity: The 'subjective

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33   http://www.grundtvigsværker.dk/.

34   https://www.ibsen.uio.no/.

35   https://www.projectmadurai.org.

36   A long line of projects similar to the Danish Mediestream have sprung to life. A brief list includes: ZEFYS Zeitungsinformationssystem (zefys.taatsbibliothek-berlin.dk); TROVE, National Library of Austria (trove.nla.gov.au); The British Newspaper Archive (british-newspaperarchive.co.uk); Chronicling America. Historic American Newspapers (chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/newspapers/); Delpher Dutch digital library (delpher.nl); Gallica archive of French newspapers (allica.bnf.fr/); The digital library of Danish American newspapers and journals (box2.nmtvault.com/DanishIM/jsp/RcWebSearchResults.jsp). See also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia: List_of_online_newspaper_archives covering 90 countries.

37   At the same time, growth of data does, however, seem to call for systematic reflection and sustainable, infrastructural solutions to maintenance. Data "preservation has recently attracted new attention within research: questions of sharing data and reproducibility of science, open access and maintenance have become more and more pertinent as the websites and digital productions come of age. '404 not found' messages now replace a growing number of hyperlinks, and the Web as scientific platform is full of digital waste-lands, caused by the end of research projects" (Christine Barats, Valérie Schafer, and Andreas Fickers, "Fading Away … The challenge of sustainability in digital studies." *Digital Humanities Quarterly* Vol. 14 No. 3 (2020): 165–189).

turn' and the 'feminization of piety'.[38] One way of approaching such investigations could be to assess whether there are significant 'macro drifts' in subject and pronominal terms dominating the religious-devotional discourses embedded in diverse forms of text material. Another field inviting computational exploration could be the one outlined by Max Weber's notion of modernity. It would be very interesting to put his classic notion of 'Entzauberung' (enchantment) and rationalization – of the gradual, historical process culminating in the late nineteenth century by dividing the world into independent value-spheres (religion being one of them)[39] – to the test. A way to operationalize such a task could be to trace dispersions, contractions, and reconfigurations of religious discourses (i.e. neural networks between relevant terms)[40] in a vast and genre-heterogenic material.

In any case, on the basis of the digital material at hand, I predict that investigations at scale of the transformation of religiosity in the long nineteenth century will be a growing field within the historical Study of Religion in the decades to come.

6   Prediction 2: Return of the Philologist

There was a time, intellectual historian James Turner argues, when philology "reigned as king of the sciences";[41] when philological competences were "the pride of the first great modern universities."[42] This time, however, is no longer. In the course of the last few decades, comparative-philological activity seems to have been undermined from within academia – a process among many other things reflected in university recruitment strategies. Yet, the so-called 'massification' of higher education[43] may also be central to the erosion of (the

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38   Cf. Linda Woodhead, *Reinventing Christianity. Nineteenth-century contexts* (London: Routledge, 2001).

39   Cf. e.g. Max Weber, "Wissenschaft als Beruf." *Schriften: 1894–1922* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 2002 [1918]), 510.

40   Pinpointing the relevant keywords for such a procedure would be the obvious first task. *God, angel, spirit, providence, blessing, damnation, prayer, contemplation, heaven, hell, afterlife* etc. could be a starting point.

41   James Turner, *The Forgotten Origins of the Moderns Humanities* (Princeton University Press, 2014): x.

42   Turner, *The Forgotten Origins*, x.

43   Cf. Delia Langa Rosado and Miriam E. David, "'A massive university or a university for the masses?' Continuity and change in higher education in Spain and England." *Journal of Education Policy Vol. 21 No. 3* (2006): 343–365.

need for and relevance of) philological erudition, a line of post-structural, critical theorists have with growing strength challenged the acceptability of scholarly pursuits focusing on religious world-views and languages in post-colonial areas.[44] In other words, the problem is that philology to some extent "owes its existence to European imperialism."[45]

So, since the middle of the twentieth century the status of philology has changed significantly. This is James Turner's assessment: In his monograph "Philology: The forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities," he outlines two basic types of philological endeavor: comparative philology and textual philology[46] – respectively diachronic and synchronic in scope.[47] The oscillation between these two philological modes, he argues, drew forth the comparative study of religions, when it came into being as an academic discipline proper in the latter half of the nineteenth century. I propose that it might soon do so again. I agree with Turner that philology did not succumb to the post-colonial pressure; that it "did not vanish," but only "went underground"[48] for a while. And I think that now might be the time for its return? At least, I see signs that philology is once again on the rise. These signs are mainly based on funding drifts and material accumulation. In addition to biblical material and the aforementioned nineteenth-century material, we see a growing number of digital archives, repositories, and editions of material relevant to the study of religions accumulating online. The quality – that is: the extent of the preprocessing procedures going into establishing this material – vary greatly, but the main trend is evident. A few examples could be projects such as these:

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44   E.g. Maurice Ölender, *The Language of Paradise* (Cambridge. MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

45   Turner, *The Forgotten Origins*, 370.

46   Cf. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* (Washington: Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data, 2003), 2.

47   Turner, *The Forgotten Origins*, 380.

48   Turner, *The Forgotten Origins*, 380.

Title	Content	Annotation
The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature. Revised edition*	This corpus contains transliterations and English translations of 394 Sumerian compositions from approximately 2100 to 1700 BCE	Each word form in the composite transliterations has been assigned to a lexeme which is specified by a citation form, word class information, and basic English translation.
Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus, Korp Version*	This corpus contains Akkadian cuneiform texts.	Tokenized
Greek Medieval Texts*	This corpus contains texts from the forth to the sixteenth century.	–
The Saga Corpus*	This corpus contains Old Icelandic (Old Norse) narrative texts from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century.	Tokenized, PoS-tagged, lemmatized, normalized orthography
Cambridge Sanskrit Manucripts**	More than 1,600 works in Sanskrit, Prakrit, Pali, Tamil, and other ancient and medieval South Asian languages.	–

*   The corpus is available for download from the clarin:el repository: https://www.clarin.eu/content/historical-corpora

** https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/sanskrit/200

FIGURE 11.9   Digital archives relevant for studies of religions
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Every academic field of inquiry is defined by the character and the format of its data. As data-types and formats change, new methodologies and competences becomes relevant. But when old material comes to life in this way, old skills become relevant once again. In the years to come, Vedic, Avestan, Sanskrit, Sumerian, Hittite, Arabic, Greek, Latin, Norse scholars will, thus, once

again, be in high demand; the growing landscape of digitized corpora will call for exploration rooted in solid linguistic proficiencies.

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The Truth of Religion: Toward New Dynamics in the Scientific Study of Religion

Eviatar Shulman

Abstract

This chapter offers a new scientific engagement with the idea of religious truth, suggesting that it is the prerogative of the scholar of religion to take emic ideas seriously and to be open to the possibility that religions access a true level of reality. So long as we deny any truth to religion, we are not scientific and only confirm our own assumptions. The approach suggested here emerges from ideas regarding the social construction of reality: the socially constructed world is cultivated over centuries and reflects the main reality human beings live in. Religious practitioners learn how to navigate this realm, in waking consciousness, in dreams and in altered states. Scholars of religion should be careful before accepting a materialistic understanding of consciousness.

Keywords

1 Introduction: Studying Religion in the University

The understanding of religion developed at CERES within the KHK consortium on "dynamics in the history of religions" is one of the more compelling conceptualizations of the life of religions in their historical contexts that I have encountered as a scholar in the field. Inspired by and working toward a vision coming from systems theory,[1] this theoretical approach describes the

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1 As in Niklas Luhmann, *Essays on Self-reference* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); *Social Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). See Volkhard Krech, "What Can We Learn from Semiotics, Systems Theory and Theoretical Biology to Understand Religious Communication," *Sign Systems Study* 28 2/4 (2020): 192–223.

local hubs and nodes in which religions thrive on the ground, always removed from the idealized pictures we find not only in texts, but even in our ossifying scholarly episteme, which has trouble relinquishing the perception of religions as stable entities with a clear logic and structure. These ever-concrete hubs and nodes interact and connect through endless links that relate to all possible academic level of analysis and disciplines, and continue to branch off in ever more directions, along the trade routes or through the virtual spaces of consciousness, while remaining ever-dynamic and interactive within themselves, self-reflective and object-related at the very same time, continuously emerging. This vision has inspired much of my thinking about religion over the last few years, even if I have yet been able to internalize it to a full enough degree.

Nevertheless, even though this picture has the potential to bring us ever closer to understanding the real life of religion on the ground, it remains, for me, unsatisfactory in two important respects. First, the effort to describe religions in their historical contexts results all too often in a lamentably *museal* situation, in which the scholar remains sterile, perhaps defensive, and avoids being implicated by the consequences of his or her research. That is to say that in the historical study of religion, we still pretend to describe historical realities as if *we, the scholars*, are not part of the picture. Thus, we rarely pause to question what the traditions and realities we study may mean for us or for our students and readers. This means, secondly, that we harbour a very thin notion regarding what religion meant or means for the people we study and fail to seriously address the question of religious truth. Committed to the ideal of scientific objectivity, and content to leave belief to the theologians, we ignore the inquiry into the positive force of religion. This leaves us studying religion under a restricted spotlight.

As we move into the heart of the 21st century, in these intensely emotional and challenging times, and when there is so great a divide between religious and secular consciousness, I contend that we must get personal and engage with the generative potentials of religion if we are to remain relevant for society. That is to say that if we keep human vision itself outside of the picture we may marginalize ourselves in perilous ways for the continuity of the discipline. Perhaps, an ideal of responsible reflection about the ideas that religions cultivate needs to be included in the way we understand our role in society, both as scholars and as teachers. When we ask what scholarship in the Humanities is meant to achieve in a time in which there is so much information available, aside from learning to assess information critically, we should consider a more robust concept of the Humanities as a method of informed, critical, reflection on the life of society, so that scholarship may be strengthened in becoming a *creative* tool in the structuring of reflective, intelligent human lives, lived by

embodied human beings, who employ critical thinking in order to make better sense of their times, communities, and selves. Perhaps, this is part of an attempt to re-integrate the subject into scientific discourse.

In the study of religion these issues are particularly sensitive and complex, and to this end I suggest that we begin to address the *dynamics in the study of religion* in new ways by showing some skeletons in our closet the light of day. This means, quite simply, that as scholars we should strive to address the question of the truth of religion in more assertive ways and to sympathetically try to understand what it means to people. It is time for us to ask not only which defensive psychological measures religions cater to or how they allow people to make sense of chaos, which political and economic structures religions uphold and who stands to gain from them, or how society is built and maintained through the internalized structures of religious vision. Today, we must also consider what positive advancements religions allow a human society to make and *whether religious consciousness may not be in touch with reality in ways we have yet to understand*. It seems not only that, for many people, religion can be a healthy and creative tool, but that religion remains one of the main interpretive patterns of human life and the world it inhabits. Religions, we may acknowledge, are based on an idea of truth that we have yet to, and will actually never be able to, prove false.[2] Without committing to any specific *version* of this truth (or these truths), and without positing any self-evident reality that must be identified in this discussion aside from the fact that religion is still meaningful to so many people and that we should base our assessment of their world-view on respect and empathy, we can still ask in a bolder way what religious truth is about and whether it has what to offer us in these post-post-modern times. Perhaps the comfort religions offer is not only a dream.

I hope you share my sense of anxiety at raising these issues. The discipline of religious studies has established itself as standing outside religions themselves, while bracketing the question of religious truth. Any attempt to come to terms with the ontology of religion is seen as a dangerous foray into zones that are better left to the *internal* perspective of the religious practitioner, while the scholar remains safely outside.[3] With great effort we have secured a relatively stable status quo by leaving theology to the theologians and proceeding

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2   Taking my cue from the great Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna, we could say that God would have to exist in order to be proven false.

3   As in Meyer, Birgit. "How to Capture the 'Wow': R.R. Marrett's Notion of Awe and the Study of Religion." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22 (2015), 8; Volkhard Krech, "From Religious Contac to Scientific Comparison and Back: Some Methodological Considerations on Comparative Perspectives in the Science of Religion," In *The Dynamics of Transculturality:*

with historical and philological analyses. The very intellectual ground we walk
on, our ontology, may be hazarded when we take religious truth seriously; and
indeed, some readers may feel uncomfortable with my suggestion that in the
study of religion we need not conduct our study only according to the assump-
tions of a materialist cosmos.[4] However, I do not accept that the split between
internal and external perspectives can be enforced too strongly in relation to
the idea of the truth of religion, and I suspect that all participants in the debate
have real internal questions at the crossroads between religion and science.[5]
All have developed habits of thought that they cultivate and reinforce, which
have supposedly decided the issue. Yet none of the big questions in which the
human search for truth are grounded have been solved, nor can they be solved
at present. Thus, we can all – scholars and believers – show some humility and
enter a sustained discussion of religious truth and see what we come up with.
So perhaps it is time to put some of our timidity behind and get dirty. Taking
religious truth seriously will also make us better historians, as it will help us
unravel the way the world appeared to the subjects we are studying.

2   Approaching the Question of Religious Truth: Bridging the Material and the Supernatural

Given that I am walking on eggshells, I will try to make my assumptions more
transparent. First, while suggesting that religions may be realistic, I am not
accepting that their philosophical or theological visions are necessarily correct,

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Concepts and Institutions in Motion, edited by Antje Flüchter and Jivanta Schöttli (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 41.

4   This, together with the question regarding the boundaries between internal and external perspectives, was the core of the criticism I received from Henrik Sørensen, in his response to my paper at the conference. I thank Dr. Sørensen for revealing to me how sensitive this type of discussion can be and for leading me to conduct it with greater care.

5   In this sense, I agree with Bruno Latour that *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), and that the divide between religious and secular conscious-ness is never that wide. See also the resonant criticism of the modern Western episteme in Chakrabarty (2000). One nice example of continuities between religious and other con-tents is the discussion by Laura Feldt (2016) of the fantastical elements in *Harry Potter* or Phillip Pullman's trilogy of *His Dark Materials*, which are continuous with religious themes. Furthermore, if we take the literature of the ontological turn in anthropology seriously, we may see that the borders between epistemes, or between them and ontologies, can be quite flexible; see for example in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4.3 (1998): 469–488; Philippe Descola, "Varieties of Ontological Pluralism," In P. Charbonnier, G. Salmon, & P. Skafish (Eds.), *Comparative Metaphysics: Ontology After Anthropology* (New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 27–39.

or even that these are the best way to articulate religious truth. Rather, I begin with a bracketing of ontology on both sides of the debate – both materialists and believers will hold their ink and allow us to ask in what way the social life of religion is in touch with true life events, what we call *reality*. In doing so, I will be giving credence to phenomena that scholars often prefer to dismiss as supernatural and to leave outside the discussion. However, I do not take "miracles" as a sign for the objective truth of G/god/s or of any trans-empirical agency, but as evidence for religions' generative potential, defined in immanent terms.

