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Editorial

MAX LILJEFORS

Max Liljefors is Professor of Art History at Lund University.

max.liljefors@kultur.lu.se

This special issue of the *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* contains four articles, the first three of which, by Jörg Lauster, Margaret Olin, and Ola Sigurdson, respectively, were originally delivered as keynote lectures at the conference "Approaching the Numinous in the Arts Today", held at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund University in May 2022. The conference was the result of the research project "Approaching the Numinous – Intersections between Religion and Aesthetics in a Secular Society", led by Jayne Svenungsson and funded by the LMK Foundation. The author of the fourth article, George Pattison, played an important role in the conception of the project and also delivered a keynote address at an earlier project event.

The overarching question of this special issue – and of the research project as a whole – is how aesthetics and art intersect with ideas and experiences of the holy in today's modern, ostensibly secularized society, whose citizens are often sceptical of religious institutions, yet may feel a strong pull towards spirituality. In addressing this question, a key concept for the project – and in several of the contributions – is the notion of the numinous, coined by Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) in his 1917 book *Das Heilige*.[1] With this term, Otto sought to postulate the irrational feeling of awe as the basis of religion, an

1. Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, Munich 1963.

idea that appeals to many who find religious doctrines outmoded but value the experience of the sacred. In Otto's thought, the ability to intuit the numinous was affined with aesthetic sensibility. The four authors in this special issue approach the topic of how the arts and the holy meet in modernity from different scholarly perspectives and reflect on a wide range of artistic expressions.

In the first article, Jörg Lauster examines how the relationship between religious experience and aesthetic experience has been understood by thinkers in the tradition of German liberal Protestantism, from Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) to Paul Tillich (1886–1965) to Ulrich Barth. The latter scholar identified four common characteristics that define and link the two experiences – fulfilment of meaning, interruption, passivity, and transcendence – and Lauster finds these components in works of art by canonical Western artists, from Raphael (1483–1520) to Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), and Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890). Lauster cautions, however, against understanding the structural affinity between religious and aesthetic experience as meaning that art and religion are "the same thing". Both represent human attempts to approach or mediate the numinous, but they have been given different goals and mandates. Art can open our horizons towards a beyond, religion teaches us how to live in relationship to it. Neither, Lauster argues, can replace the other.

The word "numinous" is often applied to experiences of nature or art that evoke a sense of the divine. But why, Margaret Olin asks in her article, is the numinous not associated with artworks of social justice, works that speak of man's exploitation of – and ethical responsibility to – his neighbour? Ideas relating to the numinous have been associated with an aesthetic of emptiness and abstraction, from Otto to twentieth-century art theorists. However, Olin shows that modern Jewish philosophers such as Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) have articulated something like the numinous in their writings on inter-human relationality. Drawing on this dialogic dimension of the numinous, Olin examines a seminal artwork of social justice, Martha Rosler's 1974–1975 *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, which juxtaposes photographic and textual representations of a run-down New York neighbourhood. In Rosler's work, as well as in works by contemporary artists concerned with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Olin finds an aesthetic of emptiness traditionally associated with the numinous, but here at home in the encounter with the vulnerable, destitute human other.

In the third article, Ola Sigurdson discusses the experience of the numinous in relation to built spaces, such as the Pantheon and St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and to spatial factors. His point of view is phenomenological: anyone who enters a numinous space does so as an embodied being, inevitably enmeshed in spatio-sensory relationships with his or her surroundings. Therefore, Sigurdson argues, the experience of the numinous should be considered essentially aesthetic. Sigurdson applies the spatial metaphors of the vertical and the horizontal to numinous experience. He does so through a reading of Mircea Eliade's (1907–1986) 1957 book *The Sacred and the Profane* (in which Otto's *Das Heilige* appears in the very first sentence) and some of the book's commentators.[2] While Eliade emphasizes the vertical power of the numinous that takes hold of the experiencing subject, his critics emphasize the horizontal, performative function of collective rituals. Sigurdson considers both approaches insufficient. They are too general and too one-sided, he argues, and do not do justice to the dialectical intertwining of verticality and horizontality in concrete experience. Sigurdson argues for a new phenomenology of numinous spaces that takes into account their specific and diverse materiality as well as our multisensory experiences of them.

In the final article of this issue, George Pattison discusses what it means that religious icons are sometimes used in military conflicts. Does the icon then become a battle-flag, he asks. The issue is framed by the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and, in particular, the "sacralization" of Russian war aims by Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill. This kind of misuse of religious symbols is not the only role icons can play in the context of war, Pattison argues. As a counterexample, he cites a scene in Sergei Bondarchuk's (1920–1994) film adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's (1828–1910) novel *War and Peace*, in which Russian soldiers before the Battle of Borodino bow in reverence to the icon of Our Lady of Smolensk – not to increase their nationalistic fervour, but in acknowledgement of their own finitude. Through an examination of the historical use of relics and icons, Pattison argues that they do not necessarily serve militaristic purposes in war, but can also serve as reminders of human mortality and the prospect of a community beyond death.

The four contributors approach the subject of this issue from different angles, but they all demonstrate the value of looking at the history of both theology and aesthetics to better understand our own contemporary spiritual dilemmas. ▲

2. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, New York 1959.

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Metamorphosis

Chances and Risks in the Relationship between Aesthetic and Religious Experience

JÖRG LAUSTER

Jörg Lauster is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich.

lauster@lmu.de

"One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous vermin. [...] 'What's happened to me?' he thought. It was no dream."[1]

Franz Kafka's (1883–1924) story is one of the greatest, but also most depressing stories of a metamorphosis. It shows what literature, which along with music and art is among the great cultural forms of human expression, can achieve. It opens up spaces of imagination in which the human relationship to the world can articulate itself. Here it is the fear of finding oneself transformed in a world in which one no longer finds a place. Kafka, they say, is the poet of modernity *par excellence*, he looks deep into its abysses. If we want to read his text metaphorically: Is this also the role of the Christian religion in the secular Western modernity? Do its attempts to approach the numinous resemble those of a vermin vainly trying to survive in the world of humans?

This is the question I will try to answer in my last of three parts. Before that, in a first step, I would like to define the relationship between religious and aesthetic experience in order to compare the relationship between religious and secular approaches to the numinous. In a second part, I will then illustrate this with examples from art.

1. Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, London 2005, 3.

Religious and Aesthetic Experience

The topic of the conference where this paper was initially presented, "Approaching the Numinous", is delicate but ingenious. Theologically, the term is by no means self-evident; there are major schools of theological thought that would say that Christianity worships precisely not the numinous, but a personal God. Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) introduced the numinous prominently into theology. He thus stands in a long tradition that I would call liberal, but Otto does not simply replace God with the numinous, things are more complicated. He is in the tradition which considers all human expressions to be symbolizations. The numinous is not an ontological or metaphysical category like the Platonic idea of the good. For Otto, the numinous is a "box", or actually I should say a container, in which people's ways of symbolizing the experience of the numinous are gathered. We can never say what the numinous is, we can only say how people react to it.[2] That is why there is no other way of dealing with the numinous than approaching. This is the doorway to looking at art and religion as such ways of approaching the numinous.

Religion and art have always been siblings. It seems that it was at about the same time that our ancestors began to paint their caves with pictures that they started to practice religious rites. In his fascinating book, which as we know was also his last, Robert N. Bellah (1927–2013) asked why this is the case. He sees an anthropologically rooted common ground between art and religion. He takes up the work of the psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) and distinguishes between being- and deficiency-cognition.[3] Deficiency-cognition is the everyday interaction with our environment, it serves to orient ourselves in the world practically and technically for the sake of our own survival. It asks which deficiencies must be overcome in order to better orient ourselves in the world. Being-cognition looks at being as it is, it does not pursue any functional or utilitarian interests. Being-cognition is reminiscent of Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) "interesseloses Wohlgefallen" (pleasure without intention), which plays a key role in his aesthetics. One could also think of Joachim Ritter's (1903–1974) theory of compensation.[4] It is out of fashion today, but played an important role in Germany for a long time. According to Ritter's thesis, from the eighteenth century onwards, the emerging aesthetic compensated for the deficits of a technical and

2. Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, Munich 2014, 5–12.

3. Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, Cambridge, MA 2011, 5, https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674063099.

4. Joachim Ritter, *Metaphysik und Politik: Studien zu Aristoteles und Hegel*, Frankfurt 2003, 407–434.

functionalized approach to the world. It sees a higher reality shimmering through in nature, and in this, on the level of feeling, it replaces the old metaphysics of nature, which had been eliminated by the scientific-technical worldview. Aesthetics, one could say, saves a remnant from the great machine of the technical and rationalistic disenchantment of the world, as Max Weber (1864–1920) described it so impressively. Bellah, however, does not make all these connections to Kant and Ritter's theory of compensation.

I do not want to discuss any further here how useful this distinction into being- and deficiency-cognition is. What is important for our context is what we can observe with Bellah and, in my opinion, already with Kant and Ritter: There is a dimension of our approach to reality that contemplates the essence of things and the world free of exploitation interests. This approach dwells in contemplation. Bellah calls this way of dealing with the world "beyonding", it frees and relieves people from the "dreadful immanence".[5] According to Bellah, this kind of approach to the numinous happens in very diverse ways and in very different processes of representation in human consciousness and culture. Religion and art belong in this sphere, each using very different modes of representation. Religion is more than concepts and art more than images. How do they relate to each other in their approach to the numinous?

In the tradition of German liberal Protestantism, the relationship between religious and aesthetic experience has traditionally played an important role. The topic has been dealt with in at least three important constellations. For the first time, and probably most intensively, this happened in the era of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), who himself was significantly involved in it. The relationship between religion and aesthetics was brought into a new light by the philosophy of Kant, since he fundamentally elaborated the constructive and active parts of human consciousness in our understanding of reality. A fundamental commonality emerges. Religious and aesthetic experiences are not simply images of reality; rather, they process it in independent representations. Whatever we know and experience of God and the world, we can only represent it symbolically. On this basis, the German Romantics stated a fundamental proximity between religion and art with, as is well known, very far-reaching consequences. They discussed to what extent art could and should take the place of religion in the future. When German Protestant theology had to reorganize itself after the First World War, Paul Tillich (1886–1965) drafted quite grandly a theology of culture.[6] He worked on this theme throughout his life, albeit later with less

5. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 9.

6. See the brillant overview Werner Schüssler & Erdmann Sturm (ed.), *Paul Tillich: Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, Darmstadt 2007, 55–67.

intensity. Tillich's theology of culture, in its differnt variations, is based on the fundamental conviction that the basic existential questions of religion about the meaning of existence are dealt with in forms of expression and symbols. Tillich was therefore alert to the cultural forms of his time in order to explore possibilities of connection and translation for religious questions. His interpretations of Expressionist art, for example, are quite remarkable. After his emigration to the United States, Tillich no longer played a role in Germany for at least a generation. In our context, the criticism of Tillich in Germany is interesting. The main argument is as follows: Those who look for points of reference in culture betray the essence of religion. Anyone who asks about the relationship between religion and the secular gives up what religion is in its essence. I think this objection is wrong, even absurd. But we have to be able to say something about it, so an answer needs to be able to say why aesthetic experiences are interesting for religion.

Finally, the relationship between religious and aesthetic experience plays an important role in contemporary German theology. Since the 1980s, questions pertaining to liberal theology have returned with vigor. How can the Church function in a society that does not automatically or naturally see itself as Christian. In many ways, today's debate is a legacy of Schleiermacher and Tillich. One of the most profound contributions to the relationship between aesthetic and religious experience is by Ulrich Barth. He is undoubtedly one of the most important figures in contemporary German-language theology and has now also recently presented a systematic theology. *Symbole des Christentums* is without question one of the most important contemporary theological books in German.[7] Barth is an excellent connoisseur of German idealism, he was president of the Schleiermacher Society for a long time. He combines philosophical and theological knowledge in a truly magnificent and clear definition of the relationship between aesthetic and religious experience. I will present its main aspects in the following.

Even a simple observation of cultural history reveals an inner connection between art and religion. At least since Plato (c. 428–c. 348 BCE), European culture has been familiar with the idea that poets need a special inspiration, or more precisely a divine inspiration, to be able to create their works. It would be worthwhile to trace this idea of inspiration in more detail. The modern concept of genius goes back to the Renaissance, which religiously fills in what Hans Belting (1935–2023) observed in his famous separation of image and cult. With the Renaissance, according to Belting's thesis, the

7. Ulrich Barth, *Symbole des Christentums: Berliner Dogmatikvorlesung*, Tübingen 2021.

individuality of the artistic process gains in importance.[8] The artist's design of a Christian motif becomes a religious treatment that can build up religious imaginary worlds. That is why the painting emerges from the shadow of the cult. The Platonists of the Renaissance did not simply want to enhance the subjective creative power of the artist with their theory of inspiration, they were not that modern after all. The artist needed divine inspiration, an idea taken up by Romanticism. Through the power of the artist, art elaborates a perspective on reality that religion had not yet articulated in its classical forms, appealing above all to the imagination. Two details are interesting. As far as I can see, the Renaissance understood the relationship between art and religion as complementary rather than competitive. The artist can represent the divine, but he does not take the place of the priest. The task was to make the divine ground of all reality visible through art, and that meant above all: to make the beauty of people and the world visible as a reflection of divine beauty. In the genius aesthetics of Romanticism, both of these things change. The relationship between art and religion is now conceived in a thoroughly competitive way; art can not only see differently, it can also better see and depict the mystery of the world. This is the birth of art as a substitute for religion. Artists become priests of the numinous. Secondly, the mystery of the world is not exhausted in its beauty alone. The dark and the incomprehensible are also aspects of the human experience of the world that art can capture. Both the claim of art to surpass itself and its power to represent the incomprehensible have had far-reaching consequences for the history of art, music, and literature in the nineteenth century.

Let us return to the definition of the relationship between aesthetic and religious experience. On the basis of Kant's theory of aesthetics, Barth elaborates four constitutive elements of aesthetic experience.[9] Firstly, aesthetic experiences are experiences of the fulfilment of meaning. Reflection and imagination work together to form an interpretation of the world that, for the most part, does not have to be linguistic, but can also be bound to moods and feelings. Something shines through that can be described as meaning, that is as a special determination of the content and purpose of what is experienced. The viewer become absorbed in the here and now. Secondly, aesthetic experiences are interruptive experiences. The ordinary world of everyday life is interrupted, something appears without intention or interest. In the aesthetic experience, the question of what something is good for is extinguished for a moment. It is simply there and for itself. Barth refers to Robert Musil (1880–1942), who thus assigns art a sphere

8. Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult: Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, 6th ed., Munich 2004.

9. Ulrich Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*, Tübingen 2003, 235–262.

of the counterworld to our everyday world. Thirdly, aesthetic experiences happen as "Widerfahrnis" (something that happens to us). Aesthetic experiences cannot be produced or made, they happen spontaneously. Although human consciousness actively participates in the construction of aesthetic experiences through reflection, imagination, and interpretation, a passive moment is added here. In aesthetic experiences, something encounters, something opens up, something reveals itself. However one may define revelation, it is obvious that the door to religious experience opens wide here. Fourthly, aesthetic experiences are experiences of transcendence. They not only interrupt our everyday experience, they transcend it. Something shines out behind and above things. Something is revealed that is otherwise invisible. Aesthetic experiences live from what Bellah would call "beyonding". They engage in "approaching the numinous". Aesthetic experience lives essentially from the representation of the unpresentable.

Fulfillment of meaning, interruption, passivity, and transcendence are four important moments of aesthetic experience. They all constitute religious experiences as well. This is an important intermediate result. There is a fundamental structural affinity between aesthetic and religious experiences. But, and this is the second important result of Barth's investigation, they fill out these structural elements very differently. Aesthetic experiences live essentially from imaginative moods, from pre-linguistic forms of interpretation. In this they are more pleasing and also lighter, which, as Barth says, constitutes the "charm" of aesthetic experiences.[10] Religious experiences are more strongly bound to content-related attributions, they link the dimension of meaning and transcendence in a way that also holds some intellectual impositions, and are thus more complex than aesthetic experience.

Barth's structural analysis provides us with ample material to further reflect on the relationship between aesthetic and religious experience. Religion and art are not simply images of a reality out there, but both are essential means of symbolization with which people process, express, and communicate their experience of the world. Because of the great structural affinity, the boundaries between the two are fluid. Unless one has a very narrow understanding of Christian religion that is exclusively oriented towards Christian dogma, it is impossible to tell when, for example, an aesthetic experience of nature turns into a religious feeling of gratitude. How should this work? Should red lights come on and a loudspeaker announce: Attention, attention, you are now entering the religious sector in your experience. It is not possible and not even necessary to name such a transition point. What seems important to me is to take a closer look at the fundamental

10. Barth, *Religion in der Moderne*, 262.

structural difference between content determination on the religious side and experience-intensive vagueness on the other side. With this distinction, we can measure the advantages and disadvantages that lie on each side of religious and aesthetic experience.

Approaching the Numinous

Raphael's (1483–1520) *Sistine Madonna* plays an important role in Hans Belting's argument. The painting can be used to show how the Renaissance moved from the cult image to the art image. The difference from a medieval or even orthodox depiction of the Virgin Mary is striking. It is the artist himself, Raphael, who appears here with his art as an interpreter of the Marian apparition. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) once mocked Raphael, saying that he was an Italian who wanted to paint nothing but beautiful women. It is true that Raphael ties the appearance of the divine in Mary to the ideal of beauty. But behind this lies a long Platonic tradition that conceives of the good, the true, and the beautiful as one. The two angels pose a riddle. No one but Raphael himself could tell us what they are supposed to tell us. In any case, their nonchalant, almost cheeky attitude brings a new, friendly and benevolent note to our dealings with divine transcendence.

A major turning point is Romanticism. An infinite amount has been written about Caspar David Friedrich's (1774–1840) *Monk by the Sea*. We know that the artist was intensively occupied with Schleiermacher's theory of religion. Obviously, he was looking for new forms of expression to depict the immeasurable and infinite of human experience of the world. The painting can also be seen as an attempt to translate the experience of the numinous into the secular by means of art. In his study *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, the American art historian Robert Rosenblum (1927–2006) has worked out that in Friedrich's work, artistic representation chooses paths that leave classical Christian iconography and ecclesiastical symbolic offerings behind. The question is: Why? Rosenblum provides an interesting clue. François-René de Chateaubriand (1768–1848) had already written in 1797 in his book on the Christian religion: "Personne n'y croit plus",[11] no one believes it any more. At the dawn of modernity, have Christian symbols outlived their usefulness? Wolfgang Schöne (1910–1989) argued similarly. In a much acclaimed essay, he traced the history of images of God in art and stated for art in the period from 1800: "God has become unrepresentable." But he adds: "Turned positively: God is invisible for today and tomorrow."[12]

11. Robert Rosenblum, *Die moderne Malerei und die Tradition der Romantik*, Munich 1975, 18.

12. Wolfang Schöne, "Die Bildgeschichte der christlichen Gottesgestalten in der

Figure 1. Raphael, The Sistine Madonna, *1513–1514, oil on canvas, 265 cm x 196 cm. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.*

Figure 2. Caspar David Friedrich, The Monk by the Sea*, 1808–1810, oil on canvas, 110 cm x 171,5 cm. Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.*

Another aspect deserves attention. As a painter of transition, Friedrich certainly still drew on classical Christian iconography in the painting *Cross in the Mountains*.[13] *The Tetschen Altarpiece*, as it is also called, provoked a considerable reaction. It is intriguing to note the criticism by Basilius von Ramdohr (1757–1822), a jurist who was completely committed to the spirit of the Enlightenment. There is no need to style the Ramdohr controversy as a showdown between Romanticism and the Enlightenment, but his criticism of the sentimentalism of art is noteworthy. He saw a "narcotic haze" coming from Friedrich's painting, an evasion and an exaggerated appeal to the affective in order to overwhelm the viewer with it. Ramdohr felt emotionally harassed by Friedrich's religious depiction. One certainly does not have to agree with Ramdohr, but at least one has to think about what the appeal to the affective means for religion.

At the end of the nineteenth century in art, the style of realism put an obvious and deliberate end to the Romantic interest in the numinous; Impressionism, in turn, showed an interest in using new forms of representation that incorporated the artists' inner experience. However, one cannot attribute a particular interest in the numinous to Impressionism. This only becomes apparent in the post-impressionist turn. With Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), and Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), new art forms of "beyonding" came to light. During their lifetime, all three had the greatest difficulty in getting their art noticed by their contemporaries. A short time later, a striking turnaround occurred, for all three are now among the best-known painters of European modernism. Cézanne has been a lasting inspiration to poets with his new view of nature, the play of colours and the mystery of the landscape that shines through in his paintings. Reiner Maria Rilke's (1875–1926) letters to Cézanne and, still in our time, Peter Handke's examination of the teachings of Sainte-Victoire make it impressively clear how modern art can be understood in a fascinating way as approaching the numinous.[14]

This also applies to the art of van Gogh, even if the reception of his paintings is somewhat more difficult. His pictures are so often printed and seen on postcards and wallpaper that the perception of his art could sometimes become very dull. Some of what Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) wrote in

abendländischen Kunst", in Wolfgang Schöne, Johannes Kollwitz & Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen (eds.), *Das Gottesbild im Abendland*, Witten 1957, 54.

13. For an overview with further literature, see Jörg Lauster, *Die Verzauberung der Welt: Eine Kulturgeschichte des Christentums*, 6th ed., Munich 2020, 491–494.

14. Reiner Maria Rilke, *Briefe an Cézanne*, Frankfurt 1983; Peter Handke, *Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire*, 10th ed., Frankfurt 2019.

Figure 3. Caspar David Friedrich, Cross in the Mountains*, 1807/1808, oil on canvas, 115 cm x 110,5 cm. Galerie Neue Meister, Dresden.*

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction comes true here.[15] It is interesting that a museum like the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam obviously has liturgical qualities in the staging of art that open up possibilities of encounter in their specific atmosphere.

Van Gogh's late paintings of olive gardens in southern France reveal his great art of using colour to make visible the mysteriousness of nature, its power, its hidden magic. The pictures do not leave one untouched and from there they also shed light on his other great paintings. *The Starry Night* is considered a great work that shows the pulsating energy and mysterious power of the universe. The picture is painted resonance. Van Gogh can easily be seen as a painter of the numinous who approaches the numinous without any Christian forms of expression. A pastor's son, van Gogh had begun studying theology and wanted to become a preacher. It is not surprising that he reflected on his relationship to religion. His letters shed light on this. He wrote to his brother about "having a tremendous need for, shall I say the word – for religion – so I go outside at night to paint the stars".[16] For the interpretation of his star pictures, this awakens many associations. But he also writes to his brother about his religious longing: "Ah, my dear brother, sometimes I know so clearly what I want. In life and in painting too, I can easily do without the dear Lord, but I can't, suffering as I do, do without something greater than myself, which is my life, the power to create."[17] The "dear Lord" of Christianity becomes "something greater than me". Dogmatic theology should be worried by this conversion, because obviously the two are not the same. But one can also read it differently. Van Gogh explains what the Christian God means to him. On this basis, his art can make it possible to at least link the classical statements of Christianity to modern experience.

The Different Possibilities of Art and Religion

What can we learn from the discussion about the relationship between art and religion? I will conclude by summarizing this with a few thoughts. Modernity, with its rapid forces of change, must indeed appear from the churches' point of view as something like a great transformation from which Christianity emerges as a helpless bug unable to find its way in this world. "No one believes it any more", wrote Chateaubriand. The forces of transformation have been working on Western Christianity for 200 years.

15. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, London 2008.

16. Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, *The Letters*, 691, 29 September 1888, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let691/letter.html, accessed 2023-01-22.

17. Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, *The Letters*, 673, 3 September 1888, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let673/letter.html, accessed 2023-01-22.

