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Editorial

PAUL LINJAMAA

Paul Linjamaa is Associate Senior Lecturer in History of Religions at Lund University.

paul.linjamaa@ctr.lu.se

This special issue of the *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* brings together a stimulating mix of contributions to the study of religion. The first two articles, authored by Brent Nongbri and Kevin Schilbrack, present us with different perspectives on the way in which scholars could and should approach the concept of "religion" analytically. The succeeding two articles comprise broader expositions from two specific fields of religious studies: Islam and China. In this way, the issue offers both composite theoretical reflections on religion as an academic subject and broader empirical expositions into specific subject matters relevant to all interested in the field of religious studies.

In 2022, the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies (CTR) at Lund University arranged a two-day colloquium in Ystad, to which Nongbri and Schilbrack were invited as keynote speakers. The aim of the colloquium was to bring together the scholars and teachers active at the CTR to discuss the one key element that brings us all together: the concept of religion. The CTR is a dynamic academic environment, encompassing a diversity of scholars exploring a large variety of different thematical subjects in a number of cultural contexts. The methodological range is also broad at the CTR. Nongbri and Schilbrack, both acclaimed scholars who have contributed to theoretically advancing the ever ongoing discussions regarding the concept of religion, were invited to speak on the concept's potentials and limitations. At the time of the colloquium, the CTR had recently welcomed two

new professors to the department: Esther-Maria Guggenmos and Oliver Scharbrodt. They were therefore also invited to share their views on the subject from their specific fields of expertise: Islamic Studies and Chinese Buddhism. Both Guggenmos and Scharbrodt contribute to this issue with their respective inaugural lectures.

In 2013, Brent Nongbri published the well-received book *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, where he problematizes the projection of the concept religion to historical epochs (and in extension cultural contexts) that lacked the term or its equivalent.[1] In a series of articles, Kevin Schilbrack has explored the implications of Nongri's points about the unfeasibility of imagining religion "before [the concept] religion" existed. Schilbrack has argued, contrary to Nongbri, that we indeed can claim that religion was or is present in cultures and periods that were or are alien to the concept itself – all the while recognizing that "religion" is a European and Christian creation with limitations and problems.[2] In their articles in this special issue, Nongbri and Schilbrack continue the debate concerning the analytic viability of the concept religion.

The inaugural lectures of Esther-Maria Guggenmos and Oliver Scharbrodt, which are published here in revised form, explore foundational issues for religious studies. Guggenmos's article relates to the topic of how one can study religion in China today; a most relevant question given the fact that the very birth of the modern concept of religion coincided with a reawakened interest in China and the East in the eighteenth century. Scharbrodt explores, among other things, how Islam relates to the modern and Western concept of religion. European curiosity with exploring the nature of Islam, Asian religions, and other "foreign" cultures has given rise to the establishment of firmer contours of what should and should not constitute religion. Today, we are aware of the Christian premises surrounding the concept. The religions of India, China, and the Middle East – not to mention Africa and the Americas – were approached not from their own premises, but always in relation to Christianity, and sometimes to demonstrate the purity or superiority of the latter. Christianity, chiefly Protestantism, has, so to speak, been used as a blueprint for identifying other religions. Thus, the written word and the internalization of doctrinal beliefs have been given priority

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1. Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, New Haven, CT 2013, https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300154160.001.0001.

2. See Kevin Schilbrack, "Imagining 'Religion' in Antiquity: A How To", in Nickolas P. Roubekas (ed.), *Theorizing "Religion" in Antiquity*, Sheffield 2019, 59–78; Kevin Schilbrack, "A Metaphysics for the Study of Religion: A Critical Reading of Russell McCutcheon", *Critical Research on Religion* 8 (2020), 87–100, https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303219900229; Kevin Schilbrack, "The Realist Discursive Study of Religion", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 36 (2024), 419–439, https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-bja10127.

and emphasis at the expense of certain lived perspectives and oral traditions. The legitimizing and typological power of "origins" is also an important aspect to recognize, which cannot be confined to the discourse of the modern concept of religion. Already the earliest Christians – on both sides of the border of proto-orthodoxy – valued apostolic order. Doctrines that could be tied to people who had actually met the "originators" – Jesus of Nazareth or his closest disciples – were given priority. The result was the creation of specific genres – such as the gospel and *vita* genres – and standardizations in theological argumentation.

The quest for Christian origins did not subside with the development of modern historical methods. The earliest theologians who developed and employed historical critical methods often did so with the specific aim of reaching as close as possible to the words and teachings of Jesus, in the hopes of identifying the purest and least polluted version of Christianity. However, in the words of Michel Foucault (1926–1984), "there is something altogether different behind things; not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms".[3] The value placed in origins and chronological priority, however, is not a Western invention. In the historical China, for example, only those religions that could be traced back in Chinese history were allowed to operate within the empire; the older the better, which meant that the representatives of the most ancient religions had the most influence at the emperors' courts. Christian missionaries managed, at times, to gain influence at the court by providing proof to the emperor that there had been Christians in China since antiquity, and that Christianity was in fact a Chinese religion on par with, for example, Buddhism.[4]

The American historian of religions Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017) – whose legacy is claimed by both Nongbri and Schilbrack in their respective articles – has contributed in many ways to the study of religion. One of his contributions is deconstructing the impression that religion (or at least the category of religion) is dependent on unique experiences. Without taking a stand on the authenticity, accuracy, or actuality of individual experience, we should be clear that what we as scholars of religion are studying are not *sui generis* characters. To declare that human experience of this kind exists – religious or otherwise – would instantaneously disqualify them from academic study. In fact, it would disqualify them from being the subject of

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3. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, New York 1984, 78.

4. In a PhD project at the CTR, Jiangong Li explores – among other things – these very questions, from the perspective of the reception of the Jingjiao Stele during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

meaningful discussion at all. Following the reasoning of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) and subsequent philosophers of language, what makes human communication successful is its establishment in things shared (regardless of positionings made regarding *das Ding an sich*). From this perspective, it is easy to agree with Smith that we, as scholars of religion, are ultimately dependent on acts of comparison.[5]

Schilbrack's article rejects a line of argument forwarded by scholars such as Talal Asad, Russell T. McCutcheon, and Timothy Fitzgerald, that religion is, at best, a concept void of analytical value and without a referent in the world, or, at worst, a Western construct that leads to confusion and undermines real studies in human behaviour.[6] Fitzgerald, for example, has argued that the concept has been used to describe and classify so many different things that it has become empty of content, forcing the world into either a secular or religious sphere that does not reflect the actual lives of people. Fitzgerald's fieldwork in Japan made him convinced of the errors of the dichotomy between religion and secularity, and that it was not possible to isolate the parts of Japanese people's lives that was to be placed in the category religion and what the lines of the category secular were. These observations, together with the fact that the category was in itself based on a Christian outlook – an idea that had already been introduced by critical and postmodern theoreticians like Talal Asad – led him to the conviction that the concept of religion lacked an actual referent enabling its use. We should thus get rid of the concept altogether. This position is, albeit rare, still echoed. There are several problems with this position, some of which Schilbrack and Nongbri point out in their articles in this special issue. It is a bad idea to turn to abandoning categories that are not clearcut. This tactic does not align itself with the way in which language and human interaction seem to work. Somewhat ironically, scholars who reject the concept because it is damaging (or even causes violence) seem to argue from a perspective which, using Mary Douglas's ideas, divide the world into pure and impure. Pure things (categories in this instance) are things that fit into categories we use to make sense of the world and impure things – dirty and thus dangerous – are those things (categories) that defy our attempt to sort and

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5. See, for example, Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, Chicago 1990.

6. See, for example, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore, MD 1993; Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, New York 1997, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195105032.001.0001; Timothy Fitzgerald, "A Critique of 'Religion' as a Cross-Cultural Category", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 9 (1997), 91–110.

structure the world around us.[7] To argue that the category religion should be rejected on the grounds that it does not neatly fit into any other category ends up being a circular argument. In fact, language does not only consist of words of Aristotelian classification.

The texts by Nongbri and Schilbrack are two excellent examples of new and constructive ways forward. Nongbri, not wishing to abandon the concept, still acknowledges its limitations and calls for religious studies – perhaps in particular historical and cross-cultural ones – to begin by recognizing the heuristic and "unnatural" nature of the concept of religion. He does not see, as Schilbrack does, any benefits in religion from a realist perspective and draws on the history of physics to demonstrate that even the most "fundamental ideas about the universe – what we think the 'real' character of the world might be – can change quite radically in the space of a few decades". Schilbrack was given the opportunity to read Nongbri's text when preparing his own article, resulting in a fruitful rebuttal, clarifying and sharpening his continued support of a critical realist approach. Religion is not, he insists, reducible to or solely dependent on human inquiry. Reducing religion to a heuristic tool devalues the work scholars do in the field of religious studies.

It has been a great learning experience for me, personally, to work with this special issue, which not only gave rise to what I hope will be received as a stimulating read, but also a new PhD course at the CTR surveying the most important theoretical and historical aspects regarding the concept and study of religion. It will be available on a national level beginning in the spring of 2025. ▲

7. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London 1966.