My approach corresponds with ones developed within the material study of religion, mainly as these have been expressed by David Morgan (2005, 2012) and Birgit Meyer (2012), who see religious truth as thoroughly immanent, embodied, and constructed. Within this fully concretized context, I am interested in the way that religion works for people and produces real effects in the world. Religious truth is something people create and perform, in many different ways, and these rely on rich arrays of sensorial, emotional, intellectual, and other bodily practices. Some of which are more conscious than others. Thus, anything sacred is a linguistic fact, the holy an embodied practice, the divine a moment of the heart; the beyond is intrinsically in the here and now. At the very same time, however, I do not accept any physicalist interpretation of the immanent. As Bishop Berkeley suggested long ago, and as science continues to confirm, pure matter has yet to be found; there is, it seems, no bedrock for reduction.[6] Thus, by speaking of a *material* or immanent context for religion, I do not in any way intend a *materialistic* interpretation of religion, and with Meyer I deny the impulse at reduction.[7] With this I take issue with methodological naturalism in the study of religion (see below), and remain sceptical regarding the expectations that a physicalist approach will ever be able to explain religion. As emphasized by Meyer, the move toward the material is a correction to internalist approaches, which will find better grounding once the study of religion is fully concretized and materialized. In her words – "The point is not to unmask religion and entities such as God, gods and spirits as fictitious illusions, but to cast doubt on the very distinction between fiction and fact – or illusion and reality – in which such unmasking rests, and instead concentrate in the material manifestation of religion – its

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6   This point has been argued for ingeniously by certain Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophers, led by Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu. See Eviatar Shulman, "Vasubandhu the Mādhyamika? Nāgārjuna the Yogācārin? On the Middle way between Realism and Anti-Realism," In Jay Garfield Jan Westerhoff (eds.), *Madhyamaka and Yogācāra: Allies or Rivals?* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 184–212, 2015).

7   Birgit Meyer, *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Toward a Material Approach to Religion.* (Inaugural Lecture, Utrecht University, 2012), 24, 28.

Gestalt – in the world." Within this conceptual framework, there is an interplay between the physical and the mental, or the object and the subject, while none of these can be reified and essentialized us ultimate realities, and these serve only as linguistic reference points. Here, internal and external, conscious and mental, or material and physical, form a continuum. It is within this thoroughly immanent cosmos that religious truth must be approached and taken seriously.

Within the study of religion, these questions have also been addressed through discussions of methodological naturalism. Without entering the complicated questions regarding the precise intention of *naturalism* in this context, with the variegated senses in which it is used,[8] it implies the naturalist stance that allows only for explanations that accord with the laws of science that aim to ground explanation in physical and observable facts. Certain articulations of methodological naturalism in religious studies, such as ones by Robert Segal and Kevin Schilbrack,[9] avoid a reductionistic stance, and thereby offer hope for a combination of subjective and objective perspectives. Others, such as ones by Edward Slingerland and Donald Wiebe, aspire toward physical explanations for religious phenomena.[10] It is the latter that we should put aside, while we may continue with the business of the study of religion just until they figure out exactly which neural pathways equal God or how the dream of a saint reduces to any material content. When consciousness is still stubbornly failing to reduce to matter even in brain science, scholars of religion should be extremely suspicious of any attempt at reduction, and must pursue an understanding of core religious issues in terms that are subjectively meaningful. That is to say that even if we ever knew what the physical correlates of religious phenomena we identify are, which would be viewed through

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8   See the introduction by Blum to Jason M. Blum (ed.), *The Question of Methodological Naturalism* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018), as well as the contribution by Daniel Pals; David Ray Griffin, "Religious Experience, Naturalism, and the Social Scientific Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68.1 (2000): 99–125; Matthew C. Bagger, "Dewey's Bulldog: Sidney Hook, Pragmatism, and Naturalism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79.3 (2011): 562–586.

9   Robert A Segal, "In Defense of a Naturalistic Approach to Religion." In Jason M. Blum (ed.), *The Question of Methodological Naturalism* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018), pp. 153–166; Kevin Schilbrack, "A Better Methodological Naturalism," In Jason M. Blum (ed.), *The Question of Methodological Naturalism* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018), pp. 251–275; Kevin Schilbrack, "A Metaphysics for the Study of Religion," *Critical Research on Religion* 8.1 (2020): 87–100.

10   Donald Wiebe, "A Manifesto for the Scientific Study of Religion or Setting the Parameters for a Scientific Study of Religions in the Modern University," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 33 (2021): 73–76; Edward Slingerlad, "Who's Afraid of Reductionism? Methodological Naturalism and the Academic Study of Religion," In Jason M. Blum (ed.), *The Question of Methodological Naturalism* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018), pp. 167–205.

scientific, third-person observation, this would not explain their meaning from the first-person point of view. While the naturalist approach that refrains from reduction may enrich our understanding and help us speak of the relationship between different levels of analysis – Schilbrack's mentioned analyses are especially compelling in this regard – reductionist ones actually rob religious studies of its very subject matter.[11] Quite simply, so long as consciousness and subjectivity are part of the empirical world, we are best to make sense of them in their own terms.[12]

Another avenue for discussing the questions at hand relates to the deepseated concern with the problem of the holy. In a recent contribution to this debate, Robert Orsi suggests social and psychological explanations come short of addressing the historical and phenomenological realities that religious subjects encounter so long as the "ontological realness of religious phenomena" is ignored. Discussing the seminal, recalcitrantly relevant work of Rudolf Otto, Orsi speaks of the manner in which Otto himself felt that the experience of the holy is realistic, even if it is revealed in diverse ways through different cultural paradigms and expressions. Under a realistic Kantian framework, Otto was interested in the way in which the holy – and not only *the idea of* the holy that is emphasized in the English translation – is materialized. Describing his own concerns with the way the concept of the "holy" is used, Orsi speaks of the many ways in which humans construe the experience of the holy, which are far removed from Otto's conceptions of the *numinous* or of the *Mysterium Tremendum.* For example, an American woman may throw the representation of a saint who failed to help her husband procure a new job on the floor of the back seat of her car. Or, Orsi's crippled uncle, who was treated in churchgatherings as a "holy" member of the church, most enjoyed the beer and food served at these events, as well as the social gathering that included members of the opposite sex. At the same time, the priests who led the event used the notion of holiness as a way to deal with their embarrassment and unease in face of challenged people, or to frame, and thereby deny, some of their social or physical needs. More generally, we may speak of the holy as an excuse for

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11   At the same time, another favoured approach of methodological agnosticism can be justifiably criticized for avoiding the issue; see Craig Martin, "Incapacitating Scholarship: Or, Why Methodological Agnosticism Is Impossible." In Jason M. Blum (ed.), *The Question of Methodological Naturalism* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018), 53–73.

12   In many respects, I am sympathetic with the stance on phenomenology expressed in Jason M. Blum, "Retrieving Phenomenology of Religion as a Method for Religious Studies." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80.4 (2012): 1025–1048.

social gatherings and for personal processing of life events, which need not relate to any outstanding felt presence beyond peoples' yearning and pain.[13]

There is thus, Orsi emphasizes against Otto,[14] no *sui generis* experience of the holy. At the same time, he feels that the holy cannot be reduced to the sum of its social and material parts, and that "holiness describes something that is real in culture and history"; this something has, he emphasizes "real, if ambivalent, effects."[15] He thus calls for an articulation of the logic of $2 + 2 = 5$, or "the tradition of the more" (p. 99), while drawing on a host of scholars who approached religion from different perspectives, including psychology, philosophy, phenomenology, anthropology and sociology, whom he takes to point to something beyond the concrete facts of religion. Orsi is thus interested in *that extra thing* that religion gives access too, which is beyond the sum of its parts, suggesting that religion cannot be made sense of only on materialist, positivist and naturalist attitudes.

As I see it, $2 + 2 = 5$ is exactly what we must avoid in religious studies in order to take "the holy" seriously. We may ask Orsi, first, whether $2 + 2 = 5$ departs from his gripping take on religion as taking place "Between Heaven and Earth," the title of his work that presents religion as an array of presences that remain within human creativity. From the perspective of this latter work, it seems preferable to take the extra fifth element that is ostensibly added to the objectifiable 4, *as already part of what these 4 are to begin with*, at the very moment they are perceived and related to by living human beings. Here, $2 + 2$ equal 4, but the 4 are not just material presences in the world or objective events that are confined within the story we know how to tell about them today. Objects

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13   A good example of this is processes of mourning in Israeli Sfaradi popular religion. For example, one month after a man in the village in which I live died prematurely this summer, people were invited to a meal, which was preceded by a session in which men read *Gemara* and prayed the joint afternoon and evening prayers, *Mincha* and *'arvit*. The atmosphere during this event and others like it is completely colloquial, with many people chatting and joking on the side while the ritual is being run by some of the more committed members. People in this gathering would all probably attest to some experience of "the holy" in the *mysterium tremendum* sense, to differing degrees, which would correspond with age and personal sentiment. Or, to take a quite different example, local lore in our village explains that the splitting of the synagogue into two congregations (which will inevitably happen), resulted in this case from a conflict over whether the local practice of drinking Arak after the reading of the Torah on Sabbath is allowed. When the new Rabbi opposed this practice, part of the community split off and founded a new synagogue (in which, surprisingly, no-one drinks Arak after the Torah reading).

14   And in line with Robert H. Sharf, "Experience." In Charles Taylor, (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, pp. 94–116 (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1998).

15   Robert A. Orsi, "The Problem of the Holy," In Robert A. Orsi (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 91.

are not just matter. Similarly, the mind is not just a machine we use to process information that is fully distinguished from these hard facts, passively organizing relevant data that would be helpful for genetic survival; rather, consciousness actively construes the world it inhabits and determines the nature of objects. While there are certainly limits to creativity, human beings live in socially constructed worlds.[16] Religions, I will suggest, know how to capitalize on this aspect of ontology, and to maximize the mind's reach into the material and objectively perceivable. Religions are adept at making use of this creative potential and exploring its depths and possibilities. While religion – religious truth included – may always depend on human agency, and while this agency may be difficult to peg down and pinpoint within a fixedly determined theoretical framework, religions work with a power or potential that is really out there in the world, a feature of objective reality, or of the relation between consciousness and reality. My aim is to advance our ability to appreciate and discuss this potency, and to see how religions create realities, rather than simply aim to adapt to some pre-determined one.

3 Towards a Social Ontology for Religion

My personal effort in giving credence to religious truth is in expanding the ontology of religion in a manner that would help us understand, in modern, secular terms, types of religious phenomena that exceed the boundaries of what we take to be a regular physicalist view of the universe. This means that I am seeking a way to justify the efficacy of belief and to rationally explain certain events and practices that appear supernatural. While much of this approach can be made to comply with a materialist view, so long as the latter takes consciousness seriously, other parts are open to the possibility that consciousness, even as a physical phenomenon, has true causal powers in ways that materialist approaches are not yet ready to acknowledge. Here, I intend the bracketing of ontological assumptions discussed above seriously, and thus defy a strong distinction between consciousness and matter, which philosophy may eventually connect for us further down the road under a monist paradigm. At the moment, it seems that physicalism[17] is confidently venturing

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16   Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999) has referred to the realistic limits of social construction in a compelling manner.

17   In "physicalism," it is still not evident what is that material that physics are made of. See Galen Strawson, "Realistic Monism: Why Physicalism Entails Panpsychism," In *Real Materialism and Other Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008).

toward pan-psychism, meaning that consciousness is understood as an inherent feature of matter, or of interactions between basic elements of matter.[18] The so-called mind-body problem, or the hard-problem of consciousness,[19] has yet to be resolved. While many still grasp at a fully materialist view of consciousness,[20] too many cogent critiques of these positions have appeared and have been gaining currency,[21] and I side with these views in accepting that consciousness cannot be denied and must be treated on its own terms within any objectivist theory of the universe.

To provide a rather banal example for the generative power of consciousness, I take the fact that I can write these very words as an indication that I am able to consciously and subjectively determine and influence physical matter, such as my fingers or my computer's keypad. I of course accept that there are biological and chemical determinations of this event, but I do not grant that they exhaust it; as far as I can see, *I* – whatever that means – *have decided*, or am deciding – whatever that means – *to write these very words*. These are conscious, subjective facts, which are not solely mental and are realized in matter, but any explanation of them must come to terms with how they appear to the

18   See Christoff Koch, *Consciousness: Confessions of a Romantic Reductionist* (Cambridge, London: MIT, 2012), 119, in which a highly respected and influential brain-scientist says: "I believe that consciousness is a fundamental, an elementary, property of living matter." Koch further developed his ideas in *The Feeling of Life Itself: Why Consciousness is Widespread but can't be Computed* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019). Together with Giulio Tononi and others, Koch designed the dominant Integrated Information Theory (IIT), which takes consciousness to be a property of complex systems of interaction between physical elements, so that the more complex is the more conscious. See Tononi, Giulio, Boly, Melanie, Massimini, Marcelo, and Koch, Christof, "Integrated Information Theory: from Consciousness to its Physical Substrate," *Perspectives* 17 (2016), 450–461. Another important voice in favor of pan-psychism is philosopher Galen Strawson, *Realistic Monism*, as well as "Cognitive Phenomenology: Real Life," in *Cognitive Phenomenology*, ed. T. Bayne & M. Montague (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Strawson speaks of himself as an "adductive," rather than a reductive, materialist, that is one who takes consciousness seriously.

19   David J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

20   Dennett is still the classic representative of this position, as in Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1991); "Welcome to Strong Illusionism," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 26.9–10 (2019): 48–58.

21   Representative studies are Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974): 435–50, and *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); John R. Searle, *The Mystery of Consciousness* (New York: New York Review, 1997); Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*; and Francisco Varela, "Neurophenomenology: A Methodological Remedy to the Hard Problem," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 3 (1996): 330–349.

first-person perspective that experiences them. A chemical explanation of this very moment will always remain partial, as would any other material explanation from the third-person view. This means that I take downward causation very seriously, and expect that it will eventually prove crucial to any materialist theory that makes sense of consciousness.[22]

What does this mean for religious studies? Notice that my point is not to argue favourably for an idealist or spiritualist view,[23] but only to establish the bracketing of ontology in the field.[24] Again, the truths we are discussing are always historical, immanent, and material or concretized, yet within this framework we are examining ways in which religious consciousness or perception can be thought to have grasp on reality in ways that do not always fit current naturalist assumptions. I outline my approach here and proceed to demonstrate it through a number of examples in the next sections.

In a series of remarkable studies, Tanya Luhrmann has taught us how, in modern American Evangelical contexts, God can be made real through practices of prayer and inner cultivation, thereby changing the mind and the structure of experience.[25] The ability to talk to God or to hear God emerges in her analysis as an acquired skill that one can cultivate in order to produce real effects in one's life, which include different types of sensory and mental

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22   See Donald T. Campbell, "'Downward Causation' in Hierarchically Composed Biological Systems." In Francisco Jose Ayala and Theodosius Dobzhansky (Eds.), *Studies in the philosophy of biology: Reduction and related problems*, pp. 179–186. London/Basingstoke: Macmillan; Arne Friemuth Peterson, "On Downward Causation in Biological and Behavioral Systems," *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 5.1, 1983, pp. 69–83.