Figure 4. Vincent van Gogh, The Olive Trees*, 1889, oil on canvas, 73 cm x 92 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.*

Figure 5. Vincent van Gogh, The Starry Night*, 1889, oil on canvas, 73 cm x 92 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.*

Romanticism saw an opportunity to respond to the transformation of Christianity. Art was seen as a way of articulating the experience of the numinous better and more appropriately for the new times. Indeed, modernist art in the nineteenth century produced fascinating representations of the experience of the numinous in the world. Today, however, we know. They do not and cannot replace the specific way in which Christian religious practice approaches the numinous.

Art can, but does not have to represent the numinous. That my examples end with the nineteenth century is not only due to the limited space of an essay. Autonomy of art is a noble keyword of modernity. In the twentieth century, art is once again breaking new ground. Today, the autonomy of art also includes being able to completely withdraw from expectations of fulfilment of meaning and transcendence. Contemporary art provides impressive examples of how art frees itself from these expectations. Analogous things are also happening in aesthetic theory formation. In the environment of the Frankfurt School, Martin Seel developed an "aesthetics of appearance" that sees aesthetic experience as being completely absorbed in the play of sensual appearances.[18] When we lie in the grass and observe clouds passing by in the sky, we observe clouds passing by in the sky – nothing else. We take pleasure in the play of wind and clouds. There is no deeper meaning. Seel also transfers this to the way we deal with art. It is the rejection of everything "beyond". This self-limitation of art and aesthetics is undoubtedly legitimate, no one would deny that. Wherever art takes this path, we must keep it free of all religious expectations of meaning. Let art refrain from approaching the numinous. Art and religion then live in two worlds.

Art does not have to, but it can approach the numinous. There are also many examples of this. However, the relationship between art and religion in this case is not easy to define. While for centuries in Christian culture art was the servant of religion, the reverse seems to have occurred with Romanticism at the latest. The claim arose that art could replace religion as a means of expressing the numinous in modernity. The examples of Caspar David Friedrich and Vincent van Gogh bring to light the extraordinary power of art to approach and represent the experience of the numinous. Art can represent the mysterious, the foreboding in our experience of the world, and take us as viewers into this "beyonding". This enchantment happens precisely through the vagueness and openness of the moods created.

For religion, this offer of art is tempting, but it is also not entirely harmless. Nietzsche has a keen eye for this conversion: "Art raises its head where religions are weakening. It takes over a lot of feelings and moods produced

18. Martin Seel, *Ästhetik des Erscheinens*, Munich 2000, 82–92.

by religion, puts them to its heart and now becomes deeper, more soulful itself."[19] What is tempting about this is that art can be used to subvert the impositions of religion. In van Gogh, however, we see that this also happens at the price of concretizing the content. Van Gogh seems to abandon Christian theism. This need not shake us, but we must remember that what the Christian religion has to say about the mystery of the world is more complex and also more concrete than what we experience in his paintings. We cannot replace the task of conceptual contemplation about our existence with art, but art can help us to stimulate this reflection. With Robert Bellah we can say: There is a capacity, a desire of human beings to deal with the mystery of this world and with the mystery of our lives. Religion and art are two great capacities to do this. But art and religion each do it in their own way. After the attempts of the nineteenth century, we know: Art cannot create a substitute for religion. That is a relief for us in theology, that is a relief for art itself. The task of religion is to use symbolic, ritual, and conceptual means to present the mystery of the world and the prospect of salvation in a way that is so tangible and concrete that people can draw support and comfort from it for their lives. Art, on the other hand, acts as an eye-opener, as a school of perception, as an exercise in "beyonding" that can lift the veil that lies over our everyday perception. To put it very short: Art opens our horizon to the open-endedness of our existence, religion offers concrete interpretations of how we can deal with it and live with it. The numinous is the incomprehensible, so by its very nature it allows many ways to approach it. We should respect and preserve this diversity. If we aestheticize religion or make art religious, both will lose in the end. Our approach to the numinous would then be much poorer. ▲

SUMMARY

Approaching the numinous is something that has forged a deep bond between art and religion in European cultural history. In the wake of Kant and Schleiermacher, the German theologian Ulrich Barth elaborates four constitutive elements that distinguish both aesthetic and religious experience: Fullfillment of meaning, interruption, passivity, and transcendence. From Raphael to Caspar David Friedrich to Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cézanne, impressive examples can be found of how these dimensions oscillate between religion and art. Nevertheless, there is a limit: art can, but does not have to, approach the numinous. Art can act as an eye-opener, as a school of perception, as an initiation into what Robert Bellah calls

19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches I: Kritische Studienausgabe 2*, Berlin 1999, 244.

"beyonding"; art can lift the veil that lies over our everyday perception. Religion lives from the numinous. The task of religion is to use symbolic, ritual, and conceptual means to present the mystery of the world and the prospect of salvation in a way that is so tangible and concrete that people can receive support and comfort for their lives from it.

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The Numinous and the Art of Social Justice

MARGARET OLIN

Margaret Olin is Senior Lecturer Emerita in the Department of Religious Studies, Yale University.

margaret.olin@yale.edu

When imbued with the presence of the divine, evoking rapture or awe, something is said to be "numinous". The word often applies to works of nature: the setting sun, the all-enveloping sky, or the light filtering through the trees; or a creation of mankind: a piece of music, a work of architecture, or a painting. But how is a work of art "numinous"? Does the work of art represent something that evokes the numinous, or does it create the experience of the "numinous" through formal means? Does it comment on the numinous or speak to it in some other way? For the most part "numinous" is applied to works of art that represent natural objects or scenes considered "numinous", or that are thought to evoke the numinous through form alone, often abstract form.

Why does the word "numinous" rarely if ever come to mind before a hard-hitting work of social justice art depicting impoverished denizens of the bowery or precarious hovels in the dust bowl, ruined homes whose residents have fled, or before works of conceptual art that communicate these and other social ills? This chapter considers the history of the concept "numinous" from its initial application to art early in the twentieth century, through its later appearance in mid-century American art theoretical discussions, to the changing implications of ideas surrounding the term as Jewish thinkers take them up in the mid to late twentieth century. Primarily

through the analysis of an influential work of the late twentieth century by Martha Rosler, I argue that the associations that arise from these changes can be applied, perhaps counterintuitively, to the art of social justice in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Rudolf Otto's Numinous Art

When Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) introduced the term "numinous" in his 1917 book *Das Heilige*, it was as much a negative concept as a positive one. "Numinous" was an answer to those who would reduce the Christian religion to a set of rational propositions.[1] The irrational did not only have its place, for Otto, it was at religion's basis. To understand it, one had to clear out the space around it. The numinous served to isolate the idea of "the holy" by thinking away the rational element. The numinous was what was not describable in language or by philosophy. He also had to isolate it from religious ethics: the numinous, in Otto's understanding of it, could not be a set of ethical commandments.[2] Not the ones that were handed to Moses, and not Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) categorical imperative. The numinous cannot be grasped, comprehended, taught, reasoned through, or explained. It is not laid down in law, or, by extension, owned. It is incommensurable to anything we know. The numinous is a kind of non-thing. In Otto's words, it is the "absolute other".[3]

So how do we access the feeling of the numinous? In a sense, we do not. Since it is not derived, like propositions and commandments which can be reasoned through, arrived at, or handed down, it is innate. We already have it within us. As a latent feeling, it cannot be introduced by an outside agent, but must rise to the surface. The numinous, it seems, is the particular kind of experience that can be evoked or awakened but not derived. Otto explores the evocation of the numinous through comparisons. He finds Kant's category of the sublime awe-inspiring much like the numinous, and the feeling of terror is close to the numinous as well.[4]

Finally, Otto derives the numinous from the experience of visual art.[5] He has in mind, however, only specific kinds of art characterized by abstraction or expressionism. Both of these were significant recent developments in his milieu, the early-twentieth-century Europe of literati and intellectuals.

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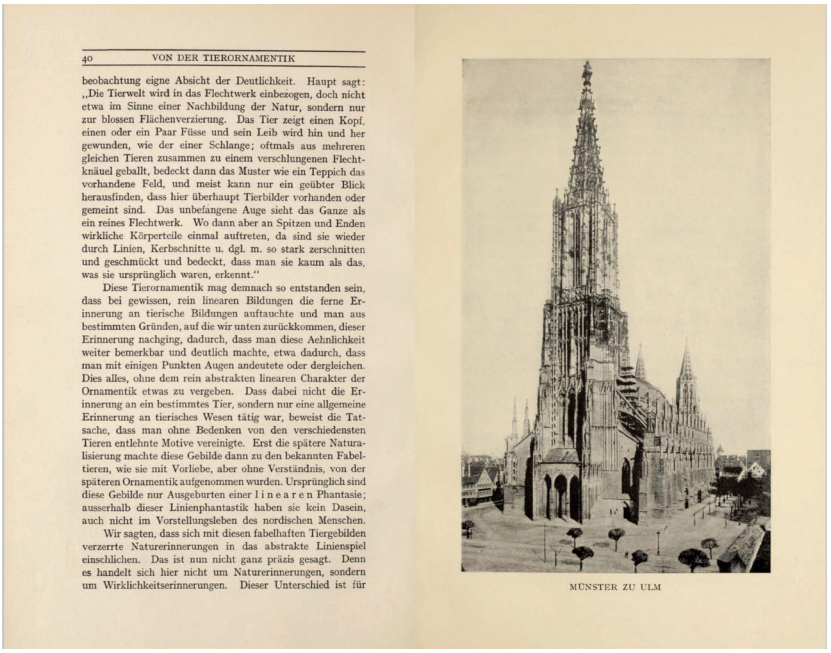
1. Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, Munich 1963, 1–4; Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, London 1958, 1–4.
2. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 1–6.
3. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 25–37.
4. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 62–65, 81–85
5. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 65–71, 87–91.

Art historian Wilhelm Worringer (1881–1965) and other thinkers provided some of the secular scriptures that inspired symbolists, German expressionists, and abstract artists such as Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), who himself inspired artists through his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.[6] Otto found the numinous in several art forms, beginning with the monoliths of Stonehenge, the mastabas, pyramids of Egypt, and the Sphinx. He also cited the Gothic art extolled by Worringer in his 1912 book *Formprobleme der Gothik*, especially what Otto calls Worringer's magnificent plate of the Cathedral at Ulm.[7]



40 VON DER TIERORNAMENTIK

beobachtung eigne Absicht der Deutlichkeit. Haupt sagt: „Die Tierwelt wird in das Flechtwerk einbezogen, doch nicht etwa im Sinne einer Nachbildung der Natur, sondern nur zur blossen Flächenverzierung. Das Tier zeigt einen Kopf, einen oder ein Paar Füsse und sein Leib wird hin und her gewunden, wie der einer Schlange; oftmals aus mehreren gleichen Tieren zusammen zu einem verschlungenen Flechtknäuel geballt, bedeckt dann das Muster wie ein Teppich das vorhandene Feld, und meist kann nur ein geübter Blick herausfinden, dass hier überhaupt Tierbilder vorhanden oder gemeint sind. Das unbefangene Auge sieht das Ganze als ein reines Flechtwerk. Wo dann aber an Spitzen und Enden wirkliche Körperteile einmal auftreten, da sind sie wieder durch Linien, Kerbschnitte u. dgl. m. so stark zerschnitten und geschmückt und bedeckt, dass man sie kaum als das, was sie ursprünglich waren, erkennt."

Diese Tierornamentik mag demnach so entstanden sein, dass bei gewissen, rein linearen Bildungen die ferne Erinnerung an tierische Bildungen auftauchte und man aus bestimmten Gründen, auf die wir unten zurückkommen, dieser Erinnerung nachging, dadurch, dass man diese Aehnlichkeit weiter bemerkbar und deutlich machte, etwa dadurch, dass man mit einigen Punkten Augen andeutete oder dergleichen. Dies alles, ohne dem rein abstrakten linearen Charakter der Ornamentik etwas zu vergeben. Dass dabei nicht die Erinnerung an ein bestimmtes Tier, sondern nur eine allgemeine Erinnerung an tierisches Wesen tätig war, beweist die Tatsache, dass man ohne Bedenken von den verschiedensten Tieren entlehnte Motive vereinigte. Erst die spätere Naturalisierung machte diese Gebilde dann zu den bekannten Fabeltieren, wie sie mit Vorliebe, aber ohne Verständnis, von der späteren Ornamentik aufgenommen wurden. Ursprünglich sind diese Gebilde nur Ausgeburten einer l i n e a r e n Phantasie; ausserhalb dieser Linienphantastik haben sie kein Dasein, auch nicht im Vorstellungsleben des nordischen Menschen.

Wir sagten, dass sich mit diesen fabelhaften Tiergebilden verzerrte Naturerinnerungen in das abstrakte Linienspiel einschlichen. Das ist nun nicht ganz präzis gesagt. Denn es handelt sich hier nicht um Naturerinnerungen, sondern um Wirklichkeitserinnerungen. Dieser Unterschied ist für

MÜNSTER ZU ULM

Figure 1. Cathedral at Ulm. From Wilhelm Worringer, Formprobleme der Gotik*, 1912.*

Otto often reached for the word "emptiness" to describe the numinous in art. Like many of his European contemporaries, he was attracted to the art of the Near and Far East, where he had traveled in 1911–1912.[8] Scholars of Buddhist art such as Osvald Sirén (1879–1966) and Otto Fischer (1886–1948), both of whom Otto cites, contributed to concepts of modern art

6. Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, London 1963; Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Garden City, NY 2021.

7. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 67–68.

8. John W. Harvey, "Translator's Preface to the Second Edition", in Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, London 1958, ix–x.

and to Otto's conception of the numinous, as exemplified in Buddhist and Taoist arts of China, Japan, and Tibet. The "numinous itself" is achieved "in the sweeping lines and rhythm" of the spare Chinese landscapes "of emptiness" made in the classical period of the Tang and Sung dynasties.[9] Through painting "almost nothing" with "the fewest strokes", Chinese painters conveyed the feeling that "the void itself is depicted as a subject".[10] Islamic architecture dispenses with figures, images, and ritual implements and works solely with light and space, he wrote, conveying "the mysticism of emptiness".[11] Otto also quotes loosely from Fischer's essay on Chinese landscape painting, which opened a 1920 issue of *Das Kunstblatt*.[12] In this essay, Fischer extoled the spirituality of Chinese landscape, and ended with the thought that these landscapes "are born from a state of the soul that is still foreign to us Europeans. Who knows whether we can find our way to it?"[13] This issue of *Das Kunstblatt*, a mainstream art journal, contained more articles about Chinese art, but also included essays by famous art critics and illustrations of the work of the German Expressionist artists August Macke (1887–1914) and Ludwig Meidner (1884–1966), the fauve, Maurice Vlaminck, and other contemporary artists. The cumulative effect was to trace the steps by which European landscape painters sought to find their way to this longed-for state of the soul.

Otto used secular metaphors drawn from aesthetics to describe the numinous, but artists and critics had long been searching for similar words to describe works of art. In his 1899 essay, "Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen Kunst", Alois Riegl (1858–1905) was already trying to express a feeling like that of the numinous. *Stimmung* was a "mood", a feeling of being in tune ("gestimmt"), which one sometimes feels in nature. Otto used the same term *Stimmung* and varieties of it to express the feeling of the numinous. His phrase, "Eine stetige fliessende *Gestimmtheit* der Seele" ("a steadily flowing mood [or harmony] of the soul"), recalls the words in which Riegl introduced the feeling of *Stimmung* in 1899 as "ein unaussprechliches Gefühl der Beseeligung, Beruhigung, Harmonie" ("an inexpressible feeling of blessedness, comfort, harmony").[14] *Stimmung* would become a catchword in the work of popular German language art critics.[15]

9. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 67.

10. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 69.

11. Rudolf Otto, *Autobiographical and Social Essays*, Berlin 1996, 191, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110814767.

12. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 67.

13. Otto Fischer, "Chinesische Landschaft", *Das Kunstblatt* 4 (January 1920), 6.

14. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 12, my italics; Alois Riegl, "Die Stimmung als Inhalt der moderne Kunst", *Graphische Künste* 22 (1899), 48, https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.4071.4.

15. Hermann Bahr, *Secession*, Vienna 1900, 50.

19. *Hui Tsung* *Herbst*

Figure 2. Hui Tsung, Herbst *(Autumn), twelfth century. Illustrated in Otto Fischer,* Chinesische Landschaftsmalerei, *1921.*

AUGUST MACKE: WEG AM RHEIN. AQUARELL.

Figure 3. August Macke, Weg am Rhein*, n.d., watercolor. Illustrated in* Das Kunstblatt *4 (January 1920).*

If these expressions suggest religious feelings, some of Otto's expressions recall the outspokenly mystical propensities of literary figures such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929). In his 1903 "Letter of Lord Chandos", a fictional letter written by an early seventeenth-century English lord to the famous proponent of the scientific method, Francis Bacon (1561–1626), Chandos despairs of the limitations of language. Words are simply too general to encompass any thought. Some simple, usually visual events will create "a shudder at the presence of the Infinite, a shudder running from the roots of my hair to the marrow of my heels". One might feel this shudder "on finding beneath a nut-tree a half-filled pitcher which a gardener boy had left there, and the pitcher and the water in it, darkened by the shadow of the tree, and a beetle swimming on the surface from shore to shore".[16] This highly visual image could easily have been inspired by some of the Chinese landscapes that Otto admired.

The Numinous in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Art

The discourse of the numinous in art developed throughout the twentieth century, even though the term "numinous" itself only rarely appeared in the context of what is more commonly called the "spiritual in art".[17] Landscape is at its basis. But by the 1960s, the term "numinous" became associated with abstraction. In 1961, when Mark Rothko's (1903–1970) paintings were first shown in London, the word "numinous" along with the connotation of emptiness, appeared in reviews of the exhibition:

> This emptiness is – and remains – the central phenomenon. Nobody has seen anything like it. The resonance, the radiance, the way that the paintings continue to arrive anew on the retina every time one blinks: none of this has been experienced before. These oblongs and bands in glowing colours that blend and merge have appeared out of nowhere, numinous and strange. But most of all, the works are transcendently empty.[18]

16. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Selected Prose*, New York 1952, 129–141. Quotation from p. 137.

17. The phrase is adapted from Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, for an influential exhibition of 1986–1987: "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890–1985", curated by Maurice Tuchman and first shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986–1987. Catalogue: Maurice Tuchman et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, New York 1986.

18. Laura Cumming, "Rothko in Britain – Review", *The Observer*, 11 September 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/sep/11/rothko-in-britain-whitechapel-review, accessed 2023-01-22.

Figure 4. Mark Rothko, Untitled*, 1951, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.*

Much of the discourse of the numinous in the art of the later twentieth century falls within this same discourse of emptiness and abstraction. While not using the term itself, Michael Fried's classic exegesis of "presentness", in his essay "Art and Objecthood" is probably one of the best-known examples of secular religiosity in abstract art in the mid-twentieth century. Fried deployed this concept in opposition to another artistic movement of the period, "Minimalism", which Fried called "literalism". It sought its artistic effect in the uncanny "presence" of an object that confronts the viewer. For Fried, "presence" leaves the art object inert, a "thing" that just takes up space. A work that imparts the feeling of presentness, however, remains completely in the temporal present: it arrests you; it stops you. Fried's tone was explicitly religious. Presentness was that feeling one has that God creates the world afresh at every moment – like the Rothko painting that arrives anew on the retina every time one blinks. Fried's essay ends with the words, "presentness is grace".[19] By "grace" Fried surely meant something of what Otto meant by an experience of the "numinous".

One logical path to follow from here would be to watch the numinous spread into media art, as it did in the late twentieth century, with the intense beauty and mystery of Nam June Paik (1932–2006) and some of Bill Viola's work.[20] Viola, who was fascinated by the Buddhist regard for emptiness, famously said that "cameras are keepers of the souls".[21] But instead I want to follow a different path, to find the numinous in an unexpected context that may push against its meaning, or perhaps against its power.

A "Dialogic" Reading of the "Numinous"

"Literalism", or minimal art, suggested to Fried spatial "presence", rather than temporal "presentness". Still abstract, minimalism whittled the art

19. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", in Gregory Battock (ed.), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, New York 1968, 147.

20. On these artists, see Jungu Yoon, *Spirituality in Contemporary Art: The Numinous in Art*, London 2010, 78–94.

21. Bill Viola, "Cameras are Keepers of the Soul", Interview by Christian Lund, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, London 2011, https://channel.louisiana.dk/video/bill-viola-cameras-are-keepers-souls, accessed 2023-01-22. On the numinous in Viola's work, see also Rina Arya, "Bill Viola and the Sublime", in Nigel Llewellyn & Christine Riding (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publication, January 2013, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/rina-arya-bill-viola-and-the-sublime-r1141441, accessed 2023-01-22.

Figure 5. Tony Smith, Die, *1962, steel, oiled finish, 6' x 6' x 6'. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.*

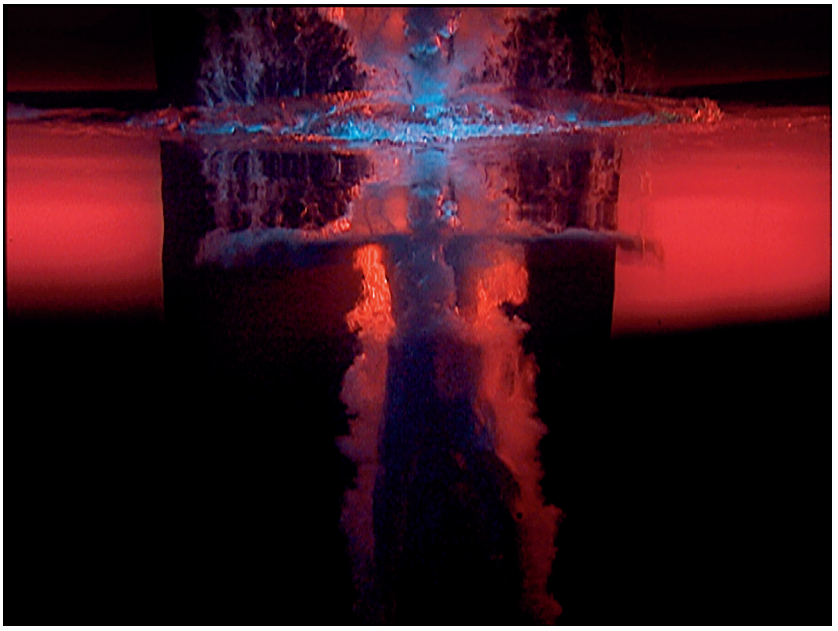


Figure 6. Bill Viola, "Fire Angel", panel 3 of 5 from Five Angels for the Millennium, *2001, video/sound installation. Photo: Kira Perov. © Bill Viola Studio.*

object down into a presence in the world whose whole existence would consist in its relation to the viewer; a pure relation, an object with no parts within in it that could relate internally to each other and distract from the primary relation to the viewer. "Relation" was a goal gaining traction among many artists. In fact, some thought that in "Art and Objecthood" Fried unintentionally made a convincing case for the value of minimalism. But philosophers of relation were already writing in the orbit of Rudolf Otto. Their writings included traces of numinous discourse. Two Jewish philosophers notably detected and argued for a dialogical element in something like the "numinous": Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Emanuel Levinas (1906–1995). Both were inspired by or inspired, artistic practices.

Buber's 1923 book *I and Thou* was a significant early example of the dialogical turn that came into its own in the middle of the twentieth century. In it he analyzed two fundamental word-pairs ("Grundworte"), *Ich–Du* (I–thou), and *Ich–Es* (I–it). Whenever one says "I" it implies a relation that will be one of these two. Speaking either of these pairs informs the relation of man to the world accordingly, or in Buber's terms, brings about man's existence in the world. I–it is the I-centered relation that perceives and knows "it". I–it designates whatever "I" encounters as a thing. Through I–it, I experience the world. This *Grundwort* enables action. I–thou is the *Grundwort* of pure relation. At first glance, there is nothing numinous in Buber's dialogic philosophy; his I–thou relationship might seem to exclude the numinous. It is, after all, not an experience in Otto's sense. Furthermore, in Otto's exposition of the numinous there is nothing exactly dialogical or even relational. The numinous is not found in other people, but alone, in moments of isolated intuition. Yet something outside must evoke it: Otto's "absolute other". Conversely (or perhaps reciprocally) Buber's *I and Thou* does find something like the numinous in interpersonal relations. Regarding I–thou, Buber wrote: "It does not help you to survive, it only helps you to have intimations of eternity."[22] That is, to say "Du" is to have an intuition of the infinite.