Imagining Science

Ancient Religion, Modern Science, and How We Talk About History

BRENT NONGBRI

Brent Nongbri is Professor of History of Religions at
MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society.

brent.nongbri@mf.no

Talking about religion in antiquity is tricky business.[1] This, at any rate, was my experience both in writing *Before Religion* and then in seeing the variety of reactions to it.[2] In the decade since the publication of the book, discussions about the applicability of the concept of religion for the study of the premodern world have moved in different directions. Some have argued

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1. The material in this article has diverse origins. The proximate cause for writing was to engage with Schilbrack's critique of *Before Religion*. Kevin and I had a very enjoyable seminar together with colleagues from Lund in Ystad in September 2022, and what follows is a much-revised version of the material I presented there. Thanks especially to Jayne Svenungsson and Magnus Zetterholm for the invitation and to Jonathan Morgan for kind bibliographic assists. I had put together some of the material on early twentieth-century physics in preparation for the Religionswissenschaftliches Seminar at the University of Zürich in 2019. I thank Mattias Brand for the invitation and the participants for their feedback. Some of the thoughts about historiography were first formulated in response to Vaia Touna's critical reflections on *Before Religion* in 2016. A revised version of the Sweden presentation was sharpened by the participants in the seminar on Current Issues in Religious Studies and Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam in December 2022. I am grateful to Dylan Burns and Gerard Wiegers for the invitation and to all those who attended for the lively discussion. The written version has benefitted from the critical eyes of Mary Jane Cuyler, Hege Cathrine Finholt, Liv Ingeborg Lied, Paul Linjamaa, Ariadne Kostomitsopoulou Marketou, Candida Moss, Filip Rassmussen, and Vaia Touna. I am very grateful for all their insights. Finally, Stan Stowers, who read this article and strongly disagreed with most of it, has nonetheless been, in his customary manner, a generous and inspiring conversation partner.

2. Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, New Haven, CT 2013, https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300154160.001.0001.

that religion hopelessly distorts "ancient realities" and that ancient historians should thus avoid the concept completely.[3] Others have pointed out that any proposed "ancient realities", religious or otherwise, are part of the past and thus lost to us; any writings we produce about the past are completely determined by our own interests here in the present.[4] Kevin Schilbrack's corpus is a special case. His extensive engagement with both my own work and that of several other colleagues who have wrestled with similar issues has reframed the entire debate. Schilbrack resolutely defends a Critical Realist approach to the study of religion.[5] In the course of that defense, he has recast these conversations as a dispute between realist and antirealist positions.[6] Schilbrack has criticized my own work and assigned it a place on the antirealist side of this divide.[7] Schilbrack's arguments are thought-provoking, but I am unsure whether a realist/antirealist dichotomy is the most helpful approach to moving this dialogue in a productive direction.[8]

In this article, I aim to engage (hopefully in a fruitful way) some of Schilbrack's criticism by offering a few reflections on his appeals to (or rhetorical gestures towards) the natural sciences as an analogue for thinking about historiography. I think the use of examples from the natural sciences may offer the potential for progress in this discussion, though in ways that differ from Schilbrack's deployment of examples from the sciences. This article will thus proceed in three parts. The first part clarifies some of the positions outlined in *Before Religion*, as I read these a bit differently than Schilbrack does. The second part queries Schilbrack's references to the natural sciences by examining the histories of the concepts of phlogiston and the electron.

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3. See Carlin A. Barton & Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities*, New York 2016.

4. See Vaia Touna, *Fabrications of the Greek Past: Religion, Tradition, and the Making of Modern Identities*, Leiden 2017, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004348615.

5. The bibliography on Critical Realism is massive. For a concise and informative overview, see Philip S. Gorski, "What is Critical Realism? And Why Should You Care?", *Contemporary Sociology* 42 (2013), 658–670, https://doi.org/10.1177/0094306113499533. I choose to capitalize Critical Realist to identify that I have in view here a well-defined group of adherents to a particular philosophical orientation and not scholars who are simply critical about realism.

6. It is not always clear that those whom Schilbrack classifies as "antirealist" would accept that identification.

7. Kevin Schilbrack, "Imagining 'Religion' in Antiquity: A How To", in Nickolas P. Roubekas (ed.), *Theorizing "Religion" in Antiquity*, Sheffield 2019, 59–78. I note in passing that other readers who operate from a Critical Realist perspective have read the conclusion of *Before Religion* as a kind of prelude to a Critical Realist investigation rather than an antithesis to such an investigation. See Philip Gorski, "The Origin and Nature of Religion: A Critical Realist View", *Harvard Theological Review* 111 (2018), 289–304, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816018000093.

8. Schilbrack appears to use the terms "antirealist" and "nonrealist" interchangeably. I will stick to "antirealist" unless I am directly quoting Schilbrack's work.

The third section suggests an alternative relationship between the natural sciences and historiography.[9]

Before Religion and Schilbrack's Critique

Schilbrack places *Before Religion* among a series of recent works that seek to "debunk" the concept of religion, that is, "to argue that it is analytically useless and has no referent".[10] This is not how I understand the overall argument of *Before Religion*. Rather, on my reading, the book makes a two-part case. First, it argues that the isolation of religion as a sphere of life that is ideally distinct from other areas, like science, international relations, law, and so on, is a relatively recent development in human history. In antiquity, gods were involved in all aspects of life from the most mundane quotidian social interactions to declarations of war. It is only in the era of the Protestant Reformation and European colonial expansion that the concept of religion coalesced with the meanings that it generally has today, a part of human belief and practice ideally distinguished from other, secular aspects of life. To put it another way, the idea of carving up the world into a space in which some things are religious and other things are not religious is not something that characterizes pre-modern cultures.[11] As such, talking about "religion" in antiquity has the potential to be quite misleading. Thus the second argument of the book: If we are going to try to use religion as an *analytical* term, such use, which *Before Religion* recommends, requires a degree of caution and self-consciousness. Using the concept of religion in relation to, for instance, ancient Hebrew sources can be somewhat confusing, since it is generally agreed that there is not an ancient Hebrew word or concept that is usually translated as "religion" in modern languages. Yet, we may nevertheless *want* to discuss the various practices and beliefs that *modern* people tend to group together as religion, to the degree that we find these individual practices and beliefs in these ancient sources.

The approach adopted in *Before Religion* was to distinguish quite sharply between *descriptive* uses of the word "religion" to refer to ways people describe themselves and *redescriptive* uses of the word "religion" that are

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9. There is much more to say about Schilbrack's overall approach, but an in-depth discussion is outside the scope of this response. For recent critical engagements with Schilbrack's broader project, see Filip Rasmussen, "The Realism of Discourse: Critical Reflections on the Work of Kevin Schilbrack", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 35 (2023), 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-bja10103; Russell T. McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion: Fanfare for the Common e.g.*, Berlin 2018, 95–120, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110560831.

10. Schilbrack, "Imagining 'Religion' in Antiquity", 61. Schilbrack's grouping includes myself, Russell T. McCutcheon, and Timothy Fitzgerald.

11. Or, to phrase it in an inverted way, "the existence of the religious/secular division is part of what constitutes the modern world". Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 12.

applied by scholars to people who do not use that term or an equivalent to describe themselves. In the latter case, *Before Religion* suggested that in order to avoid confusion or slippage between these two uses, scholars should be explicit in acknowledging that the use of the concept was an imposition on the ancient evidence:

> The problem with using "religion" to talk about the ancient world is not anachronism. All of our concepts are modern and hence anachronistic when applied to the ancient world. The problem is that we so often suffer from a lack of awareness that we are being anachronistic. Informed and strategic deployment of anachronism, on the other hand, can have unexpected and thought-provoking results. Thus, I do think the use of religion as an explicitly second-order or redescriptive concept has a place in the study of antiquity.[12]

To try to find a way to talk about ancient sources that was less likely to suggest that, say, ancient Romans, clearly distinguished between what modern people would call "religion" and other areas of life (politics, economics, law, science, and so on), *Before Religion* advocated a stance that tried to emphasize the concept's historically situated origins while at the same time maintaining the concept as a part of an analytical toolbox for talking about antiquity:

> If we want to go on talking about ancient Mesopotamian religion, ancient Greek religion, or any other ancient religion, we should always bear in mind that we are talking about something modern when we do so. We are not naming something any ancient person would recognize. In our current context, we organize our contemporary world using the concepts of religious and secular. Furthermore, we carve up the religious side of that dichotomy into distinct social groups, the World

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12. Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 158. When he was not specifically engaged in the realist/antirealist argument, Schilbrack has outlined a position that I read as similar to what is articulated in *Before Religion*. See Kevin Schilbrack, "The Social Construction of 'Religion' and its Limits: A Critical Reading of Timothy Fitzgerald", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 24 (2012), 103, https://doi.org/10.1163/157006812X634872, where he writes: "I recommend that one accept the idea that the modern western scholar who uses 'religion' for pre-modern or nonwestern examples *is* imposing a foreign, etic concept. Imposing foreign concepts is simply part of what it means to interpret human behavior. To impose a concept that the people one studies do not recognize, however, is not to assume that one's concept captures the essence of things or the metaphysical nature of things (two phrases Fitzgerald uses regularly for the positions he rejects). It is merely to claim that the concept is fitting and that, for one's own purposes, it is interesting." I suppose the difference between our outlooks would hinge upon what exactly is meant by the word "fitting" in the last sentence.

Religions. Intentionally or not, when we bring this vocabulary to ancient sources, baggage comes along with it. I am advocating that we admit to and embrace this fact. Religion is a modern category; it may be able to shed light on some aspects of the ancient world when applied in certain strategic ways, but we have to be honest about the category's origins and not pretend that it somehow organically and magically arises from our sources. If we fail to make this reflexive move, we turn our ancient sources into well-polished mirrors that show us only ourselves and our own institutions.[13]

Schilbrack characterizes this stance as "nonrealist" and rejects it in no uncertain terms:

Nongbri draw[s] the nonrealist conclusion [...] and so he holds that scholars can use the term "religion" to redescribe aspects of antiquity only if they do not claim that the term corresponds to something that is really there. A heuristic view like this is a problematic one for historians. It implies that one's redescriptions of the past reflect one's own interests but do not grasp any real patterns or causes in the societies studied. Given this heuristic view, one can argue that one's categories are useful for one's own purposes. But unless one commits to speaking of real structures in the society, that is, structures that operate independent of one's labels, one cannot argue that one's redescription of it is illuminating, explanatory, accurate, or true.[14]

I would not say that *any* redescription is (or could be) explanatory, accurate, or true, but I do think redescriptions can be illuminating without being characterized by any of those other terms.[15] I read Schilbrack here as gesturing towards what another Critical Realist has called the threat of "debilitating relativism" that allegedly looms unless one commits to the idea that words refer directly to pre-existing real things.[16] For Schilbrack, to talk

13. Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 153.