23   Such a view comes in many shades and colours, many of which are influenced by the Indian Advaita tradition, and is being articulated in a new, interesting version by Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Loop: Epiphanies of the Mind and the Future of Knowledge* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2019); see earlier antecedents in *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012). My approach would rather fit a looping structure that pendulates between realism and anti-realism, as suggested by Robert. H. Sharf, "The Looping Structure of Buddhist Thought (Or, How Chan Buddhism Solves the Quantum Measurement Problem" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (forthcoming)).

24   While this is a theme for another contribution, I would suggest adopting a rigorous approach of Methodological Scepticism, which would not prioritize any metaphysical theory or prioritize its ontological commitments until such a theory can hold its ground on crucial metaphysical problems. As funny is this may sound, another relevant approach could be that of Methodological Dualism, which would take both matter and consciousness seriously until a better explanation for their nature and relation will be conceptualized.

25   Tanya M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012); *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020).

encounters that are healthy and normative. This type of analysis sets the stage for a more daring approach from the perspective of ontology, which works with Peter Berger's theory regarding the social construction of reality that has the potential to bridge many of the gaps between the subjective and the objective.[26] Much of the human negotiation with the "supernatural" can be explained with the help of this theory, which is able, within a Durkheimian perspective, to explain how an individual is shaped *by the social beyond*, that is by social powers beyond his awareness and control. At the same time, inner structures of belief become objectified and externalized and become socially accepted facts. Much of my point is that religion works creatively with this potential. I will end up, however, going beyond even this radical interpretation of Durkheim and Berger to suggest that physical objects can become imbued with the social construction that they are constituted by to become magically potent. I should emphasize that my analyses at this stage are mainly programmatic and interpretive, and that I am aware that each of the risky steps I am taking needs a fuller analysis on its own, as does much of the structuring of the discussion above.

In *The Sacred Canopy*, published over 50 years ago, and while building on the anthropological theorization in his *The Social Construction of Reality*, co-authored with Thomas Luckmann, Peter Berger discussed this manner in which religion works in the structuring of reality. Berger describes the dialectical process through which human individuals create society by a process of externalization, so that society becomes objectified into a *sui generis* entity. Thus, for example, Judaism, Buddhism or Christianity, at the different levels of their instantiation, become real, autonomous forces that are alive in the world and have concrete causal powers, even though they were produced by humans and cannot be pinpointed into any specific entity. At the next stage, after social realities are created by humans, society, with its norms and thought structures, is internalized *back into the individual*, so that the originally externalized and

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26   Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969). For a new articulation of this theoretical approach see Antonio Sandu, *Social Construction as Communicative Action* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016). For an appropriation of this approach in contemporary study of religion, see Markus Dressler, "*The Social Construction of Reality* Revisited: Epistemology and Theorizing in the Study of Religion," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 31 (2019): 120–151. These ideas correspond in interesting ways with the ontological turn in anthropology, as in Viveiros de Castro, Cosmological Deixis, and Descola, "Varieties of Ontological Pluralism."

objectified external reality is reabsorbed into consciousness and the individual is re-created by society. This is a continuously emergent dialectical process that tells us much about how an individual understands him/herself, even as an ostensibly autonomous agent. Religion plays an important part in this process of world creation, in which cosmos is created out of nomos, then to be established as a seemingly independent entity. Thus, Berger says –

> *Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established.* Put differently, religion is cosmization in a sacred mode. By sacred is meant here a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience. This quality may be attributed to natural or artificial objects, to animals, or to men, or to the objectivations of human culture. There are sacred rocks, sacred tools, sacred cows. The chieftain may be sacred, as may be a particular custom or institution. Space and time may be assigned the same quality, as in sacred localities and sacred seasons. The quality may finally be embodied in sacred beings, from highly localized spirits to the great cosmic divinities (1969: p. 25).

For Berger, objects transmit socially accepted, so-called sacred power. We may, however, raise the question to what degree social construction extends into the material world. Perhaps, religious objects are constituted by consciousness in a manner that allows them to transmit the powers invested in them through the imagination. The object in a religious ritual does not represent anything, but itself materially embodies human perception. This is what the object actually *is* for the people that use it. Or, within the social construction of reality, the creation of sacred objects as external, objectified realities, which is produced through discourse and shared perception, becomes a reality that transmits these objectified *mental* powers back on individuals. When objects receive the mental cathexis of projective consciousness again and again over centuries of religious life, they come, in reality, to transmit that very power of social understanding. And for most people, *this is reality*; as people who are constituted within this reality, and for whom we can draw no clear line between social identity and self-identity, these objects have true agential power.

Beyond this, it is also important to take notice of the fact that much of social construction takes place in states of consciousness that are beyond human control, and that it is precisely in such altered states, as in meditation, swooning or dreams, that people experience the deeper levels of social construction and prove their ability not only to navigate them, but also to act creatively

within them. For Berger, dreams are a threat on social order, which raise the eerie possibility that the world could have been constructed differently.[27] Here, rather, we will see that such states beyond our more common notions of agency are part of what impregnate objects and places with sacred power that is securely beyond peoples' conscious control.

We move to a series of concrete examples.

4   The Cult of Saints in Contemporary Israeli Judaism

Yoram Bilu is a fascinating Israeli anthropologist who has devoted large parts of his career to the study of cultic practices of saint worship in modern Israeli Judaism. Among these, much of his research has been directed to the study of Moroccan Jewish saints. One the most fascinating of these is Rabbi David-u-Moshe,[28] a well-known saint who died in Morocco in the twelfth century, and who is believed to have continued to perform many miracles for Moroccan Jews over the centuries. In 1973, a little more than two decades after most Moroccan Jews moved to the newly born state of Israel, Rabbi David-u-Moshe appeared in the dream of a man who lived in Tsfat (Safed) in the North of Israel named Avraham Ben-Haim. Ben-Haim was a man with no saintly appeal until then, although some of his ancestors were considered saints, including his grandfather, who was deeply significant to him personally. In the dream, Rabbi David u-Moshe told Ben-Haim that he desires to move to Israel since his followers have left him, and that he should prepare a room to house him in his own, very modest apartment, in which he lived with his wife and ten children. Such nightly visits returned in a series of dreams, in which Rabbi David u-Moshe was often accompanied by other prominent saints, including Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai, clearly the most important saint in Modern Israel and who tradition considers to be the author of the Zohar, the primary text of Jewish Kabbalah.

What is especially remarkable about this story is how well it has become accepted and integrated into the rapidly expanding map of modern Israeli cultic sites (this has become the new mark of Israeli religion since the 1990s, and today there is a veritable boom of this new Israeli cult of saints). It is already

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27   Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 23.

28   This study appears as chapter one of Yoram Bilu, *The Saints' Impresarios: Dreamers, Healers, and Holy Men in Israel's Urban Periphery* (Boston: Academic Press, 2010); this is a translation of the original version published in Hebrew in 2005. U-David in Moroccan Hebrew replaces the more common "Ben," so that the name means David son of Moses.

a few decades now since the site has been attracting many thousands of pilgrims, and most significantly on the day of the saint's annual festival (Hillulah). Ben-Haim announced the dreams through a series of letters that were distributed through webs of synagogues, with each letter communicating yet another element in the revelations he received. The site is successful to the degree that at rabbi David u-Moseh's original tomb in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, one finds today a picture of his new home in the North of Israel.[29]

Here, our point is ontology, or perhaps the psychological appropriation of ontology, in which people are saved from car accidents by the saint, aided in battle (mainly in the Lebanon wars) – these are the main contexts in which the saint tends to intervene – and in which many people have been said to heal from diverse types of personal distress and illness. Coming to visit a saint may, literally, cure people, and the number of stories is uncountable. I take these accounts quite seriously, even if some of them are more wishful thinking than others, and if they employ a genre of religious language to construct their personal narrative. Indeed, this is precisely the point – religions *can* be used to produce effective personal stories, and these change people's physical state of being. One case that especially stuck to my mind is a letter I found on the internet by a man named Dudu Cohen, who quite literally owes his life to the Rabbi.[30] His mother, who had trouble conceiving, experienced intense bleeding during early pregnancy, and the foetus was diagnosed as suffering from a series of ailments so that the doctors strongly recommended abortion. The couple went home to prepare, and that same night Rabbi David u-Moshe came to visit the father (who insists that this was not a dream but a real-life event), promising him that the baby would be born healthy, provided that he was named after him. Years later, that same child grew up to share his report, and indeed he is named after the saint – Dudu is short for David.

My point here is not that this long-deceased saint actually worked things out for the couple; but denying the logic of this account as it is experienced from a religious perspective does not imply that the story is not true. Flat denials of the truth of such stories are pointless and should not be seen as scientific. Trying to explain how these realities come about, I suggest that the theory of social construction can go a long way, while we also should keep in mind that people train

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29   Ben-Haim's achievement is exceptional precisely in his ability to obtain recognition for his site from both municipal and national levels of administration. This allowed his private visions to become an enduring social reality, in ways that other similar sites did not succeed in. The quotidian cultic practices of the site, including meals, donations, candle lighting, and prayer, as well as the more ecstatic events of the festival, are described in Bilu, *The Saints Impresarios*, ch. 1.

30   https://www.hidabroot.org/article/2016. Last accessed June 4, 2021.

in directly perceiving such indigenous theories of religion, as described by Tanya Luhrmann: [Luhrmann], whose basic claim is that "god or spirit…" "god or spirit – the invisible other – must be made real for people, and that this real-making changes those who do it."[31]

The fact that saints help women become pregnant and give birth after they had experienced problems in conceiving, pregnancy and child-birth is of course widespread. In her recent monograph on *The Voices of the Ritual*, Nurit Stadler offers a fascinating array of such success stories that she collected at popular sites in contemporary Israel across Jewish and Christian traditions.[32] Best-known among these may be the tomb of the Matriarch Rachel – itself a contested religious and political site with a long and complicated history – who thanks to her own trials is now understood to be capable of giving the gift of the womb to women who have trouble conceiving. Similar reports come from the Palestinian Christian site of the Tomb of Mary, where Stadler enters fascinating detail regarding the bodily practices of climbing down the steep staircase into what she considers as "the womb" of the tomb, crawling beneath it, as well as kissing, touching or rubbing pictures on it, thereby coming into bodily contact with the idol. With this, Stadler reminds us that we are not speaking of mere matters of "belief" or of the imagination, but of concrete, embodied practices that bring about a physical sense of encounter with the religious object.[33] Interestingly, Rachel the Matriarch's tomb is now covered by a curtain (parochet) made of the unused wedding dress of a Jewish women named Nava Applebaum, who was killed in a terrorist attack on the night before her wedding – again, a woman who remained childless. One of the most striking sites discussed by Stadler is that of "Miriam the laundress (Miriam Hakovesset)," who was the cleaning lady in the household of a well-known Jerusalem Rabbi. Here, when coming to pray, people bring cleaning materials as offerings to the saint – rags, soaps, etc. Miriam Hakovesset is

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31   Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*, xii.

32   It should be emphasized that the works of Bilu and Stadler are ethnographic studies that do not venture into metaphysical territory. Bilu is an anthropologist with training as a psychologist, whose interpretations uncover psychological dimensions of the events he portrays. For example, he shows how Avraham Ben-Haim cleared his and his wife's bedroom to make room for the migrating, dead saint after the couple had moved beyond the stage of life in which they procured offspring. Stadler is interested in the bodily aspects of the ritual and in women's empowerment within the political context of contesting the holy land. The metaphysical interpretation of their work is my own.

33   For compelling discussion of religious presence in objects, see David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the Power and History of Response* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1987); Morgan, *The Embodied Eye* and *The Forge of Vision.*

reported to have relieved dozens of women from their barrenness, often after many years of disappointment.[34]

Are we doomed to continue to doubt the efficacy of such practices, or may we begin to seriously ask how they work? Must we take the evidence only as circumstantial? We should probably remain doubtful that the souls of Miriam the laundress, the Mother Rachel, Nava Applebaum, Rabbi Akiva's wife, Rabbi David-u-Moshe, Rachel of Beit She'an, and others, actually intervene on behalf of barren women. Nevertheless, it is ignorant of us to completely deny the stories. It would not be difficult for us to admit that such events can take place through a mechanism resembling a placebo effect, meaning that the visit to the shrine can change the mental state of participants, and that this psychological regeneration can, at times, change the biological conditions that prevented pregnancy, perhaps through a reduction of anxiety. However, as suggested by Anne Harrington's fascinating analysis, it is quite difficult to draw the line between a biological and psychological explanation for such events, and they raise questions we are not yet able to answer regarding the powers of the mind.[35] In speaking of a placebo, in the context we should allow more than the obvious idea that social reassurance reduces stress. That is, a sensitive analysis of religious consciousness should help us extend the concept of placebo and examine its mechanisms, and calls us to consider ones that do not reduce to explanations that rely only on testable levels of anxiety or to release levels of opioids.[36]

Simply, religious subjects seem to know how to work creatively within the constructed ontology of their religion. In the not uncommon cases we surveyed, we see that religious understanding offers a way to create real effects in the world, which present themselves as supernatural. The idea of the holy is central to the grammar of religious psychology, and it is impregnated with deep cultural, historical, and psychic significance. Encountering the different manifestations of the holy and calibrating one's attitudes toward them is reassuring and therapeutic, and allows people to re-constitute themselves as healthier subjects by drawing on these rich mines of socially constructed reality. Yet there is, in fact, no other world, as there is no clear gap between the social, the psychological, the biological and the chemical; these levels of reality all overlap and are accessible through the structures of the religious

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34   I refer here mainly to the work presented in chapter 2–3 of Stadler's monograph.

35   Harrington, Anne. *The Cure Within: A History of Mind-Body Medicine* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008).

36   See further Anne Harrington (ed.), *The Placebo Effect: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999).

imagination. That is to say, that through the cathexis of manifestations of the holy with social and psychic significance, a site of pilgrimage, or a holy man, become an ontologically powerful presence, which can have a transformative effect on religious subjects.

5   Dreams, Altered States of Consciousness, Intersubjectivity, and Agency

We can extend the argument once we come to understand that the real effects of religion on the physical body can be, and often are, activated through states of consciousness that are beyond people's conscious control, most straightforwardly in dreams. In Bilu's account of Rabbi David u-Moshe, or in his discussion of other, similar sites and saints, such as the one in the backward city of Beit-She'an called *Pitcho shel Gan-Eden* ("Entrance to Heaven," thought to be blessed by the Prophet Elijah),[37] we find that these sites are not only constructed by dreams, but that they are maintained and continue to work through dreams – indeed by webs of dreams shared between many participants, some of which are prophetic. *Entrance to Heaven*, a site with a short heyday of about two decades, exhibited many of the practices that shape such ostensibly holy places. Here, it is not only that saints come to visit people in their dreams, cure them and provide warning and insight, but people also learn of these sites through dreams and receive hitherto unknown details about them (so go the reports). The dreams of a diversity of people intersect with each other, thereby upholding the site and proving its efficacy in the minds of its adherents, through what Bilu terms "a community of dreamers." While much like in Bilu's previous story, it is a male dreamer named Ya'ish Oḥana who announces the site at first, here we find other dreamers, most of which are women, involved in sustaining the place. Thus, for example, it is Ya'ish Oḥana's wife who received the dream that the saint who supports the site is the prophet Elijah; a woman named Zohara learned of the site through a dream, and after visiting it is healed from long-experienced pains and her daughter became pregnant after 16 years of failed attempts; the woman who lived in the apartment before the Oḥana family moved in had a prophetic dream that anticipated the identity of the place; a woman named Raḥel (Rachel) who became one of the sites main frequenters, had a long series of dreams about the healing and benefits given by the site; Elijah and other saints appear in the dreams of many followers and confirm the original revelation.