Like the numinous, the "thou" is ungraspable by reason. "Not that scientific and aesthetic understanding is unnecessary", writes Buber, "but it should do its work faithfully and immerse itself and disappear in the truth of the relation which surpasses understanding and embraces what is understandable."[23] Unlike Otto, however, Buber envisioned the spirit not as inside the I, evoked by the other, but as in the relation itself. The spirit is between

22. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, New York 1970, 84.
23. Buber, *I and Thou*, 91.

people, or more precisely, the spirit is not within man; rather, man lives within the spirit.[24]

Buber emerges from and in turn affects much the same milieu as does Otto: the secular religiosity of early twentieth-century Europe, including its mysticism. Repeatedly, Buber uses the argument that while the "it" is reducible to its qualities, the "thou" is not "a loose bundle of named qualities".[25] Robert Musil's (1880–1942) *Man Without Qualities*, begun not many years later (although never finished), emerges from some of these same attitudes.[26] The emptiness of the Chinese landscapes that Otto cites, barely suggested with a few lines, and devoid of detail, convey a similar sense. Indeed, Buber shares a formal and spiritual affinity with Otto's aesthetics. An art historian by training, and briefly, by aspiration, Buber expressed his early dialogism in visual terms, using the word *Stimmung*, as a form of relation, to describe both Hermann Struck's (1876–1944) distant views of monuments in Palestine and the basic idea of the Jewish people itself.[27] Later, he cited Leopold Krakauer's (1890–1954) sketches of plants in Palestine, which exhibited, like some of the Chinese drawings, extensive empty space. In Krakauer's drawings, Buber saw art as an activity of relation, of forms that wished to come into being, and of an artist who reciprocally wished forms to bring themselves into being.[28] It is not Buber's artistic taste, however, that would come to influence the art of social justice.

To help relate numinous dialogism to social justice art we turn to Emanuel Levinas, another dialogical philosopher who explicitly relates his ideas to social justice. Levinas's notion of the Other has frequently been compared to Otto's "absolute other".[29] Levinas, however, placed the "face to face" relation at the basis of his philosophy. Because of this emphasis on the dialogical, Levinas is also frequently compared to Buber. Yet the relationship to the Other described by Levinas differs from Buber's I–thou relationship, primarily because his interlocutor is not a "thou", the familiar *Du* in Buber's German (*toi* in French), but rather the formal, and more distant "you" (*vous*

24. Buber, *I and Thou*, 89.

25. For example, in Buber, *I and Thou*, 59.

26. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, London 1979.

27. Discussed in Margaret Olin, *The Nation Without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art*, Lincoln, NE 2001, 118–124, where Buber's art historical training, under Alois Riegl, is also discussed.

28. Olin, *The Nation Without Art*, 124–126.

29. For example, Henning Nörenberg, "The Numinous, the Ethical, and the Body: Rudolf Otto's 'The Idea of the Holy' Revisited", *Open Theology* 3 (2017), 546–564, https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2017-0042; John Caruana, "'Not Ethics, Not Ethics Alone, but the Holy': Levinas on Ethics and Holiness", *Journal of Religious Ethics* 34 (2006), 561–583, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9795.2006.00285.x

einiger prächtiger Palmen ab. Kein anderer Baum wirkt doch wie dieser. Er verleiht sofort der ganzen Landschaft den Charakter! Die Kolonisten empfingen uns herzlich. Sie sind unabhängig von Zuschüssen und zahlen bereits Schulden ab.

Vor Wad el Chanin.

Figure 7. Hermann Struck, Vor Wad el Chanin, *etching. Illustrated in Adolf Friedemann & Hermann Struck,* Palästina, *1904.*

Figure 8. Leopold Krakauer, Ancient Olive Tree. *Illustrated in Martin Buber, "The Anguish of Solitude: The Art of Leopold Krakauer",* Ariel *9 (Winter 1964–1965).*

in French).[30] This difference is central to Levinas's placement of ethics in the form of responsibility at the center of the dialogical relation.

Levinas differs from both of these thinkers in placing the transcendent explicitly in a social context. He views the face's essential revelation as its potential for speaking. Revelation, he writes, is discourse.[31] This revelation is not euphoric, or at least not only euphoric, for the speech of the Other consists in a command. It is possible to wonder, while reading Levinas, whether pain is a necessary component of revelation, somehow associated with the terror that Otto finds analogous to the numinous. But even terror is terror of something, and the particular nuance of the idea of terror differs, in Levinas, from that suggested by Otto. The Other who commands us in Levinasian theories is not only above us, but also below us, soliciting us "by his destitution in the face of the Stranger, the widow and the orphan".[32] The Other, is, in short, fragile. While our terror, in Otto's terms, is for ourselves, any terror that Levinas suggests is at least as much on behalf of the Other as for ourselves. When the Other approaches us through the defenseless stranger, what she immediately commands is that we not commit murder.[33] The horror, or the pain of seeing the other and realizing one's responsibility and one's inadequacy to that responsibility, is comparable to Otto's numinous even while it translates the numinous into an ethics, an infinite ethics.

Levinas did not intend his ideas about the face to apply specifically to the visual encounter with a human face, especially as a representation. He can seem to have rejected the phenomenal altogether because he distinguished his notion of infinity as noumenon from a numen, an argument that referred to Kant's notion of a noumenon beyond the sensory, and distinguished from a "phenomenon".[34] He generally seemed skeptical, at best, of visual representation, even when he wrote sympathetically about art in his "Reality and its Shadow".[35] There, art is an ethics, and this ethics is not a knowledge but rather a relationship. He may well have agreed with Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905–1980) meditation on the gaze: "if I apprehend the look, I cease to perceive the eyes."[36] This would suggest that neither Sartre nor Levinas would regard a portrait as a good vehicle for representing a gaze, although for Sartre a variety of emotions, including fear, but not

30. Emanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Pittsburgh, PA 1969, 101.

31. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77.

32. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78.

33. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199

34. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77.

35. Emanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, Dordrecht 1987, 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-4364-3_1.

36. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, New York 1956, 258.

responsibility, marks the response to the apprehension of a gaze. Indeed, a gaze is often something that one feels, intimates, or even hears, rather than sees.[37]

It is unclear the extent to which Levinas's own pronouncements about art are relevant to his relation to contemporary art. In fact, the value of the representation of the gaze is possibly the wrong issue to take up with Levinas. Art, as Michael L. Morgan points out in his discussion of the supposed one-sidedness of Levinas's thought, is created with a viewer in mind. The ethical is not, therefore, one area isolated from other, religious areas that Levinas privileges; it is the heart of religion itself. Moreover, it pervades all areas of life.[38] It is difficult indeed to imagine something worth doing that is only done alone, at least when one thinks in terms of the wider context in which one is doing it. There are many ways to "kill" a person, and physical nourishment is not the only way to save a life. Art may help. To go further, the physical representation of a face may not be the only way to seek a face-to-face encounter in art.

It is unnecessary for our purposes to rehearse the history of the denigration of vision in twentieth-century philosophy.[39] Whatever Levinas thought of visual art, and despite his effort to disassociate his theories from perceptual sensations, or at least representation, he was a conduit for ideas of the numinous that seep into contemporary discourses of social justice art. His ideas can and have been used to think with by artists with varying approaches. Most notably, the filmmakers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne had Levinas's work in mind in making their films.[40] Their films use Levinasian elements depending, as in *The Promise* (1996), on a plot that concerns relationships of obligation and commitment, and explicitly enacts Levinasian notions of responsibility. They also introduce, as has been argued, formal strategies that convey Levinas's ideas of the numinous.[41] My question here, however, focuses directly on the question as to whether it is possible or

37. One of Sartre's examples involves hearing footsteps behind one and concluding that one is being seen. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 260.

38. Michael L. Morgan, *Discovering Levinas*, New York 2007, 289–299, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511805240.

39. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley, CA 1993.

40. Jean-Pierre Dardenne & Luc Dardenne, *Au dos de nos images (1991–2005): Suivi de Le fils et de L'enfant*, Paris 2005. I owe the reference to the Dardenne brothers and a lot more to Michael Morgan.

41. Perhaps the most notable discussions are Sarah Cooper, "Mortal Ethics: Reading Levinas with the Dardennes Brothers", *Film-Philosophy* 11:2 (2007), 66–87, https://doi.org/10.3366/film.2007.0011; Edward Lamberti, *Performing Ethics Through Film Style: Levinas with the Dardenne Brothers, Barbet Schroeder and Paul Schrader*, Edinburgh 2020, especially 41–42.

desirable to have anything like a numinous experience with a work of social justice art. Does a work of art command the viewer, and if so, how?

A Dialogic Numinous in the Art of Social Justice

Discourse is sticky. Vestiges of an old discourse that one thought one rejected may subtly cling to one's effort to replace it. This applies to the visual discourse of art and art traditions as well as to theory. In the 1960s, the artist Martha Rosler attended lectures on "Oriental art" by the painter Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967), whose work is often mentioned in the same breath with the word numinous.[42] The idea also showed up in the lecture hall. In Brooklyn College, he taught art history, and his style, writes Rosler,

> was like Zen – he would show slides of Asian art and say, "Here is one and here's another, and another..." There was great interest at that time in Eastern philosophies and their reflection is a certain kind of artistic understatement. That went well with [...] his paintings. Everything was very [...] silent, and concentrated. I found his paintings astonishing.[43]

Rosler entered college as an abstract painter herself but as her art turned to a more politically active direction involving more photography and collage, she seemed to abandon the silence, the emptiness, and the numinous as understood in the work of artists like Reinhardt.

Instead, her work was outspokenly social in content and often conceptual in style. Rosler exhibited *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* as an installation in 1975, and first published it as a chapter in her book *Three Works* in 1981, the version in which I will discuss it here.[44] The Bowery is a neighborhood of New York long known for its sleezy bars, pawn shops, and flop houses, where alcoholism abounded and alcoholics descended to their lowest point. It was a place where, if unable to cough up the sum for a place in a flop house, one might curl up for the night on the threshold of a shop. The word "Bowery" became synonymous with

42.For example, Christopher French, "Against the Proposition that 'Art is Art and Everything Else is Everything Else'", *The Brooklyn Rail* (Ad Reinhardt Centennial 1913–2013, December 2013/January 2014), https://brooklynrail.org/special/AD_REINHARDT/artists-on-ad/against-the-proposition-that-art-is-art-and-everything-else-is-everything-else, accessed 2023-01-22.

43. Benjamin Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler", in Martha Rosler, *Positions in the Life World*, New York 1998, 23.

44. Martha Rosler, *Three Works*, 2nd ed., Halifax 2006. It was uncertain where and when the installation was first exhibited at the time of the interview with Buchloh. Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler", 44. But Rosler now says that the first exhibition was in San Francisco in 1975. See also the extensive analysis of *The Bowery* in Steve Edwards, *Martha Rosler: The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, London 2012.

Figure 9. Ad Reinhardt, 34, 1964, oil on canvas, 153 cm x 152,6 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Courtesy of Estate of Ad Reinhardt.

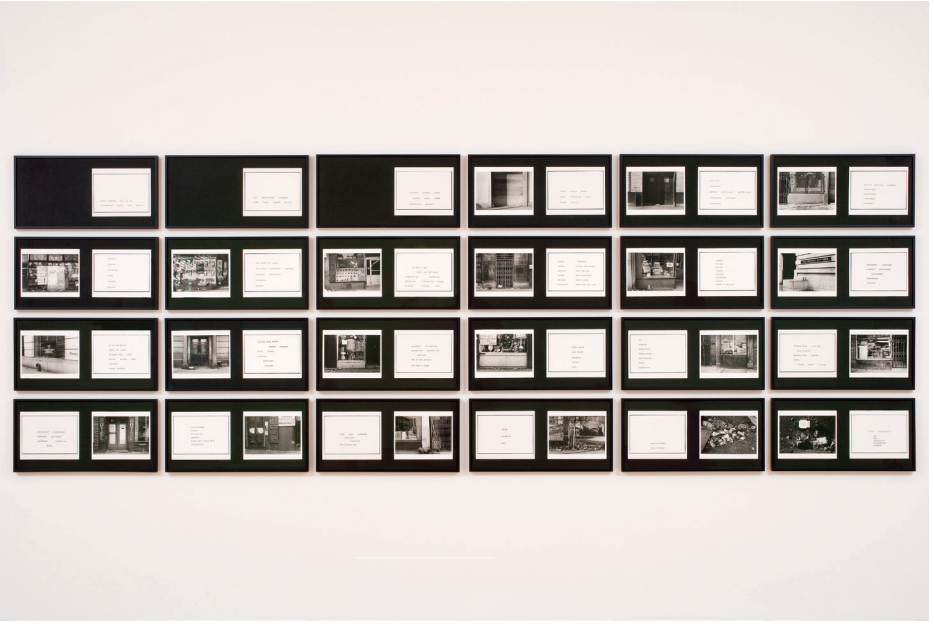


Figure 10. Martha Rosler, The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems, *1974–1975, 45 gelatin silver prints on 24 black boards, each 25,4 cm x 55,9 cm. © Martha Rosler. Courtesy of the artist.*

degradation. Like Skid Row in Los Angeles, the Bowery was a favourite subject for documentarists, voyeurs (sometimes the same people), or activists in mid-twentieth-century America. In Lionel Rogosin's (1924–2000) 1956 film, *On the Bowery*, a fiction film acted by real-life denizens of the Bowery, the main character, an alcoholic, walks down night streets populated by drunken men sleeping in doorways. Rosler's project can be seen as an answer to films like this or to a book of photographs that she cites as its "perfect foil", although she saw it only after completing her installation, Michael D. Zettler's 1975 book, *The Bowery*.[45]

In both Rogosin's film and Zeitler's book, the Bowery is inhabited by troubled people who drink and sleep on its streets; the viewer is invited to gaze at their anguished, damaged faces or slumping bodies. In the book, a photograph of an alcoholic on the right side of a spread is coupled with words taken from interviews on the left. Zettler's introduction states:

> The name [Bowery] brings thoughts of winos, down-and-outers, the end of the line. [...] Whatever you're looking for in the way of pain, torment, and degradation is on open display, available to the general public. [...] There is little pretense here; these men are alcoholics, drunks, and most readily acknowledge this.[46]

Like Zettler's book, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* consists of facing pages with words on side of the spread and images running parallel to it, on the opposite, facing page. The photographs show storefronts on the Bowery, taken from the sidewalk. They begin at the north end of the Bowery and literally continue *down* the street, to the south. Her words are not quotations from people who live and work there, however. They consist rather of stanzas of a concrete poem. The poem explores the role that language plays in turning an individual human being into the representative of a category, that of the "drunk", making a person, in Buber's terms a thou, into an it.

In Rosler's book, the poem begins alone on the first page and the two spreads that follow contain words on the right hand page and blank pages on the left. The words are adjectives used outside the Bowery to characterize the temporary, inoffensive quality of being high: "aglow, glowing, [...] mellow [...] lubricated, greased."[47] On the third full spread, photographs begin to appear on the left hand page, thus preceding the words. These

45. Rosler, *Three Works*, 86, n. 23.
46. Michael D. Zettler, *The Bowery*, New York 1975.
47. Rosler, *Three Works*, 8.

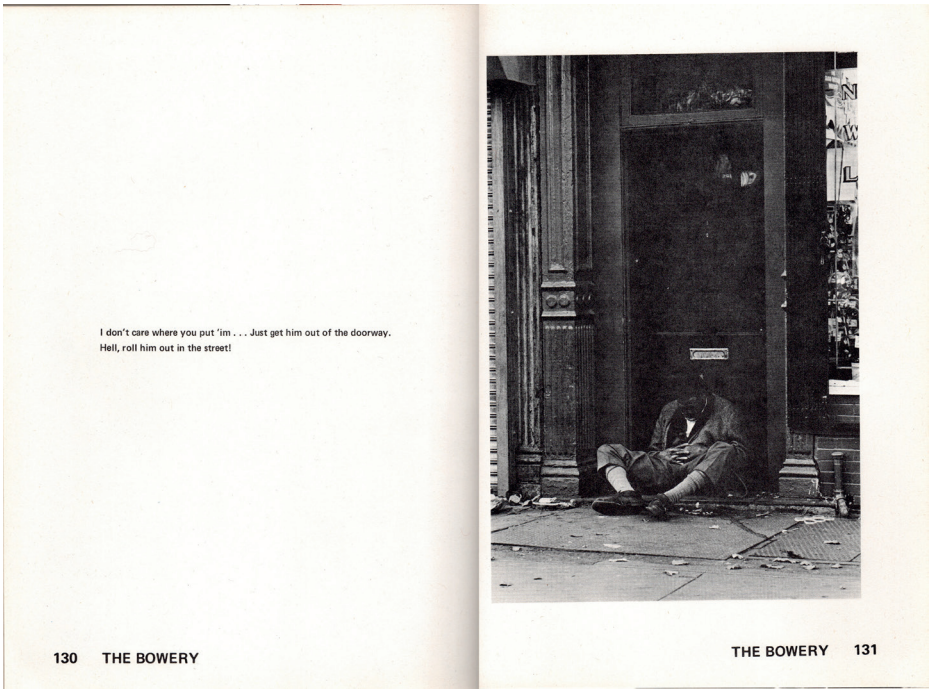


Figure 11. Page spread from Michael D. Zettler, The Bowery, *1975. Courtesy of the artist.*

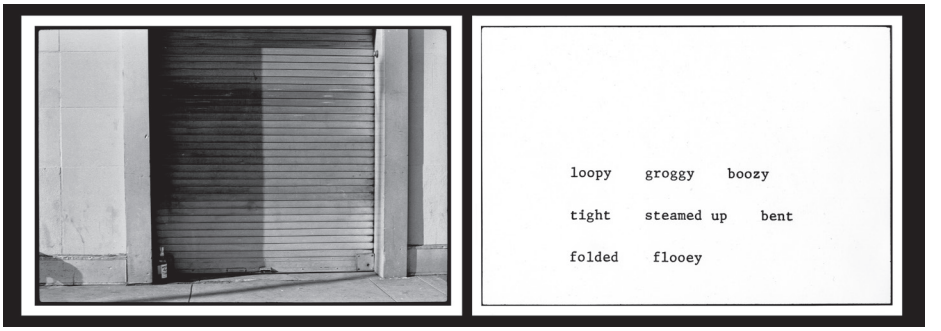


Figure 12. Martha Rosler, The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems, *detail.*
© Martha Rosler. Courtesy of the artist.

adjectives might already seem dehumanizing. But across from the photographs they demonstrate the stages of dehumanization as the words shift to ones that describe a deeper, more profound drunkenness of the person who might sleep in an entranceway like the one on the photograph opposite. Even here there is a progression in both words and images. These first words, being vague, are accompanied by photographs of facades with no words, almost as abstract as a canvas of a Reinhardt or even a Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993). But the facades become a bit noisier; the more clamorous ones respond to the rhythm and the metaphors of the words, which cascade around the page in different configurations, adding to the ruckus.

Up to this point, the words, at least, are reminiscent of a list compiled by Edmund Wilson (1895–1972) in "The Lexicon of Prohibition", which contains many of the same words in much the same order, "beginning with the milder stages and progressing to the more disastrous".[48] One could almost think that Rosler has created an illustrated version of Wilson's text, a work that she does not recall having seen. But two-thirds of the way into Rosler's text, something happens that changes everything. The words and the images trade places, and nouns replace the adjectives. They do not describe, but rather label, fixing people firmly into a type. The nouns, now on the left pages of the spread, run the show. There is no longer the potential to become something other than a "drunk". The section is shorter, as if to show that once a noun is applied to someone rather than a descriptive adjective, rapid deterioration sets in. The people, mercifully, remain unseen: they are exactly what you fail to see when you make a person – a thou – into a thing – it.

Both "stanzas" of the poem refer specifically to death. The last word among the adjectives is "gone". At the end of the shorter section of nouns the words are "Dead Soldiers, Dead Marines", phrases that refer to empty bottles. Empty bottles lie on or near the thresholds in nearly all the photographs, as though to represent the people who left them there. In the context of the last image, they also evoke the people who drank them to the dregs. The last two photographs lack an architectural background, but look down at piles of bottles. Zettler's book, too, ends with death: a dead body, a morgue, a death certificate, and finally Potter's field, where anonymous and unclaimed bodies are buried. In Rosler's book, the words have run out; the poem has ended; the images reverse again; only the title of the piece accompanies the last image. The work demonstrates how words can violate the

48. Edmund Wilson, *The American Earthquake: A Documentary of the Twenties and Thirties*, New York 1971, 89.

Figure 13. Richard Diebenkorn, Ocean Park *#67, 1973, oil on canvas, 254 cm × 205,7 cm. The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. © The Richard Diebenkorn Foundation.*

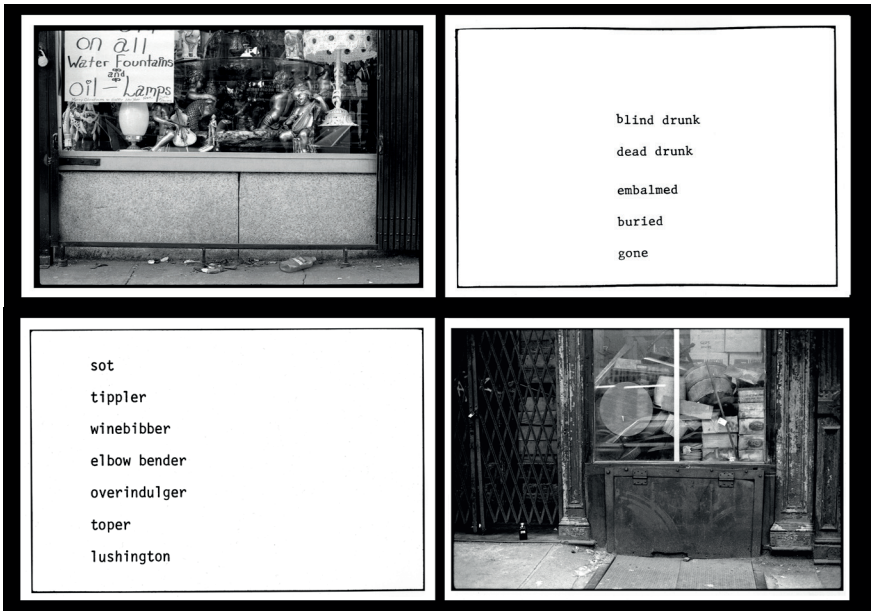


Figure 14. Two consecutive spreads from Martha Rosler, The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, detail.*

very commandment imparted, according to Levinas, by the ”look”: Thou shalt not kill.

Like much conceptual art, this series is in large part a meta-comment, or as Rosler puts it, a quotation. It is not exactly about the Bowery, or at least not primarily about the Bowery. The photographs are in part commentaries on the kinds of businesses whose thresholds are nightly resting places for homeless people. Consequently they critique capitalism, which makes profits for banks, and leaves the lower classes out in the cold: the trickle-down theory at its limit, where the lowest in line get the dregs. A focus on the individual would not show these structural problems, but a view of the literal structures outside which these human beings sleep make the point.

The work is also, in accord with its title, about the limits – and the power – of “descriptive systems”, or “representations”. Whether the subject is an individual or a great social problem, these systems are based on conventions, and tend to reify whatever they describe. This effort places *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* close to the project of deconstruction. It shows, under the guise of inadequacy, the actual *power* of description, which, in turn plays its role in capitalism, where inadequate beings wield great power.