14. Schilbrack, "Imagining 'Religion' in Antiquity", 66.

15. I use "illuminating" here in the sense of helping us to think about a topic in a clearer way, not in the sense of coming closer to any "True" sense of a thing. Thanks to Candida Moss and Filip Rassmussen for pointing out the potential confusion.

16. Christian Smith, *What is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up*, Chicago 2010, 159. I find this view deeply misguided for a number of reasons, the most important of which is the observable process by which words gain and lose meanings through social consensus. We can see this process at work constantly in controversies over the contested meanings of words.

about religion in ancient sources that themselves lack the concept is "to discover" ancient religions.

In a more recent article that discusses the views of several historians who have weighed in on the applicability of religion for studying antiquity, Schilbrack argues that the simple *existence* in ancient sources of the various practices and beliefs encompassed by modern definitions of religion is sufficient to say that religion existed in that culture, even absent any evidence of internal connection between these practices and beliefs in the sources themselves:

> None of these historians argues that people in antiquity did not believe in gods or other spiritual beings, did not seek to interact with them with sacrifices and other rituals, did not create temples or scriptures, and so on. If one uses [Edward Burnett] Tylor's definition of *religion* as belief in spiritual beings or [William] James's definition of *religion* as adjusting one's life to an unseen order – *or any of the other definitions considered in this entry* – then religion *did* exist in antiquity.[17]

We do indeed find descriptions of these kinds of practices and beliefs in some of our sources, but my point is to stress that *we as historians* group these together as "religion" and that this act of grouping is a result of our own peculiar set of interests and is not intrinsic to the ancient sources. To me, Schilbrack's approach yields confusion. It is a type of confusion I explicitly tried to avoid in *Before Religion*:

> Consider the following statement from the anthropologist Benson Saler: "The testimony of various ethnographies affirms that people do not need a category and term for religion in order to 'have' a religion or be religious in ways that accord with notions of religiosity entertained by anthropologists." This is a very tricky statement. The end of the sentence shows that Saler is using religion as a redescriptive concept (religion is "notions of religiosity entertained *by anthropologists*"). The quotation marks around the word "have" are thus quietly doing an impressive amount of work for Saler. It is not the case that the people who are the subject of these ethnographies describe themselves as "religious" or "secular" or talk about "their religion". Rather, they "have" religion only insofar as anthropologists are free to impose their own framework for the purpose of study.[18]

17. Kevin Schilbrack, "The Concept of Religion", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 28 March 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/concept-religion/. Italics in original.

18. Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 22.

I understand the descriptive/redescriptive distinction as an attempt to recognize and respect that different groups of people organize themselves and their worlds in different ways, while at the same time acknowledging the possibility (and desirability) of comparison and translation between different groups of people. Schilbrack's effort to establish a kind of substantial "reality" of redescriptions strikes me as counterproductive in this regard. If it is we historians who are picking out this-and-not-that from ancient sources in order to discuss "ancient religions", then it is *we* who are generating (not "discovering") the "ancient religion" in question. It is exactly this *bundling* of some sets of beliefs and practices in our sources and not others, this *classification*, that is the issue. Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017) can be helpful here. He commended the act of making generalizations, "understood to be a mental, comparative, taxonomic activity which directs attention to co-occurrences of selected stipulated characteristics while ignoring others". Applied to the study of religion, this approach meant that "our object of interest would then be 'religion' as the general name of a general anthropological category, a nominal, intellectual construction, surely not to be taken as a 'reality'. After all, there are no existent genera".[19] It is by applying the concept in this way that I think we can sensibly talk about religion in antiquity.

I think it is clear from the preceding discussion that part of Schilbrack's discomfort with *Before Religion* has to do with its stance on how the word "concept" is used. The approach to concepts in *Before Religion* followed the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), who pointed out that when we analyze a concept in practice, we generally analyze "the use of a word".[20] Thus, if a language lacks the word "religion" or an easily translatable analogous term, any use of the word "religion" as an analytical concept would be, in this framework, a redescriptive use. Schilbrack approaches concepts quite differently, connecting religion to "transhistorical reality":

> Nongbri raises precisely the question whether "you need the word to have the thing", and he argues that if a society lacks the word "religion", then it is not plausible to suggest that its members have the concept of religion, since concepts do not float free of language. He also argues that if a society lacks the concept of religion, then it is not plausible to suggest that its members have the experience of religion, since

19. Jonathan Z. Smith, "A Twice-Told Tale: The History of the History of Religions' History", *Numen* 48 (2001), 141–142, https://doi.org/10.1163/156852701750152636.

20. In the most recent English translation, "die Anwendung eines Worts" is rendered as "the application of a word". See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th ed., Chichester 2009, I.383.

experience does not float free of concepts. But the account I am offering is not that "religion" refers to a transcultural and transhistorical concept or experience, but that it refers to a transcultural and transhistorical reality. The anachronistic objection assumes, fallaciously, that any given society is exhausted by what its members think of themselves.[21]

Responding to this reading involves digging a bit into what Schilbrack means by "transhistorical reality". Throughout his writings, when Schilbrack refers to the reality of religion, he is careful to distinguish between what he calls "natural kinds" or "physical facts" on the one hand and "social facts" or "social kinds" on the other. "Natural kinds" are said to exist independently of human cognition and include things like stars, volcanoes, mountains, lightning, frogs, cell nuclei, amino acids, molecules, carbon, and gravity. "Social kinds" are said to be dependent upon human cognition and include things like traffic laws, marriages, governments, private property, politics, economics, and religion.[22] If I read him correctly, Schilbrack argues that religion is a historically emergent concept that still can be applied transhistorically to capture a reality in antiquity that ancient people themselves may not have recognized.

I should say at the outset that I am among those who are not entirely comfortable with this overall distinction between natural kinds and social kinds, and much of what follows flows from that discomfort. Is

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21. Kevin Schilbrack, "A Realist Social Ontology of Religion", *Religion* 47 (2017), 171, https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1203834. Elsewhere, Schilbrack elaborates this critique by asserting the transhistorical reality of more emotionally loaded concepts. For instance, he has written "religions, like dinosaurs and sexism, have existed even without the term". Kevin Schilbrack, "Religions: Are There Any?", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78 (2010), 1125, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfq086. The invocation of more highly charged concepts (such as sexism, racism, and homophobia) raises the stakes of these debates. There seems to be a question implied: Do you mean to say that cultures without these terms (or easily translatable analogues) did not have these phenomena? Did sexism not exist until the word was invented? It is clear that historical records (and current news reports) present us with cases of groups of people being marginalized and abused because of a variety of different characteristics. Yet, every culture encodes acts of marginalization and abuse differently. (Why do anglophones have rac-*ism* but homo-*phobia*?) It seems to me that it is worthwhile to acknowledge and think about these differences instead of glossing them over by insisting that concepts from one particular culture and era must be universally applicable in all places and times. At the same time, if we wish to assess aspects of our ancient sources using modern European concepts of racism and so on, we should certainly be free to do so.

22. These examples are drawn from several of Schilbrack's works mentioned elsewhere in these footnotes and also Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto*, Chichester 2014. For a streamlined history of the idea of "natural kinds", see Ian Hacking, "Natural Kinds: Rosy Dawn, Scholastic Twilight", *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 61 (2007), 203–239, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246100009802.

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"a mountain" *really* a natural kind? What are the boundaries of a mountain? How far do they extend in each direction? Do they continue below sea-level? (And how and when do we calculate sea-level?)[23] How can a mountain be differentiated from a very large hill or a so-called "extinct" volcano? The establishment of these natural kinds seem to be equally dependent upon human classification, though in less immediately obvious ways than the so-called social kinds.

Although Schilbrack makes this division, he often invokes "natural kinds" and examples from the physical sciences as analogies or illustrations in order to demonstrate the relationship between concepts and the real things they are said to designate.[24] Here is one example:

> The concept of "DNA", for example, has a history. The concept of a long molecular string that carried the blueprint of an organism's genetic information was hammered out over the twentieth century by contending biochemists. But the fact that the molecule to which the term "DNA" allegedly referred was first imagined as a single string, then modeled as a triple helix by Linus Pauling before it was re-imagined as a double helix by James Watson and Francis Crick does not imply that *the molecule itself* changed from a single helix to a triple helix to a double helix, much less that *the referent of the concept* was invented by Watson and Crick.[25]

Schilbrack's language here seems to imply access to "the molecule itself" and "the referent of the concept".[26] And in fact this kind of language characterizes his critique of what *Before Religion* has in his view neglected: "*real* patterns or causes in the societies studied", "*real* structures in the society, that is, structures that operate independent of one's labels", "*real* patterns

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23. In practical terms, geologists use the concept of a geoid, a kind of approximation of a global mean sea level based on gravitational measurements, in order to measure elevations. But of course, this is simply a convention agreed upon by the scientific community.

24. As he phrases it, the "independence of the natural world from human concepts also holds when one is speaking of the social world". Schilbrack, "Imagining 'Religion' in Antiquity", 68.