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37   Bilu, *The Saints Impresarios'*, ch. 3.

In this context of dreams and the sharing of sub-conscious, unconscious, and perhaps even prophetic materials,[38] we see that holy sites of the sort we have been discussing are being maintained through cognitive efforts beyond the control of waking consciousness. Here we may quote the work of Amira Mittermaier (2012), who in her discussion of contemporary Muslim Egypt suggests that we cannot account for the phenomena of dreams in religion within modernist conceptions of subjectivity and agency. Drawing on the work of scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty and Robert Orsi, she submits that the phenomena of agency cannot be reduced to the individual, and that the understanding is that dreams do not originate inside the dreamers; rather they *come to* them. With this we recall that social reality is not created only consciously, and that the internalized structures of objectified reality do not reduce to concrete experiences people have had in their waking states. Thus, again, in the study of religion we need a much richer notion of consciousness than the one available through materialist or evolutionary frameworks.

Not only dreams point to an agency beyond normal awareness; religions thrive on altered states of consciousness, whether in the deep states of *samādhi* experienced by Buddhist meditators,[39] states of possession,[40] or the use of psychoactive substances. June McDaniel describes the ecstatic practices of Bengali saint-religion, paradigmatically displayed by the famous devotee of Krishna, Caitanya.[41] In his pilgrimage to Vraj, the land of Krishna, Caitanya would regularly lose consciousness, faint and behave in ways that are reminiscent of an epileptic attack. These acts were interpreted by his followers as a type of *samādhi*, an intense state of submersion in divine truth, in which Caitanya would encounter Krishna and his lover Rādhā. Thus, Caitanya is thought to have identified the places in which Krishna's mythological tales took place, through his experiences of these events in *samādhi*. These lapses of consciousness that are understood as divine encounters characterize the careers of paradigmatic modern Indian saints such as Ramakrishna,[42] Ramana Maharshi,

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38 The idea of pre-cognition is central to the account developed by Jeffrey Kripal, as in his *Authors of the Impossible*. This is a notion that should be taken seriously but which I do not try to address in the present context.

39 See Eviatar Shulman, *Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

40 As in Katherine M. Erndl, *Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual, and Symbol* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), ch. 5.

41 June McDaniel, *The Madness of Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

42 Romain Roland, *Life of Ramakrishna* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2012).

or Anandamayi Ma.[43] In her later work on Begali folk cults of the Goddess, McDaniel speaks also of people dreaming of their gurus long before they meet them, or of religious practitioners receiving communications from gods and saints in their dreams or in other states of concentration.[44]

We need not engage in metaphysical interpretation in order to include these perspectives in our account of the supernatural. The internalized grammar of the constructed reality of religion is part of peoples' cultural heritage, which has been historically cultivated over many generations and is accessible through creative acts of the imagination, many of which are unintentional. In such so-called altered states of consciousness, religious adepts can work, intensely it seems, within their own cultural grammars, traversing the terrain of what their societies accept as truth. As Bilu suggests, dreamers "know" how to work according to a deeply internalized cultural grammar.[45] Similarly, Luhrmann shows us how different types of inner senses can be rigorously cultivated.[46] These are real potentials of consciousness, which religious practitioners have learned how to make use of, in a manner that could even be made to fit a materialist and evolutionary framework, so long as the latter is sincerely interested in coming to terms with the lived phenomenology of consciousness.[47] What we find here are moments of deep encounter with the inner structure of social construction, of knowing its internal working and significance.

6   Amulets, Rocks and Goddesses

The analysis conducted above suggests that cultural truth can be no less, and perhaps even more, ontologically real and effective than physical, material truth, and can have a dramatic effect on peoples' lives. With this we can take one last even more hazardous step, and suggest that religious objects can actually house some of the projective perceptions that are directed toward them

43   Lisa L. Hallstrom, *Mother of Bliss: Ānandamayī Mā* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

44   June McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

45   Bilu, *The Saints' Impresarios*, 179.

46   Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*, ch. 3.

47   Notice that here, Koch's definition of *consciousness* as equal to *experience* in *The Feeling of Life Itself*, p. 3, which derives from the attempt within brain sciences to make room for the first-person perspective, comes short of what we need. While this is an important position in the context of Koch's own debate, in the context of religion, or psychology, we cannot reduce consciousness only to lived experience, but must include the structures that give rise to experience.

and channel the power and imaginative depths of religious truth. Thus, for example, when a Buddhist specialist provides a client with an amulet – this is not just matter, but a culturally cathected object, filled with real, effective, conscious power. Surely, it is difficult for us to imagine what this means – why not rest with the understanding that these physical objects, such as a sacred text or icon, convey their significance within the socially constructed, imaginary world? Yet once we begin to make room for the manner in which consciousness extends into and effects the body, the boundary between the subjective and the objective is called into question, and objects may be charged with perception. Here, the imagination *is* the fact.

Let us take Buddhist amulets as an example; in Thailand good amulets produced by monks thought to have irregular meditative attainment and power can sell for tantalizing sums of money, hundreds of thousands of dollars and more.[48] We can imagine that an amulet – at least as it is perceived through eyes of practitioners – is imbued with protective and therapeutic potential. Here, quite literally, adept practitioners, most commonly monks, will imbue the otherwise plain ceramic or other material with powers that derive from their depth-meditation, from the sacred texts they utter, from other sacred objects, such as statues of the Buddha or relics, which would normally be connected to the amulet by a string, and from ritualized combinations of these elements.[49] In some mysterious way, or maybe not all that mysterious – this is the working of the deeply internalized magic of cultural grammar and age-old cultivated understandings of truth – much like the Moroccan Israeli saints, these amulets can actually save peoples' lives. In what sense can we say that the amulet actually conveys sacred power, intending this in a physical sense? The idea I am raising is that there is a powerful, materialized presence of historical perception that is made alive through the active appropriation of tradition.

Thinking along these lines, we can begin to intuit how it happens that stones are considered to be the goddess. Here I intend something beyond the

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48 In amulets, my understanding is based mainly on the studies by Stanley J. Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), and Justin T. McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost & the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). For a good place to purchase pricy amulets online, see https://www.thailandamulets.com/index.php (last accessed 6.6.2021).

49 The production of amulets shares elements with the central rituals of protective chanting, *paritta*, which employ texts as a sacred presence of the Buddha. See Lily de Silva, Paritta: A Historical and Religious Study of the Buddhist Ceremony for Peace and Prosperity in Sri Lanka. *Spolia Zeylanica*, vol. 36, ed. P.H.D.H. de Silva. Colombo: Department of Government Printing; Eviatar Shulman, "The Protective Buddha: on the Cosmological Logic of Paritta," *Numen* 66 (2019): 207–242.

use of images (although these can also be interpreted as objects cathected by perception), but rather how, as McDaniel describes it, it is rather common in rural Bengal for people to have the goddess appear in their dreams and relate how she has placed herself inside a rock in a stream, which can then be retrieved, placed in a temple, and worshiped to good effect.[50] While to some this may seem as a manipulation, and some such goddesses are emically considered fake, we can easily see how these practices emerge out of a cultural perception of divinity in which gods materialize in reality.[51] Once instantiated, these goddesses may transmit the powers invested in them by the faithful – perhaps they require an act of devotion in order to have better chances at success; perhaps, for others, they can work irrespective of "belief," since for them the cultural grammar is more immediately accessible. Indeed, Handelman, Krishnayya and Shulman have discussed how in Southern India, goddesses can be deliberately cultivated and grown in rich generative processes, not only deeply symbolic of cultural realities, but actually embodying them.[52]

These rock-goddesses resemble the Buddhist worship In South-East Asia of the magical monk Upagupta, a most respected arhat who is completely unknown in canonical, literary sources. Upagupta, as discussed beautifully by John Strong,[53] can be retrieved from rivers as a rock, while he can be encountered also in many other cultic objects, as well as through his statue, normally placing his hand in his alms bowl while gazing toward the sun, which he is stopping so that he may continue eating before mid-day arrives. The practices surrounding Upagupta are inspiring, and perhaps the most moving is when his statue is drifted down the river in order to chance upon believers further downstream and bless them, as Upagupta is known to normally reside under the waters. Obviously, a material, causal explanation for the appearance of Upagupta in one of these local contexts is that he was floated down the river, having been put in the water by a person from another village. Yet for the people whom Upagupta visits, he emerges no less from the shared, historical cultural grammar, from the perceptions of generations over generations to whom Upagupta has brought blessing, which they can now receive and take in.

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50   McDaniel, *Offering Skulls*, Ch 1.
51   The set of temples of the seven sisters described be Erndl, *Victory to the Mother*, ch. 2, offers good evidence of these processes.
52   Don Handelman, M.V. Krishnayya, and David Shulman, "Growing a Kingdom: The Goddess of Depth in Vizianagaram." In Don Handelman, *One God, Two Goddesses, Three Studies in South Indian Cosmology* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014).
53   John Strong, *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta: Sanskrit Buddhism in North India and Southeast Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

Is divine or supernatural power situated in flat, faceless, fully natural rocks one may draw from the river? Here, these rocks *are*, quite simply, Upagupta, the author of magical, protective power, and have become so by absorbing the magical power attributed to him. A rock like this can guard a ritual, a common role Upagupta takes. I interpret these rocks as a simple and straightforward intuition regarding the ability of matter to receive the attribution of religious power. People live in imaginatively construed, cultural worlds. This is their primary reality, the truths of their day, in which rivers and ricks, amulets and images, all inhere.

7   Conclusion

I have suggested that as intellectuals working in the field of religious studies, we should try to empathically appreciate the ideas and actions of religious people. Perhaps my own effort is off the mark. But perhaps it is sober – my idea does not go far beyond the fact that culture works to real effects in the world. I suggest, as well, that consciousness has access to this truth in manners we cannot understand only through the working of normal, waking conscious- ness. To this I add the question where the border between consciousness and matter actually is, and suggest that objects can hold some of the powers that are accessible to consciousness.

Bilu's latest work is a study of practices that actuate the presence of the deceased Lubavitcher Rabbi in the Hasidic movement of Habad. The Rabbi again intervenes in reality in so many ways that literally stretch the bounds of anything we may call reality. A striking example would be how he visited a prison-guard in a dream, instructing her where to find Matzot (Passover bread) and wine, so that his incarcerated follower could perform the necessary Passover rites, while appearing in his dream as well and assuring him that all is taken care of; or how he rescued a non-Jewish scuba diver from drowning, who later identified him in a picture on the street. Surely Habad thrives on an intense expansion of the capacity for fantasy. But, we may agree, fantasy is creative and works in the world. I don't quite know where to draw the line, but I do suggest we move it away from the museal attitude that takes all these practices as instances of the human capacity for strange and silly behaviour. Perhaps, religion is more serious than we think, and just like religious practi- tioners themselves, we should not get too stuck on the outer level of the story and on the concrete details. With no need to verify the specific claims to truth of any one particular religion – of any particular node or hub – we may still be able to contemplate, and to personally grapple with, the idea that the logic of

religion rests on sounder ground than we imagined, or perhaps on reasonable practices in a groundless world to begin with.

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"Is There a Future for a Scientific Study of Religion?"

Luther H. Martin

Abstract

A scientific study of religion depends, in part, on understanding the German origin of that study, of *Religionswissenschaft*. And, it depends crucially on understanding "religion" as a theoretical object of such a study. Following a brief discussion of these two issues, various approaches for a scientific study of religion are surveyed, beginning with that of the cognitive sciences, currently the most robust approach for that study. The conclusion considers the future of scientific approaches to the study of religion, both by professional societies and by individual scholars with a pessimistic view of the former and a more optimistic but still guarded view of the latter.

Keywords

scientific study of religion – *Religionswissenschaft* – cognitive sciences – network theory – quantitative studies – computer simulations – big data

1 Introduction

I find it somewhat curious for me now to be problematizing a future for a scientific study of religion.[1] For, as a graduate student of biblical studies in 1960s Germany, I was well aware of the observation made by *neuetestamentlicher*

Rudolf Bultmann that any time people enter a room and switch on a light or go
see a doctor in response to some ailment, they acknowledge a natural scientific
worldview (*Weltbild*).[2] This is also the case, to update Bultmann's observa-
tion, anytime you look at your mobile phone. Consequently, Bultmann argued
that since all modern "thinking is irrevocably formed by science,"[3] students
of religion must engage with scientific methods in their work, approaches that
entail the formulation of explanatory hypotheses based on ethnographic, his-
torical, and/or comparative data and testing those hypotheses empirically – as
have scholars in virtually all other academic disciplines. However, by the time
I began teaching, in 1967, the study of religion had largely come under the sway
of Mircea Eliade's crypto-theological phenomenology, perhaps the most fash-
ionable approach to the study of religion in the twentieth century.

A phenomenological approach to the study of religion had been introduced
in 1887 by Chantepie de la Saussaye in his influential *Lehrbuch der Religionsge-
schichte*. However, Saussaye's *Lehrbuch* was translated into English by Beatrice
Colyer-Fergusson, who rendered the "*Religionsgeschichte*" of Saussaye's title as
"Science of Religion" (1891).[4] This notion of a scientific study of religion origi-
nated with Colyer-Fergusson's father, Max Müller, the German philologist and
Orientalist who had first introduced the phrase in 1860 into English, and into
German as *Religionswissenschaft*.[5] Müller, of course, is generally considered to
be the founder of a modern "science of religion."[6]

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2 Rudolf Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie* (München: A. Lempp/Chr. Kaiser, 1941), 4
   and n. 1; "New Testament and Mythology," R.H. Fuller, trans., in *Kerygma and Myth* (London:
   s.p.c.k., 1953), 5.

3 Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie*, 3; "New Testament and Mythology" 3.

4 P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte* (Freiburg: J.C.B. Mohr, 1897);
   de la Saussaye, *Manual of the Science of Religion*, Beatrice S. Colyer-Fergusson (née Müller),
   trans. (London: Longmans, Green, 1891).

5 F. Max Müller, "Semitic Monotheism," in Review of Ernst Renan, "*Histoire Générale et Système
   Comparé des Langues Sémitiques*. 2nd. ed. Paris: Imprimerie Impériale 1858," and of Renan,
   "*Nouvelles Considérations sur le Caractère Général des Peuples Sémitiques, et en particulier sur
   leur Tendance au Monothéisme*. Paris: Imprimerie Impériale 1859," in *The Times* (London): 14
   April (1860): 6–11; 16 April (1860): 12–16; rpt. in F. Max Müller, *Essays on the Science of Religion,
   Volume 1: Chips from a German Workshop* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1867), 377; also
   Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1873), 7.
   See Hubert Seiwert, "The Study of Religion as a Scientific Discipline: A Comment on Luther
   Martin and Donald Wiebe's Paper," *Religio. Revue pro religionistiku* 20.1 (2012), 29.