This project might seem to have little to do with the numinous, but contemplating this work could open up the numinous-like feeling of a revelation, as it did for me when I first saw it not long after it was published. Rosler, too, may have had some of the same feelings. She dedicated the book in which she published this piece to Ursula Eder, “in whom I first saw the beauty of thought brought to bear on art”. Rosler does not often use the word “beauty” without irony. Nor is the word “beauty” often used in connection with Rosler’s work. The straightforward way in which she photographs the Bowery, one facade at a time, might seem to be self-consciously unaesthetic. How can something so thoroughly non-humanized, so mundane, be beautiful? But the beauty of thought can be thrilling – there is the beauty of math, but also the beauty of carrying out an idea to its limit. “Beauty” is in itself not an expression of the numinous. But I do want to retain Otto’s association with the irrational, and term Rosler’s work “rational” only in a metaphorical sense.

Recall that the meditation on the beetle, which gives Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s Lord Chandos a feeling comparable to the numinous, concerns the direct contact with the real as opposed to the inadequacy of language. The numinous, if that is what it is, precludes rationality, but can be found in the trivial, in the detail, in the ostensibly unimportant, as in Leopold Krakauer’s drawing of a thistle. The trivial detail certainly marks

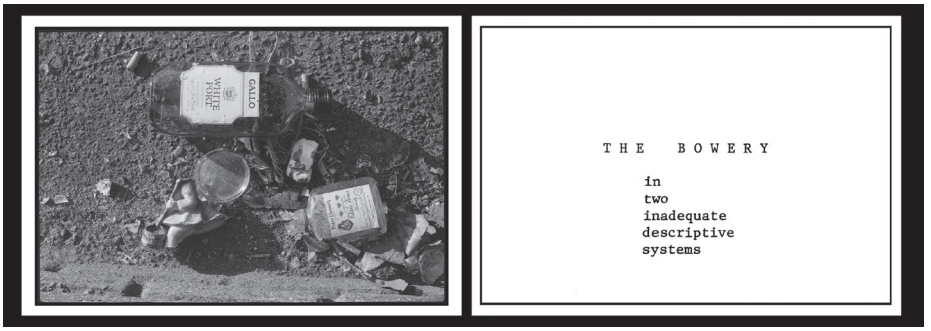


Figure 15. Martha Rosler, The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, detail.*
© Martha Rosler. Courtesy of the artist.

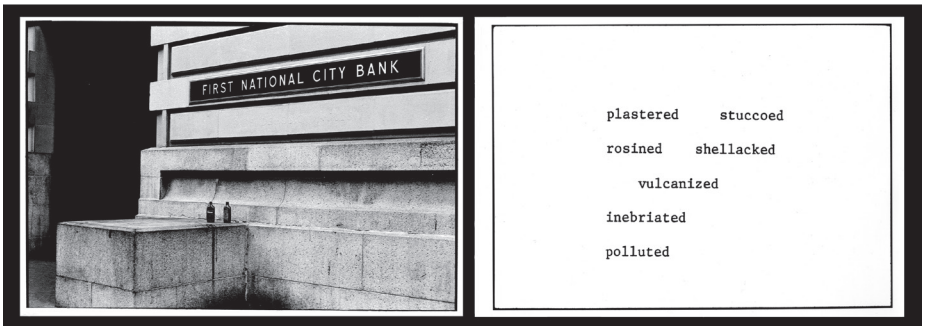


Figure 16. Martha Rosler, The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, detail.*
© Martha Rosler. Courtesy of the artist.

Rosler's subject matter as well. In Krakauer, and also in Otto's favourite classical Chinese landscapes, the emphasis was in the artist's effort to show a great deal with few means. There is an emptiness in Rosler's work, too, in the omnipresent empty bottles in the doorways, which compensates, if anything can, for the absence of people, and the "inaccessible mystery" of the interior spaces of the shops.[49] It is an emptiness that can evoke the numinous. In Rosler's rigorous and exacting determination to follow a path in which she expresses as much as possible using the fewest means – the fewest words and photographs depicting only the absolutely necessary – is there perhaps a kind of Ad Reinhardt moment after all?

The procession of scattered words on one side and that of facades on the other, in the painstaking adherence to their system, in the refusal to succumb to a sentimentalizing and objectifying view, and in the depressing full stop to which it comes, this poem of words and images asks the viewer to contemplate actual human beings sleeping, resting, in these thresholds. The title also suggests that both of these two descriptive systems are inadequate because they do not add up to one full description. In fact, nothing adds up to a "full description". If these representations were adequate, they would exclude the numinous, which cannot, after all, be described. In Levinas's terms, the ability to describe these people would relegate them to a "totality", rather than "infinity". I use the term "dialogic numinous" to describe the effect that Rosler's work can have.

Epilogue and Conclusion

Some of what I have written about Rosler's work could apply to more recent work by other artists as well, work that forces us to face people through their empty environments, that makes us aware of the "thou" behind the "it". Miki Kratsman's and Shabtai Pinchevsky's "anti-mapping project" works "towards an investigation into the conditions of visibility and invisibility imposed upon Palestinians in the production of the landscapes of Israel and the Occupied Territories". Kratsman uses the expression "emptiness" both in photographs and in a written text to describe the feeling the project intends to impart: "One of the goals of the project is to represent the absence or future absence of a place, of the victim, the one no longer there, sometimes all we can do is write of, or point at an emptiness to represent the absence of the victim."[50]

49. The phrase is from a personal communication from Martha Rosler, to whom I am indebted for reminding me of the absence of shop interiors in the piece, and much else.

50. Quoted in Andrew Fisher, "Miki Kratsman and Shabtai Pinchevsky: The Anti-Mapping Project", *Philosophy of Photography* 10 (2020), 244, https://doi.org/10.1386/pop_00019_1. See also Nurit Chinn, "Miki Kratsman and Shabtai Pinchevsky's 'Anti-Mapping' Unveils Histories

Figure 17. Miki Kratsman & Shabtai Pinchevsky, The Anti-Mapping Project*, detail. Camera location: 31° 48' 42,22" N, 35° 20' 18,84" E. Altitude: 240,5 m. Image direction 161.00° (magnetic direction). Courtesy of Miki Kratsman.*

Figure 18. Naomi Safran-Hon, Mirror Ceiling: A Room with a Mattress and a Chair*, 2020, acrylic, gouache, lace, archival ink jet print, and cement on canvas and fabric, 243,84 cm x 152,4 cm. Courtesy of the artist.*

The victims, in the case of Khan al-Ahmar, like Rosler's denizens of the Bowery, are absent from the photographs, but not – yet – from Khan al-Ahmar. This village in the occupied territories was slated to be demolished by the Israeli government and the occupants expelled to an area that houses a garbage dump near a Palestinian city. Seeing the homes empty is, in fact, chilling. And the project is about this feeling, perhaps more than the facts it contains: straightforward photographs, GPS coordinates, and an arial map. As with Rosler, the care with which Kratsman and Pinchevsky obey their own rules and assemble their facts is an important component of the feeling.

Israeli-American painter Naomi Safran-Hon imparts a different expression of emptiness. Safran-Hon grew up in Haifa, Israel. Her series consists of enormous, breathtakingly beautiful paintings derived from photographs she took of the interiors of homes that Palestinians left behind in 1948 when they fled the neighbourhood Wadi Sahid, in Haifa. The varied materials, including concrete and lace, that Safran-Hon works into the paintings give the destruction they depict a sense of having been lifted from the rooms themselves. Like *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, people are absent. In this case, they are absent not only from the paintings, but also from the homes, and from Haifa. The paintings depict the debris of their lives, the remains of the beauty people once cared about creating in their homes, and the thoughtless destruction that tried to make "thou" into "it", over and over.

The examples of Social Justice art discussed here do not only issue a litany of complaints. There is a reason why one works for social justice; it involves pulls and yearnings towards something better as well as anger at what is.[51] In the work of these artists that means showing "what is" while coming face to face with people who have been victimized, people whom one cannot look *at*, but whose gaze one can feel. Their absent voices are a command that one must obey, even when one would prefer to spend time alone, steeped in the numinous so beguilingly described by Rudolf Otto. Martha Rosler has said, "I am still trying to cope with the loss of the Transcendent from Art".[52] ▲

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of Forced Displacement in Israel and Palestine", *British Journal of Photography*, 11 August 2021, https://www.1854.photography/2021/08/miki-kratsman-shabtai-pinchevskys-anti-mapping/, accessed 2023-01-22.

51. I borrow this expression from Maud Lavin, with whom I explored this interpretation in e-mails.

52. Personal communication to the author.

SUMMARY

In *Das Heilige,* Rudolf Otto discusses not only conceptual, but artistic parallels to the idea of the "numinous". The artistic styles and periods that he mentions are those admired by European literati and intellectuals of his time. They include the spare Chinese landscapes "of emptiness", made in the classical period of the Tang and Sung dynasties, as well as the gothic art that inspired the movement towards abstraction in the early twentieth century. Related ideas continue to pervade the discourse of champions of abstract art well into the twentieth century, as in in Michael Fried's exegesis of "presentness", in his essay "Art and Objecthood". Seemingly counterintuitively, ideas associated with the numinous also infiltrate discourses of the art of social justice. Some Jewish thinkers who referenced or absorbed Otto's ideas, translated them into relational notions or ethical ideas of responsibility. When these ideas seep into the contemporary discourse of social justice art, concepts of the numinous cling to them. An investigation of a significant work of art in the service of social justice reveals a connection between conceptual art, the numinous, and social justice that extends from the era of the early 1980s into our own time.

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Numinous Edifices

Aesthetic Experiences of Sacred Spaces

OLA SIGURDSON

Ola Sigurdson is Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Gothenburg.

ola.sigurdson@lir.gu.se

Strolling through Rome

Once, when I was strolling through the Centro Storico in Rome, sometime after the third wave of the Coronavirus, I was struck by the long queue for the Pantheon. Usually, one can simply walk straight through the portico into the rotunda, but at this time, no doubt because of the health measures called for by the pandemic, one had to stand in line to get in. Judging by the length of the queue, the wait did not seem to deter the visitors: the Pantheon remained one of Rome's best-attended monuments. Although I usually take the time to visit the Pantheon whenever I am in Rome, this time I decided to pass. A few days later, however, I went to St Peter's Basilica, avoiding the longer queues by arriving early in the morning. At 8:30 a.m., the queues for the security and health checks were short, but soon, even the massive St Peter's started filling up. Security checks were, to be sure, in place even before the pandemic, but it is still interesting to note how popular it is to visit this monument, despite the inconvenience of the security check.

No doubt there are many significant differences between the Pantheon and St Peter's in terms of history, purpose, and architecture, the one being (re)built as a temple by the Roman emperor Hadrian (76–138) with the help of the architect Apollodorus of Damascus and dedicated around 126 CE, the other being (more or less) completed in 1626 as the most important church of Western Christendom. The Pantheon was, at least in the

beginning, a sanctuary for Roman religion, but was converted into a Christian church by Pope Boniface III (c. 540–607) in the seventh century, and still functions, occasionally, as a church even though it is the property of the Italian government.

What they share, however, and the reason that I mention them together here, is the experience of space that they both conjure up in the visitor. To enter the Pantheon's dome between the columns via the vestibule is a short, horizontal walk that abruptly ends with a vertical shift when our attention is drawn upwards in accordance with the central axis of the building. Our eyes are almost inevitably attracted to the *oculus* or eye in the centre of the dome, which is where the light enters from above. It is always open. The centre of gravity in the relation between visitors and the space circumscribed by the edifice shifts from us to the temple as our own activity is transformed into a more passive receiving of the light that flows from the *oculus*. It is as if the eye in the ceiling is looking at us rather than we at it.

Something similar could be said of the experience of visiting St Peter's. Arriving, as one does as an unofficial visitor, from the Piazza San Pietro, one is enclosed by the colossal colonnade, designed four columns deep by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) as a forecourt of the basilica.[1] Although the square is, in itself, awe-inspiring, even in its horizontal direction towards the entrance of the basilica, the trajectory turns upwards after the entrance, as the visitor is struck by the vastness of the space circumscribed by the building. The dome of St Peter's is 136,57 metres tall, compared with the Pantheon's 43,3 metres, and is one of the tallest domes in the world. The central nave that stretches towards the apse is 186,36 metres long and is lavishly furnished in a baroque style and ornamented with huge pilasters. The experience is overwhelming, not least due to the sheer volume of the space enclosed by the building. If the experience of space in the Pantheon, particularly the shift in the centre of gravity experienced by the visitor to the temple or from horizontality to verticality, could be described as intense, at and in St Peter's, the similar shift in the centre of gravity is experienced as prolonged and massive. It is difficult to take in the vastness of St Peter's. Perhaps it is better experienced in a crowd, as a collective experience?[2] Like all the grand churches of European Christendom, it is not exactly a serene place of meditation, but rather a crowded and cluttered place.

1. See Mårten Snickare, "How to Do Things with the Piazza San Pietro: Performativity and Baroque Architecture", in Peter Gillgren & Mårten Snickare (eds.), *Performativity and Performance in Baroque Rome*, Farnham 2012, 65–83.

2. See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Crowds: Das Stadion als Ritual von Intensität*, Frankfurt 2020.

Here, I am trying to conjure up some basic aspects of the experience of numinous spaces. The examples I have chosen are of course examples of temples (from the Latin *templum*), that is, places for worship of the divine. Never mind that the Pantheon once was a sanctuary for all the gods (*pan* in Greek meaning "all" and *theion* "gods") and only later became a Christian church. One may perhaps even presume that one reason for turning the Pantheon into a Christian church was that the experience of numinosity remained, even for those inhabiting a post-Constantine Rome that had become Christian and that had a constrained relation to its non-Christian past. Undoubtedly there is a difference between entering the Pantheon in its pre-Christian days and entering after it had been redecorated more in accordance with Christian beliefs, but nevertheless its fundamental axes remain and so also the possibility of experiencing the shift in the centre of gravity. This is an experience that is possible to have outside any traditional religious affiliation, often witnessed to by visitors writing from an allegedly non-confessional perspective; I would even venture to suggest that this is a large portion of the attraction for the contemporary tourist. Standing in the queue waiting to have his or her Green Pass checked, the expectation of a numinous experience is invoked by the space of the building. William L. MacDonald (1921–2010), in his book on the Pantheon, thinks the experience is "neither sacred nor secular", but goes on to describe it in terms that describe precisely such a crossing of the horizontal and vertical as an experience of the sacred does.[3] Such experiences are of course coloured by one's religion, or lack thereof. I suggest, however, that religion or personal belief is not the cause of these experiences but rather that they are, in fact, a function of space itself or, perhaps better stated, the relation between human beings and a particular kind of space, defined by a certain kind of building. The experience of numinous space is the experience of an embodied being, who, due to the embodied nature of his or her existence, is always also a spatial being.

In this article, I will explore the experience of the sacred with a focus on how it is realized in and through spatial categories, particularly buildings. My main aim is to show how this experience is an aesthetic experience – "aesthetic" in the more original meaning, as an examination of the knowledge of our world gained intuitively and through our senses. Although I am sceptical of claims of separating experience from ontology or theology, my perspective here is decidedly phenomenological, particularly in that I am interested in how the sacred is experienced, not in whether it should be

3. William L. MacDonald, *The Pantheon: Design, Meaning, and Progeny*, Cambridge, MA 1976, 132.

interpreted as an apprehension of the divine or some supramundane being. At the same time, however, I am also concerned with uncovering some of the shortcomings in how phenomenology has treated the topic, especially concerning the relation between the power and the performance of the sacred, as well as the sometimes quite abstract and generalizing talk of the sacred in some classic accounts. With regard to terminology, I use "sacred" and "numinous" more or less as synonyms, which I believe is generally the case in the literature, although I have some sympathy for Rudolf Otto's (1869–1937) understanding of the numinous as the sacred minus the moral. My exploration shall proceed through a critical look at some of the classic contributions on the topic; one may well have reservations with regard to some of their suggestions, but to dialectically proceed through them may have the constructive advantage of clarifying their shortcomings while building on their strengths in the service of a revised understanding of sacred spaces. At the end, I offer some constructive suggestions on how to improve the way in which we deal, phenomenologically, with numinous edifices.

Mircea Eliade's Sacred Space

The common denominator and point of departure for a phenomenological discussion of what I call "numinous" or "sacred spaces" is likely to be found in the first chapter of the Romanian historian of religion and philosopher Mircea Eliade's (1907–1986) classic *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (written in French but originally published in a German translation in 1957).[4] The chapter is entitled "Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred" and is a summary of the experience of space in several religions and what is common to them all. Eliade is keen to uphold the commonality of experiences of the sacred among all human beings throughout his book. In it, he is heavily dependent upon the binary distinction between sacred and profane, heterogeneity and homogeneity, cosmos and chaos, as well as centre and periphery. One of the hitherto most ambitious attempts at interpreting spatiality from a phenomenological perspective, the German philosopher Otto Friedrich Bollnow's (1903–1991) *Human Space*, has a chapter on sacred space that is essentially based on Eliade's account – with the addition of a few pages from the Dutch historian and philosopher of religion Gerardus van der Leeuw's (1890–1950) *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* as well as from a few other authors such as the Austrian art historian Hans Sedlmayer (1896–1984) and Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945).[5] I take my current

4. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Orlando, FL 1959, 20–65.

5. Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Human Space*, London 2011, 133–141. See also Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, Princeton, NJ 1986, 393–402.

point of departure from a critical reading of Eliade's book, so let me begin with a short summary of what it says.

Eliade's chapter on sacred space begins with the distinction between heterogeneous and homogeneous space. The experience of a certain space as sacred is an experience of that space as different from other spaces. Space in its most general form is experienced as a vast expanse without any form; only the hierophany (that is, the manifestation of the sacred) establishes a centre around which orientation is possible. In this way, a world is established where qualitative distinctions are possible. "There is, then, a sacred space, and hence a strong, significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and so are without structure of consistency, amorphous", writes Eliade.[6] The founding of the world, if you will, *is* the differentiation within space between sacred and profane. For the non-religious human being, or the human being without any notion of the sacred, space can only appear as undifferentiated, amorphous, and neutral, and, like the scientific geometrical space, without existential significance. This is, however, only possible in theory, according to Eliade, not in practice, as some kind of "valorization of the world" always remains, like "privileged places".[7] Only the founding of the world through a hierophany permits a true orientation in the world, and so, despite Eliade's quite obvious critique of "industrial society" for its levelling of human existence, the distinction between heterogeneous and homogeneous space is ontological, not just historical.[8]

In more concrete terms, the distinction or even opposition between homogeneous and heterogeneous space could be illustrated by my example of St Peter's in front of the Piazza san Petro in Rome. The door and the threshold between the church and the square indeed mark the continuity between these significantly different spaces, but most of all mark a form of discontinuity, according to Eliade: "The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds – and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible."[9] This is not a property of the threshold of a church door as such, but holds both for thresholds in general (think of domestic thresholds that differentiate between the domestic and the public) as well as for other religious buildings, monuments, and sites. Thresholds signify passage and transformation. But entering a church or any other religious building is not the only way that this differentiation occurs. Within the religious building another opening usually occurs, where

6. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 20.
7. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 23–24.
8. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 24.
9. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 25.

the sacred intervenes – this is the hierophany or theophany. This second opening need not occur each and every time, automatically as it were, but at least must be indicated by a sign or an evocation. Even if sacred space in one sense is a given, it is not static but has to be performed, but this performance is not, at least not from the perspective of the sacred space, a construction of sacred space by human beings alone, but "reproduces the work of the gods".[10] As Eliade puts it somewhat later, "every construction or fabrication has the cosmogony as paradigmatic model".[11] Remember my short description in the introduction of how our eyes turn upward towards the *oculus* when entering the Pantheon.

The heterogeneity of sacred space is not confined to particular religious buildings, sites, or monuments, however. All the world could be a place of manifestation of the sacred, according to Eliade, and so also particular territories that are consecrated by a ritual. Since the distinction between the sacred and the profane *is* the origin of the world, any ordering of a previously unordered chaos is also a sanctifying act through which a cosmos is created. Eliade uses the erection of a Vedic fire altar as an example of how the claim for a new territory – whether through conquest or occupation – is a cosmogonic act through which what previously was, at least for us, an unordered chaos becomes part of "our world".[12] At least in archaic religions, according to Eliade, whatever world that is not ours is not a world but chaos: "the cosmicization of unknown territories is always a consecration; to organize a space is to repeat the paradigmatic work of the gods."[13] This works both ways: the loss of that token that signifies creation also undoes the cosmos and with it the community that belonged to that cosmos. The enemy that threatens one's own community is also a representative of chaos. Even the fortifications against enemies around a city are thus more than defences against human beings; through circumscribing the city it also rules out and holds off the powers of chaos.

The *axis mundi* or cosmic pillar through which all levels of existence commune with one another signifies the centre of the world. Now we are, in a sense, back to the sacred space in a more circumscribed meaning: the *axis mundi* that symbolizes the centre of the world could be manifested concretely in a religious building, site, or monument. It need not be a building, like a church, as in my own introductory example, but could be a sacred mountain, like Meru in India or Fuji in Japan, or a city, like the former city of the emperor in Beijing (or the city of Rome, for that matter, or Jerusalem,

10. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 29.
11. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 45.
12. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 30–31.
13. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 32.

or Mecca, and so on). This is where heaven and earth meet and where chaos is ruled out. It is the place that orders the world, the centre from which the world comes to birth, even its navel.[14] Thus, the centre of the city or village symbolizes the creation of the world, and the centre of the city or village, in a traditional society, could be empty but could also be represented by a sanctuary. But more common dwellings, like the house one lives in, are also structured in the same way as are sacred buildings in that they too take part in the cosmic symbolism: "The house is an *imago mundi*."[15] Every house in that sense is a sacred space, since it enacts and repeats the creation of the world by its bringing order to space. That a certain space is considered sacred, as, for example, a church or a mountain, does not exclude but presupposes that the entire world is sacred, and the former works rather as a representative of that more extensive sacred space, an intensification of it. According to Eliade, such buildings are derived from the primary experience of sacred space in its more extensive meaning, a sacred cosmos.[16] Sacred space as manifested in buildings is dependent on a particular, and experienced, worldview. At the same time, these buildings serve as a reminder of the sacredness of the cosmos, and thus resanctify the world. Even if they are mere earthly versions of a more perfect transcendent ideal, they not only point towards their archetype but symbolically participate in it.

Eliade, finally, suggests that, on one hand, for the "profane" human being in the modern world, there are no longer any distinctions that differentiate sacred from profane space, which means that such distinctions disappear. In the industrial age, when, for example, the architect Le Corbusier (1887–1965) suggests that a house is "a machine to live in", habitation becomes a matter of functionality only, and the distinctions between different kinds of habitation disappear and lose their cosmic significance.[17] Space becomes homogeneous and dwellings infinitely replaceable, as the desacralization of the cosmos goes hand in hand with the desacralization of human dwellings. On the other hand, there are still vestiges of a more traditional worldview in industrial society, Eliade thinks, in the way that there are still rituals for

14. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 38–39, 44.

15. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 53.

16. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 58.

17. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 50, 56–57. The quotation from Le Corbusier comes from *Towards a New Architecture*, Garden City, NY 1986, 5. The introduction to Le Corbusier's book, originally in French from 1923, suggests that this is more complicated than Eliade's mention in passing allows for: "The Architect, by his arrangements of forms, realizes an order which is a pure creation of his spirit." Perhaps this is a creation of the architect's own spirit, and he or she now becomes the creator, but on the other hand, the architect "gives us the measure of an order which we feel to be in accordance with that of our world" (p. 3). Whatever the differences, it is remarkable how similar these accounts are in terms of the significance they ascribe to buildings.

settling into a new house, people still have "privileged places", such as where one was born or met one's partner.[18] These are experiences of nonhomogeneous space, even though they lack any cosmic underpinning. It seems to me that Eliade is profoundly ambivalent about the possibility of experiencing a thoroughly profane space even by modern human beings, and perhaps consequently so: if profane space means homogenous space, according to Eliade, then this is a space where no existential orientation is at all possible, and since even modern human beings do or must orient themselves, even existentially, then it seems to follow that the notion of a genuinely empty or homogenous space is more of a limiting concept than anything encountered in practice.