25. Schilbrack, "Imagining 'Religion' in Antiquity", 66–67. My italics.

26. I was genuinely puzzled by this language and said as much in my brief comments in my own contribution to that volume. Brent Nongbri, "The Present and Future of Ancient Religion", in Nickolas P. Roubekas (ed.), *Theorizing "Religion" in Antiquity*, Sheffield 2019, 1–7, at p. 6: "On most points, Schilbrack's chapter is admirably clear, but I must admit that it remains unclear how exactly the critical realist gains this privileged access to the 'real structure' or 'actual character of the world', and how these 'real structures' can somehow adjudicate between competing, secondary conceptions of these structures by something other than the (socially determined, linguistically based, and thoroughly human) rules of the historical or interpretive enterprise."

in the world", and finally the "*actual character* of the world".[27] In order for such critiques to make sense, it would seem to be the case that Schilbrack and other Critical Realists have direct access to what those *real* patterns and *real* structures are, access to *the actual character* of the world. Yet, the chief spokespeople for Critical Realism push back against such an idea, generally acknowledging the limits of human knowledge. For instance, Roy Bhaskar (1944–2014), the founding figure of Critical Realism, has written: "We have explicitly to differentiate the independently existing (intransitive) world from our (transitive) socially produced and fallible claims to knowledge of it."[28] It seems to me that such a distinction would prevent one from speaking authoritatively about such things as "the referent of the concept" of DNA or "the molecule itself". One would need to say something like "our current understanding of the structure of DNA" or "what we now think of as the referent of this concept". Yet, introducing that kind of indeterminacy into the relationship troubles the whole idea of words and concepts being referential to real things.[29]

But I want to stay with these analogies from the natural sciences. There is something here that is worth pursuing. It may well be helpful for historians to draw analogies from the natural sciences, but I think the analogies drawn by Schilbrack and other Critical Realists employ an idiosyncratic view of how science proceeds as a practice and what kind of knowledge these practices produce. Without getting too tied up in definition of the term "concept", I want to think a bit about what it means to say that "the *referent of the concept* exists in the world" in the realm of the natural sciences. The examples of phlogiston and electrons should illustrate some of the problems and potentials.

Thinking with the Sciences – Phlogiston and Electrons as Concepts and Things

Schilbrack is open to the critique of concepts and offers an example taken from the sciences: "One can critique a given concept – or even reject it entirely as misconceived, as with 'phlogiston' – without denying that there is a real world, both human and extra-human, independent of our concepts."[30] Even though Schilbrack mentions phlogiston only in passing, it is worthwhile to dwell for a moment on both its place in histories of science and the

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27. These references are found in Schilbrack, "Imagining 'Religion' in Antiquity", 66, 75–76. My italics.

28. Roy Bhaskar, *Enlightened Common Sense: The Philosophy of Critical Realism*, London 2016, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315542942, 7. For clarification of Bhaskar's distinction between "transitive" and "intransitive", see also p. 47.

29. In other words, from what Archimedean point is a concept judged to be a better or worse approximation of the referent?

30. Schilbrack, "Imagining 'Religion' in Antiquity", 69.

characterization of it as a "misconceived" concept.[31] Schilbrack can casually use the word phlogiston without further explanation because readers can be expected to recognize it as a traditional example of a scientific concept that has been rightly rejected.[32] Yet, it is also generally accepted that the phlogiston theory set the conditions for the development of the concept of oxygen, a concept that appears much more familiar and acceptable to us today. A closer look at these eighteenth-century sources will, I think, complicate the easy use of "misconceived" to describe superseded scientific concepts.

The figure most closely associated with the theory of phlogiston is Georg Ernst Stahl (1659–1734).[33] Stahl argued that a substance called phlogiston could explain combustion and the production of metals from ores. From the standpoint of this system, combustible materials contained a common component, phlogiston, that was released when the combustible material burned. When ores were heated with charcoal, they absorbed phlogiston from the charcoal and became metals.[34] The phlogiston-based explanations of these processes were convincing to many throughout the first half of the eighteenth century and were eventually taught at universities. The system had loose ends but was, by the standards of the time, reasonably tidy. In the words of one historian (with tongue only somewhat in cheek, as I read him), "everything fitted together very well".[35]

Working firmly within this system, Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) is generally credited with discovering oxygen, the type of air that is best for breathing, through experiments in the 1770s that involved heating various substances and collecting the "air" they emitted.[36] In the context of our discussion, it will be useful to note carefully how Priestley characterized this discovery:

31. Elsewhere Schilbrack has written that sometimes "categories that are unreflectively taken to refer to something real actually fail to do so". The example he provides, again, is phlogiston. So, "misconceived" seems to mean "fails to refer to something real" in a correspondence theory of truth. See Schilbrack, "A Realist Social Ontology of Religion", 164.

32. Recent studies have, however, questioned or at least complicated, this standard story. See, for instance, Hasok Chang, *Is Water H₂O? Evidence, Realism and Pluralism*, London 2012, 1–65, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-3932-1.

33. Georg Ernst Stahl, *Zymotechnia fundamentalis*, Halle 1697, 80. Stahl built upon the earlier work of Johann Becher (1635–1682). See Johann Becher, *Actorum laboratorii chymici monacensis, seu Physicae subterraneae libri duo*, Frankfurt 1669, 146–168, on "combustible earth" (*terra pinguis*).

34. Stahl, *Zymotechnia fundamentalis*, 121: "In fact, I can show by various other experiments how phlogiston from fat and charcoal enters most readily into the metals themselves and regenerates them from burnt lime into their molten, malleable, and blendable consistency." ("Possum quidem variis aliis experimentis, hoc monstrare, quomodo φλογιστόν, ex pinguedinibus, carbonibus, in ipsa metalla promptissime ingrediatur, eaque regeneret, ex calcibus exustis, in fusilem suam, et malleabiliem, atque amalgamabilem, consistentiam.")

35. James Bryant Conant, *The Overthrow of the Phlogiston Theory: The Chemical Revolution of 1775–1789*, Cambridge, MA 1964, 14.

36. The technical literature of course distributes credit for the innovation more broadly,

The most remarkable of all the kinds of air that I have produced by this process is, one that is five or six times better than common air, for the purpose of respiration, inflammation, and, I believe, every other use of common atmospherical air. As I think I have sufficiently proved, that the fitness of air for respiration depends upon its capacity to receive the *phlogiston* exhaled from the lungs, this species may not improperly be called, *dephlogisticated air*.[37]

Further experimentation in dialogue with Priestley's findings led Antoine Lavoisier (1743–1794) to rechristen Priestley's dephlogisticated air: "I will henceforth designate the dephlogisticated air or eminently breathable air in the state of combination and fixity, by the name of *acidifying principle*, or, if one prefers the same meaning under a Greek word, by that of *oxygine principle*."[38] Lavoisier's choice of the neologism *oxygine* ("acid maker") reflected his supposition (an incorrect supposition, from the standpoint of modern chemistry) that this substance was present in all acids. Lavoisier would go on to carry out experiments – and an extensive publicity campaign – that played a key role in the scientific community's ultimate rejection of the phlogiston-based system of explaining combustion in favor of his own system.[39] His *oxygine* thus became divorced from "dephlogisticated air", though it remained embedded in a system of thought very much dependent on substances now viewed skeptically by modern chemistry, such as

but in popular accounts, Priestley usually receives the bulk of the accolades. See, for instance, Victor K. McElheny, "Chemists Salute Priestly, 1774 Discoverer of Oxygen", *New York Times*, 3 August 1974, 25, 50. For doubts about the very idea of a specific moment of "discovery" of oxygen, see Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 4th ed., Chicago 2012, 53–57.

37. Joseph Priestley, "An Account of Further Discoveries in Air", *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 65 (1775), 384–394. Quotation at p. 387.

38. Antoine Lavoisier, "Considérations générales sur la nature des acides et sur les principes dont ils sont composés", *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences* (1778), 535–547. Quotation at p. 536: "Je désignerai dorénavant l'air déphlogistiqué ou air éminemment respirable dans l'état de combinaison & de fixité, par le nom de principe acidifiant, ou, si l'on aime mieux la même signification sous un mot grec, par celui de principe oxygine." In this era, the word "principle" could be used in the way we would now use the word "substance" or "material".

39. Antoine Lavoisier, "Réflexions sur le phlogistique, pour servir de développement à la théorie de la Combustion et de la Calcination, publiée en 1777", *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences* (1783), 505–538. For Lavoisier's promotional activities, see Arthur Donovan, *Antoine Lavoisier: Science, Administration and Revolution*, Cambridge 1996, especially 157–187. The supporters of the phlogiston theory continued to try to bring their theory into agreement with the latest experiments for decades. See the four-part study of J.R. Partington & Douglas McKie, "Historical Studies on the Phlogiston Theory", *Annals of Science* 2 (1937), 361–404, https://doi.org/10.1080/00033793700200691; *Annals of Science* 3 (1938), 1–58, https://doi.org/10.1080/00033793800200781; *Annals of Science* 3 (1938), 337–371, https://doi.org/10.1080/00033793800200951; *Annals of Science* 4 (1939), 113–149, https://doi.org/10.1080/00033793900201171.

caloric (heat conceived as a material fluid). For Lavoisier, combustion involved the *oxygine* giving up its caloric.[40] At this point, it may be helpful to pose a series of questions: Is Priestley's dephlogisticated air "the same thing" as Lavoisier's caloric-laden *oxygine*? Or is either of them the same thing as any of the allotropes of oxygen recognized by modern physics and chemistry? If we say that phlogiston is "misconceived", would we say that dephlogisticated air, dependent as it is on the concept of phlogiston, is also misconceived? If dephlogisticated air is misconceived, would not Lavoisier's *oxygine* also be described as misconceived? So, perhaps the central question is: From a Critical Realist standpoint like Schilbrack's, at what point does a concept cross the line from being "misconceived" to being a concept that has a "real" referent?[41] And by what standards does one make that distinction? Ian Hacking (1936–2023) has proposed a widely cited criterion for determining when a concept passes this threshold: the ability to manipulate something means that it necessarily has a real referent.[42] Yet, despite the common-sense appeal of such a view, the history of science regularly casts doubt on such claims. The history of phlogiston is itself illustrative here. Before the concept of phlogiston was completely abandoned, Torberg Bergman (1735–1784) performed measurements that (seemingly) quantified the phlogiston content of various metals.[43] It is easy to mistake the ability to *control* or *manipulate* with the ability to *understand* or *know* in a fundamental way.