6 Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies* ((New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 9–30,
   esp. 11–12). The most important writings on the subject by Max Müller include, *Essays on
   the Science of Religion* (1867); *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873); and his Gifford
   lectures on *Natural Religion* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1889). A scientific study
   of religion can, of course, be traced back to David Hume's *The Natural History of Religion*
   (London: A. and H. Bradlaugh Bonner, 1757) and, indeed, to naturalistic explanations for

2   Religionswissenschaft

Müller's German term for a science of religion, *Religionswissenschaft*, has been understood in a number of ways. For example, it has been identified with, as well as differentiated from, *Religionsgeschichte*, and it has been translated both as 'comparative religion' and as 'academic study of religion.' Further confounding these ambiguities is that the German word for 'science,' *Wissenschaft*, is a broad designation for the disciplined pursuit of any kind of knowledge, including humanities such as art, literature, religion and history,[7] whereas the English word refers to the natural (and social) sciences to the exclusion of the humanities. However, Müller was quite clear that he meant by *Religionswissenschaft* the idea that a "science of religion might be classified as one of the natural sciences."[8] He emphasized this point in his first Gifford lectures by citing the stipulations of Adam Gifford,[9] whose trust fund endowed this series, that Gifford lecturers should treat their subject "as a strictly natural science" just "as astronomy or chemistry is."[10] This science of religion, Müller argued, would take its place as "a science among the sciences" as "the last-born child of the nineteenth century."[11] Despite his fundamental commitment to discovering the seeds of religious truth in all the world religions, and especially in Christianity,[12] Müller believed that the "toilsome journey [of] the historian of religion arrives in the end at the same summit which the philosopher of religion [the theologian] has chosen from the first as his own."[13] Still, he seems to

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the gods proposed by the pre-Socratics (Donald Wiebe, "Philosophical Reflections on the Presocratics: A Contribution to the Scientific Study of Religion," in *Theorizing "Religion" in Antiquity*, Nickolas P. Roubekas, ed. [Sheffield: Equinox, 2019], 81–102). While Müller's pivotal role is contested among specialists (Leonardo Ambasciano, *An Unnatural History of Religions* [London: Bloomsbury, 2019], 33), his argument for a "science of religion" was, nevertheless, the first fully fledged methodological proposal to be formally adopted.

7   When I began teaching in 1967, the Department of History at my university was situated in the social sciences. In 1987, however, members of that department decided that they were, after all, humanists, and so, resituated themselves as part of the humanities curricula of the university.

8   Müller, *Natural Religion*, 13. Müller argued that his approach was based on that of comparative philology, which he understood to be the application of "scientific method to questions about the nature and function of language" (Müller, *Essays on the Science of Religion*, xix).

9   Müller, *Natural Religion*, vii–xii.

10   Müller, *Natural Religion*, x, 11.

11   Müller, *Natural Religion*, 11.

12   Juraj Franek, *Naturalism and Protectionism in the Study of Religions* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 67.

13   Müller, *Natural Religion*, 542.

have pragmatically compartmentalized religion and its scientific study as two mutually exclusive sources of knowledge.

Müller's proposal for a science of religion arose out of the context of scientific advances that were characteristic of nineteenth-century Europe generally. In fact, "scientist" as an occupational designation was first recognized during this century.[14] While advances in such sciences as chemistry, physics, and mathematics rapidly became more and more specialized and, consequently, less comprehensible to the literate public, those in biology, exemplified by Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859), remained appealing and accessible.[15] In fact, Darwin's *Origin of the Species* has been taught in undergraduate literature classes at my university as an example of nineteenth-century writing that is clear and engaging. And, like the phylogenies Darwin described for biology, the developing specializations of nineteen-century knowledge promoted an 'academic speciation' that differentiated the various curricular divisions that persist in universities today. With this academic differentiation, a scientific study of religion became realized as an ideal, separate from its literary, philosophical, and theological antecedents.

A formal retreat from the scientific attitude for a study of religion was proposed for the 1900 "*Exposition Universelle*" in Paris by some who wished to stage an interfaith dialogue like that of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions. Instead, a group of historians of religion, led by Jean Réville, organized an "International Congress of the History of Religions" for this Exposition.[16] Religious studies historian Eric Sharpe considered this meeting to be "the first genuinely scientific congress of comparative religion."[17]

In 1909, Cambridge classicist Jane Harrison made what was perhaps the final appeal for a scientific study of religions when she returned to Darwin's expectations for a psychology that would focus on "the necessary acquirement of each mental capacity by gradation"[18] to propose a study of religion as a suite of evolved behaviors and practices.[19] Though unheeded, Harrison's proposal

14 The term 'scientist' was first used by the English polymath William Whewell in 1834 in his anonymous review of Mary Somerville, "*On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences*," *The Quarterly Review*. 51 (1834): 59; and again by Whewell in 1840 in his *The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences* (London, J.W. Parker, 1840), vol. 1: cxiii.

15 Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* [1859] (New York: Signet Classic, 2003).

16 Jean Réville, "The International Congress of the History of Religions," *The Open Court Journal* 5 (1900): 271–275; see Donald Wiebe, "Globalization – Expansion and Demise of the IAHR," in his *An Argument in Defence of a Strictly Scientific Study of Religion: The Controversy at Delphi* (Toronto: The Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion, 2021), 103–116.

17 Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (London: Duckworth, 1975), 138.

18 Darwin, *Origin of the Species*, 458.

19 Jane E. Harrison, "The Influence of Darwinism on the Study of Religion," in *Darwin and Modern Science: Essays in Commemoration of the Centenary of the Birth of Charles Darwin*

presciently articulated the contemporary agenda of the cognitive sciences of religion.[20]

A late nineteenth-century pseudo-Darwinian interpretation of religion as progressively evolved from primitive to civilized soon overshadowed any theoretically sound proposals for a scientific study of religion. The political abuses of this social Darwinism repositioned studies of religion back into theology and philosophy, to a descriptive and empathetic phenomenology, and, subsequently, to the anti-science agenda of much postmodernism.[21] At the close of the twentieth century, however, a few historians began a "return to science" that acknowledged the evolutionary history of human subjects and how this biological substrate might inform historical change[22] – a theoretical approach that has been exploited by but a few historians of religion.[23]

Recently, some scholars of religion have attempted to construct theories of cultural evolution that are reminiscent of the earlier social Darwinism.[24] However, their proposed correlations of cultural change to biological evolution are weak. For example, its proponents argue that *intentional* selections of cultural variations by historical agents are equivalent to the *natural, non-intentional* selections of biological variations that are central to Darwinian evolution.[25]

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    and of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Publication of the Origin of the Species, A.C. Seward, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909), 494–511.

20   Leonardo Ambasciano and Panayotis Pachis, "Strangers in a Strange Land No More: Introducing the Book Review Symposium Section and Jennifer Larson's *Understanding Greek Religion*," *Journal of Cognitive Historiography* 4, no. 1 (2017), 14–15; Ambasciano, *An Unnatural History of Religions*, 153–156.

21   Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1996).

22   Matthew H. and Doris V. Nitecki, eds., *History and Evolution* (Albany: SUNY, 1992); David Gary Shaw and Philip Pomper, eds., *The Return of Science: Evolutionary Ideas and History.* Theme Issue of *History and Theory* 38, no. 4 (1999).

23   E. g., William E. Paden, *New Patterns for Comparative Religion: Passages to an Evolutionary Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Lior and Lane, eds. *Routledge Handbook of Evolutionary Approaches to Religion.* See also Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), and Walter Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

24   Jonathan H. Turner, Alexandra Maryanski, Anders Klostergaard Petersen, and Armin W. Geertz, *The Emergence and Evolution of Religion by Means of Natural Selection* (London: Routledge, 2018).

25   Turner *et al. The Emergence and Evolution of Religion*, 12, 47. In addition to natural selection (Darwin, *Origin of the Species*, 88–89, 91), Darwin also allowed for sexual selection (Darwin, *Origin of the Species*, 95–96), both of which result in speciation. Darwin spoke of "methodical [or intentional] selection" and "unconscious selection" (Darwin, *Origin of the Species*, 51, 91) as processes of selective breeding or of accidental domestic-environmental selection, such as hunting (Darwin, *Origin of the Species*, 47), which result in variation within species.

Further, this approach disregards alternative theories for explaining cultural change, such as cognitive attractors that shape cultural factors in the epidemiological histories of populations.[26] And, this approach neglects recent conclusions from the global comparisons of ancient DNA, now recoverable from even the smallest of ossified remains, which reveal that cultural variations are not explained by evolutionary developments at all but are driven by the recurring dispersions and complex mixtures of populations from divergent biocultural environments – and have been from their very beginnings.[27]

It might be asked whether attempts to understand cultural evolution by analogy to Darwinian biological evolution, one of the most successful and powerful of modern scientific theories, is a type of "scientism" that adopts "the manners, the trappings, the technical terminology, etc. of the sciences … for answers to questions beyond their scope."[28] Since religion is a social construct, I prefer models of historical change and development to those of evolution.

The return to science by some historians of religion does not represent a nostalgic relapse into a "naïve image of the natural sciences," by which some have deceitfully characterized recent interest in scientific studies of religion.[29] Rather, this return simply accepts the importance of acknowledging the scientific attitude for the study of religion that was recognized by Bultmann some eighty years ago and that was argued by Müller over a century and a half ago.[30] And, in the legacy of Müller and Bultmann, I will refer by science to the natural sciences and to possible contributions of those sciences to the study of religion.

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26   Nicholas Claidière, Thomas C. Scott-Phillips, and Dan Sperber, "How Darwinian is Cultural Evolution?" *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological Sciences* 369, no. 642 (2014): 1–8. In an imaginative thought experiment, Thomas Lawson has recently demonstrated just how such ordinary cognitive proclivities might be assembled to create a religion ("How to Create a Religion," *e-Rhizome. Journal for the Study of Religion, Culture, Society and Cognition* 1, no. 2 [2019]: 132–137).

27   David Reich, *Who We Are and How We Got Here: Ancient DNA and the New Science of the Human Past* (New York: Vintage, 2018); Noreen Tuross and Michael G. Campana, "Ancient DNA," in *The Science of Roman History: Biology, Climate, and the Future of the Past*, Walter Scheidel, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 205–223; Roy J. King and Peter A. Underhill, "Modern DNA and the Ancient Mediterranean," in Scheidel, ed., *The Science of Roman History*, 224–248.

28   Susan Haack, "Six Signs of Scientism," *Logos and Episteme* 3, no. 1 (2012): 75–95.

29   Kocku von Stuckrad, "Straw Men and Scientific Nostalgia: A Response to Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe," in *Conversations and Controversies in the Scientific Study of Religion*, Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 271–276.

30   Naomi Oreskes, "Put Your Faith in Science," *Time Magazine* 194, no. 21 (19 November 2019), 23–24.

3   "Religion" as a Theoretical Object of Scientific Study

In recent scholarship, "religion" has been contested as a modern, culturally-constructed category, inappropriate for identifying an object of scientific study – indeed, as the object of any kind of study. Some postmodernists have gone so far as to argue that since no word for religion exists in the ancient or non-Western worlds, there was no religion in these worlds.[31] One scholar has written, for example, that: "if there is a word that has changed from century to century, and has a different aspect in every country in which it is used … it is religion." This appraisal is, however, not from some contemporary postmodernist contesting the uncritical use of academic categories; it is the "modernist" insight of Max Müller.[32] As Müller recognized, the category "religion" has a long-historical and a wide-cultural usage rendering any essentialist definition a misleading fabrication. Perhaps recalling Edmund Burke's distinction between definition and what nevertheless might be historically discerned,[33] Müller insisted that scientific historians and comparativists of religion must simply "make clear to themselves and to others" what they mean by the term "rather than simply assuming that the category in-and-of itself distinguishes

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31   Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 2, 8. Visitors to museum exhibits of Egyptology might be astounded to "discover" that there was no art in ancient Egypt because there is no word for it in their language (Edward Bleiberg and Stephanie Weissberg, *Striking Power: Iconoclasm in Ancient Egypt.* [St. Louis/New York: Pulitzer Arts Foundation/Brooklyn Museum, 2019]). Nor, did the Akkadians have words for "ethics," "law," "music," "art," "science," "economy," "technology," "government," "media," or "culture" (Alan Lenzi, "Ancient Mesopotamian Scholars, Ritual Speech, and Theorizing Religion Without 'Theory' or 'Religion'." In Roubekas, ed. *Theorizing "Religion" in Antiquity* [Sheffield: Equinox, 2019], 154), nor the Greeks for "economy," "society," or "psychology," etc., etc. – but we can nonetheless study such types of human behaviors and productions (Robert L. Fowler, "Thoughts on Myth and Religion in Early Greek Historiography," *Minerva* 22 [2009], 22–23).

32   F. Max Müller, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by the Religions of India* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878), 8–9, 197; Luther H. Martin, "The Jabberwocky Dilemma: Take Religion for Example," in Roubekas, ed., *Theorizing "Religion" in Antiquity* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2019), 418–419. On the perils of comparative and historical research among the different religions, see already Müller's admonition in his "Preface" to the fifty volumes of the *Sacred Books of the East*, which he edited in *Vol.* 1, *The Upanishads*, Part 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), ix–xxxviii.

33   Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, [1790], T.H.D. Mahoney, ed. (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), 71; cited by Michael E. Hobart, *The Great Rift: Literacy, Numeracy, and the Religion-Science Divide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 10.

relevant data to be questioned and explained."[34] This clarification of data to be studied must not simply be an *ad hoc* presumption but must be theoretically framed and warranted if there is to be any intersubjective accord within scientific studies of religion.

I, along with a number of other contemporary scholars, have identified the data for a scientific study of religion as those observable human doings that are legitimated by claims to the authority of culturally-postulated superhuman agents.[35] From the theoretical perspective of evolutionary psychology, claims to the authority of superhuman agents represent an abstracted superspecies that is unique to the cognitive capacity of *Homo sapiens*, and that not only differentiate humans from other species,[36] but also discriminate those human behaviors that might be studied as religious from their other cultural practices.[37]

Many scholars have generalized claims of commerce with superhuman agents with the practices of the Tungusic people of Northern Asia, often referred to as "shamanic." While some have associated the neurodivergent states of consciousness associated with these "shamanic" performances as the first iterations of a universal psychological design for religiosity,[38] they are more often associated in modernity with pathology. However, altered states of consciousness are a pan-human cognitive potential,[39] the control of which has often proven valuable for establishing social identity.[40]

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34   Müller, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion*, 9; Thomas Spencer Jerome, "The Case of the Eyewitnesses: 'A Lie is a Lie, Even in Latin,'" in *The Historian as Detective: Essays on Evidence*, Robin W. Winks, ed. (New York: Harper & Row 1969), 188–190.

35   The definition of religious actions as human doings that are legitimated by culturally postulated superhuman agents was introduced into the cognitive science of religion by E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, in their *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 123–127; see also 61, 82, 89, 112.