Phenomenology in Eliade's Account of Sacred Space

Eliade's understanding of sacred space is not just pure phenomenology in the sense of only describing how space appears to human beings as it appears in their experience. It is also ontological, in that it suggests what kind of "worldview" is implied by such experience. One could even get the impression that the worldview seems to take precedence, and, to be sure, Eliade never suggests that it is phenomenology that he is doing. Also, his account is highly abstract in that it generalizes from a broad religious material, something Eliade himself admits by saying that it is not the infinite variety that interests him, but rather the elements of unity. The emphasis on difference is between the two different attitudes of "religious man" and "nonreligious man".[19] Yet another characteristic of Eliade's interpretation of sacred space is that it abstracts from any actual description of how space is materially constituted and structured. It is hardly Eliade's point, I think, to dissociate material construction from existential significance, even if he differentiates between "geometrical space" and the experience of heterogeneous space.[20]

Nevertheless, in effect Eliade leaves out, from his discussion, the possibility that the actual, material construction of space could give rise to genuine differences in the way that space is experienced existentially. Does the materiality of a building contribute to the way it is experienced, so that the tactile harshness of the concrete that the Pantheon is built of gives rise to a different experience from, say, the warmness of a wooden stave church? Do the different organizations of space in, for example, a traditional basilica, a gothic cathedral, and a modern brick church with a flat roof bring about different conceptualities as well as experiences of how the divine is related to

18. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 24, 57.
19. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 63.
20. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 22–23.

the created?[21] What I suggest is that Eliade's emphasis on elements of unity between different manifestations of the religious worldview and, especially, different instances of sacred architecture actually obscure some of the complexity of the experience of sacred space and how it is dependent on sense impressions.

Along with this tendency comes, not surprisingly, another problem that I have already hinted at: the precedence of worldview or ontology in Eliade's account on behalf of experience. While I think it is certainly permissible and even commendable to ask what worldview certain experiences imply and vice versa, I cannot escape the impression that Eliade's reduction of the possible attitudes to just two, "traditional" and "modern" or "religious" and "nonreligious", is too simplistic. This distinction goes hand in hand with the experience of space as heterogeneous and homogeneous, respectively, but it does not really hold up for Eliade himself, as he insinuates that space is never really experienced existentially as purely homogeneous. Implicit in Eliade's argument is that the "modern" attitude has as its consequence an impossible flattening of the experience of space, but in a certain sense Eliade too, with his description of sacred versus profane space in *The Sacred and the Profane*, partakes in such a flattening. What if it is the poverty of the descriptions of space that obfuscates the heterogeneity of the experiences of space rather than a lack of the experiences themselves? It is understandable that Eliade writes the way he does in a book from the 1950s that wishes to speak to how its own context perceives itself, but it is perhaps less an attempt to stay true to the experiences of space and more of a polemical piece that risks overstating its case. Eliade's account runs the risk that his more historical distinction between sacred and profane, as a result of secularization, overrides a phenomenological distinction between space as sacred, as in a temple, and as profane, as in a market. In the latter distinction, sacred and profane could be understood not as a binary opposition but as a functional differentiation within society. Such a functional differentiation may well conform to a traditional society in the way Eliade conceives it, as the differentiation between "red letter days" and ordinary days in the liturgical calendar does not exclude that the whole month, or year, is sacred.

Consequently, my critique of Eliade's understanding of sacred space in *The Sacred and the Profane* has to do with its lack of phenomenological precision. One need only look at a comprehensive description of spatiality as an existential category, as in Bollnow's *Human Space*, to understand how

21. See Richard Kieckhefer, *Theology in Stone: Church Architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley*, Oxford 2004, https://doi.org/10.1093/0195154665.001.0001; Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *Sacred Power, Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship*, Oxford 2008, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195314694.001.0001.

complex spatiality as such is, and that "homogeneity" might be an imprecise designation even of something called profane space from a phenomenological perspective. But perhaps I am unfair to Eliade, given that he never claims to be doing phenomenology in *The Sacred and the Profane*? Let us therefore take a short look at the section on sacred space in Bollnow's book to see what he does with Eliade, while also glancing at how he uses van der Leeuw's short section on the very same topic.

In *Human Space*, Bollnow starts from Eliade's distinction but remarks almost at once that one needs to be more careful in distinguishing between the homogeneity of abstract, geometrical space and the homogeneity of profane space, as the latter is only homogeneous in relation to sacred space.[22] For Bollnow, non-homogeneity is a characteristic of "experienced space" – that is, "space as it is manifested in concrete human life" – as such.[23] Only when "experienced space" is colonized by abstract, geometrical space would it assume a homogeneous character, but even then it goes against the grain of experience. Even today, "in these secular times", "the house of the human individual is still a sacred area", according to Bollnow, so there is a limit to secularization in the sense of emptying the human dwelling of all existential significance.[24] According to van der Leeuw, there is a proximity between house and temple in traditional society, and Bollnow traces the remaining sacrality of the dwelling back to its roots in "mythological thought".[25] In his association of the existential significance of the dwelling with religious thought, Bollnow is essentially in agreement with Eliade. No secularization in the sense of a complete rationalization and externalization of human life is possible. But at the same time, Bollnow is more nuanced than Eliade in terms of his phenomenology.

To begin with, Bollnow emphasizes that there are different forms of sacred space, and, perhaps more importantly, with the help of van der Leeuw he points out how the manifestation of sacred space occurs as an internal differentiation within space. As van der Leeuw puts it, sacred spaces "have their specific and independent value" as "resting-places" in "universal extensity" and thus become not a "part" of this universal extensity but a "position".[26] This means that sacred space might well be a kind of centre with the help of which human beings can orient themselves in space, but that does not mean that whatever parts of space are not "centre", not sacred but

22. Bollnow, *Human Space*, 135.

23. Bollnow, *Human Space*, 19.

24. Bollnow, *Human Space*, 133–134.

25. Bollnow, *Human Space*, 134. See also van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 395.

26. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 393.

profane, are just an amorphous homogeneous extension. Quite the contrary: even peripheral space stands in a non-antagonistic relationship to central space. There is a recurring antagonism in Eliade's exposition between sacred and profane that is explained more by his cultural criticism than his phenomenology. Bollnow essentially agrees with Eliade's idea that, as Bollnow himself puts it, "every building of a house is the establishment of a cosmos in chaos", but this act of separation that is constitutive of a world does not mean that profane space will forever be associated with chaos.[27] Building a house, or for that matter founding a city, is a repetition of the primordial act of creation, which also means that the house or the city in itself symbolizes the creation of cosmos. As examples of this, Bollnow picks up Eliade's report of a Native American tribe, Hans Sedlmayr's account of the symbolism of Byzantine churches, as well as Plutarch's (c. 45–c. 120 CE) account of the foundation of Rome.[28]

Essentially, Bollnow is more interested in the sacrality of the house, of human dwellings, than in the more pronounced sacrality of religious buildings and sites, and how their "paler, but still effective form" is a reflection of "a purer and more primeval case". This comparison, he suggests, helps us to understand how even today (Bollnow's book was originally published in 1963), "in these secular times", building and dwelling in a house retain something of a sacred character: the experience of the dwelling as in some sense the centre of the world, the house as set apart from other spaces, the house as a realm of peace, and as an image of the world.[29] On the last point, he quotes Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962) and suggests that being at home in a house is the presupposition of being at home in the world.[30] Bollnow's interest, in other words, is more in the experience of the sacred in "ordinary" spaces than in traditionally "extraordinary" spaces, such as religious buildings.

Writing a comprehensive phenomenology of the human experience of space, Bollnow's aim is different from Eliade's in *The Sacred and the Profane*. Nevertheless, we can see a convergence in how Bollnow suggests that the house retains some of the characteristics of a more traditional form of sacred space and that, therefore, the distinction between "traditional religious" and "modern secular" is far from absolute. However, even in his dependence, for his own analysis, on Eliade, he is quietly but distinctly critical of Eliade's conflation of a historical narrative of secularization and a phenomenological

27. Bollnow, *Human Space*, 137.

28. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 46; Hans Sedlmayr, *Die Entstehung der Kathedrale*, Wiesbaden 2001, 119.

29. Bollnow, *Human Space*, 140–141.

30. See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Boston, MA 1994, 4, 7.

distinction between sacred and profane space. In Bollnow's own account, existential space, whether sacred or profane, would not be reduced to homogeneity, except as a matter of the colonization of the spatial aspects of the life-world by an abstract, geometrical understanding of space. While there are indeed, as Eliade suggests, social trends that threaten to mute spatial "resonance" – the possibility of standing in a living relationship to one's environment and not just regarding it as inanimate – and while some of these trends *may* be effects of a scientistic (rather than scientific) worldview, that does not mean that human beings in general experience space as something amorphous, homogeneous, and inert, only that the vocabulary for describing experiences of spatial significance in everyday life is reduced, privatized, and, in the worst case, assumes an uncanny quality.[31] To a certain extent, Bollnow presents a more nuanced phenomenology of sacred space, especially in his clarifications. But at the same time, he leaves out some of the more "extraordinary" experiences of sacred spaces (not just religious buildings), which might be disadvantageous to his understanding of the sacred as such and also, by extension, to his account of the house. The latter, although interesting as such, is of no concern here.

The Power of the Sacred

One essential trait of Eliade's understanding of sacred space that is missing from Bollnow's discussion, and that perhaps tends to be overshadowed by other concerns in Eliade's own analysis, is the power of the sacred. To experience a space as sacred is to have some experience of a power that cannot be fended off but that imposes itself on the person. This corresponds to the hierophany in Eliade's account: "Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred."[32] The word "hierophany" comes from a combination of the Greek adjective *hieros*, "sacred", and the verb *phanein*, "to bring to light", "to reveal". The verb emphasizes the dynamic character of how the sacred imposes itself on the recipient. In my short description of visits to the Pantheon and St Peter's in Rome, I pointed out how the experiences of these two buildings involved a shift in the centre of gravity from visitor to space. This is an example of how the quality of power in the experience of the sacred is manifested concretely in the very form and materiality of a building. In other words, there is an active or even performative quality in how the power of the sacred asserts itself. I shall return to this performative quality below, but in this section I will focus on the question of what kind

31. See Hartmut Rosa, *Resonanz: Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung*, Frankfurt 2019.
32. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 26.

of power inheres in the manifestation of the sacred, taking my cue from one of Eliade's predecessors, Rudolf Otto.

Whatever the source of an experience of the sacred and the nature of the sacred itself, an essential quality of that experience is how it asserts itself with power. The experience of someone who finds him- or herself in the grip of the sacred is sometimes described as "awe", "astonishment", or even "dread". A classic interpretation of such experiences is found in Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* from 1917, which is mentioned by Eliade as the very starting point of his own reflections on religious experience.[33] Unlike Eliade, Otto, a German theologian and scholar of religion, wants to uncover and isolate to make more distinct that aspect of the "holy" (or sacred) that goes beyond any moral goodness or epistemological cognition, and which he calls the "numinous" – it is the same thing as the holy, one could say, minus the moral. "Numinosity" is an adjective coined by Otto himself, and he derives it from the Latin *numen*.[34] A particular characteristic of the numinous is that one cannot have it at one's disposal; the initiative, so to speak, is always on the side of the numinous itself, even when its reception is conditioned by the one receiving. As Otto puts it, the numinous "cannot, strictly speaking, be taught, it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind".[35] This means, as Otto is eager to emphasize, that any reception or reaction on behalf of the subject experiencing it is dependent upon its being "objectively given"; even if the numinous cannot be described as such, it is experienced as something "which in itself indubitably has immediate and primary reference to an object outside the self".[36] The important point about the numinous is not that it is an object in any definable sense but that it is something external to the subject, which means that it also can impose itself on the subject receiving it. This is also why Otto chose to talk about it as *das Ganz Andere*, the "Wholly Other".[37] Even when Otto speaks of the numinous – as in "the numinous" – as a noun, his intention is quite the opposite of any objectification. The numinous quality of the numinous itself can be spoken or written about, but strictly speaking never defined, only experienced.

How is the numinous experienced? It is experienced not in a simple but in a complex way, as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. That it is a mystery essentially means that we cannot have the numinous at our disposal. It imposes itself; it takes the initiative. The aspect of *tremendum* accentuates this

33. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 8–10.

34. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, London 1958, 6–7.

35. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 7.

36. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 10.

37. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 25–30.

distance between the numinous and the experiencing subject. A translation of *tremendum* would be "awe inspiring" to the point of "dread" or the "uncanny". Otto summarizes it as "absolute unapproachability".[38] To further highlight that this still is a phenomenon that overpowers any human ability, Otto also speaks of the experience of the numinous as *majestas* – "majestic" – as a qualification of *tremendum*. In the experience of being overpowered, as being a mere creature before something that absolutely exceeds oneself, unapproachability takes upon itself an aspect of humility on behalf of the subject. A third and final qualification of the numinous alongside *tremendum* and *majestas*, mentioned by Otto, is "energy" or "urgency". This further stresses the active nature of the numinous object, which is not indifferent, but as if it has its own desire.

Even given these different aspects of the experience of the *mysterium tremendum*, this is only one side of the experience of the numinous. If *tremendum* speaks of the distance between the numinous object and the experiencing subject, there is also the almost opposite or at least contrastive pull of the *fascinans*. The mystery of the numinous object at the same time has an "element of daunting 'awefulness' and 'majesty'" and "something uniquely attractive and *fascinating*", which "combine in a strange harmony of contrasts".[39] Despite the aspects of awe or dread, in the experience of the numinous one is also drawn towards it as an object of desire in its own right, not only for the sake of "salvation" or anything else that is pragmatically useful. "Longing", "solemnity", and the sheer dazzlement and excitement of the over-abundant nature of the numinous characterize the fascination that is also part of this experience. For Otto, all these aspects, both of the *tremendum* and the *fascinans*, help us to understand the phenomenon of the power of the numinous. They are still generalizations, however, of experiences of something that cannot, in principle, be defined, and in Otto's discussion of them in *The Idea of the Holy*, they are presented as drawn from an empirical material that is quite rich in its nuances. In keeping with the irreducibly transcendent nature of the numinous, he calls them "ideograms" to suggest that they hint at rather than denote their referent.[40]

In the wake of Otto's interpretation of the power of the sacred, we can now approach the question that I asked at the beginning of this section, concerning what kind of power the power of the sacred – or the numinous – is. The "object-like" quality of the numinous is a presupposition of that power, which perhaps becomes clear if the moment of surprise is

38. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 19.
39. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 31.
40. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 19.

accentuated in the awe-inspiring and overwhelming experience of the numinous. A constitutive part of the experience of the sacred is the asymmetry implied between the experiencing subject and the numinous object in which, as mentioned, it is the latter that takes the initiative and, in keeping with the uncontrollable nature of the experience, seemingly spontaneously so. The German philosopher Hermann Schmitz (1928–2021), one of the so-called "new phenomenologists", defines the numinous, inspired by Otto, in terms slightly different from the previous discussants, as that which, "for a human being seized by it at the time in question", then and there possesses authority in the form of an "unconditional seriousness".[41] Schmitz praises Otto for his phenomenological insight that the phenomenon neither belongs on the side of subjective feelings nor appears as an object, even though he thinks that Otto falls short of his own insight due to his dualistic Kantian epistemology. Schmitz himself, however, suggests that the numinous is a kind of "atmosphere", that is, something that surrounds the one seized by it as an aesthetic experience that is embodied – aesthetic in the sense of sensory impressions – and that unconditionally lays hold of the person.[42] Dwelling, in the most general sense of the term, is the human attempt to become familiar with an atmosphere of this kind through carving out a leeway or an area that relieves us of this unmediated exposure to its unconditional authority.[43] Building a temple – or any house for that matter – is an attempt to circumscribe the numinous, to make it somehow manageable and possible to live *with* rather than *before*.

Schmitz is helpful when it comes to understanding the nature of numinous power. On one hand, as we have seen, this power takes its expression in and authority from what he calls an "unconditional seriousness". On the other, through the dwelling this "unconditional seriousness" is mediated so that human beings do not encounter it, as it were, "raw". This "mediation of the unconditional" sounds as if it were a paradox, but I think not in the sense of a cognitive paradox. Rather, it refers to the ambiguity or perhaps duality of the experience of the numinous. Otto was, as we have seen, quite emphatic about the ambiguous quality of the experience, but here it is a matter of another ambiguity or duality – more like Moses, in the story of Exodus 33:18–34:9, who asked to see the glory of God but only got to see his back, since no one could see God's face and live. In other words, God's manifest presence is only presented to Moses indirectly. Analogically, the

41. Hermann Schmitz, *System der Philosophie: Dritter Band. Der Raum, Vierter Teil. Das Göttliche und der Raum*, Freiburg 2019, 87. My translation.

42. Schmitz, *System der Philosophie*, 81–82. On atmosphere, see Ola Sigurdson, *Atmosfärer: En essä*, Stockholm/Umeå 2023.

43. Schmitz, *System der Philosophie*, 213.

temple, as an example of the circumscribing dwelling, both presents and obscures the numinous in that it holds together the fact that it is not at our disposal and the hermeneutical insight that if it somehow engages us in any case it therefore must come within our reach. In other words, there must be both continuity and discontinuity in the aesthetic experience of the numinous for it to be experientially meaningful and even relatable.

In terms of power, this means that it is, at least in principle, possible to recognize the authority of the numinous, its overwhelming quality, while understanding how it is possible not to be directly seized by it. Take the tourist visiting St Peter's: it is indeed possible, as a tourist, to recognize as well as experience something of its numinous quality, while yet remaining a tourist, that is, someone visiting the basilica for sightseeing purposes rather than worship. Perhaps some of the allure of a numinous space like St Peter's, even for the tourist, who may well be a non-believer or an agnostic unconcerned with its religious meaning, is found in the potential numinosity of the building itself, experienced both as present and distant. That it is possible to experience an atmosphere such as the numinous as both present and distant in a particular building is explained by an understanding of the numinous such as Schmitz's, as it shows why the various degrees of experienced intensity do not contradict the asymmetry in the relationship between the numinous and the experiencing subject. There is indeed a shift in the centre of gravity from horizontality to verticality, but there is still the possibility of reflexively relating to this very shift while yet recognizing it. This means, in turn, that the power of the numinous should be understood not in purely causal terms but rather as an "insisting" power, a power whose vertical authority is mediated horizontally. Phenomenally, it is experienced more as a kind of dance than as an encroachment in this intertwining of activity and passivity, of horizontality and verticality. Here, I turn to the performative quality of the sacred experience.

The Performance of the Sacred

If the power of the sacred draws attention to the vertical moment of the numinous, the performance of the sacred similarly stresses the horizontal aspect. I have just suggested that, perhaps, verticality and horizontality should dialectically be held together, rather than be disconnected from each other. But before I return to this hypothesis, let me first present what I mean by the performance of the sacred from a spatial perspective. In my narrative introduction to this essay, I tried to present a short sketch of what an experience of the numinous could be from a first-person perspective. One distinguishing feature of such an experience that I wanted to highlight is its

dynamic quality. The shortest version of a description of such an experience is that it entails a shift in the centre of gravity from horizontality to verticality, but in real life it is a matter of approaching the building, entering it, walking farther inside it, and so on. In other words, the experience of the sacred is dynamic rather than static. As I have already made clear, it indeed involves a form of passivity on the part of the experiencing subject in that he or she undergoes this experience of some form of power outside him- or herself. At the same time, however, the passivity is not absolute. This is indicated by the narration of how this experience came about. It involves a dynamic transformation from one state to another and so the relation between passivity and activity is more complex and nuanced than an either/or relationship. In more detailed reports of experiences of the sacred, especially reports involving such buildings as the Pantheon or St Peter's, it is usually emphasized how iteration contributes to the sense of the sacred, either in the form of liturgy or ritual involving the buildings or just the thousands or millions of people who visit them, year after year. It is not just a matter of experiencing the sacred in and through the buildings but also of being aware of how they have been and are treated as sites of the sacred.

Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017) has, in a well-known critique of Eliade and his discussion of sacred spaces, pointed out how sacred spaces are created by religious traditions, not just given as such. In *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, Smith takes Eliade to task for privileging "event" before "memorial" and "cosmogony" before "politics" in religious history.[44] As Smith puts it, "there is nothing inherent in the location of the Temple in Jerusalem. Its location was simply where it happened to be built".[45] It was an active choice to build it where it was built, not a necessity that passively had to be accepted (even though it was legitimated as such afterwards). Other places, of course, could have a necessary locative specificity, such as Bethel for its association with the patriarch Jacob (see Gen 28:10–22). Even then, the associations of the place will be built through narrative and ritual. Sacredness is, then, more a matter of the use of a certain building or site than of any inherent properties in it: sacred power is "situational" rather than "substantive". "Ritual is not an expression of or a response to 'the Sacred'; rather, something or someone is made sacred by ritual."[46] This means that nothing is sacred in itself – nor is anything profane in itself. Or again, "ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are".[47] Sacrality does not, even though experience might

44. Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, Chicago 1987, 1–23.
45. Smith, *To Take Place*, 83.
46. Smith, *To Take Place*, 104–105.
47. Smith, *To Take Place*, 109.

make it seem so, inherently dwell in certain spaces, but is on the contrary projected on certain spaces as an effect of rituals being performed in and around them. Sacred spaces are made, not found. The power of the sacred is a function of the horizontal – the temporal – not of the vertical.

No doubt Smith's critique of Eliade (who actually mentions performance, but does not offer any detailed account of it) is an important reminder that sacred spaces are always sites of power, where power is contested. Iteration is certainly a means for making something, a particular sacred space, appear as if it were absolute and natural rather than relative and construed. As Smith points out, the history of religions is certainly full of examples of how a particular place is imbued with new meaning through a ritual taking place there. There might be several reasons for speaking of "sacralized space" rather than "sacred space" to highlight this performative aspect of the sacred. If, however, Smith's critique is taken as replacing a vertical and substantive understanding of the sacred with a horizontal and situational understanding (which I am not sure was his intention), then there is a risk of underestimating the power of the sacred (by power, I mean here its "insistence"). Even if this power is in some way a function of ritual, the experience of it can hardly be altogether reduced to some kind of active intention behind the ritual. If it were just a matter of ritual, ritual would be understood as an arbitrary imposition on space, with space (and place) in itself just being inert and mute.

I repeat my contention that this is not how space in general is experienced, and especially not sacred space. To the experience of the sacredness of a certain space belongs a surplus that in its manifestation cannot be reduced to anything self-produced. In its spontaneous and imposing power it is experienced as something beyond human control. Any particular experience of space, including, of course, sacred space, could well be illusory, in thinking that space actively imposes itself upon us. But if all our experience of the heterogeneity of spaces is false, then our alienation is without limit, including, I suppose, also our theories of the performance of the sacred. If spaces cannot assert themselves, but all their significances are actively and exclusively produced by us, then such a theory of the performance of the sacred is as "subjectivistic" as a theory of the power of the sacred, such as Eliade's, is "objectivistic". Would, then, an experience of anything "other" (even with a lowercase "o") be at all possible, or would every "other" be reduced to "the same"? Are we not, to the same extent as in Eliade's account, again encountering a perspective that takes leave of the material as "other", if spaces cannot affect us in ways that go beyond our use of them?

I am far from suggesting that this is what Smith wants to say, even though he has formulations that might sound like it. In his polemics against a

substantive interpretation of the sacred, he is understandably emphasizing a situational interpretation. His interest is not the phenomenon of the sacred as such or everyday life; rather, it has to do with how the sacred is interpreted in religious studies and how particular historical instances of it have been misconstrued. What if we, as I have already hinted at, do not think of the horizontal as the alternative or opposite to the vertical, but rather as the way in which the vertical asserts itself, as a kind of surplus over and in the horizontal? If there is, indeed, a "mediation of the unconditional", then the sacred could be understood, not as a static relation between the sacredness inherent in a building and the one perceiving it, but as a dynamic mediation of something that takes place in between subject and object, as a kind of irreducible surplus.[48] To understand how this can come about, I shall now take a closer look at how performance might work in relation to the sacred.