The non-reality of the concept of phlogiston (its failure to refer, in Schilbrack's terms) complicates the idea of a real referent for the concept of *oxygine*. The history of physics demonstrates that a similar set of complications

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40. Lavoisier, "Réflexions sur le phlogistique", 535: "Combustion itself is nothing other than the effect which takes place in the moment when the *oxygine* principle abandons the caloric matter to engage in a new combination." ("La combustion elle-même n'est autre chose que l'effet qui a lieu dans le moment où le principe oxygine abandonne la matière de la chaleur pour s'engager dans une nouvelle combinaison.") A similar formulation appears in Lavoisier's textbook first published in 1789: "The oxygen which forms the base of this gas is absorbed by, and enters into, combination with the burning body, while the caloric and light are set free." Antoine Lavoisier, *Elements of Chemistry, in a New Systematic Order*, Edinburgh 1790, 414. For the original, see Antoine Lavoisier, *Traité élémentaire de chimie, présenté dans un ordre nouveau*, vol. 2, Paris 1789, 478: "La combustion n'est autre chose, d'après ce qui a été exposé dans la première Partie de cet Ouvrage, que la décomposition du gaz oxygène opérée par un corps combustible. L'oxygène qui forme la base de ce gaz est absorbé, le calorique & la lumière deviennent libres & se dégagent."

41. In practice, the "crossing of the line" for the realist moves in the opposite direction, repeated experimentation demonstrates (or does not demonstrate) that a concept *thought* to have a real referent in fact has no real referent. I am grateful to Paul Linjamaa for the observation.

42. See Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Natural Science*, Cambridge 1983, 22–24, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511814563.

43. See, for example, the chart based on Bergman's work in "Chemistry", *Encyclopædia Britannica*, vol. 4, 3rd ed., Edinburgh 1797, 374–635, at pp. 406–407.

also accompanies concepts of subatomic particles like electrons, which are often invoked in debates about realisms.[44] It is therefore worthwhile to dip into the history of the idea of electrons to try to articulate some of these complications.

To have a clear discussion of electrons involves talking about atoms, but where do we begin the story of atoms? Narratives of the development of atomic theory usually start in the fifth century BCE with the highly fragmentary remains of the writings of Leucippus and Democritus (c. 460–c. 370 BCE), who conceived of the world as being made up of small indivisible bodies (*atoma somata*).[45] Another starting point could be the Roman philosopher Lucretius (c. 99–c. 55 BCE), whose exposition of an Epicurean version of atomic theory survives much more fully than any Greek account in the form of a Latin poem of about 7,400 hexameter lines.[46] Or again, we could commence with Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459), who discovered a manuscript of Lucretius in 1417 and reintroduced Lucretian atomic theory to Europe.[47] Or we might begin the story at the turn of the nineteenth century with the work of John Dalton (1766–1844), who is often lauded as the founder of modern chemistry, with his proposals that elements are formed from atoms of different weights that can combine in whole-number ratios to form compounds.[48] All of these figures have their place in modern textbook histories of the atom.

But we could begin the story equally well with scientific discussions that occupy less space in modern science textbooks. In the second half of the nineteenth century, one of the competing theories of matter held that atoms were not really particles at all but instead swirling vortices in a frictionless fluid sometimes identified as luminiferous ether.[49] Schilbrack's language about "the referent of the concept" existing in the world comes to mind here. Did luminiferous ether and vortex atoms exist in the world? Modern scientists would say no, but some scientists at the time acted *as if* vortex atoms and ether did exist. They conducted experiments and

44. See Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, Oxford 2006, 38–39, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199287185.001.0001.

45. For the views of Leucippus and Democritus, we depend on later authors who were often hostile in their summaries. See, for example, Aristotle, *De caelo* 303a.

46. See David Sedley, *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom*, Cambridge 1998, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511482380.

47. For an engaging account of atomic theory in the Renaissance, see Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, New York 2011.

48. See John Dalton, *A New Theory of Chemical Philosophy*, London 1808–1827, especially vol. 1, part 1, 211–216.

49. For a good overview, see George M. Fleck, "Atomism in Late Nineteenth-Century Chemical Philosophy", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24 (1963), 106–114, https://doi.org/10.2307/2707861.

made calculations with that assumption. One of those scientists was J.J. Thompson (1856–1940), whose first book explored vortices in general and offered thoughts on vortices in chemical combinations.[50] Several years later, Thompson would publish the results of a series of experiments with cathode rays that led to the conclusion that atoms were particulate but in fact *not* indivisible, as had previously been supposed by particulate atomic theorists. Instead, he determined that they most likely contained even smaller, negatively charged particles that he called simply "corpuscles".[51] Already by 1902, Thompson's "corpuscles" were assimilated to the word that was then being used to designate the negative electric charge itself, the "electron" or "atom of electricity".[52]

In 1907, still employing the vocabulary of corpuscles, Thomson elaborated a "corpuscular theory of matter", producing a new view of the atom, which he described in the following way:

> In default of exact knowledge of the nature of the way positive electricity occurs in the atom, we shall consider a case in which the positive electricity is distributed in the way most amenable to mathematical calculation, i.e., when it occurs in a sphere of uniform density, throughout which the corpuscles are distributed.[53]

Thus, the atom was presented as a positively charged sphere, throughout which negatively charged particles were scattered. We may again ask Schilbrack's question: Did the referent of this concept exist in the world?

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50. J.J. Thomson, *A Treatise on the Motion of Vortex Rings*, London 1883.

51. J.J. Thomson, "Cathode Rays", *The London, Edinburgh and Dublin Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science* 44 (1897), 293–316, https://doi.org/10.1080/14786449708621070. Later in his life, Thomson reflected on the importance of his early interest in the idea of vortex atoms. See J.J. Thomson, *Recollections and Reflections*, New York 1937, 95: "The investigation [...] like most problems in vortex motion, involved long and complicated mathematical analysis and took a long time. It yielded, however, some interesting results and ideas which I afterwards found valuable in connection with the theory of the structure of the atom, and also of that of the electric field." And indeed, Thomson's way of speaking about corpuscles illustrates this development of thought: "We might regard the mass of a corpuscle as the mass of the ether carried along by the tubes of electric force attached to the corpuscle as they move through the ether. An example taken from vortex motion through a fluid may make this idea clearer." J. J. Thomson, *The Corpuscular Theory of Matter*, New York 1907, 162.

52. See Shelford Bidwell, "Magnetism", *The New Volumes of the Encyclopædia Britannica*, vol. 30, 10th ed., Edinburgh 1902, 452: "These particles, which were termed by their discoverer *corpuscles*, are more commonly spoken of as *electrons*, the particle thus being identified with the charge which it carries. [...] The application of this term [electron] to Thomson's corpuscle implies, rightly or wrongly, that, notwithstanding its apparent mass, the corpuscle is in fact nothing more than an atom of electricity."

53. Thomson, *The Corpuscular Theory of Matter*, 103.

Thomspon's honest presentation of his method gives us the answer: He said that he would, "in default of exact knowledge", proceed *as if* a certain model were the case in order to conduct further experiments. In practical terms, this is the way that all good science works. It is just that Thomson is refreshingly clear and forthright about it.

Just four years later, Ernest Rutherford (1871–1937), working with the results of a series of experiments that involved the scattering of alpha particles by extremely thin metal foils, posited still another model of the atom, now with "a central charge supposed concentrated at a point" and an "opposite compensating charge supposed distributed uniformly throughout" the spherical atom.[54] At the time, Rutherford proposed no more specific structure for the atom but instead referred to the work of Hantaro Nagaoka (1865–1950), who had suggested a model of the atom consisting of negatively charged electrons arranged in rings around a positively charged particle, with the stipulation that the electrons "must be very small compared to the attracting centre, in order that the ring may not collapse".[55] These ideas lie behind the common image of the atom as something like a solar system, with a dense positively charged nucleus orbited by much smaller negatively charged electrons. Just over a year after Rutherford's paper, Niels Bohr (1885–1962) argued in a set of articles that appeared in 1913 that electrons must orbit a positively charged centre (now the nucleus) in shells of particular energy levels and could change levels, emitting or absorbing energy when doing so.[56] Bohr's model did not, however, propose a means for exactly *how*

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54. Ernest Rutherford, "The Scattering of α and β Particles by Matter and the Structure of the Atom", *The London, Edinburgh and Dublin Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science* 21 (1911), 669–688, https://doi.org/10.1080/14786440508637080. Just as the conceptions of electrons and atoms change through time, so also the terms "alpha particles" and "beta particles" have been understood in quite different ways in the period since Rutherford coined the terms "alpha radiation" and "beta radiation" in 1899. See Ernest Rutherford, "Uranium Radiation and the Electrical Conduction Produced By It", *The London, Edinburgh and Dublin Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science* 47 (1899), 116, https://doi.org/10.1080/14786449908621245. For context, see Roger H. Stuewer, "The Nuclear Electron Hypothesis", in William R. Shea (ed.), *Otto Hahn and the Rise of Nuclear Physics*, Dordrecht 1983, 19–67, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-7133-2_2.