36   Hobart, *The Great Rift*, 367, note 14.

37   Luther H. Martin, "The Origins of Religion, Cognition and Culture: The Bowerbird Syndrome," in *Origins of Religion, Cognition and Culture*, A. Geertz, ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 178–202.

38   Michael Winkelman, "Shamanic Universals and Evolutionary Psychology," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 16, no. 2 (2002): 63–76; Joseph Bulbulia, "Are There Any Religions? An Evolutionary Exploration," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 17, no. 2 (2005): 71–100.

39   Eric R. Kandel*, The Disordered Mind: What Unusual Brains Tell Us About Ourselves* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018).

40   Altered states of consciousness by *H. sapiens* can also be experienced today as "religious" or "spiritual" (Robert N. McCauley and George Graham, *Hearing Voices and Other Matters of the Mind: What Mental Abnormalities Can Teach Us about Religions* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2020]); see also Michael Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us about Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression and*

Some 11,000 years ago, during the Holocene, when human societies began to exceed the approximately 1500 member threshold for face-to-face governance,[41] the increased population pressures resulted in a socioeconomic division of labor governed by hierarchical administrative polities.[42] In this context of socioeconomic allotments, some neurodivergent factionists, claiming the authority of superhuman agents, legitimated an identity as "religious specialists," organized guilds for marketing their intercourse with the "gods," and sought access to power, economically and/or politically. In other words, religions do not emerge nor do they evolve; rather religions are associations constructed for social, political, and/or economic ends; their success is measured by their ability to achieve a cultural stability, e.g., transgenerational transmission.

Those associations that were legitimated by claims to the authority of superhuman agents and that achieved some cultural stability, competed not only with one another for status but also as alternatives to, or for alliances with, political guilds which were legitimated by their own authoritarian power, the police – even in those theocratic societies claiming an ultimate administrative authority of "Big Gods."[43] The modern study of religion usually concentrates on describing those guilds that were politically successful, especially those that developed into the familiar "world religions."

The stipulation of religion as human doings, legitimated by claims to the authority of superhuman agents is, of course, a rehearsal of E.B. Tylor's well-known "minimal" definition of religion (1871),[44] a characterization already suggested two decades earlier by Müller (1867),[45] and now supported by research in the cognitive sciences. Some, however, have claimed that this *stipulation* for

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      Transcendence (New York: Penguin, 2018); David Lewis-Williams, *Conceiving God: The Cognitive Origins and Evolution of Religion* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010).

41   The 1500 population threshold for face-to-face governance is established by the social mind hypothesis of Robin Dunbar, e.g., Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 76–77; Dunbar, *How Many Friends Does One Person Need?* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 33; Clive Gamble, John Gowlett, and Robin Dunbar, *Thinking Big: How the Evolution of Social Life Shaped the Human Mind* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 41–42, 193–198.

42   Lawrence H. Keeley, "Hunter-Gatherer Economic Complexity and 'Population Pressure': A Cross-cultural Analysis," *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 7, no. 4 (1988): 373–411.

43   See critical responses to Norenzayan's thesis by historians of religion in the review symposium on Ara Norenzayan's *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), in *Religion* 44, no. 4 (2014), 592–683.

44   E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture. Part II: Religion in Primitive Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, [1871] 1958), ii. 10.

45   Müller, *Essays on the Science of Religion*, x; on the relationships between Müller and Tylor, see Marjorie Wheeler-Barclay, *The Science of Religion in Britain, 1860–1915* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010).

the behavioral parameters of religions is, itself, an essentialist *definition*,[46] an agonistic conceit that is, of course, simply incorrect.[47] While the Tylorian stipulation is clearly incomplete and insufficient as a comprehensive definition of religion, it does provide an initial heuristic for identifying certain human assertions and actions as religious. However, behaviors associated with claims to the authority of superhuman agency must be historically and culturally parsed. For example, an additional "Durkheimian" caveat stipulates that religious representations are those that are bestowed with costliness, in terms of time, labor, cognitive effort, etc.[48] The particular spatial domain upon which such "religious" claims are mapped, whether that domain is mythologically-, geographically-, or cosmologically-structured, determines ways by which divine-human commerce is imagined and the cognitive and cultural constraints upon that imagination. Such Tylorian (and Durkheimian) stipulations identify theoretically the empirical data for religion that might be studied scientifically.[49]

4   The Cognitive Sciences

While some scholars of religion were returning to science by employing evolutionary theory, others began developing the insights from innovative research on the human brain into a cognitive science of religion. Ironically, the theoretical frame of the cognitive sciences, with its concern for identifying pan-human traits of human cognition, also represents a return to Darwinian evolution. The brain is an evolved organ, like hearts, kidneys, or any other organ of the human body. And, like other organs of the body, the brain evolved functions as adaptions to environment pressures. The interdisciplinary researches of the cognitive sciences are concerned with describing, and explaining, minds, i.e., the mental functions of human brains: the perceptual and conceptual representations constructed by human brains, the ways by which attention is directed

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46   Ivan Strenski, "Much Ado about Quite a Lot: A Response to Alessandro Testa's Review of Strenski, Understanding Theories of Religion," *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* 85, no. 1 (2019): 365–388.

47   Armin Geertz, "How Did Ignorance Become Fact in American Religious Studies? A Reluctant Reply to Ivan Strenski," *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* 86, no. 1 (2020): 365–403.

48   For Durkheim, religion "always presupposes that the worshipper gives some of his substance or his goods to the gods" (Émile Durkheim, The *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, J.W. Swain, trans. (New York: The Free Press, [1912] 2015), 385).

49   For a succinct discussion of "religion" as a theoretical object of scientific study, see Geertz, "How Did Ignorance Become a Fact," 387–394.

to some but not all of these mental representations, the reasons why certain of these representations become deposited in memory, and with their public distribution.[50] Primarily, this innovative research has challenged the epistemological assumption of mind as a *tabula rasa* that might be fully explained by inscriptions of culture, a cultural-behavioral view documented from Aristotle (*De Anima*, 429b29–430a), but especially associated with the seventeenth-century philosophy of John Locke.[51] However, recent technological advances, such as structural and functional brain imaging, have shifted philosophical speculations about minds to neurocognitive explorations of brains. The cognitive sciences, and those approaches influenced by the cognitive sciences, are currently the most theoretically nuanced and methodologically refined by scholars of religion.

For those who wish to incorporate insights from the cognitive sciences, and/or from those approaches influenced by the cognitive sciences, into their study of religion, some familiarity with contemporary research in the cognitive sciences is, of course, necessary. However, any numbers of accessible overviews are now available.[52]

4.1   *The Cognitive Science of Religion*

A cognitive science of religion was first proposed in 1980 by anthropologist Stewart Guthrie. However, such an approach was undertaken by scholars of *religion* only a decade later, by historian of religion E. Thomas Lawson and philosopher of science and religion Robert N. McCauley. Briefly, the cognitive

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50   The cognitive revolution can be traced from three presentations to a meeting at MIT in 1956 (Howard Gardner, *The Mind's New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution* [New York: Basic Books, 1985], 28–31). Computer scientists Allen Newell and Herbert Simon showed that cognitive processes might be replicated by a computer program and, thus, objectively described and tracked ("The Logic Theory Machine. A Complex Information Processing System," published in the *Journal of Symbolic Logic* 22, no. 3[1957]: 331–332). Psychologist George Miller argued, in his influential presentation, "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two," that there are constraints on cognition (published in *Psychological Review* 63, no. 2 [1956]: 81–97). Linguist Noam Chomsky showed that syntactic structures are underdetermined by cultural input and, consequently, are an innate property of the brain ("Three Models for the Description of Language," *IRE Transactions on Information Theory* 2, no. 3 [1956]: 113–124) – however, that innateness might be understood. The evolutionary history of *H. sapiens* explains shared characteristics of human cognition.

51   John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Thomas Bassett, 1689).

52   For a cognitively based account of religion, see Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); for a new comprehensive introduction, see Claire White, *Introduction to the Cognitive Science of Religion*: *Connecting Evolution, Brain, Cognition, and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2021).

science of religion is an investigation of the neurocognitive underpinnings of religious practices and thought that can be expressed in theoretical, descriptive, and explanatory claims and that are testable against intersubjectively available data.

In addition to claims about the legitimating authority of superhuman agents, an expanded parameter of mental attributes identified by cognitive scientists as foundational to religious formations include: Theory of Mind or the attribution of mental states to others, including claims about superhuman agents and especially to a causal intentionality for these agents, a social engagement with these agents by individual followers, the various cognitive effects of mind-altering religious practices, from inhibitory routines such as fasting or meditation to the excitatory practices of high arousal rituals, the prosocial effects of religious practices, etc. Although a theoretical stability for a cognitive science of religion remains to be fully consolidated,[53] experimental support for identifying those cognitive functions exploited by religions is a welcome addition to the largely dated and often injudicious methodological tools of our field.

4.2   CSR 2.0: Experimentalism

While the first generation of cognitive scientists of religion tended to be primarily historians of religion, the second generation of this field of study, sometimes referred to as CSR 2.0,[54] is characterized largely by experimentalists. However, their ahistorical laboratory research has often fallen prey to a common cultural presumption, supported by the influential thesis of Durkheim, that religion represents primarily a positive social value. For example, a number of experimental studies of religions have focused on establishing a relationship between religion and "pro-sociality." Pro-sociality is, of course, characteristic of any in-group formation. However, the stronger the in-group technologies, the stronger their boundary constructions segregate an out-group populace, a social exclusion that has inevitably resulted in hostility and conflict.[55] As

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53   Luther H. Martin and Ilkka Pyysiäinen, "Moving Towards a New Science of Religion; or, Have We Already Arrived," in *Mental Culture: Classical Social Theory and the Cognitive Science of Religion*, Dimitris Xygalatas and William W. McCorkle, Jr., eds. (London: Routledge, 2013), 213–226.

54   Leonardo Ambasciano, "Exiting the Motel of the Mysteries? How Historiographical Floccinaucinihilipilification Is Affecting CSR 2.0," in *The Cognitive Science of Religion after Twenty-Five Years*, Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe, eds. (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 215–249.

55   Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe, "Pro- and Assortative-sociality in the Formation and Maintenance of Religions Groups," *Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion* 2, no. 1 (2014): 1–12.

historian of religion J.Z. Smith has argued, religion "has been responsible for more death and suffering than any other human activity,"[56] an evaluation of violent behavior that is documented from its emergence during the Holocene. As summarized by cultural anthropologist Brian Ferguson, the Holocene represented a "shift to a more sedentary existence, a growing regional population, a concentration of valuable resources such as livestock, increasing social complexity and hierarchy, trade in high value goods, and the establishment of group boundaries and collective identities," conditions, Ferguson concluded, that are the prerequisite for the warlike cultures that became common during that period and afterwards.[57] This social dynamic of conflict, which is attendant upon the pro-social formation and maintenance of social groups, including the religious, has been largely neglected by CSR experimentalists or only mentioned in passing.[58]

The pro-social bias that characterizes CSR 2.0 is unsurprising given that most research by CSR experimentalists is funded by pro-religious interest groups such as the Issachar Fund,[59] the Spaulding Trust,[60] and, especially, the John Templeton Foundation.[61] The Templeton Foundation, for example, was the sole "funding opportunity" previously listed on the webpage of the International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion.[62] Research on religion funded by foundations with pro-religious goals is similar to clinical trials for new drugs conducted by their pharmaceutical manufacturers. Unsurprisingly, such clinical trials have been found to have up to a 50 percent higher odds of reaching favorable results for company products than do independent assessments.[63]

56   Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (University of Chicago Press, 1982), 110.

57   R. Brian Ferguson, "Why We Fight," *Scientific American* 319, no. 3 (2018): 80–81.

58   Martin and Wiebe, "Pro- and Assortative-sociality."

59   http://www.issacharfund.org/about/ (accessed June 30, 2021).

60   https://www.spaldingtrust.org.uk/about (accessed June 30, 2021).

61   Donald Wiebe, "Religious Biases in Funding Religious Studies Research?" *Religio. Revue pro religionisitu* 17, no. 2 (2009): 125–140; Leonardo.Ambasciano, "The Case of the JTF," personal communication, 22 December 2019; Ambasciano, "Memoirs of an Academic Rōnin: Religious Studies and Mentorship in the Age of Post-Truth," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 33, no. 1 (2021): 1–20.

62   http://www.iacsr.com/memberscorner/research-funding-opportunities/ (accessed 1/6/2020; subsequently deleted). In November 2020, the International Association for the Cognitive Sciences of Religion (IACSR) renamed itself the International Association for the Cognitive and Evolutionary Sciences of Religion (IACESR).

63   Tamar Oostrom, "Funding of Clinical Trials and Reported Drug Efficacy" (2021). https://www.eheathecom.org/pdfs/Oostrom.pdf (accessed 23 June 2021); John P.A. Ioannidis, "State of the World's Science: Rethink Funding," *Scientific American* 319, no. 4 (2018):

Commentator Michael Lewis has posited that the sample size used by experimental psychologists for their trials is generally some 40 subjects, a sample which, he contends, actually gives "only a 50 percent chance of accurately reflecting the [larger] population. To have a 90 percent chance of capturing the traits of the larger population, the reference sample," he concludes, "[would need to number] … at least 130."[64] But in a recently anthologized volume of representative experiments by cognitive scientists of religion,[65] the sample size of many experiments ranges from fewer than 25,[66] to a high of 70.[67] In this view, the statistical power for CSR experiments to reflect larger populations ranges from null to 50 percent.

5   Behavioral Economics of Religion

Like cognitive science of religion, a behavioral economics argues that the mind operates with its own cognitive heuristics in the face of real-world uncertainty.[68] Associated primarily with the work of Israeli psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, the goal of their approach is to take "psychology out of the contrived laboratory" in order to address "real world data," especially that having to do with decision making.[69] Consequently, Tversky and Kahneman sought to identify those systematic mistakes of rational judgements that are seemingly ingrained in the human mind and are,

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       53–55; Gisela Schott, Henry Pachl, Ulrich Limbach, Ursula Gundert-Remy, Klaus Lieb, and Wolf-Dieter Ludwig, "The Financing of Drug Trials by Pharmaceutical Companies and Its Consequences," *Deutsches Ärzteblatt International* 107, no. 17 (2010): 295–301.

64   Michael Lewis, *The Undoing Project: A Friendship That Changed Our Minds* (New York: Norton, 2016), 161 and note; Joseph. P. Simmons, Leif D. Nelson, and Uri Simonsohn, "False-positive Psychology: Undisclosed Flexibility in Data Collection and Analysis Allows Presenting Anything as Significant," *Psychological Science* 22, no. 11 (2011): 1359–1366.

65   D. Jason Slone and William W. McCorkle, Jr, *The Cognitive Science of Religion: A Methodological Introduction to Key Empirical Studies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

66   Slone and McCorkle, *The Cognitive Science of Religion*, 104, 142, 205, 219–223, 235.

67   Slone and McCorkle, *The Cognitive Science of Religion*, 82, 118. As contributions to the Slone and McCorkle anthology are summaries of research, some contributors neglected to indicate the sample size employed. Studies employing sample sizes over 100 often utilized online surveys (e.g., Slone and McCorkle, 57) or drew upon existing databases (e.g., Slone and McCorkle, 64, 156). It should be acknowledged that a few contributors conceded the insufficient size of their earlier research samples (e.g., Slone and McCorkle, 24), especially recognizing the criticism of small sample sizes in research by empirical psychologists generally (e.g., Simmons *et al.*, "False-positive Psychology," 141, 152).