A performance, according to Erika Fischer-Lichte, whose *The Transformative Power of Performance* (German original from 2004) is a classic, concerns "the transformation of the performance's participants"; it disputes the dichotomous division between subject and object and turns the spectators into participants.[49] Thus, it is about presence rather than interpretation, and the presence in question is not something that exists "before" or "outside" the performance itself. Presence "happens" in the performance and is perceived as a form of energy.[50] It is important, however, not to understand this performance in an individual manner. On the contrary, it is an embodied co-presence among, in the case of theatre, "spectators" and "actors" and, of course, the material scene of the performance. This also, naturally, goes for the performance of a certain building, city, or site: the experience of a sacred space like St Peter's involves the material edifice as much as other visitors, be they tourists or celebrants.[51] A performance, in other words, is as much material as it is aesthetic, political, or social, if these are understood as differentiated from one another.[52] All these dimensions of existence are intertwined in performance, and through the performance, any static dichotomies between subject and object or meaning and materiality become dynamized. As Fischer-Lichte describes the performance, it enacts what she

48. See Bernhard Waldenfels, *Hyperphänomene: Modi hyperbolischer Erfahrung*, Frankfurt 2012, 353–412.

49. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, London 2008, 16–17.

50. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 98.

51. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 75–137. See also Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Transforming Spectators into *Viri Perculsi*: Baroque Theatre as Machinery for Producing Affects", in Peter Gillgren & Mårten Snickare (eds.), *Performativity and Performance in Baroque Rome*, Farnham 2012, 87–97.

52. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 51.

calls an "in-between" state, or a state of liminality.[53] This is also what Eliade – as well as Fischer-Lichte herself – described as a threshold. As discussed above, thresholds enact and signify passage and transformation, and so do performances. Fischer-Lichte talks about a "destabilization of the self, the world, and its norms" in "the experience of the concerned subjects", and this is very much what takes place when the point of gravity shifts in the aesthetic experience of sacrality in the Pantheon or St Peter's.[54]

Fischer-Lichte notices the similarities between performances understood as art and as ritual, and also that they often are intertwined, even though she ultimately wishes to hold them apart.[55] The distinguishing mark is that artistic performances take place outside a ritual or religious context. They do not refer to another world that might mitigate their physical impact or imbue them with meaning. This claim is somewhat dubious, given both Fischer-Lichte's emphasis on the inevitable intertwining as well as the self-testimonies of performance artists.[56] Nevertheless, she is aware of how close a performative presence comes to some notion of the power of sacrality as it makes an impact on those within the sphere of its radiance. She sometimes uses a theological vocabulary, as in performance as a "transfiguration" of the commonplace, or when she uses the metaphor "*theatrum vitae humana*" – "the theatre of human life" – in understanding the relation between art and life.[57] Furthermore, in the last chapter of *The Transformative Power of Performance*, she speaks of the "reenchantment of the world".[58] Reenchantment is understood by her as a "liberation from all endeavors to understand and the revelation of the 'intrinsic meaning' of man and things".[59] Again, despite her nearness to some understanding of the sacred, in this last chapter she distances herself from what she calls a "two-world theory", and suggests that performance is characterized by "self-referentiality" even as she recognizes the "transformational power" of performance. One may ask, however, if this "self-referentiality" of performance really does justice to the openness or porosity of the subject that undergoes the experience of a performance. Given the instability of the demarcation between art and reality in performance, according to Fischer-Lichte's own understanding, how can performance be defined as something that, as such, excludes the possibility

53. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 174.

54. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 179.

55. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 91.

56. See, for example, the self-biography of Marina Abramović, *Walk Through Walls: A Memoir*, London 2016, in which she quite explicitly refers to Tibetan Buddhism as a background to many of her performances.

57. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 168, 205.

58. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 181–207.

59. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 186.

of experiencing what Otto calls the "Wholly Other"?[60] It seems to me that she applies a much too stark distinction between a traditional notion of the sacred and that kind of sacrality that takes place in artistic performances, as well as a simplified idea of the former's "two-world theory". If "aesthetic experience" – that is, transformative experience of the subject concerned – could be applied to non-artistic as well as artistic performances, then how could the "Wholly Other" be excluded in principle? As she herself states, "the border turns into a frontier and a threshold, which does not separate but connects".[61]

As spatiality as such is also something that happens in performance rather than being a static "thing", sacred space is performed, and it is through the very performance of the space that its sacredness takes place. It is when the sacred space is performed that it also lays claim to a certain authority over those present. But even though sacrality is in some way produced, much like presence, this does not mean that its production should be taken as the opposite of its reception. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht uses the Eucharist as an example of precisely this dialectic: "the celebration of the Eucharist, day after day, will not only maintain but intensify the already existing real presence of God."[62] In this account, the situational character of the Eucharist both holds together its presentation with its representation and also makes it uncontrollable in the sense of impossible to plan. Fichter-Lichte's interpretation of the performance of the sacred, as we may well call it, is quite helpful in understanding how it is possible to speak of the production of an experience of numinosity in built edifices without denying the possibility of a power of the numinous that goes beyond human intention. As Paul Ricœur (1913–2005) has noted in a similar discussion, the interpretation of a founding tradition is a constitutive part of that very tradition; the performance of the sacred is part of the efficacy of the sacred: "between the sacrality of space and the act of habitation subtle exchanges occur."[63] Ricœur shows us, in a manner not that distant from Fischer-Lichte, that the performance and the power of the sacred need not be understood as each other's opposites, but can be held in dialectical tension.

60. See Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 200.

61. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 204.

62. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford, CA 2004, 85. See also pp. 16–18.

63. Paul Ricœur, "Manifestation and Proclamation", in Mark I. Wallace (ed.), *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, Minneapolis, MN 1995, 51.

Conclusion

Let us return to Rome, or at least to my short narrative introduction. I shall draw this exploration to a close through some short reflections on what it might mean that the experience of the numinous is an aesthetic experience. The casual visitor to the Pantheon or St Peter's might perhaps experience something of the numinous or sacred, and this, I assume, is one of the reasons why so many visit these monuments. If he or she experiences something like this, the history of the places as well as their former and contemporary uses are parts of such an experience and also, and perhaps not least, of their material form. Visiting the Pantheon or St Peter's carries the potential of such an experience, not only because of any ideas we might have of them but also for their atmosphere in the sense of that multi-sensory impression they evoke in us through and because of their appearance. Such impressions are not of sight only, but all of our senses play a role: the tactile feeling of the Pantheon's concrete, the smell of dust and sometimes of incense that surrounds us, the memory of bread and wine for those of us who go to communion, not least the acoustics of that vast space, and of course the sight of the play of light. The Pantheon and St Peter's are certainly only examples of the loci of such experiences; I have chosen them simply because they are quite well-known to many. Other similar buildings could, *mutatis mutandis*, work in a similar way.

In this article, I have argued that power and performance are dialectically related in the experience of the sacred; consequently, the experience of the sacred is not less sacred because it also is an aesthetic, multi-sensory experience. Without the circumscribing edifice in all these aspects that both evoke in us and shield us from the sacred, it is open to question how much of it we would experience. It is true that modern culture as well as modern Christianity has emphasized the cognitive faculties, and perhaps also sight as the sense associated with them, so there has been forgetfulness of the experience of being an embodied as well as a spatial creature. But that does not mean that the atmospheric qualities of an experience of space have disappeared, only that they have become more unarticulated, especially in much academic discourse.[64] To retrieve a sense of that experience through discursive articulation might both make us more aware of it and give us the means of a critical assessment of it. But to retrieve it, we need, I think, to be more mindful of its actual, material form. It is not so much that this form only exemplifies sacredness; rather, it participates in it through producing it. To articulate such experiences, we need also heed their specific characteristics:

64. On this topic, see, for instance, Gernot Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces*, London 2017; Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*.

even though there might be commonalities between different experiences of the sacred generated by different edifices, their distinct qualities are as important for rising above (or going below) mere generalities that might once again obscure the concrete experiences. The phenomenological study of sacred spaces might have something in common with cartography, in that it needs to attend to the specifics of the aesthetic experiences of these spaces.

I noted in my introduction that, even though there are common denominators between the experiences of the Pantheon and of St Peter's, these sites are both distinct in the way the experience of the sacred is staged in them. In the classic literature on the sacred, some of which has been discussed here, the accent is on the general rather than the specific and on the abstract and cognitive – myth, if you will – rather than the concrete and experiential – form and matter. Although some form of generalization and abstractness is unavoidable in academic inquiries of this kind, one should not stop there. In a discussion of the atmospheric qualities of experiencing the numinous in and through an edifice, the specifics of that edifice need to enter the discussion. The atmosphere's mode of existence is situated between subject and object – between the visitor to the Pantheon and the building itself – and to avoid giving the impression of that atmosphere as something existing only in the mind of the visitor, the specifics of the building become important for our understanding of its particular atmosphere. What Gumbrecht says about a literary work is also true of a building: "By 'concreteness' I mean that every atmosphere and every mood – as similar as they may be to others – has the singular quality of a material phenomenon."[65] To attend to that "singular quality of a material phenomenon" through discursive accounts of aesthetic experience would, according to Gumbrecht, "reactivate a feeling for the bodily and for the spatial dimensions of our existence".[66] The discursive description needs to attend to the intuitive impression as closely as possible to catch sight of how the numinous manifests itself. To understand the numinous is of course of utmost importance, but, in the face of this phenomenon, like so many other aesthetic experiences, one needs to be aware of the limits and shortcomings of academic descriptions. In some rare moments they might perhaps inspire an atmosphere in the reader, as literature often does, but more often they need to rest content with gesturing towards it.[67] ▲

65. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, Stanford, CA 2012, 14–15.

66. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 118.

67. See Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, 16.

SUMMARY

In this article, I explore the experience of the sacred with a focus on how it is experienced through spatial categories, particularly buildings. My main aim is to show how this is an aesthetic experience in the sense of what is intuitively given through our senses. My perspective is phenomenological in that I am above all concerned with how the sacred is experienced, not with how it should be interpreted. Thus, I discuss some of the classic writers on the phenomenology of religion – Mircea Eliade and Rudolf Otto – as well as some of their critics – Jonathan Z. Smith and, indirectly, Erika Fischer-Lichte. In their respective contributions to our understanding of how the sacred manifests itself in spatial edifices, I find both the classics and their critics constructive but ultimately wanting: while the classic approaches emphasize the power of the sacred and its verticality, the critics' responses stress the performance of the sacred and its horizontality. My own contribution consists of a dialectic combination of the two: that the sacred is in some sense construed through the iterations of its performance does not exclude a sacred power that manifests itself through this very performance as a surplus. I conclude that there is a need for a phenomenology of numinous edifices that attends more concretely both to the actual materiality of the buildings in question, as this gives rise to different experiences of the sacred, as well as to the articulation and nuances of a multisensory experience of such buildings.

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Presence and Power

Reflections on the Politics and Theology of Icons

GEORGE PATTISON

George Pattison is Professor of Divinity Emeritus at the University of Glasgow.

pattisog@gmail.com

This article is developed from a paper given to the Eighth Graduate Workshop of the international Russian Art and Culture Group in October 2020.[1] In the light of the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin, I have had to reconsider the argument that I put forward in that paper. Essentially, the elements of the argument remain the same, but the tone and emphasis have needed to change – dramatically. In the earlier version, I treated the use of icons as "battle-flags" to assure a nation or army that God "is on our side" as a largely historical phenomenon. However, the sacralization of the Russian war effort by Patriarch Kirill and the harnessing of the Russian Orthodox Church's iconographical, liturgical, and pastoral practice as well as its doctrinal and ethical teaching (the Patriarch has declared this a "metaphysical" war), show that this use (or, better, abuse) is only too real in our world today. From a certain perspective this might seem to make my argument completely redundant. On the other hand, the task of developing an account of why and how icons speak to those living out the pain and terror of frontline situations in a way that is *not* reducible to their use as propaganda, could be seen as all the more urgent and important.

1. "The Problem of Religious Art in Modernity: Uses and Abuses of the Icon in Russia", *Russian Art and Culture Group*, https://russian-art.net/workshops/workshop-08/, accessed 2023-01-22.

Icons are, of course, a phenomenon of Christian life as well as being the object of formal doctrinal definition and it is this lived experience of icons that is my primary reference in this paper, rather than the official teaching of the Church. This is not said so as to imply any dissonance between these: the extent to which practice does or does not cohere with doctrine is a quite different question that I shall not be addressing here. However, I should also add that it is, of course, very difficult to draw a firm line between them. Precisely because icons are a particular means of making present the divine persons or mysteries that they depict, they are always doctrinally loaded. Yet the way in which the icon manifests doctrinal truth is, clearly, different from that associated with dogmatic propositions hammered out in ecclesiastical assemblies and commented on in academic research and debate. Even if we call icons visual theology (as many do), this is still something different from the theology that is written and debated.

My title indicates what I understand to be the main distinctive function of the icon, namely, to make present the person or mystery that it depicts and to do so in such a way that the power of that person or mystery can become effective in the lives of believers. This gives the icon an especially significant role in the life of Christian communities, but, at the same time, it is precisely this function of making the power of the divine present in this-worldly existence that also makes the icon a potential site of abuse. "Power" is both inherently unstable and the object of a near insatiable desire on the part of human beings, exposed as they are to the uncertainties of this transient life.

Memorably filmed in Sergei Bondarchuk's (1920–1994) 1960s film adaptation, a dramatic scene in Leo Tolstoy's (1828–1910) *War and Peace* exemplifies the power of icons in pre-revolutionary Russia. The scene is set on the eve of the Battle of Borodino as the Russian army and an accompanying corps of peasant labourers prepare their defences against the impending French attack. Suddenly, a cry goes up: "Here they come! [...] They are bringing her, they are coming [...] Here she is [...] they'll be here in a minute" and, in response, officers, soldiers, and peasants run down to the road to greet "her".[2] But who is "she"? She is not a member of the imperial family or even the wife of a general but the icon of Our Lady of Smolensk, led in procession by a regiment of infantry. As Tolstoy describes the scene, the militiamen throw down their tools and, heads bared and bowing to the earth, join the already huge crowd of soldiers accompanying the icon. When the icon arrives at the top of the hill the procession stops and the army gathers round, high-ranking generals, officers, common soldiers, and peasants cross

2. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, London 1971, 826.

themselves as the choir continues its chant: "'O Mother of God, save thy servants from calamity', and the priest and deacon chimed in, 'For to Thee we fly as our invincible Bulwark and Protectresss', [and] there was a gleam on every face of that sense of the solemnity of the coming moment."[3] Then, suddenly, the crowd parts as General Kutuzov, leader of the Russian army, arrives, crosses himself before the icon, and bends down, his hand touching the ground according to Orthodox custom. After the liturgical service is finished,

> Kutuzov went up to the holy picture, dropped heavily on his knees, bowing to the earth, and for a long time he attempted to get up, and was unable from his weakness and heavy weight. His grey head twitched with the strain. At last he did get up, and putting out his lips in a naively childlike way kissed the holy picture, and again bowed down, with one hand touching the ground.[4]

We are left in no doubt that Our Lady of Smolensk is venerated by the entire army, binding together men of every class, from the peasant labourers, through the common soldiers, and all the way up through the ranks to Kutuzov himself. The film adds a detail that is not in the novel, showing even the sceptical Pierre Bezukhov removing his hat in a spontaneous response to the atmosphere of the scene. The fact that this scene, no matter how idealized, reflects something genuinely and distinctively Russian can be demonstrated by a simple thought-experiment: try to imagine Lord Nelson (1758–1805) on the eve of Trafalgar or the Duke of Wellington (1769–1852) on the eve of Waterloo behaving like Kutuzov, falling to the ground in essentially the same spirit of humility as an ordinary peasant. I am not suggesting that they did not have and did not express their personal faith, but in their British aristocrat tradition, any such gesture of self-abasement in full view of the lower ranks of army, navy, or society would be out of the question. This is not a moral judgment on their personal lack of humility, simply an observation about cultural expectation. And, of course, there is little doubt that Tolstoy is deliberately contrasting Kutuzov's self-humbling before the icon with the self-deifying hubris of Napoleon (1769–1821) that has brought such colossal destruction to the Russian lands.

But just what is the meaning of the Russian army's veneration of the icon?

One answer, tempting to a secular generation brought up on the idea of Christianity as the ideology of empire, is that an icon such as that depicted

3. Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 827.
4. Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 827.

here is being used in much the same way as a battle-flag, a rallying-point for the army as it prepares itself for battle. Is this a sign in which to conquer, a crusader's flag, a talisman, an extra injection of military valour and power?

The question can, I think, be reasonably extended to the use of icons in the context of national or communal self-affirmation in general, then or now. What does it mean for the icon to be the unifying sign of a "we", a collectivity that is engaged in pursuing its interest in the world in competition with other national entities? Is this not a subversion of its legitimate function as an object of religious veneration, a secular and, implicitly, violent usurpation? And however sincere, does such use not open the door to manipulation by cynical rulers always ready to exploit the credulous masses, as exemplified in twentieth-century totalitarianism?

The use of icons in the context of warfare was not, of course, a modern invention. Visitors to Novgorod can see the twelfth-century icon of Our Lady of the Sign in the Cathedral of St. Sophia. In another of the city's churches is a different icon that depicts the processing of Our Lady of the Sign as Novgorod is being besieged by an attacking army of rival Russian princes in 1170. According to Novgorodian legend, it was the icon of Our Lady of the Sign that brought about the defeat of the besiegers and the liberation of the city. Indeed, such is the power of the original icon that it is, as it were, transferred to its secondary manifestation in the icon of the city's deliverance.[5]

In fact, the use of icons in the context of warfare reaches still further back, as notably in the Byzantine use of the icon of the Theotokos Blachernitissa to defend the city against attacks by Persians and, later, Arabs. In view of the later Russian self-identification as guardian of Orthodoxy, it is ironic that the relic of the Protecting Veil of the Virgin was deployed in the ninth century to repel a naval attack by the forces of Rus'.

This last incident pinpoints what will be a major focus of this paper, namely, that there is a considerable overlap between how icons and relics are used, in this case as a defence in warfare, but also in healing, agriculture, and business affairs. The most significant bridge between the relic and the icon is also to be found in Byzantium, specifically the relic known as the Mandylion that arrived in Byzantium in 944.

The legend of the Mandylion, first found in Eusebius' (c. 260–339) *Church History*, tells the story of the Syrian King Abgar of Edessa (d. c. 50 CE) who suffered from a skin disease. Hearing of the miracles being wrought in Palestine by Jesus of Nazareth, Abgar sent a delegation to summon the Saviour to his court. He, however, merely took a cloth and impressed on it

5. The icons are illustrated in Viktor Lazarev, *Novgorodskaya ikonopis*, Moscow 1969.

an image of his face which he then returned to Abgar. The image itself was, of course, sufficient to bring about the hoped-for cure. Two points merit especial comment here. Firstly, this image was not a work of art but an image "not made by hands". If we insist on the distinction between image and relic, it was a relic rather than an image, a physical object directly associated with the body of the Saviour and, in that respect, comparable to Mary's veil or the crown of thorns. In this respect, it is a significant element in the story of Abgar that although he had sent his court-painter to paint an image of the Saviour, this was impossible to carry out due to the crowds. The only possible image was the one not made with hands.

Secondly, it was, of course, a relic that bore an image and, as such, became the model for the painted icon of the Saviour's face. This guarantee of the veracity of the image is itself a key point in the classic defence of icons, as in the writings of John of Damascus (c. 675–749). The icon that is to be venerated is not a made-up work of art, a product of the human mind, but a faithful depiction of the Saviour as he was when he made himself visible in the Incarnation and the relic of the image not made with hands becomes the guarantee of the faithfulness of this depiction. This guarantee, this continuity, facilitates the transfer of the properties of the relic to the painted image, so it can do what the relic itself was also able to do as an actual extension of the body of the Saviour. For the Damascene, the image of Christ was Christ, just as the image of the emperor was the emperor (a point I take to refer to the authority conferred by the imperial image on, for example, coinage). The same logic would also be applied in the case of the saints: like the relic (but differently), the icon of the saint *is* the saint, able to do what the saint would also be able to do.

The Mandylion is the most renowned example of an image not made with hands in the East, but there are comparable phenomena in the West. The idea that the truly holy image is not just a product of human art but involves direct divine intervention was a powerful one and examples continue to the threshold of the Renaissance. Clearly the best-known examples are the legend of Veronica's cloth and the Shroud of Turin. In some ways, the story of Veronica's cloth repeats that of Abgar, although in this case the image is captured as the result of a human being coming to the assistance of the divine. As represented in painting, the image itself is often strikingly similar to that of the icon not made with hands, although the Veronica is much later than Abgar's image, first appearing in the thirteenth century and possibly generated by the reception of an icon of the image not made with hands in Rome. To confuse matters further, the image of the icon not made with hands is sometimes referred to in non-theological art-books as

the Veronica icon. Also in the thirteenth century we find the legend of a friar, Bartolomeo by name, who was charged with painting the eponymous scene of the Annunciation in the Church of the Most Holy Annunciation of Florence; however, Bartolomeo found that he was unable to paint the face of Mary as it should be painted; having prayed about this problem, he came into the church one morning to discover that, overnight, an angelic hand had completed his work. The resulting work is therefore at one and the same time painting and relic.

G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) said of our modern relation to medieval art that no matter how skilfully or beautifully the artist has portrayed the holy subject "we no longer bow the knee".[6] Or, to put it bluntly, what the modern visitor to Florence sees is "a Giotto" or "a Fra Angelico" and not the Mother of God. Legends such as those of the Mary of the Most Holy Annunciation Church remind us that the medieval eye saw very differently. Clearly, patrons who expended considerable sums on new works were very interested in the magnificence of the resulting work, but for many this was secondary to the power of the work as a direct connection to the divine – and it is here that the continuity between icon and relic is important.

In his classic study *The Cult of the Saints*, Peter Brown describes the rise of the cult of relics in the ancient church in the third and fourth centuries and although his focus is on the Western Latin church, his examples come from around the Mediterranean basin, and it is clear that much of what he describes is also relevant to what would become the Eastern Church.

As Brown tells the tale, the cult of relics effected a transformation of late Roman society, enabling the replacement of older pagan Roman networks of kin and friendship with a new set of networks that transcend the narrowness of the older model. An especially important role is played by the grave of the saint, as already in the cults associated with the graves of the biblical patriarchs. To be buried or to have a loved one buried in proximity to the saint, is to get assurance that they will be exceptionally well protected and looked after in their passage to the next life. Thus far, the cult was still likely to be the preserve of the well-to-do who could afford to make elaborate burial arrangements, people like Paulinus of Nola (354–431), a rich landowner who used his wealth to develop the shrine and cult of St. Felix (d. c. 260), his heavenly "friend" and patron.[7]

Later, the bodies of the saints began to be broken up and distributed far and wide, meaning that a bone, a fingernail, a lock of hair, or an item of clothing could make the saint present anywhere throughout the Christian

6. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Oxford 1975, 11.

7. Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Chicago 2015. On Paulinus, see especially pp. 53–60.

world. This was, in effect, a radical democratization of the cult and although, naturally, relics associated with Christ, Mary, and the apostles retained a priority over others, relics of minor saints also made Christ's power present in their own communities. As John of Damascus famously commented, to limit the number of permissible icons to those of Christ himself and to a narrow range of biblical topics and persons would be to rob the king of his army. But the saints are not only Christ's army in an external sense, since through their union with Christ's person their flesh "participates in the divine nature and by this communion becomes unchangeably God". The grace that worked in them in their lives "does not depart from their soul or bodies in the tombs or from their likenesses and holy images".[8] Images therefore enabled a further "democratization" of the presence and power of the saints. Not every local church can have the benefit of an important relic (although the market-forces of medieval Europe ensured a massive supply of these and, as has often been said, a forest could be made of all the relics of the true cross then in circulation). But every church can have an image and, as time went on, every household and every individual could have their own image, a conduit for the presence of divine power in everyday life. This proliferation also allowed for the increasing specialization of these powers, so that particular saints could be looked to for help with toothache, burns, childlessness, and so on. The faithful themselves and enlightened sceptics are equally able to offer a near endless stream of anecdotes to illustrate this wonder-working power.