55. Hantaro Nagaoka, "Kinetics of a System of Particles Illustrating the Line and Band Spectrum and the Phenomena of Radioactivity", *The London, Edinburgh and Dublin Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science* 7 (1904), 451, https://doi.org/10.1080/14786440409463141.

56. Niels Bohr, "On the Constitution of Atoms and Molecules", *The London, Edinburgh and Dublin Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science* 26 (1913), 1–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/14786441308634955; *The London, Edinburgh and Dublin Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science* 26 (1913), 476–502, https://doi.org/10.1080/14786441308634993; *The London, Edinburgh and Dublin Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science* 26 (1913), 857–875, https://doi.org/10.1080/14786441308635031.

electrons made these hypothesized "quantum jumps", as they came to be called.

The First World War brought a pause to these rapid developments, but just over a decade after Bohr's article, a quick series of important studies appeared.[57] In 1924, Louis de Broglie (1892–1987) proposed that electrons, like light, may be conceived as both particles and waves.[58] In 1925, Werner Heisenberg (1901–1976) pioneered matrix mechanics to provide a mathematical foundation for Bohr's quantum view of atoms.[59] Almost simultaneously, building on the insights of de Broglie, Erwin Schrödinger (1887–1961) produced a mathematical equation to describe the behaviour of quantum systems in terms of probabilities.[60] A new picture of the atom thus emerged in which electrons did not move in orbits but behaved as waves and existed in clouds around the nucleus, such that the position of an electron could not be known but instead must be expressed in terms of probabilities. In 1928, Paul Dirac (1902–1984) derived a wave equation that made the quantum view of the atom consistent with Albert Einstein's (1879–1955) theory of special relativity.[61] In the resulting physical models of the subatomic world, electrons are more like vibrations at specific energy levels in a field that occupies all of space that appear as particles only when they are observed.[62] In the writings of all of these scientists, the "reality" of the electron as an object in the physical world thus begins to flicker and sometimes disappear into the mathematics. Dirac put it this way in 1941:

> The mathematical methods at present in use in quantum mechanics are capable of direct interpretation only in terms of a hypothetical world differing very markedly from the actual one. These mathematical methods can be made into a physical theory by the assumption

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57. The astonishingly fast pace of shifts in knowledge in the 1920s makes a tidy narrative difficult. This paragraph is is a highly selective and simplified account.

58. Louis de Broglie, "Recherches sur la théorie des quanta", *Annales de physique* 3 (1925), 22–128. For a more general discussion, see Louis de Broglie, *An Introduction to the Study of Wave Mechanics*, London 1930.

59. Werner Heisenberg, "Über quantentheoretische Umdeutung kinematischer und mechanischer Beziehungen", *Zeitschrift für Physik* 33 (1925), 879–893, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01328377.

60. Schrödinger's papers on the topic were published in 1926 and are translated in Erwin Schrödinger, *Collected Papers on Wave Mechanics*, London 1928.

61. See Paul Adrien Maurice Dirac, "The Fundamental Equations of Quantum Mechanics", *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London, Series A* 109 (1925), 642–653, https://doi.org/10.1098/rspa.1925.0150; Paul Adrien Maurice Dirac, "The Quantum Theory of the Electron", *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London, Series A* 117 (1928), 610–624, https://doi.org/10.1098/rspa.1928.0023.

62. It is worth pausing to reflect on just how different Dirac's electrons are from Thomson's corpuscles. Is there any meaningful sense in which they are "the same thing"?

that results about collision processes are the same for the hypothetical world as the actual one. One thus gets back to Heisenberg's view about physical theory – that all it does is to provide a consistent means of calculating experimental results.[63]

Furthermore, at what seemed to be the most fundamental level, it turned out that knowledge of the world involved what has come to be known as "the observer effect". As Heisenberg phrased it, at the atomic level, "the interaction between observer and object causes uncontrollable and large changes in the system being observed".[64] Compare the view of Bohr, which is in some ways more radical: "The interaction between the objects under investigation and our tools of observation, which in ordinary experience can be neglected or taken into account separately, forms, in the domain of quantum physics, an inseparable part of the phenomena."[65]

For these physicists, this recognition that the researcher has a determining effect on the phenomena being observed brought about something we might now describe as a reflexive posture. Werner Heisenberg spelled out these implications more fully in 1958:

> Profound changes in the foundation of atomic physics occurred in our century which lead away from the reality concept of classical atomism. It has turned out that the hoped-for objective reality of the elementary particles represents too rough a simplification of the true state of affairs and must yield to much more abstract conceptions. When we wish to picture to ourselves the nature of the existence of the elementary particles, we may no longer ignore the physical processes by which we obtain information about them. [...] For the smallest building blocks of matter every process of observation causes a major disturbance; it turns out that we can no longer talk of the behavior of the particle apart from the process of observation. In consequence, we are finally led to believe that the laws of nature which we formulate mathematically in quantum theory deal no longer with the particles themselves but with our knowledge of the elementary particles. The question whether these particles exist in space and time "in themselves" can thus no longer be posed in this form. We can only talk about the processes that occur

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63. Paul Adrien Maurice Dirac, "The Physical Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics", *Proceedings of the Royal Society, Series A* 180 (1942), 17–18, https://doi.org/10.1098/rspa.1942.0023.

64. Werner Heisenberg, *The Physical Principles of the Quantum Theory*, Chicago 1930, 3.

65. Niels Bohr, "The Unity of Human Knowledge", *American Journal of Hospital Pharmacy* 17 (1960), 696, https://doi.org/10.1093/ajhp/17.11.694.

when, through the interaction of the particle with some other physical system such as a measuring instrument, the behavior of the particle is to be disclosed. The conception of the objective reality of the elementary particles has thus evaporated in a curious way, not into the fog of some new, obscure, or not yet understood reality concept, but into the transparent clarity of a mathematics that represents no longer the behavior of the elementary particles but rather our knowledge of this behavior. The atomic physicist has had to come to terms with the fact that his science is only a link in the endless chain of discussions of man with nature, but that it cannot simply talk of nature "as such".[66]

The view from these physicists of the middle of the twentieth century encourages humility about the kind of knowledge that the physical sciences *as a practice* can produce. Heisenberg put it this way: "In science, also, the object of research is no longer nature in itself but rather nature exposed to man's questioning, and to this extent man here also meets himself."[67] Niels Bohr made a similar point in a speech delivered in 1960: "Indeed, from our present standpoint, physics is to be regarded not so much as the study of something *a priori* given, but rather as the development of methods for ordering and surveying human experience."[68]

The views of Heisenberg, Bohr, and Dirac are of course not the only interpretations of the quantum turn in physics. Einstein never accepted their position, intuiting that despite its promise, the quantum mechanics developed in the 1920s simply could not be "complete". Already in 1935, Einstein and two colleagues published a provocative paper challenging Bohr's position by pointing out that certain correlations resulting from one quantum system interacting with another (the phenomenon now known as entanglement) result in the counterintuitive conclusion that the measurement of one particle affects the state of another particle even if it is very distant from the first.[69] Until his last days, Einstein remained troubled by these "spooky

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66. Werner Heisenberg, "The Representation of Nature in Contemporary Physics", *Daedalus* 87 (1958), 95–108. Quotation at pp. 99–100.

67. Heisenberg, "The Representation of Nature", 105.

68. Niels Bohr, "The Unity of Human Knowledge", in Aage Bohr (ed.), *Niels Bohr: Essays 1958–1962 on Atomic Physics and Human Knowledge*, Suffolk 1963, 8–16. Quotation at p. 10. On the fate of Bohr's quotation on the internet, see N. David Mermin, "What's Wrong With This Quantum World?", *Physics Today* 57 (2004), 10–11, https://doi.org/10.1063/1.1688051.

69. Albert Einstein, Boris Podolsky & Nathan Rosen, "Can Quantum-Mechanical Description of Physical Reality Be Considered Complete?", *Physical Review* 47 (1935), 777–780, https://doi.org/10.1103/PhysRev.47.777. It is perhaps worth noting that when Schrödinger coined the term "entanglement" for this phenomenon, he referred not to the particles themselves, but "that which I have called the *entanglement* of our knowledge of the two bodies". Erwin Schrödinger, "The Present Situation in Quantum Mechanics", *Proceedings*

actions at a distance".[70] Objections also came from Schrödinger, who designed his famous cat illustration to express what he viewed as the absurdity of the probabilistic aspects of quantum theory when applied to macroscopic objects (like cats).[71]

Despite these and other reservations, the discipline of physics continued to build on the insights of quantum mechanics, eventually incorporating it into quantum field theory, which now forms part of the foundation of the Standard Model of physics. And the cluster of views associated with Bohr and Heisenberg remains influential.[72] There has been no shortage of efforts to supplant that interpretation – superstring theories, many-worlds theories, loop quantum gravity theories, objective collapse theories, and more.[73] But none of these has yet proven persuasive to a majority of physicists. In terms of where "the science" stands now, we may quote the view of two prominent physicists and critics of the Standard Model: "In its standard formulation and interpretation, quantum mechanics is a theory which is excellent (in fact it has an unprecedented success in the history of science) in telling us everything about *what we observe*, but it meets with serious difficulties in telling us *what there is*."[74]

I want to draw out three points from this discussion. First, I think electrons are great. I'm a fan. Today's scientific community accomplishes amazing things and provides us with technologies that we can all appreciate. As I was in the process of writing this paper, I was also completing a report on the results of radiocarbon analysis of several ancient Greek and Latin manuscripts. I am a grateful user of the technologies produced by modern science. And I am happy to treat its models and theories *as if* they represent reality. But, if the history of science serves as a guide, these models and theories can and will change.[75] Thus, to suggest that there are "real" referents to these particular concepts *du jour* seems to me to be hasty and somewhat

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of the American Philosophical Society 124 (1980), 323–338. Quotation at p. 332.