68   Lewis, *The Undoing Project*, 42.

69   Lewis, *The Undoing Project*, 293.

therefore, predictable.[70] For example, Tversky and Kahneman have argued that psychologists have fallen prey to what they have identified as the aforementioned heuristic fallacy of "Belief in the Law of Small Numbers."[71] In addition to cultural presumptions and cognitive biases, in other words, scholars of religion need to heed and to avoid those heuristic fallacies identified by behavioral economists.

Whereas behavioral economics has been a major influence in the fields of economics, medicine, and politics, this approach has been underexploited in the study of religion.[72] A few scholars of religion have referred to their approach, but only tangentially, primarily to Kahneman's *Thinking Fast, Thinking Slow*, a popular overview of his research findings. More recently, however, several economists have addressed the question of the relationship between religious agents and economic behaviors,[73] and behavioral economist Jonathan Tan has now forthrightly identified his research as a "behavioral economics of religion."[74]

6   Cognitive Historiography of Religion

Cognitive historiography is the investigation of "past minds."[75] Like behavioral economics, cognitive historiography of religion seeks to take religion out of contrived laboratory settings to address real world data that extends over space and throughout time. Its cognitive approach negates the Lockean behaviorism that takes descriptions of context as sufficient for explaining historical data.

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70   Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, *Judgement under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 3–20.

71   Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Belief in the Law of Small Numbers," *Psychological Bulletin* 76, no. 2 (1971): 105–110.

72   Kahneman, winner of the 2002 Nobel Laureate in Economics, was fascinated about why people continue to believe in God (Lewis, *The Undoing Project*, 66). For example, he noted an inconsistency in religious participation, in which, on the one hand, there is a "relatively greater favorable impact on both positive affect and stress reduction" but, on the other, provides participants "no reduction of feelings of depression or worry" (Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 396). But he never pursued research in this area.

73   Elizabeth Minton and Lynn R. Kahl, *Belief Systems, Religion, and Behavioral Economics: Marketing in Multicultural Environments* (New York: Business Expert Press, 2014).

74   Jonathan H.W. Tan, "Behavioral Economics of Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*, Paul Oslington, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 512–529.

75   Luther H. Martin and Jesper Sørensen, *Past Minds: Studies in Cognitive Historiography* (London: Routledge, 2011).

Rather, cognitive historiography takes seriously the distinction first made by Hegel between 'accounts of human doings in the past' (*historiae rerum gesta-rum*), and 'the doings themselves' (*res gestae*),[76] a distinction acknowledged in a number of languages, in German, for example, between *Geschichte* and *Historie*. English, however, has only one word for both meanings, "history" – a semantic synonymy that inevitably results in a Pirandellian confound between account and actuality.[77]

Recognizing the Hegelian distinction between human doings in the past and the accounts of these doings, cognitive historiography seeks to understand how past human doings have themselves been processed by and transmitted by minds in the first place, as well as how the subsequent accounts of those doings have been produced and transmitted by historians. As Tversky noted, historical findings are "part of a broader class of judgments involving intuitive interpretation of data."[78] Historians, for example, "take whatever facts they had observed (but neglecting the many facts that they did not or could not observe) and make them fit neatly into a confident-sounding story."[79] Philosopher Alex Rosenberg has recently argued that historical narratives are inexorably molded by the historian's Theory of Mind[80] – a cognitive inference that is, perhaps, more readily familiar from those genres of Anglo-American literature in which the mental states of animals are narrated,[81] such as the familiar jungle tales by Rudyard Kipling,[82] but that is documented with the domestication of animals during the Holocene.[83] Consequently, Rosenberg concludes that historical

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76   G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, J. Sibree, trans. (New York: Dover, [1861] 1956), 60.

77   E.g., Luigi Pirandello, (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, John Linstrum trans. [London: Bloomsbury, 2009], 64): "Whatever is a reality today, whatever you touch and believe in and that seems real for you today, is going to be – like the reality of yesterday – an illusion tomorrow".

78   Lewis, *The Undoing Project*, 206.

79   Lewis, *The Undoing Project*, 207; Elizabeth Wayland and Paul T. Barber, *When They Severed Earth from Sky: How the Human Mind Shapes Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 27.

80   Alex Rosenberg, *How History Gets things Wrong: The Neuroscience of Our Addiction to Stories* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018).

81   Richard W. Bulliet, *Hunters, Herders, and Hamburgers: The Past and Future of Human Animal Relationships* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 191.

82   Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book* (London: Macmillian, 1894); Kipling, *Just So Stories* (London: Macmillian 1902). The cognitive principle of agency has been emphasized in the construction of myths by Barber and Barber, *When They Severed Earth from Sky*, 41–52.

83   Joseph LeDoux, *The Deep History of Ourselves: The Four-Billion-Year Story of How We Got Conscious Brains* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019), 316.

narratives, like anthropomorphic animal stories, are simply fiction.[84] In other words, historians quite unwittingly employ biased schemata,[85] such as those cognitive heuristics constructed in terms of Theory of Mind, to connect the disparate dots of available evidence. Unlike the children's game, however, the evidential dots of historical evidence are unnumbered. Insights from the tested and testable theories of the cognitive sciences can aid historians in "connecting the dots" of their fragmentary data into coherent narratives with greater nuance and more confidence than might otherwise be the case. And a significant methodological contribution of the cognitive sciences is to alert historians not only to those biases and heuristics in the manufacture and preservation of their historical sources, but also to those in their own work.

A notable cognitive history of a particular religious tradition is Jennifer Larson's comprehensive *Understanding of Greek Religion* (2016), in which Larson clearly explains her various cognitive approaches to particular features characteristic of ancient Greek religions (e.g., gods, myth, rituals, sacrifice, etc.), and she provides, as well, a view into "the complexities of … [the] source material."[86] However, Larson is a classicist, not a religious studies scholar.[87]

7   Network Theory

Along with the cognitive sciences, network theory proposes a second major approach for a scientific study of religion. While not as well-known to scholars of religion as cognitive approaches, a structural mapping of relationships among social groups has been popular among social scientists since the 1950s,

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84 For a severe critique of Rosenberg's "scientistic" "physicalism," see Massimo Pigliucci, "Why Alex Rosenberg – and a Number of Other Philosophers – Are Wrong Just about Everything: A Commentary on Scientistic Reductionism," *Journal of Cognitive Historiography* 5, nos. 1–2 (2018–2019), 197–204.

85 "Schemata" is a generic term for cognitive templates that is sometimes used to designate conceptual in contrast to action templates, or "scripts" (William F. Brewer, "Schemata," in *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, R.A. Wilson and F.C. Keil, eds. [Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999], 720).

86 Jennifer Larson, *Understanding Greek Religion* (London: Routledge, 2016), xvii. See the "Book Review Symposium on Jennifer Larson's *Understanding Greek Religion*," in the *Journal of Cognitive Historiography* 4.1 (2017).

87 Several cognitive studies of specific religious traditions have now been published by historians of religion (e.g., István Czachesz, *Cognitive Science and the New Testament: A New Approach to Early Christian Research* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017]; Olympia Panagiotidou, with Roger Beck, *The Roman Mithras Cult: A Cognitive Approach* [London: Bloomsbury, 2017]; Luther H. Martin, *The Mind of Mithraists: Historical and Cognitive Studies in the Roman Cult of Mithras* [London: Bloomsbury, 2015]).

an approach that can be traced back to the 1908 publication of Georg Simmel's *Soziologie*.[88] In chapter six of this volume, "*Die Kreuzung sozialer Kreise*," Simmel focused on what is usually translated as concentric "webs of group affiliations."[89] Italian sociologist Mario Diani has concluded that it is Simmel's emphasis on the *form* of social relationships rather than on their specific *content* that "facilitates the application of his concepts to historical periods other than the ones which provided most of his empirical examples."[90]

More recently, Israeli historian Irad Malkin has recast structural mappings of social relationships into an approach informed by contemporary chaos theory, a restructuring that transforms earlier descriptions of network relations into theoretical explanations. The emergence of networks, Malkin writes, is directly related to the "[c]haotic behavior, fractal patterns, and random links" that result in "small worlds."[91] Small worlds are defined by universal sets of nodes and links,[92] which, however, are decentralized.[93] Network principles are documented from the natural sciences – from physics, molecular biology, and neurology,[94] to the functions of human memory,[95] and to those of consciousness itself.[96] And, these small world relationships are characteristic of manufactured networks, as well, from power grids to contemporary on-line religious networks.[97]

Anna Collar's study of *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire* (2013) pays close attention to specific religious networks, especially that of Jupiter Dolichenus, as well as the complex interrelations between the Dolichenean network

88   Georg Simmel, *Soziologie: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1908).

89   Georg Simmel, *Conflict and the Web of Group-Affiliations*, Kurt H. Wolff and Reinhard Bendix, trans. (New York: The Free Press, 1955). "The Web of Group-Affiliations" is the translation by Bendix of "*Die Kreuzung sozialer Kreise*," Chapter 6 of Simmel's *Soziologie*, 403–453, first published as Chapter 5 in Simmel, Über soziale Differenzierung. Soziologische und psychologische Untersuchungen (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1890), 100–116.

90   Mario Diani, "Simmel to Rokkan and Beyond: Towards a Network Theory of (New) Social Movements," *European Journal of Social Theory* 3, no. 4 (2000): 394.

91   Irad Malkin, *A Small Greek World: Networks in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 209.

92   Malkin, *A Small Greek World*, 16, 27.

93   Malkin, *A Small Greek World*, 5.

94   E.g., Toby Spribille, Veera Tuovinen, Philipp Resl, Dan Vanderpool, Heimo Wolinski, M. Catherine Aime, Kevin Schneider, Edith Stabentheiner, Merje Toome-Heller, Göran Thor, Helmut Mayrhofer, Hanna Johannesson, and John P. McCutcheon, "Basidiomycete Yeasts in the Cortex of Ascomycete Macrolichens," *Science* 353, no. 6298 (2016): 488–492.

95   Alcino J. Silva, "Memory's Intricate Web," *Scientific American* 317, no. 1 (2017): 30–37.

96   Steven Strogatz, *Sync: How Order Emerges from Chaos in the Universe, Nature and Daily Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), 14.

97   Malkin, A *Small Greek World*, 205–206.

and Roman culture.[98] Collar's study, in other words, established the value of network theory for a scientific study of religion.[99] But, again, Collar is not a religious studies scholar but an archaeologist.

8 Quantitative Approaches for a Scientific Study of Religion

While historians of religion organize their conclusions in narratives, natural scientists "prefer to test their hypotheses using statistics or other quantitative methods."[100] Whereas quantitative approaches cannot construct hypotheses, they can demonstrate theoretical reliability by formulating generally expressed hypotheses into particular logical rules appropriate for statistical modelling or digital processing. The results of such logical inferences can then be compared with other available data – historical, ethnographic, and experimental – for corrections to, or confirmations of, theoretical predictions.

In addition to the statistical models of population history I mentioned above that are reconstructed from analyses of "stones, bones, and genomes,"[101] I can mention such research areas as mathematical biology, which employs computational models to describe and to explain principles of organic systems,[102]

98 Anna Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire: The Spread of New Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

99 Other studies of networks have also focused on the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, e.g., Esther Eidinow, ("Networks and Narratives: A Model for Ancient Greek Religion," *Kernos* 24 [2011]: 9–38), and Irad Malkin, Christy Constantakopoulou, and Katerina Panagopoulo, eds. (*Greek and Roman Networks in the Mediterranean* [London: Routledge, 2009]). One religious studies scholar, Aleš Chalupa, and colleagues at the Department for the Study of Religions, Masaryk University, have researched networks of the Roman cults of Mithras employing computer modeling (https://www.muni.cz/en/research/pub lications/1315375 [accessed 2/10/2020]). And network models have been suggested for the successes of early Christianity by Rodney Stark (*The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996], 20), and by Albert-László Barabási (*Linked: How Everything is Connected to Everything Else and What it Means for Business, Science, and Everyday Life* [New York: Penguin, 2003], 3–5, 7, 19, 129, 136). For limitations in applying network theory to historical cases, see Luther H. Martin, "Was there a Network of Roman Mithraists"? *Religio. Revue pro religionistiku* 26, no. 2 (2018): 167–182, and Leonardo Ambasciano, "The Goddess Who Failed? Competitive Networks (or the Lack Thereof), Gender Politics, and the Diffusion of the Roman Cult of Bona Dea," *Religio. Revue pro religionisitu* 24, no. 2 (2016): 111–165.

100 Edmund Russell, *Evolutionary History: Uniting History and Biology to Understand Life on Earth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 167.

101 Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of An Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 13, 67.

102 Marc Mangel, *The Theoretical Biologist's Toolbox: Quantitative Methods for Ecology and Evolutionary Biology* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

cliodynamics, a scientific historiography that employs econometric techniques, macrosociological approaches and statistical modes of long-term processes of population variation,[103] and explorations of the Malthusian interplay between populations and nature that have recently been exemplified in histories of the Roman Empire.[104] However, none of these has been employed specifically in the study of religion.[105] Rather, I shall briefly note two quantitative approaches by scholars of religion that have shown promise for its scientific study.

8.1   *Multi-agent Social Simulations*

One of the more interesting quantitative approaches to the study of religion is computer-generated, multi-agent artificial intelligence.[106] This agent-based modeling of religious scenarios is a mathematical and computational tool that is based primarily on the modeling of complex social, economic, and biological systems by epidemiologist Joshua Epstein at the close of the last century.[107] Most social scientific theories, Epstein argued, have been occupied with "static equilibria" that have "ignored time dynamics"[108] – an intriguing observation with respect to the temporal interests of historiography. On the other hand, agent-based modeling seeks simple explanatory rules for the complex interactions of human-like agents that are simulated in computer-generated virtual environments, in space as well as over time.[109]

Subsequently, the abstract rules of behavior exhibited by agent-based modeling have been supplemented with an integration of the physical manifestations of the body.[110] And, cognitive scientist Ron Sun has now developed an

103   Peter Turchin, *Historical Dynamics: Why States Rise and Fall* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). Turchin is also Editor-in-Chief of *Cliodynamics: The Journal of Quantitative History and Cultural Evolution*.

104   Harper, *The Fate of Rome*; Scheidel, *The Science of Roman History*.

105   While a historian and not a scholar of religion, Turchin is cooperating with those who are, e.g., Harvey Whitehouse, Pieter François, and Peter Turchin, "The Role of Ritual in the Evolution of Social Complexity: Five Predictions and a Drum Roll," *Cliodynamics: The Journal of Quantitative History and Cultural Evolution*, 6, no. 2 (2015): 199–216; Turchin, "Religion and Empire in the Axial Age," *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 2, no. 3 (2012): 256–260.