At a very basic level, the icon is not, then (as the modern secular viewer might think), a mere "representation", an attempt to "picture" an absent object: it is a living entity in its own right, inhabited by the persona of the saint. Here we encounter a certain tension in the defence of images, running all the way through from early iconodules such as John through to contemporary apologetics. On the one hand is what we might call a Platonic argument, namely, that the sensuous qualities of the image can be used as a way of lifting the mind to the realm of higher, invisible things. On the other is the more materialistic argument that the image is the way in which the inhabitants of the higher realm, Christ and his saints, become present to us in the actual world in which we live. It is this second argument that the continuity between relic and icon brings into focus. Here too we may note how, in normal church practice, believers do not spend their time just looking at the icon, they kiss it and pray before it, looking *to* it, indeed, but not necessarily *at* it. To enter a church rich with icons is not to enter

8. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images: Three Apologies against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, Crestwood, NY 1980, 27.

a gallery but is to arrive at a party, surrounded by wise and helpful family elders and friends, to be amongst those who love us and can do good for us. Of course, as with all human relationships, matters could take a very different turn if the looked-for help did not come. Oleg Tarasov tells the story of a devotee praying for his house to be spared in an urban conflagration and, when his prayers produced no result, throwing the icon into the fire, telling it to help itself out. Similarly, when their pleading to an icon to protect them from robbers proved fruitless, a group of Russian peasants hung their icons upside down in the trees and insulted them blasphemously. We may laugh, but these responses are entirely consistent with a whole way of thinking about icons.[9]

None of this is to say that the visual properties of the image are unimportant, merely to emphasize that they are only one aspect of the icon's function in Christian life as it is lived. Nevertheless, although representing the visual likeness of its subject-matter is not the primary aim of the icon, it is a necessary condition, the guarantee of its capacity to function as a bearer of the power of its subject.

I shall return to the question with which I began, namely, what it means to venerate an icon in the context of national or communal self-affirmation. First, however, I want to make a digression via another important sub-topic that relates both to the cult of relics and the cult of icons, namely, death.

As I have already observed, Brown sees graves as being an early focus of the cult of the saints. Already prior to Christianity, there is evidence of the ancient world falling under the spell of an increasingly dark and threatening sense of death. Here we might compare the graves of early Etruscan art with those of the first century BCE. Where the art of the earlier graves shows their inhabitants happily enjoying favourite pursuits such as hunting and partying, the later tombs introduce demonic figures accompanying the departed to judgement, tearing them away from their weeping kin. By the second and third centuries of the Christian era, death was for pagans a dark, fearful, and shameful thing. Christian faith in the resurrection of the body offered a powerful counter-narrative. This was not just theoretical but also involved a changing practice with regard to burials and the care of burial sites. Where the bodies of unbelievers became rotten and foul, those of the saints were observed to be fragrant and even beautiful. Gregory of Tours (538–594) writes of his dead ancestor Gregory of Langres (c. 446–539) that in death "his face was so filled with glory that it looked like a rose. It was deep rose red, and the rest of his body was glowing white like a lily". Paulinus

9. Oleg Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion: Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia*, London 2002, 113.

marvelled at what Brown calls the "awesome stillness" of Felix's remains.[10] The trees and flowers that flourish at the graves of the saints provide an intimation of the garden of paradise in which the dead (on some accounts) now rest – as we see Christ resting in the time between his death and harrowing of hell as represented in the unusual icon "the eye that never sleeps".[11]

Again, the cult of relics provides one route by which the promise of resurrection can become present now. The very tininess of the relic itself demonstrated the power of the heavenly over the earthly according to what Brown calls a logic of "inverted magnitudes".[12] The dismembered body of the saint distributed amongst the faithful approximates to the ubiquity that Protestant theology ascribed to the body of Christ. It is a medium of life nearly entirely separated from the fate of a localized and rotting corpse; it may be just a "little drop of blood" but its power can become present virtually everywhere and is able to prevail over physical forces and, on some occasions, human enemies that are much greater in magnitude than itself. The same is true of the icon.

The face of the saint depicted in the icon is of course a human face. But it is not, for the most part, a face painted in accordance with ideas of individual subjective personality such as are familiar in Western religious art from the Renaissance onwards. Apart from the requirement to paint the icon in accordance with prescribed rules, Tarasov notes that in some cases the features of the saint, particularly in the case fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century Russian saints, may have been derived from portraits made on the occasion of their deaths. Thus far, the requirement of verisimilitude seems to be entering in. Tarasov observes that in this period, the Baroque, the iconic face too became to some extent individualized and, as he quotes the seventeenth-century iconographer Joseph Vladimirov, saints, like the rest of us, possess "their own likeness".[13] But, as he also points out, the "illumined countenance" of the Baroque icon is a kind of borderline phenomenon, revealing both the divine image in which human beings are created and their individual personality. Death, for the saint, is precisely the moment of transition from earthly to heavenly life. Consequently, the face or countenance of the dying or recently dead saint belongs simultaneously to two worlds – not, as in the case of Christ, by virtue of an innate twofold nature, but on account of their faithfulness to Christ in life and his vindication of that faith through the miracles they have been able to perform,

10. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 76–77.
11. An example of this is kept in the Pskov Museum, Russia.
12. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 78.
13. Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion*, 227–228.

including the miraculous preservation or even transformation of their dead bodies.

In this way, the icon, like the relic, could mediate divine power not only in a general way but also, often, with particular reference to the believer's experience of death. The issues are focused in a striking way in Fyodor Dostoevsky's (1821–1881) *The Brothers Karamazov* when the holy Elder Zosima dies and many believe that his body will be miraculously preserved, as befits the body of a saint. However, against all expectation on the part of his followers, his body begins to rot and those who have condemned him as a fraud seem to be vindicated. Here, it seems, is Dostoevsky's testimony that, in the world of modernity, we cannot expect the kind of immediate revelations of divine presence and power vouchsafed to our ancestors. Though we too may nourish the hope of immortality, we do not have direct access to that heavenly world, but remain (as Dostoevsky reported of himself) suspended in a crucible of doubt. Yet it is striking that the rotting body of Zosima is not quite Dostoevsky's last word in the novel and, in the Epilogue, he leaves us an image of a face that *is* transfigured in death, namely, the face of the child Ilyusha, who, after dreadful suffering, lies in his coffin:

> His thin face was hardly changed at all, and strange to say there was no smell of decay from the corpse. The expression of his face was serious and, as it were, thoughtful. His hands, crossed over his breast, looked particularly beautiful, as if chiselled in marble.[14]

Here, perhaps, we see again the "awesome stillness" of the dead of which Paulinus of Nola spoke many centuries before. Although the content of Alyosha Karamazov's farewell discourse to Ilyusha's friends can be glossed almost entirely in secular terms, the transfigured body of Ilyusha hints that this hope is not for this life only.

The relic and the icon, then, may be the media of many particular interventions (in warfare, healing, agriculture, and so on), but perhaps their overarching role is in relation to the last things. In communicating the presence of the living God and of his army, the communion of saints, they provide assurance that we are not to be defined solely as "mortals", but also as members of a community that transcends death and is not destroyed by the prospect of becoming a rotting corpse. Ultimately, we are all helpless before death, and even the wonders of modern medicine can only postpone and not remove the end of earthly life. The icon marks this ultimate limit, a

14. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, London 1912, 813.

point at which finite, mortal existence stands before an immortal heavenly life in which we are united with all we have loved and who love us.

I come back to *War and Peace* and to the image of General Kutuzov, kneeling before the icon of Our Lady of Smolensk. There is, I think, a world of difference between the function of the icon represented in this scene and the raising of a crusader's battle-flag. The crucial difference is this: that, as portrayed by Tolstoy, the great general is shown acknowledging that there is an absolute limit to his power and that of his army, of which, in this moment he is the embodiment. He is not merely acknowledging the uncertainty of the outcome of the impending battle. It is more an acknowledgment that he and his soldiers are all equally exposed to individual and collective death, standing before a power that is greater than that of any human power, a power that no human being and no human society has at its disposal. The power of the icon is in the revelation that there is a power other than that of the all-destroying and indifferent fate of the classical world or the infernal machine that Dostoevsky saw in Hans Holbein's (c. 1497–1543) painting of the dead Christ. We may be helpless before the power of death, but even in our helplessness, precisely in acknowledging our helplessness, another kind of life is revealed, a life of which the defining principle is all-embracing compassion.

This may not seem to amount to much. But we can glimpse something of its significance if we compare the attitude of Kutuzov as it is portrayed here with that of the post-Christian societies of the modern world. In times of crisis when the earth moves and the foundations are shaken, post-Christian societies too look to their leaders for assurance and guidance. But the particular myth of our time is that our leaders have or should have the human and technical competence to secure a good outcome, to "do a good job", as President Trump said of himself in relation to Covid-19 (though vast numbers of commentators in America and around the world would dispute the accuracy of that self-assessment). For the majority of our contemporaries it seems, there is no power beyond that of society or the leaders in whom society invests its hopes. If society fails or if our leaders fail, we just do not know where to turn and are, indeed, helpless. It is this situation that encourages leaders to instrumentalize traditional symbols of religious life, Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, or Buddhist, as a means of underwriting the power they wield. But this is very different from seeing in those symbols a reminder of the limits of human national, technological, economic, and military power. Even for those who cannot embrace Christian belief in a communion of saints eschatologically united with God in Christ, the icon serves as reminder, never more timely than in a time of crisis, that the world

is ultimately not at our disposal, a mere resource to fuel whatever kind of life we want to lead. For the iconodule, the icon is much more than this, of course, but even this limited and negative lesson is important. It is particularly important in relation to the abuse of the icon as, in effect, a battle-flag. The veneration of icons amongst Russian forces in Ukraine, contextualized by Patriarch Kirill's fulsome endorsement of the war and its aims, indicate that icons, like other religious and national symbols (and like theology itself), can only too easily be made subservient to goals that can only with difficulty be squared with the values of Christ's peaceable Kingdom. But we should not concede that this is the sole, still less the proper function of icons in such extreme situations. ▲

SUMMARY

Contextualized by the use of icons during the current war in Ukraine, the paper finds a point of orientation in the veneration of the icon of Our Lady of Smolensk by the Russian army on the eve of the Battle of Borodino, as portrayed by Tolstoy. Is this turning the icon into a battle-flag? The use of icons in historic conflicts parallels the use of relics as a means of making present the power of the saint. Peter Brown shows that the cult of relics was closely associated with the sacralization of the burial site and dead body of the saint, democratized through the dismemberment of the saints' bodies and the use of physical items associated with them, a process that icons take still further, making the saint present in every church and household. Showing the saint as both heavenly and earthly, the icon recalls human beings to their own finitude and mortality, as we see in Tolstoy's image of Kutuzov kneeling before the icon of Our Lady of Smolensk. As expressive of human beings' individual and collective incapacity in the face of the last things, this understanding of icons provides a defence against the misuse of the icon as a battle-flag or its instrumentalization as a means of political domination and manipulation.

Gabriel Bar-Sawme. *Entering the Holy Place in Syriac Orthodox Liturgy: A Ritual and Theological Analysis*. Uppsala: Uppsala universitet. 2021. 299 s.

Denna avhandling utgår från en av liturgins många inkonsekvenser; ett av de ögonblick där ord och handling inte går ihop. Varför har det blivit så att en rik och betydelsefull bön, som beskriver övergången från en del av liturgin till en annan, viskas fram bakom ett förhänge i stället för att ropas ut? Utifrån en enkel observation av den nutida syriskortodoxa riten vecklar Gabriel Bar-Sawme upp frågan med hjälp av tidigmedeltida manuskript och skärskådar frågan från olika håll. I avhandlingen finns hela forskningsprocessen behandlad, från manuskript till transkribering och översättning, från kontextualisering i ett historiskt, arkeologiskt rum till en rituell och teologisk analys. Om en avhandling ibland sägs vara ett gesällprov skulle detta kunna vara det i flera discipliner, och Bar-Sawme, som skrev i ämnet kyrkovetenskap i Uppsala, uppvisar både liturgihistorikerns noggrannhet med detalj och ritualteoretikerns känsla för liminalitet.

Den bön som studeras är en ingångsbön till den eukaristiska liturgin, som kallas ”inträdets *sedrō*” (”Sedrō of entrance”), utifrån ett syriskt ord som kan ha flera betydelser, bland annat ordning. Med ritualteorin som övergripande perspektiv, framför allt hämtat från Ronald L. Grimes, undersöks denna bön dels historiskt, utifrån hur liturgin gestaltades rituellt under de århundraden manuskripten härstammar från (800–1200-talen), dels rituellt, utifrån hur koret och församlingen konstrueras i bönen. Den historiska ambitionen följs upp i kapitel 2–4, medan den rituella framför allt diskuteras i kapitel 5–6. I kapitel 2 söker författaren den arkeologiska och arkitektoniska kontexten för ingångsbönen genom att diskutera hur en skillnad mellan kor och skepp gradvis växte fram, det som i den bysantinska traditionen kom att bli ikonostasen, och i den syriskortodoxa förhänget som dras för under olika delar av liturgin. Var kanske förhänget i själva verket öppet när bönen lästes förr i tiden? I kapitel 3 rekonstrueras ingångsbönens plats i riten utifrån de olika manuskripten, och författaren noterar hur nattvardsförberedelsen håller på att bli prästens förberedelse mer än någon annans, vilket leder till att gemensamma böner börjar läsas tyst av prästen. I det fjärde kapitlet, som är ett slags brygga till de efterföljande kapitlen om ritualisering, diskuteras olika tempelmotiv i bönerna, som Guds höghet, Kristi offer och församlingens orenhet, motiv som sedan återkommer i senare analyser.

De två sista analyskapitlen, kapitel 5 och 6, undersöker författaren rituell plats och kropp utifrån ett ritualiseringsperspektiv. Båda kapitel handlar om hur liminalitet skapas genom bönernas metaforer. Det är alltså inte bara den arkitektoniska uppdelningen av rummet, där präster och församling befinner sig i olika delar, som skapar en distinktion mellan heligt och profant i kyrkobyggnaden, utan texterna förutsätter samma åtskillnad, formulerar den lika tydligt, ja, excellerar i den. Genom att kontinuerligt arbeta med motsatsbilder som framhäver Guds höghet och människans låghet skapas en särskild laddning för altarrummet, där Gud tronar i kosmos mitt. Å ena sidan ropar texterna ständigt ut frågan hur någon kan närma sig Gud, å andra sidan befinner sig församlingen i en situation där Anden ”nu” sänker sig över offret på altaret. Det är inte bara en enskild bön som uttrycker denna gräns, utan hela liturgin blir på så sätt ett inträde i en annan sfär, eller på samma gång den gudomliga verklighetens inträde i den mänskliga. Detta har konsekvenser för den rituella kroppen, vilken undersöks i kapitel 6. Den rituella kroppen, blir det tydligt, är inte bara individens kropp, utan hela församlingens ”sårade [...] orena kropp som blir fylld av Guds närvaro” (s. 180), så att hon/den förvandlas och själv blir ett tempel för Gud. Hela liturgin, men särskilt ingångsbönen med dess betoning på liminalitet, är på så sätt transformativ och del av en *rite de passage* med potential

för hela församlingen – även om ingångsbönen nu bara har blivit prästens.

Det måste konstateras att Bar-Sawme har gjort en viktig insats genom att sätta sökljuset på denna liturgiska tradition som fortfarande inte har ägnats särskilt stor uppmärksamhet, trots den rika repertoar som den innehåller. Hela det arbete som han har utfört genom att transkribera och översätta dessa syriska manuskript till god engelska är en bedrift i sig och föranleder förhoppningsvis fler översättningar, även till svenska. Den teoretiska ramen för avhandlingen, ritualteorin, fungerar väl, även i de mer historiska kapitlen, och skapar en intressant dynamik i läsningen av både arkitektur, rit och text, som tillsammans ger en helhetsbild. I min mening lider avhandlingen samtidigt av några barnsjukdomar, som nog handlar om ett välkänt fenomen: en viss hemmablindhet i materialet som gör att argumentationen inte alltid flyter (vilket författaren verkar medge på s. 117). Den tekniska terminologin, med syriska ord och ett nummersystem för ingångsbönernas titlar, är inte fel i sig, men hopar sig ibland så att läsningen kompliceras på ett sätt som inte riktigt motsvarar den breda teoretiska ambitionen. De långa citaten, ibland över flera sidor, gör det också svårt att följa argumentet, eftersom varje utdrag är mycket rikare än en kort sammanfattning kan ge skäl för. Är det verkligen Guds barmhärtighet som är den mest passande rubriken i kapitel 4, när det lika mycket handlar om Guds höghet och outgrundlighet? Överhuvudtaget saknas en referens om den vikt det apofatiska språket spelar i syrisk tradition (se till exempel Sebastian Brock, Robert Murray [1926–2018] och Kees den Biesen). I text- och metaforanalysen, som utkristalliserar teologiska motiv, hade jag önskat mig ett skarpare metodiskt redskap för att göra bönernas rikedom och retoriska strategi större rättvisa.

Om den rituella analysen i avhandlingens titel är väldefinierad är den teologiska det i lägre utsträckning. Det finns spridda referenser till judiska, bysantinska och västliga liturgiska och teologiska traditioner, men inte konsekvent. Det vore förstås omöjligt att ta hänsyn till någon av dessa i större grad, men det är som att avhandlingen saknar ett större forskningssamtal att ta spjärn emot, vare sig det skulle gälla annan ortodox liturgi eller nutida liturgisk teologi. Om en övergripande åsiktsspänning mellan forskare i närliggande fält tydligare hade identifierats kunde analysen av det syriska materialet blivit mer konsekvent och resultaten mer specifika. Dessutom uppfattar jag att ett sådant ämne finns i bakgrunden, nämligen frågan om församlingens delaktighet, som väl är den mest diskuterade i västlig liturgi på 1900-talet. Det faktum att det avslutande kapitlet handlar om den kollektiva kroppen indikerar att ämnet är angeläget för författaren. Vid ett tillfälle säger han dessutom att det är ofrånkomligt att skapa gränser: alla får inte plats i koret, runt altaret. Vid ett annat tillfälle frågar författaren vad som skulle hända om gränsen, exempelvis förhänget, togs bort, och säger sedan att han ska återvända till frågan, vilket han inte gör. Frågan hänger alltså, liksom förhänget, kvar i luften. Samtidigt ger avhandlingens rika analys av liminalitet som skapas genom gränser i rum, rit och metafor ett angeläget bidrag inte bara till att förstå den historiska utformningen av den syrisk-ortodoxa riten, utan också till den teologiska reflektionen av den i nutiden, likväl som av andra nutida riter.

Förmodligen hade denna avhandling blivit mer fokuserad om den hade valt ben att stå på, antingen det liturgihistoriska materialet i sin kontext, eller en mer liturgiteologiskt inriktad ritualdiskussion. Å andra sidan är den stora ambitionen välkommen, och Bar-Sawme har därigenom inte bara bestått ett, utan flera gesällprov, genom att förena språklig kompetens med teoretiskt intresse, och denna breda kompetens gör hans fortsatta forskarbana spännande.

Andreas Westergren
Docent, Lund
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Ive Brissman. *Wild Enchantments in the Anthropocene: Exploring the Wild in Narratives, Practices and Place in Dark Green Spirituality*. Lund: Lund University. 2021. 334 s.

Wild Enchantments in the Anthropocene offers a distinctive view of the motivations that inspire and motivate people to engage with(in) the larger-than-human world in ecologically positive and climate-disaster challenging ways. (By "inspire", I allude to what brings people to commit to environmentalism. By "motivate", I allude to what keeps them going. The near-synonymity of the terms is, I hope, fruitful but need not be taken as programmatic.) *Wild Enchantments in the Anthropocene* presents Ive Brissman's reflections and conclusions arising from fieldwork research conducted from 2009 to 2015 in the county of Devon, in the southwest of the United Kingdom. Participation in workshops and courses at Schumacher College (which offers degrees and "transformative" short courses focused on holistic ecology), and conversations with other participants and similarly committed people, provide a rich context for reflection on religiously-informed environmentalism.

The key proposal of the dissertation is that "enchantment" does not fully represent or explain the acts and ideas considered and discussed here. It is certainly clear from the rich description and careful reflection on study courses and guided walks on Dartmoor (an upland National Park) that feelings of awe, reverence, joy, wonder, and so on underpin the "love of nature", which is "understood to be the basis of an ethical relation to nature" (p. 304). Nonetheless, *these* activists and concerned environmentalists are not romantics (in the sense of naive people wearing green tinted glasses). They are fully aware of the unfolding deadly drama of our obscene Anthropocene era. Thus, their wonder is allied with wounds. This collocation ("wonder and wounds") is Brissman's most compelling contribution to the scholarship of green-spirituality and eco-activism. It does not merely describe the inspirations and motivations, experiences and ambitions of those whose ideas and lives are discussed here. It enhances previous views of the enchantment involved in environmentalism by applying and advancing critical understanding of the affects and strategies implicated in *some* people's relationships with the larger-than-human world.

Brissman deploys the term "dark green spirituality" to bring previous scholars into dialogue. For example, she takes "dark green" from Bron Taylor – who uses it to refer to a "deep shade of green" in which "nature" has intrinsic value but can evoke perilous fear – and "spirituality" from Roger Gottlieb – for whom it refers to "a discovery of a sense of selfhood beyond the ego". She agrees with Gottlieb and, probably, with many participants at Schumacher or Dartmoor that "religion" labels something dogmatic and institutionalized. This particular distinction between "religion" and "spirituality" is unlikely to persuade many of those involved in debating the terms – especially because self-transcendence seems so deeply embedded in many (Protestant Christian inflected) definitions of "religion". Nonetheless, it does situate Brissman's work as an engagement with the practitioners who interest her – for whom knowledge requires committed activism and personal transformation.

These are just some of the scholarly foundations on which *Wild Enchantments in the Anthropocene* builds. Brissman is similarly inspired by Jane Bennett's insistence that enchantment and disenchantment are stories that can be told differently, opening conflicting understandings of the nature (and "Nature") of Modernity. This dynamic understanding, Brissman concludes, has contributed to her ability to answer key questions related to her fieldwork: What is the attraction of spirituality? What motivates people to turn to spirituality? Her answer is that

> a central motivation seems to be that spirituality offers a framework, a language, symbols and values that make it possible to address the uncertainty and challenges lying ahead. This is not to say that spirituality makes the difficulties disappear; instead, they are set within a context, and they become part of a narrative which offers hope and models for action, and that addresses the emotional, existential and ethical dimension of living in times of crisis (p. 272).

Spirituality, here, energizes a fusion of "narrative, practice and place [which] together offer ways to cultivate wild enchantments", encapsulated in her "catchier formulation": "*working with wonder and wounds*" (p. 272). It is, then, important that Brissman's research engaged with people in a specific landscape, Dartmoor, a place severely damaged in the distant past and famed for its uncanny, eerie, and fearsome moods. Dartmoor is a "wild" place but not a pristine one. It is one of the many forerunners of the damaged lands which are now caused by the ongoing assault on the larger-than-human world. It is not always clear that the *wounded* "wildness" of Dartmoor is kept in sight by Brissman or those she presents. Sometimes a wistful enchantment seems to edge out darker responses and inspirations for eco-activism – especially as people pursue their own "rewilding", conceived here as an increased "love of nature", rather than the degrowth re-negotiation of human relations with the larger biotic community that "rewilding" sometimes labels. However, it is understandable that inspiration and motivation require hope – which can be crushed by pervasive disaster narratives. Indeed, Brissman's discussion of the attractions of "spirituality" offers some profound contrasts with some other interpreters' dismissal of the seeking of modes of putatively individualized selfhood. People who have been on the frontlines of radical eco-activism are, we see, attracted to experimental and experiential "spiritualities" as one means of building resilience and one way of shaping a kinder human kinship in the larger world.