70. The phrase ("spukhafte Fernwirkungen") comes from a letter Einstein wrote to Max Born dated 3 December 1947 and published in Max Born, *Natural Philosophy of Cause and Change*, Oxford 1949, 122.

71. Schrödinger, "The Present Situation", 328.

72. I avoid the term "Copenhagen interpretation" of quantum mechanics in deference to the growing consensus that it conflates too many conflicting views to be useful. See Don Howard, "The Copenhagen Interpretation", in Olival Freire Jr. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Quantum Interpretations*, Oxford 2022, 521–542.

73. For a good overview of the present state of affairs, see Carlo Rovelli, *Reality is Not What it Seems: The Journey to Quantum Gravity*, London 2017.

74. Giancarlo Ghirardi & Angelo Bassi, "Collapse Theories", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 15 May 2020, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/qm-collapse/. Italics in original.

75. This is simply an observation of scientific practice without a value judgement, not to be confused with the argument sometimes known as pessimistic induction.

hubristic, not to mention out of keeping with the continuous process of revision that is characteristic of scientific practice.[76]

This leads to my second point, namely that the easy, almost common-sense reference to the simple "reality" of molecules, atoms, and subatomic particles ("the referents of the concepts", to use Schilbrack's terminology) seems out of touch with realism debates in the physical sciences. By extension, so too is the distinction between natural kinds and social kinds in general. Thus, what Schilbrack and others describe as "natural kinds" might be described as humans' current best efforts to understand and navigate the world. We treat these kinds *as if* they are real until, through random experience or designed experiment, it no longer seems good to do so. Such a view does not deny the reality of a world outside ourselves and our conceptions, but it does recognize the limits of those conceptions. If pressed on the issue, I would consider this kind of position a very much pared down and humble realism, though I would again stress that the realism/antirealism distinction as Schilbrack applies it may not be an especially useful tool in these discussions.[77]

Third, the analogy that Schilbrack uses between concepts and their alleged referents in the natural sciences to talk about concepts and alleged referents in the study of religion is not effective, but it is suggestive of a different kind of analogy. Even if a field like quantum mechanics has "serious difficulties in telling us *what there is*" at a fundamental level, the scientists who work in the field have sets of rules in place that ensure that the practice of science provides us with usable and generally reliable (though fallible) tools for navigating the world. Electrons (and atoms and molecules and mountains) are parts of descriptive systems that scientists use to

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76. If one of the competing "theories of everything" turns out to satisfy the mathematical needs and experimental results, do we really imagine that the community of physicists will take off their lab coats, dust off their hands, and say, "We've got reality. Let's call it a day"? It seems unlikely.

77. I am (painfully) aware of the vast bibliography on various "realisms" that is not cited here. I would only point out that there are varieties of scientific realisms that move away from the kind of direct connections between concepts and referents that Schilbrack endorses. For instance, Karen Barad's notion of agential realism "rejects the notion of a correspondence relation between words and things and offers in its stead a causal explanation of how discursive practices are related to material phenomena. It does so by shifting the focus from the nature of representations (scientific and other) to the nature of discursive practices (including technoscientific ones), leaving in its wake the entire irrelevant debate between traditional forms of realism and social constructivism". Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham, NC 2007, 44–45, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388128. For a concise overview of the theory, see Karen Barad, "Agential Realism – A Relation Ontology Interpretation of Quantum Physics", in Olival Freire Jr. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Quantum Interpretations*, Oxford 2022, 1031–1054. I thank Liv Ingeborg Lied for bringing Barad's work to my attention.

navigate and manipulate the world. The community of scientists have rules for what gets to count as knowledge about these systems (what is considered a well-designed experiment, what a good explanation entails, and so on).[78] We might think of historians relating to the past through a similar process.

Lessons for Historiography

We seem to have drifted quite far from the questions of the concept of religion and historiography that Schilbrack raised. But our trip through some of the well-travelled (and less travelled) paths in the history of science can be suggestive for historians, who may find themselves facing analogous challenges and perhaps benefitting from analogous solutions for moving forward.

To begin with some of the basic insights of late-twentieth-century historiography: Historians study surviving traces of the past. The past is the totality of things that have happened.[79] Histories are narratives. The past and history are thus not the same *kinds* of things. Historical accounts cannot be judged against the past because the past is gone and not directly accessible to us in the present. What is accessible are traces left from the past – artifacts and texts. Keith Jenkins has put it in this way:

> No account can re-cover the past as it was because the past was not an account but events, situations, etc. As the past has gone, no account can ever be checked against it but only against other accounts. We judge the "accuracy" of historians' accounts *vis-à-vis* other historians' interpretations and there is no real account, no proper history that, deep down, allows us to check all other accounts against it: there is no fundamentally correct "text" of which other interpretations are just variations; variations are all there are.[80]

But if "the past" is not directly accessible, how then do we judge one historical account as better or worse than another?

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78. For a recent and highly readable history of this regime of rules, see Michael Strevens, *The Knowledge Machine: How Irrationality Created Modern Science*, New York 2020. For a grittier account of the social practice of science, see Andrew Pickering, *Constructing Quarks: A Sociological History of Particle Physics*, Chicago 1984.

79. I make this statement in the context of a human scale and acknowledge that developments in modern physics may require a rethinking of this "common sense" notion of the past. For two views, see Barad, "Agential Realism", 1048–1049; Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*, London 2018.

80. Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, London 2003, 14, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203426869.

Like scientists, historians set up rules. Historians establish rules for what constitutes good history and what counts as evidence. These rules are socially constructed and always under revision. Some rules seem fairly stable (for example, "Internal contradictions in historical accounts are bad"). Other rules lose currency (for example, "Good history teaches us about Great Men and the Great Things they accomplished").[81] Historians judge each other by how well we follow the rules (and, on occasion, how convincingly we challenge those rules).

What, then, do we say about those traces of the past that we treat as our sources? Even Jenkins speaks of them as somehow decisive: "Whilst *the sources may prevent just anything at all from being said*, nevertheless the same events/sources do not entail that one and only one reading has to follow."[82] How does such a determinative view of "the sources" relate to Jenkins's earlier assertion that "variations are all there are"? A generous reading would be that "the sources" do not constrain their own interpretation *by themselves*, but in dialogue with the socially determined sets of rules by which historians operate. Historians determine which traces of the past get to count as sources and then *invest* sources with power. This way of thinking about sources is nicely captured by the historian Simon Goldhill's characterization of "things":

> Things require people to make them talk, even and especially within the rhetoric which insists that "things speak for themselves". [...] Things do not have a life of their own, simply awaiting the excavator's spade, but always take shape and meaning within a cultural milieu, a cultural milieu which is reciprocally created and moulded by things. Things take on cultural authority because they can be taken to express value, ideology, history; things can lose their authority because this invisible, soft power is not integral to them.[83]

Things, or perhaps better, traces of the past, do exist but what is meaningful about them are the uses to which we put them here in the present. We might summarize this view of the practice of history as follows:

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81. An excellent example of this phenomenon can be drawn from some of the material treated in this article, namely the changing narration of the "Chemical Revolution". Older histories lionized Lavoisier as a shining beacon of Truth in a world of ignorance, while more recent studies tend to emphasize his embeddedness in the scientific trends and struggles of the time. See the discussion in Frederic Lawrence Holmes, *Eighteenth-Century Chemistry as an Investigative Enterprise*, Berkeley, CA 1989.

82. Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, 15. My italics.

83. Simon Goldhill, *The Buried Life of Things: How Objects Made History in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Cambridge 2015, 195, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316103821.

- Historians *invest* certain sources with power (or determine what things get to be considered as sources).
- The community of historians has a *social* agreement, almost always unspoken, that says we *grant* these ancient artifacts/documents with an authority, that they will in some sense be determinative for assessing better and worse historical readings.
- Thus, our interests here in the present shape all of our interactions with ancient sources.
- Our relationship with these sources and our determination of *what gets to count* as a valid source in the first place are all firmly planted in the contemporary concerns of historians.
- But within the game that historians play, within the sets of rules that historians continuously establish, debate, and revise, we can still talk coherently and convincingly about the past.
- It is, however, a past that is always out of reach. So, historical accounts are always subject to revision, but we can still say: My understanding of the ancient world is better than your understanding of the ancient world, because my reading shows more careful and thorough consideration of the ancient sources.
- The surviving ancient sources have this value in discussions of the past *not* because they *are* the past. Rather, it is because the community of historians have set up the rules of engaging and interpreting sources in this way.

Concluding Thoughts

I will close by offering an extended quotation from one of Schilbrack's essays on realism. It nicely draws together several of the issues discussed in this article:

> Though the invention of the concept of "religion" is recent, the claim that there really is religion in a culture that lacks that concept is analogous to the claim that there really is money, property, royalty, or sports in cultures that lack those concepts. When one applies such labels and redescribes a culture with an etic term, it is true that one may misunderstand or distort it. And it is important not to drop the fact that such redescriptions are never free of the scholar's political interests and biases. Nevertheless, such labels refer to roles, practices, and institutions that structure a given society, and these structures operate before they are redescribed. Societies are not unstructured, like generic white noise or cookie dough, but are structured by the imaginations of their

members. My proposal, in other words, is that structured forms of life predicated on the belief in superhuman beings – that is, religions – existed even before the label "religion" was invented. The scholar's use of the label does not create the form of life. Map is not territory.[84]

I agree with Schilbrack that we can find evidence in ancient sources for social structures of ancient people. If we follow Schilbrack in accepting that "societies are structured by the imaginations of their members", it still seems to me worthwhile to distinguish between structures that modern people imagine (including religion) and the structures imagined by those groups who lived before the emergence of the concept of religion. Insisting on the "reality" of religion in eras before anyone used that concept overwrites the ancient imagined structures in what seems to me to be an unhelpful way. Cultures can posit superhuman or non-obvious beings and interact with them in various ways without necessarily bundling those interactions together as religion and sequestering them from "secular" domains of life.