106   Justin E. Lane, *Understanding Religion Through Artificial Intelligence: Bonding and Belief* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 7–10.

107   Joshua M. Epstein and Robert Axtell, *Growing Artificial Societies* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996).

108   Epstein and Axtell, *Growing Artificial Societies*, 2.

109   Epstein and Axtell, *Growing Artificial Societies*, 153.

110   Rolf Pfeifer and Josh Bongard, *How the Body Shapes the Way We Think: A New View of Intelligence* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), esp. 217–221. For an emphasis on embodiment as well as embrainment (as well as encultured and extended) for a scientific study of religion, see Armin Geertz, "Brain, Body and Culture: A Biocultural Theory of Religion," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22, no. 4 (2010): 304–321.

integrated cognitive architecture that provides agent-based simulation with a quantitative explanation also for psychological data.[111] His major goal is to ground the social sciences generally in the cognitive sciences with his "cognitive social sciences" project.[112]

Contributors to a volume entitled *Maths Meet Myth*, edited by English physicist Ralph Kenna and two of his associates (2017), deal specifically with the relationship of cognition to networks, with specific reference to history, mythology, and literature. The sub-title of this volume, *Quantitative Approaches to Ancient Narratives*, suggests there is much to be explored in quantitative approaches for a scientific study of religion, especially for a scientific history of religions.[113]

Currently, quantitative approaches have been employed by only a few scholars of religion, for example, on Eucharistic developments in early Christianity,[114] or, on certain exemplars of Graeco-Roman religions.[115] However, an edited volume entitled *Digital Humanities and Research Methods in Religious Studies* was recently published that includes sixteen case studies specifically exemplifying the use of digital technologies in the study of religion.[116] And, three of the sixteen papers presented at the conference on which this volume is premised were devoted to aspects of digital research for the humanities. Clearly the promise of these quantitative approaches for the study of religion should not be discounted.

8.2 *Big Data Approaches*

Related to computational simulations of religious scenarios, some scholars of religion are pioneering the quantification and digitalization of Big Data.[117] For

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111 Ron Sun, *Cognition and Multi-Agent Interaction: From Cognitive Modeling to Social Simulation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

112 Ron Sun, *Grounding Social Sciences in Cognitive Sciences* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2012).

113 Ralph Kenna, Máirín MacCarron, and Pádraig MacCarron, eds. *Maths Meet Myths: Quantitative Approaches to Ancient Narratives* (Switzerland: Springer, 2017).

114 Vojtěch Kăse, *Tracing the Origins of Eucharistic Magic: On the Role of Cognitive Attraction in the Cultural Transmission of Collective Ritual*, PhD dissertation, University of Helsinki/Masaryk University, 2019.

115 A project at Masaryk University, for example, focuses on "A Generative Historiography of the Ancient Mediterranean: Modelling and Stimulating the Diffusion of Religious Ideas and Forms of Behaviour" (GEHIR) (gehir.phil.muni.cz/ [accessed July 3, 2021]). Agent-based modeling of religious scenarios is also being pursued by researchers at the University of Agder (Justin E. Lane and F. LeRon Schults, "Cognition, Culture, and Social Simulation," *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 18, no. 5 [2018]: 451–461).

116 Christopher D. Cantwell and Kristen Petersen, eds. *Digital Humanities and Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021).

117 Erez Aiden and Jean-Baptiste Michel, *Uncharted: Big Data as a Lens on Human Culture* (New York: Riverside Books, 2013).

example, Edward Slingerland and a group of his colleagues have published a paradigmatic article entitled "A 'Big Data' Approach to Mind-Body Concepts" in early Chinese texts.[118] Slingerland's approach is the basis for a comprehensive "Database of Religious History" being compiled at the University of British Columbia. In addition, a "Global History Databank" (*Seshat*) is being compiled at the Evolution Institute at Oxford University under the direction of Peter Turchin. While there is currently a somewhat contentious relationship between the proponents of these two projects,[119] both are constructing global compilations of religious data against which historical hypotheses might be scientifically constructed and tested. And, they might eventually lead to the documentation of general patterns in the history of *H. sapiens*, as occurred in the case of paleontology.[120]

As Slingerland's research has exemplified, big data from the past has been digitalized primarily from the realm of texts, often with a historiographical neglect of material culture.[121]

Might material culture, e.g., archaeological remains, be productively digitalized? And, of course, does sufficient data exist apart from texts for the quantification of specific historical happenings that might, in fact, be qualified as "Big"?[122] Further, recent research has documented "an intuitive and possibly innate instinct for numbers,"[123] a cognitive heuristic bias for numerical quantification, which, like the cognitive schemas for detection of agents or for expression in narrative compositions, can bias the quantitative approaches of researchers.

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118   Edward Slingerland, Ryan Nichols, Kristoffer Neilbo, and Carson Logan, "The Distant Reading of Religious Texts: A 'Big Data' Approach to Mind-Body Concepts in Early China," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, no. 4 (2017): 985–1016. There is, of course, nothing new theoretically in this approach to texts. Biblical scholars have productively mined textual data in their "higher criticism" since the nineteenth century. The essential difference is that nineteenth-century biblical scholars laboriously codified their Big Data on 3 × 5 cards (in Europe, A6 cards) while contemporary researchers employ efficient computer assessments and automated algorithmic analyses of their data.

119   See the overview of the two projects, with critiques, in the *Journal of Cognitive Historiography* 5.1–2 (2018), 115–158.

120   Neil Shubin, *The Universe Within: The Deep History of the Human Body* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 132–138; David Sepkoski and Michael Ruse, eds. *The Paleobiological Revolution: Essays on the Growth of Modern Paleontology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

121   An appropriate methodology for digitalizing the remains of material culture presents, of course, its own set of problems.

122   Graham, Shawn, Ian Milligan, Scott B Weingart, Kim Martin, eds., Exploring Big Historical Data: The Historian's Macroscope. second edition (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2022).

123   Andreas Nieder, *A Brain for Numbers: The Biology of te Number Instinct* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019), 147.

9   Conclusion

The axiological principles of science underlying contemporary cognitive, network, and quantitative possibilities for the study of religion recall the *Weltbild* that Charles Darwin already epitomized in the nineteenth century, and from which Max Müller fashioned the beginnings of a *Religionswissenschaft*. Nevertheless, Bultmann felt it necessary to note that studies of religion had, by the mid-twentieth century, yet to engage with scientific methods. And still the question remains in the twenty-first century: is there a future for a scientific study of religion? The answer is "yes" and "no."

From the robust theoretical and research models I have described, a promising future for scientific studies of religion might be concluded. And although a cognitive science of religion is now flourishing as an interdisciplinary research program,[124] its future remains nevertheless elusive, compromised, and conflicted.

First of all, science, any science, is hard. Human brains simply did not evolve to do science, a cognitive deficiency exemplified by the difficulties many face when first encountering mathematics, the language of science,[125] or when confronted with such of its counterintuitive ideas as black holes or the quantal structure of matter. And, science is fragile. Philosophers and historians of science have argued that the robust cognitive efforts and supportive social conditions required for science to succeed have been culturally sporadic.[126] This fragility of science is documented by its general neglect following its initial introduction in ancient Greece, the subsequent rejection of innovative technologies by early Chinese emperors, and a theocratic opposition to advanced astronomy and mathematics in the medieval Arabic cultures.[127] And, while science has contributed immeasurably to human knowledge, especially over the past two centuries, its findings are currently denied by many and openly attacked by others.[128] The aggressive neglect of science in the study of religion, throughout its history, exemplifies this retrograde mode of thought.

Since its beginnings in the nineteenth-century, the study of religion has been governed by an anti-science trajectory recently documented independently

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124   Franek, *Naturalism and Protectionism in the Study of Religions*, 116.

125   Hobart, *The Great Rift*, 5–10.

126   Robert N. McCauley, *Why Religion Is Natural and Science Is Not* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 279–286.

127   Toby E. Huff, *The Rise of Early Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 47–90, 237–286.

128   Lee McIntyre, *The Scientific Attitude: Defending Science from Denial, Fraud, and Pseudoscience* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019).

in four historical overviews.[129] Although three journals are now being published that are specifically devoted to scientific studies of religion,[130] and a few centers for its graduate education and research are active,[131] as well as some informally organized research teams, scientific studies of religion nevertheless remain tangential to local, national, and international associations for the study of religion; and many of these associations are even averse to the word "science."[132] The International Association for the Cognitive and Evolutionary Sciences of Religion, founded in 2006, remains the sole association explicitly dedicated to a scientific study of religion[133] – and there are already attempts by those with theological agendas to colonize this approach to a scientific approach to the study of religion.[134]

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129   Ambasicano, *An Unnatural History of Religions*; Franek, *Naturalism and Protectionism in the Study of Religions*; Donald Wiebe, *The Learned Practice of Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020); and David Robertson, *Elite Knowledge: Gnosticism and the History of Religions School* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

130   The *Journal of the Cognitive Science of Religion* (first published in 2013) and the *Journal of Cognitive Historiography* (first published in 2014), as well as the more broadly focused journal *Religion, Brain & Behavior* (first published in 2011). The *Journal of Cognition and Culture* also publishes in the area of cognitive science of religion.

131   E.g., the Universities of Aarhus, Oxford, and British Columbia.

132   For example, in 2015, the International Committee of the International Association for the History of Religions rejected a proposal to include the word "science" in the title of the Association as did the Executive Committee of the Association again in September 2019. Given this Association's goal of globalization, "science" is ironically the only epistemology which is currently accepted cross-culturally that explicitly corrects for cultural as well as cognitive biases (McIntyre, *The Scientific Attitude*, 81–113; Donald Wiebe, "What's in a Name? For the IAHR – Just about Everything," in *An Argument in Defence of a Strictly Scientific Study of Religion*, 117–140. In response to persistent attempts to dilute the IAHR's ideal of a scientific study of religion from its beginning, see Réville, "The International Congress of the History of Religions;" R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Marburg – and After?" *Numen* 7, no. 1 [1960]: 215–220; Angelo Brelich, "A proposito di un Congresso di Storia delle religioni," *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* 31 [1960]: 121–128, edited with English translation by Leonardo Ambasciano as, "Some Notes Concerning a Congress of the History of Religions," in Donald Wiebe, *An Argument in Defence of a Strictly Scientific Study of Religion*, 215–224).

133   Whereas the webpage of the newly renamed IACESR states that its objective is "the scientific study of religious phenomena" (https://iacesr.com/ [accessed June 20, 2021]) and the reference on the previous webpage of the IACSR that listed the Templeton Foundation as the sole "funding opportunity" was deleted (supra note 62), a recent letter to the membership of the IACESR from its Executive Secretary (dated 16 November 2020), proudly lauds the success of a number of IACESR members, including Association officers, for securing grants in the amount of millions from the Templeton Foundation and the Issachar Fund.

134   Aku Visala, *Naturalism, Theism and the Cognitive Study of Religion: Religion Explained?* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011); Roger Trigg and Justin L. Barrett, eds., *The Roots of Religion: Exploring the Cognitive Science of Religion* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014); Roger Trigg, *Does Science Undermine Faith?* (London: SPCK, 2019).

The only academic institutions dedicated solely to scientific studies of religion are in the Czech Republic, namely, the "Laboratory for the Experimental Research of Religion" (LEVYNA) at Masaryk University Brno, and the recently established "Cognitive Laboratory for Research into Religion" at Palacký University Olomouc.[135] And, to my knowledge, the Department of Religion at California State University, Northridge is the only undergraduate Department of Religion with a permanent faculty position specifically dedicated to a scientific study of religion.[136] Claire White, the first person appointed to, and current holder of, this position, has now published the first *Introduction to the Cognitive Science of Religion*, notable because it is designed specifically for undergraduate instruction. Where undergraduate courses incorporating scientific approaches to the study of religion are taught, however, they are typically offered through departments of anthropology, biology, psychology, or sociology. Rather, curricular offerings in undergraduate Departments of Religion tend to be religion appreciation courses, analogous to those in music and art.

A strictly scientific study of religion remains, of course, a logical possibility but it does not seem to be a pragmatic probability. Both the tenaciousness of pro-religious cognitive and cultural biases and the anti-science historical trajectory of the study of religion argue that any institutionalized study of religion beyond 2020 will continue to be dominated by intuitively credible but epistemologically arid approaches, cloaked in a sophistic jargon of learned practice.[137] Perhaps White's new *Introduction to the Cognitive Science of Religion* will mark a turning point in the desultory history of that teaching?

Let me be clear. A scientific approach to the study of religion is not the only way by which religion might be studied. And there is no problem with theological or religious approaches to the study of religion. Religions are, after all, major social groups in human cultures and they have a vested interest in their preservation and expansion.

However, any promising future for a strictly scientific study of religion would seem to lie with the initiatives of relatively small ensembles of collegial

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135   The background of this unique situation in the Czech Republic is the influence on the study of religion by the Communist era Institutes of Scientific Atheism and the absence of departments of theology at Czech universities (Tomáš Bubík, "The Czech Journey to the Academic Study of Religions: From the Critique of Religion to its Study," in Tomáš Bubík and Henryk Hoffman, eds., *Studying Religions with the Iron Curtain Closed and Opened*. Leiden: Brill, 2015: 1–54).

136   The position in the Department of Religion at California State University, Northridge is specifically defined as "The Cognitive Science of Religion."

137   Wiebe, *The Learned Practice of Religion*; Joseph LeDoux, *The Deep History of Ourselves*, 316; Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe, "Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: The Persistence of a Delusion," *Religio. Revue pro religionistiku* 20, no. 1 (2012): 9–18, and *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 3 (2012): 587–597.

individuals, spread across an array of academic departments and programs, whose research and teaching is pursued largely in the absence of significant institutional support or professional patronage.[138] Those scholars of religion venturesome enough to explore scientific epistemologies for their study, and to incorporate such approaches into their teaching and research, will be rewarded with expanded intellectual horizons and exciting new questions about, and insights into, their empirical and historical areas of specialization. As Max Müller first envisioned over a century ago, a scientific study of religion can suggest previously unexplored explanations for those recurrent human behaviors, practices, and conceptualizations that define and shape the fascinating field of study we all share; and, as Bultmann appreciated some eight decades ago, will do so in ways that are germane to the modern scientific environment we all inhabit.

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138   Luther H Martin and Donald Wiebe, "Last Chapters," in *Conversations and Controversies in the Scientific Study of Religion*, 336. Interestingly, religious studies scholar Russell McCutcheon has arrived at this same conclusion with respect to "critical studies of religion," in *On the Subject of Religion: Charting the Fault Lines of a Field of Study*, J.C. LoRusso, ed. (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2022), 77–93.

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Index

This book includes a collection of articles by leading researchers on the topic of religious contact in the study of religion. Resulting from the final conference of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg 'Dynamics in the History of Religions' – one of the largest research initiatives in the interdisciplinary study of religion worldwide in recent years (2008–2020) – this book encapsulates the twofold aim of this conference. First, to 'step back' and reflect upon the merits and challenges of studying religious dynamics as a result of intra-, inter-, and extra-religious contact, and second, 'to look beyond' and pave ways for future approaches to study religion as a social phenomenon.

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