Although there are curious omissions in the scholarship cited – works as varied as those of Stephen Sutcliffe about spirituality and those of Isabelle Stengers about ontologies and the Anthropocene – *Wild Enchantments in the Anthropocene* rewards reading, especially by emphasizing the continuous interaction of woundedness and wonder. The many acts of resistance to the deadly machine of Modernity include: complexifying understandings of enchantment and disenchantment (especially when attributed to dichotomized social processes), re-composing human relatedness within our damaged world, and finding ways to express both anger and joy in threatening times. Brissman enables us to consider these and other important themes carefully and clearly. There are unresolved issues in *Wild Enchantments in the Anthropocene*, but this is largely the result of the raising of intriguing matters in interesting and insightful ways. This is, then, a fine foundation for further discussion and engagement.

Graham Harvey
Professor, Milton Keynes
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Anders Jarlert (red.). *Lunds domkapitels och domkyrkoråds historia*. Lund: Lunds universitets kyrkohistoriska arkiv. 2021. 616 s.

Lunds domkapitels och domkyrkoråds historia är en unik publikation i två band på över 600 sidor. Unik då vi för första gången får en sammanhållen analys och beskrivning av dessa institutioners organisation och verksamhet från medeltiden till slutet av 1900-talet. Unikt är det även att projektet kom till stånd och kunde genomföras, vilket skedde genom ett initiativ av boktryckaren Per-Håkan Ohlsson (1916–2014) och en stor donation från Thora Ohlssons

stiftelse. Donationen ledde inte enbart till att projektet kunde genomföras utan även att uppsägningen på grund av arbetsbrist av de båda professorerna i kyrkohistoria, Samuel Rubenson och Anders Jarlert, hävdes, vilket gagnat utvecklingen av den kyrkohistoriska disciplinen vid Lunds universitet. Jarlert har varit projektets ledare och bokens redaktör.

Syftet med projektet har varit att belysa de skiftande funktioner som Lunds domkapitel och domkyrkoråd har haft och fortfarande har. Ett vidare syfte har varit att utreda hur funktioner som under vissa tider tillhört domkapitlet övergått till andra organ inom eller utanför kyrkan. Samtliga nio kapitel behandlar organisation och medlemmar i domkapitlet, ekonomi och kyrkorätt, liturgiska och pastorala ställningstaganden samt avstånd och eller närhet till kungamakten och påvemakten.

Inledningsvis presenterar redaktören en ”avslutande inledning” om projektet och pekar på några viktiga händelser i Lunds domkapitels och domkyrkoråds historia. Inledningen ger läsaren en god introduktion och en första förståelse för de båda institutionernas uppdrag i kyrka och samhälle. Första bandet fortsätter med att Bertil Nilsson ger generella aspekter på ”Domkapitlens uppkomst och utveckling under medeltiden”. I det andra kapitlet om ”Lunds domkapitels äldsta historia – tiden fram till 1274” diskuterar Anna Minara Ciardi framväxten av ett lundensiskt domkapitel och dess tillväxt under 1100-talet. Ciardi visar att lundakapitlet redan från början fungerade som ett nav i sin samtids kyrkliga och politiska kontext. Det var till exempel därifrån som biskopar till de övriga danska stiften rekryterades. Ärkebiskopens status och person, menar Ciardi, var helt avgörande för relationen till kungamakten och därmed för hela kapitlet och dess kaniker. Den fortsatta utvecklingen under medeltiden undersöks dels av Ane L. Bysted med bidraget ”Fra kirkekampe til begyndende nationalkirke: Lunds domkapitel 1274–1400”, dels av Jeppe Büchert Netterstrøm i kapitlet ”Domkapitlet mellem magt och magtesløshed: Senmiddelalder och reformationstid (1400–1536)”. Första bandet avslutas med att Per Stobaeus presenterar renässanshumanisten Christiern Pedersen (ca 1480–1554), kanske den mest kända lundakaniken, som översatte och utgav ett stort antal böcker på danska och latin. Det som gör Pedersen så speciell är att han levde i en brytningstid och att vi genom honom får en direkt inblick i händelser som format framtiden: humanismens och boktryckarkonstens tidiga skede, liksom Kalmarunionens upplösning och reformationen. Stobaeus pekar på att Pedersen även är intressant att studera för att visa bredden inom domkapitlets verksamhet, då han inte som de flesta biskopar och kaniker på senmedeltiden hade kyrkorätt som huvudämne.

Med orden ”natten mellem den 10. og 11. August 1536 blev de danske bisper fængslet i København” inleds andra bandet och Ole Bays diskussion om reformationens betydelse för domkapitlet. I ”Domkapitlet udhules: Lunds domkapitel 1536–1671” diskuterar Bay hur domkapitlen, även om lundakapitlet efter reformationen kunde fortsätta att förvalta sin rikedom, under en dramatisk tid får nya former och uppgifter. Bay pekar på att kungen inte längre visade något intresse för att domkapitlen skulle ha inflytande i biskopens och stiftets administration, vilket han menar kan ha varit avgörande för att prästerna inte längre skulle utbildas vid domkapitlen utan vid universitetet.

När Skånelandskapen övergår från det danska riket till det svenska börjar en omstöpning av domkapitlet. Enligt fredstraktaten skulle de bestämmelser som gällt under den danska tiden fortsätta att gälla. Dock visar David Gudmundsson att kapitelgodsen belades med högre skatter än under den danska tiden och hur de sedan riskerade att helt dras in till förmån för grundandet av Lunds universitet 1666. Det är just Lunds domkapitels stora jordegendomar om totalt 1 450 gårdar som gör att universitetet placerades i Lund, inte som en del av försvenskningen vilket är en seglivad myt i Lund. En

av domkapitlets uppgifter sedan medeltiden hade varit att förvalta domkyrkan, något som fortsatte efter reformationen och övergången från Danmark till Sverige. Ansvarsfördelningen hade blivit oklar när det gamla domkapitlet upphörde och uppgifterna fördelades eller hamnade mellan olika instanser. Lösningen blev ett särskilt kyrkoråd för Lunds domkyrka, domkyrkorådet, vilket tillkom år 1695 framdrivet av domkyrkans stora behov av renovering. Om detta och mycket mer skriver Gudmundsson i kapitlet ”Lunds domkapitels och domkyrkoråds historia 1658–1710”. Anders Jarlert fortsätter med en detaljrik framställning av ”Lunds domkapitels och domkyrkoråds historia 1711–1900-talets mitt”. Hela den juridiska tanken om ett domkyrkoråd bygger på domkyrkan som ett självägande rättssubjekt skild från domkyrkoförsamlingen. Varken domkapitel eller församlingens beslutande organ fick formellt inflytande över domkyrkobyggnaden. Avslutningsvis diskuterar Erik Sidenvall i kapitlet ”En anomali bevarad: Domkyrkorådet under behandling i utredningsarbete och kyrkomötesdiskussioner under 1900-talets senare hälft” de kyrkorättsliga och organisatoriska utredningar och debatter som ledde fram till domkyrkorådets fortlevnad efter Svenska kyrkans relationsförändring till staten år 2000.

Genom projektets forskning och publicering av dessa volymer har vi fått en mångfacetterad bild av Lunds domkapitel och domkyrkoråds historia av vilken det tydligt framgår hur viktigt samspelet med internationella skeenden och förändringar har varit för utveckling och förändring av dessa organ liksom samspelet med det omgivande samhället. Här framträder tydligt det som ofta glöms bort: att lundensisk kyrkohistoria är en självklar del av såväl den dansk-svenska kyrkohistorien som den europeiska.

Jan-Olof Aggedal
Docent, Lund
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Tomas Poletti Lundström. *Trons försvarare: Idéer om religion i svensk radikalnationalism 1988–2020*. Uppsala: Uppsala universitet. 2022. 230 s.

I sin avhandling tar sig Tomas Poletti Lundström an idéer om religion i den svenska radikalnationalismen. Avhandlingen inleds med frågan: ”Men är han kristen *på riktigt*?”, en fråga Poletti Lundström får av en medstudent efter att ha presenterat sin uppsats om en radikalnationalist som blivit katolik. Författaren beskriver hur frågan fortsatt gäcka honom genom åren, och avhandlingen kan ses som ett inlägg i debatten om hur relationen mellan religion och radikalnationalism bör förstås: Är den ett uttryck för en sammanflätning av politisk övertygelse och religiös tro eller en form av ”kidnappning” av religion för politiska syften? Det Poletti Lundströms avhandling tydligt visar är att det historiska perspektivet behövs för att fullt ut förstå denna relation. Svaret på frågan återkommer jag till längre fram.

Avhandlingens centrala frågeställning handlar om hur föreställningar om religion förstås, används och förhandlas av de studerade aktörerna. Till sin hjälp tar författaren texter publicerade under tidsperioden 1988–2020 av tre centrala aktörer inom den radikalnationalistiska miljön: Sverigedemokraterna (SD), Nordiska motståndsrörelsen (NMR) och influencern The Golden One. I detta material konstaterar Poletti Lundström att ”det verkar som om religion är allestädes närvarande och frånvarande på samma gång, ett viktigt – men undflyende – begrepp under ständig förhandling” (s. 11). Utifrån det beskrivs avhandlingens syfte som att bidra till kunskapen om det svenska radikalnationalistiska landskapets ideologiska kontinuitet och förändring, genom att besvara forskningsfrågan: Hur har religion förhandlats i svensk radikalnationalism och vad har denna förhandling inneburit för ideologisk kontinuitet och förändring?

Avgörande för den ställda frågan såväl som för bevarandet av densamma är det

inifrånperspektiv på religion som Poletti Lundström anlägger. Han formulerar det själv som att han ”*inte* [studerar] det som konventionellt ansetts vara religion” (s. 24), i stället önskar han analysera vilka fenomen som tilldelas epitetet religion och varför. Han säger sig vidare genomföra en morfologisk ideologianalys i vilken ideologier betraktas som en kamp att diskursivt definiera det offentliga politiska språket. Forskarens uppgift är att dechiffrera dessa betydelser i den ”utvidgade nutid” (s. 26) studien vill undersöka. Detta ligger för mig snubblande nära diskursanalysen, men här har Poletti Lundström valt en annan väg. Den metod han använder sig av är en kombination av korpuslingvistiskt orienterad textanalys, digital etnografi och närläsning av ett urval av texter. Utifrån hur studiens ambitioner formuleras kan jag inte låta blir att tro att en faktisk diskursanalys hade varit analysen än mer behjälplig.

Avhandlingen gör en insats för att röja väg genom den begreppsmässiga röra som följer med den miljö författaren kallar för det radikalnationalistiska landskapet. Det primära angreppssättet betecknas ”metodologisk inlevelse”, med ambitionen att förstå det studerade landskapet ”på dess egna villkor” (s. 47). I analys och diskussion synliggör Poletti Lundström hur begreppet religion hos de olika aktörerna rör sig över olika nivåer och ibland tilldelas motstridiga betydelser. Inifrånförståelsen av religionsbegreppet skapar förutsättningar att ta sig an denna komplexitet, men det finns samtidigt risk för en analytisk trubbighet när aktörernas egna definitioner används i stället för fördefinierade analysbegrepp. Det stora antalet begrepp som florerar gör också att det är lätt att förirra sig i begreppsdiskussionen snarare än att lägga fokus på avhandlingens viktiga samhällsbidrag.

Efter sedvanlig genomgång av teoretiska utgångspunkter, material, metod, tidigare forskning och etiska ställningstaganden som projektet krävt av sin författare kommer det första av avhandlingens tre analyskapitel, baserat på texter i *Sverige-Kuriren*, sedermera *SD-Kuriren*. Genom analys av dessa visar Poletti Lundström bland annat hur begreppet religion är centralt i SD:s nationsdefinition. Nationens ”andra” diskuteras främst i termer av islam och muslimer, en tematik som förstärks under den studerade perioden med huvudargumentet att islam är icke-kompatibelt med och ett hot mot svenska värderingar. ”Vi” definieras i stället genom kristendom med ett särskilt fokus på Svenska kyrkan, vilken beskrivs som ”en naturlig del av den svenska folksjälen” (s. 105).

Hos NMR har religionsbegreppet en annan funktion. Här är nationalsocialismen överordnad och det är i relation till den som religion – i sina olika betydelser – diskuteras. Religion förstås som något privat, acceptabelt så länge det inte står i strid med nationalsocialismen. Den antijudiska rasismen är central och ”judendomen” porträtteras på motstridiga sätt – en destruktiv religion med anspråk på världsherravälde kontra en antireligiös konspiration maskerad som religion – beroende på vilken poäng som önskas betonas.

Slutligen har kroppsbyggaren och influencern The Golden One en stor digital följarskara på Instagram, med vilken han delar träningsråd och ideologiska ställningstaganden. Här vävs paganism och kristen estetik samman med populärkultur och utsagor kring kroppens disciplinering. I denna smältdegel av föreställningar blir begreppet ”tro” en central komponent i försvaret av den så kallade europeiska biokulturen, som i kulturkampen står emot det främmande i form av såväl feminism, liberalism och globalism som judendom och islam.

Inledningsvis utlovades svar på frågan om relationen mellan religion och radikalnationalism: Är det en ”kidnappning” som ägt rum? Nej, blir svaret, för är det ens möjligt, frågar sig Poletti Lundström retoriskt, att kidnappa något som man anser sig vara en del av? Att en SD-politiker utan svårigheter kan motivera sina politiska ställningstaganden med bibelcitat blir en logisk följd av ett

idéuniversum där det som betecknas som religiösa respektive politiska åsikter är sammanvävda med varandra. Denna diskussion gör också Poletti Lundströms avhandling till ett inlägg i diskussionen om huruvida det är möjligt eller önskvärt att dra en skarp gräns mellan religion och politik. I min läsning styrker avhandlingen min egen position, att denna uppdelning är såväl konstruerad som problematisk.

Det resultat jag menar bidrar mest till att öka förståelsen för den politiska situation som just nu utspelar sig framför våra ögon är hur religionsbegreppet hos SD förflyttat sig från periferin till ideologins mitt. Att islamisering, ett begrepp som SD enligt Poletti Lundströms analys bidragit till att etablera också i en internationell kontext, har blivit inlemmat i den svenska vardagsterminologin och används flitigt i dagens politiska diskussion illustrerar hur radikalnationalistiska idéer om religion färdats in i den bredare samhällsdebatten. Denna insikt menar jag är avhandlingens viktigaste, och uppmanar oss att vara uppmärksamma på andra liknande förflyttningar som bidrar till att spä på problematiska föreställningar om samhällets ”andra”.

Linnea Jensdotter
TD, Lund
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Elayne Oliphant. *The Privilege of Being Banal: Art, Secularism, and Catholicism in Paris*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2021. 276 s.

Elayne Oliphants bok är resultatet av två års intensivt fältarbete och erbjuder en sällsynt kombination av en detaljerad, småskalig fallstudie och potentiellt mycket generaliserbara resultat. Genom att använda etnografiska metoder för att studera verksamheten vid Collège des Bernardins i Paris under två år sedan öppnandet, mellan 2008 och 2010, erbjuder Oliphant en insiktsfull studie av de dolda privilegierna för en historiskt etablerad majoritetsreligion, till och med i de länder som anses vara exemplariska för sin strikta åtskillnad mellan stat och kyrka.

Boken består av sex kapitel som är uppdelade i tre delar och åtföljs av en inledning och en epilog. Varje del diskuterar var sin aspekt av romersk-katolska privilegier: kuratering (del 1), förmedling (del 2) och reproduktion (del 3). Varje kapitel går på den hårfina linjen mellan insikterna från fältarbetet och de fyra utställningar som erbjöds under Oliphants tid vid Collège des Bernardins, även engagemanget i bredare vetenskap och teoretiska antaganden. I boken diskuteras ett antal teoretiska frågor, från distinktionen mellan ”religion” och ”kultur”, genom frågor om sekularismens protestantiska eller romersk-katolska ursprung, en studie av den religiösa arkitekturens och materialitetens agerande, till frågor om religiös pluralism i den offentliga sfären och de därmed sammanhängande ojämlikheterna.

Bokens kärna är den titulära ”banaliteten”, ett begrepp som Oliphant lånat från Charlie Hebdos framlidne redaktör Stéphane Charbonnier (1967–2015). Han förklarade den kontinuerliga publiceringen av satiriska bilder av profeten Muhammed som oroade många muslimer och konstaterade att de måste fortsätta tills islam har gjorts lika banal som katolicismen. Som Oliphant påpekar använde Charbonnier termen ”banal” på ett nedvärderande sätt, som ett tecken på svaghet, men också som en förnuftig anpassning till moderniteten. Men i enlighet med Hannah Arendts (1906–1975) användning av termen hävdar Oliphant att ”banalitet” är ett tecken på privilegier. Det gör det möjligt för metoder och symboler från grupper som betraktas som ”banala” att presentera sig själva som självklart oproblematiska när analoga metoder och symboler från grupper som inte har detta privilegium betraktas på ett mycket kritiskt sätt närhelst de manifesteras.

Oliphant anser att katolicismen har ett sådant privilegium av banalitet i Frankrike. Offentliga manifestationer av romersk-katolska

kyrkan får täckmantel av ”kulturell”, vilket gör att de ostört kan ta plats i det offentliga rummet. På så sätt förblir en nunnas dräkt osynlig, medan varje muslimsk huvudbonad är föremål för offentlig granskning i full omfattning. Bokens huvudsakliga studieobjekt, Collège des Bernardins, som är en renoverad cistercienserklosterbyggnad från 1300-talet, är också enligt Oliphant ett exempel på en sådan dynamik. Å ena sidan utformar det sin verksamhet som kulturell och fokuserar på konstutställningar, och skapar därmed ett sätt att uppmuntra en sekulär publik att engagera sig i det. Å andra sidan beskriver Oliphant många tillfällen då akademins mer självpromoverande karaktär blir tydlig – dess försök att understryka katolicismens viktiga roll i Frankrikes historia och arv, vilket leder till att romersk-katolska privilegier upprätthålls gentemot andra religiösa grupper.

På det hela taget är Oliphants bok en mycket intressant och relevant studie, vars både styrka och svaghet ligger i det studerade materialet. Å ena sidan gör den detaljerade studien av Collège des Bernardins det möjligt för henne att förbli mycket konkret i sin analys. Å andra sidan innebär fokuseringen på kollegiet att det behövs fler studier för att bekräfta Oliphants iakttagelser (och några av dem refereras redan i boken). Detta ska dock inte läsas som en kritik av boken, utan snarare som en uppmuntran att följa i Oliphants fotspår.

Ryszard Bobrowicz
TD, Luxemburg
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Emma O'Donnell Polyakov. *The Nun in the Synagogue: Judeocentric Catholicism in Israel*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press. 2020. 230 s.

Emma O’Donnell Polyakov invites the reader to follow her journey through the slopes of Jerusalem’s hills to discover the new Catholic approach to Jews and Judaism, born among Catholic monks and nuns living in the State of Israel. With her, one enters various monasteries, hermitages, and private quarters to listen to the voices of those who dedicate their life to praying for the Jews.

The study focuses on a phenomenon of Judeocentric Catholicism in Israel, developing further the ideas expressed by the author in previous publications. Written in an appealing style, it presents lived post-Holocaust and post-conciliar developments in the Catholic relation to the Jews, Judaism, and the state of Israel, giving voice to those monks and nuns who exhibit the attitudes of the “new philosemitism”. Through their personal narratives, O’Donnell Polyakov’s study explores how this new philosemitism is linked, on the one hand, to the history of supersessionism and the *teaching of contempt*, and on the other hand, to the identity of those who chose to devote their lives to Jewish-Christian dialogue and praying for Israel. They often came from Jewish or mixed Jewish-Christian background and some of them experienced the Holocaust first hand. She refuses to offer “a concluding evaluation of the phenomenon” (p. 203), but rather prefers to share her analysis with the reader, pointing to the aspects of the movement that can be potentially beneficial or harmful to Jewish-Christian relations.

The book is based on interviews with approximately eighty nuns and monks in Israel and West Bank, and operates within the framework of lived religion. The structure is somehow unconventional: a patchwork of chapters of analytical discussion and narrative “portraits” – vignettes presenting individual informants. The role of the latter is “not to simply transcribe our meeting but to communicate the subtleties of interpersonal encounters that elude the standard academic writing” (p. 9). The content is presented within four parts: “The Jewish People Through a Christian Lens”, “A Judeocentric Catholicism”, “Religious Identity After the Holocaust”, and “Praying for the Jews”. The first part presents the Christian image

of the Jews and investigates how it is being constructed, pointing also to Christian responses to the state of Israel. The second part provides a historical background of the phenomenon of Judeocentric Catholicism and starts exploring personal narratives regarding that experience. The third part brings forward the stories of Holocaust survivors who converted to Catholicism and conducted their monastic life in Israel, focusing on hybrid Jewish-Catholic religious identity, post-Holocaust theology, and the role of the trauma in their conversions. The final part concentrates on the challenges of Christian prayer for the Jews, in particular the tensions resulting from the mission of the Church to evangelize all the nations and the soteriological role of Christ.

O'Donnell Polyakov is Assistant Professor of Religious and Theological Studies at the Merrimack College and her research interests revolve around contemporary Jewish-Christian relations, with a focus on memory and place, religious ritual, and interreligious studies in Jerusalem, as well as antisemitism. She describes various communities appearing in the book with easiness, reflecting her familiarity with the context of their life and work, and demonstrates a nuanced approach to the political context of contemporary Israel and the all-permeating reality of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Moreover, the author exhibits outstanding alertness and sensitivity when it comes to sensing supersessionist tropes and theological ideas about the Jews that might threaten Jewish self-understanding. As in her previous book, *Remembering the Future* (2015), the author uses the ethnographic method, however, this time to an even larger extent, and does so with skill and grace: the transition between the empirical data and the analytical sections of the book seems seamless and easy to follow.

Undoubtedly, the study is an important contribution in the field of interreligious studies and a trailblazer in the study of philosemitic Catholic monasticism as well as the Hebrew-speaking Catholics in Israel. One of its strengths lies in the applied methodology, very well suited for the topic. While it allows for the discussion of important theological problems in Jewish-Christian relations, it leaves a lot of space for personal narratives, making the book more heartfelt than most publications in the field. The author is a skilled ethnographer not steering away from the problematic implications of some convictions exhibited by the informants. At the same time, she presents them in an empathic way, suggesting how meaningful the encounters with them were for herself. In a sense, she becomes a "tender narrator"; a term proposed by the Nobel laureate Olga Tokarczuk for a narrator approaching their protagonists with respectful empathy. The choice of the topic is another merit of the book. While a plethora of publications about Christian Zionism can be easily found, this phenomenon remains under-researched, and thus, *The Nun in The Synagogue* is an important contribution, proving the author's familiarity with the studied environment. Finally, O'Donnell Polyakov's prose is very engaging, therefore making the book a pleasant and accessible reading also for those whose interest is not necessarily academic.

The only area that could benefit from further improvement are the theoretical reflections, which could be amplified in some points. In particular, the section on interritual sharing and appropriation seems to require further elaboration and might be easier to understand after adding more context of the Christian rationale for doing so. Moreover, deepening the discussion regarding the Christian will to share their belief in Jesus might add more nuance to the representation of the phenomena. It might benefit from addressing further questions such as whether "the hope that Jews will recognize Jesus as the messiah is still essentially a desire for conversion" (p. 191) or whether it could be understood as a merely eschatological hope, and how the interviewees could simultaneously bear witness and respect the Jewish

theology without wishing to influence it. As these questions lie at the core of theology of religions, it might add to the understanding of the tension implicit in the Jewish-Christian relations, especially in Israel. Finally, a concise recapitulation of the ways in which these monks and nuns "push boundaries of Catholic thought on Judaism" (p. 197–198) placed in the concluding section of the volume would help the readers to take with them a clearer picture of the phenomenon. However, these minor imperfections do not reduce the overall significance and value of the publication.

Magdalena Dziaczkowska
Doktorand, Lund
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