I want to draw out a final point from this quotation. Throughout much of that essay, Schilbrack refers to Jonathan Z. Smith and marshals Smith's work for his Critical Realist project. And at this climactic point in his essay, Schilbrack concludes with a statement that, for a certain set of readers, is surely a distinct echo of Smith's famous essay and eponymous book, *Map is Not Territory*. A distinct echo, but, perhaps tellingly, not a full quotation. Smith ended the essay (and book) with that statement, but included a short coda that, if taken seriously, would significantly complicate Schilbrack's project. According to Smith, "map is not territory – but maps are all we possess".[85] That is to say, the "territory" to which Schilbrack refers is, within Smith's framework, just another map. This kind of claim does not, I think, force us to think of Smith as a "nonrealist" in the sense that Schilbrack uses that term. Smith's assertion does not seem to me to be an ontological claim (a denial of the *existence* of things outside our maps) but rather an epistemological claim (a recognition of *the limits of our knowledge* of things outside our maps).[86] Schilbrack makes a valiant effort to claim Smith as an ally to Critical Realism and to wrest his legacy from those whom he regards as antirealists. But the fact that both groups seem to be so ardently drawn to

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84. Schilbrack, "A Realist Social Ontology of Religion", 167.

85. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, Chicago 1978, 289–309. Quotation at p. 309. Smith here draws on the work of Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, 3rd ed., Lakeville, CT 1950, 55–65.

86. That Smith encourages scholars to "undergo the ordeal of incongruity" when working with sources suggests that he understands them to be invested with a kind of agency, to be something other than reflections of ourselves. Smith, *Map is Not Territory*, 309.

Smith's oeuvre is perhaps an indication that becoming preoccupied by the realist/antirealist dichotomy is not really the best way of proceeding. If the physics of the last century and a half has taught us anything, it is that our most fundamental ideas about the universe – what we think the "real" character of the world might be – can change quite radically in the space of a few decades. Historians should take heed and approach their own engagement with the traces of the past with due humility.[87] ▲

SUMMARY

Disagreement about the trans-cultural applicability of the concept of religion has been a feature of the academic study of religion for decades. In a series of recent essays, Kevin Schilbrack has powerfully reframed these discussions as a debate between realist and antirealist philosophical orientations. Aligning himself with Critical Realism, Schilbrack argues that religion is a transcultural and transhistorical reality and that those who deny this are antirealists. As my own work is among his targets, this article engages Schilbrack's critique. The first part of the article challenges some of Schilbrack's readings of *Before Religion*. The second part queries Schilbrack's use of examples from the physical sciences as analogies for the relationship between concepts and the real things they are said to designate. The third part models an alternative use of examples from the natural sciences to think about historiography, concluding that the realist/antirealist dichotomy is not a useful tool. The physics of the last 150 years has shown that our most fundamental ideas about the universe – what we think the "real" character of the world might be – can change radically in short intervals of time. Historians should take heed and approach their own engagement with the traces of the past with due humility.

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87. Even if I am unpersuaded that speaking of "transhistorical realities" will help us as we continue to grasp at the past and use it to make sense of our present, I am grateful for Schilbrack's careful interrogation of my work and that of others. It has encouraged me to think more thoroughly through several important issues and to engage more fully in bodies of literature that I had until now neglected.

The Concept of "Religion" as a Heuristic Device

KEVIN SCHILBRACK

Kevin Schilbrack is Professor of Religious Studies at Appalachian State University.

schilbrackke@appstate.edu

Introduction

It is common that a scholar will describe a culture using concepts not known by those being so described.[1] As many have noticed, this is often true of the use of the concept of "religion", a concept whose use as a cross-cultural taxon is relatively new. How should historians, anthropologists, theologians, and others understand the imposition of the concept "religion" on cultures that do not have that concept?

I have previously characterized the answers to this question as a choice between *realism* (the view that the concept is not merely part of the observer's perspective but also refers to a social reality operating in the world) and *nonrealism* (the view that the concept is merely part of the observer's perspective and does not also refer to a social reality operating in the world).[2] One finds debates between realists and nonrealists in the natural sciences

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1. I want to thank the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies at Lund University and in particular Jayne Svenungsson for arranging the conversation between me and Brent Nongbri that led to these two papers. I also want to thank Brent Nongbri for the effort, intelligence, and respect that he put into doing justice to my work, which I hope I have reciprocated.

2. Nongbri points out that I have used "nonrealist" and "antirealist" interchangeably. See Brent Nongbri, "Imagining Science: Ancient Religion, Modern Science, and How We Talk About History", *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 100 (2024), 200, https://doi.org/10.51619/stk.v100i3.26535. A useful distinction between them, however, is that a "nonrealist" is someone who holds that the discourse in question does not refer to something that exists independent of that discourse, and an "antirealist" is a nonrealist who also explicitly argues against the view that it exists in that realist way.

and in other inquiries in which people use theoretical tools to represent some aspect of the world,[3] and I contend that the same debates arise in the humanities and the social sciences. In the past, I defended a realist position regarding "religion", and I have categorized Brent Nongbri's work as representative of the nonrealist camp.[4] In his response, Nongbri says not only that the nonrealist label does not fit his work but that the realist/nonrealist debate is not very helpful in general, given that answering the ontological question about the nature of things has little impact on how scientists and other scholars actually work.[5]

I understand my argument that "religion" refers to transhistorical or transcultural realities as part of what one might call "a materialist account" of human behaviour. On a materialist account, human beings live in a world, much of which they may have only recently discovered and named. On such an account, human behaviour is shaped not only by entities outside our bodies (such as the planet's lithosphere) and by entities inside our bodies (such as leukocytes in our blood), but also by social and cultural entities. Towards the goal of understanding and explaining the material structures that operate in societies and cultures, I think that the academic study of religion is best served by a realist social ontology of religion. My argument for realism does not depend on any particular definition of "religion". However, I judge that the academic study of religion is best served by a polythetic or family resemblance definition of "religion" that reflects the fact that religions are so heterogeneous.[6]

In this paper, I seek to explain what I take to be the best way to understand the status of concepts used in the academic study of religion. The first three sections of the paper seek to clarify the different positions on this question, the distinctiveness of the heuristic position that Nongbri defends, and the reasons why someone who is a realist might nevertheless agree with

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3. For a short and clear introduction to these debates, see Anjan Chakravartty, "Scientific Realism", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 12 June 2017, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/scientific-realism/.

4. Kevin Schilbrack, "Imagining 'Religion' in Antiquity: A How To", in Nickolas P. Roubekas (ed.), *Theorizing "Religion" in Antiquity*, Sheffield 2019, 59–78, https://doi.org/10.1558/equinox.27964.

5. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", especially 208–220.

6. I first proposed a multi-component definition, but that definition was still monothetic. Kevin Schilbrack, "What *Isn't* Religion?", *The Journal of Religion* 93 (2013), 291–318, https://doi.org/10.1086/670276. For an explanation why a polythetic definition is better, see Kevin Schilbrack, "Mathematics and the Definitions of Religion," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 83 (2018), 145-160, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-017-9621-6. For a comparison of my "anchored" polythetic definition to other polythetic approaches, see Kevin Schilbrack, "The Concept of Religion", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 28 March 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/concept-religion/.

critics in resisting the use of the term "religion". The following three sections then defend the realist position by showing the costs of the heuristic view, the soundness of the realist view, and a discussion of how the realist view is consonant with the insights of three figures to whom Nongbri appeals for support, namely, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017), and Werner Heisenberg (1901–1976).

The Three Positions at Issue

Increasingly over the past decades, scholars have been making a reflexive turn, that is, a shift of attention to examine the concepts that have shaped their academic disciplines. One sees this reflexive turn throughout the university as scholars look in the mirror, so to speak, and ask how the concepts of "art", "society", "culture", "science", "politics", "law", "history", and so on have been socially constructed, by whom, in what context.[7] Let us use the name "the critical study of 'religion'" for the reflexive turn in the academic study of religion.[8] The critical study of "religion" has shown that it is only in the last few hundred years – only as modern European colonial empires appeared – that the term "religion" came to be used to name social practices around the world predicated on beliefs about supernatural entities. Given this realization, many of those making the reflexive turn have drawn the conclusion that the concept of "religion" is a part of the modern Western imagination that does not refer to something real outside that sphere. I call that position "nonrealism". A nonrealist scholar holds that the concept of "religion" has been imposed on non-Western cultures and on pre-modern history, but there was no such form of life that actually existed in those times and places. The reflexive turn is an important part of any academic discipline. Nevertheless, I have argued that the socially constructed nature of the concept of "religion", its provenance in Christian discourse, and its colonialist uses to denigrate and manage indigenous peoples do not undermine the ability of that concept to refer to real social structures, even where the concept was not known. I hold that "religion" is not restricted to the modern West but can also refer to forms of life that existed in pre-modern history and in non-Western cultures. For this reason, I argue that we should

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7. Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm describes what he calls "concepts in disintegration" throughout the academy in his *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory*, Chicago 2021, 49–84, 303–306.

8. I prefer this to the commonly used label "critical religion", which seems open to misunderstanding. The use of the term "critical" for the reflexive turn, though apt, should not be confused with the use of the term "critical" in Enlightenment, Kantian, or Frankfurt School senses. See Kevin Schilbrack, "Do You Practice the Critical Study of Religion?", *Religion* 54 (2024), https://doi.org./10.1080/0048721X.2024.2388436.

recognize two positions in the critical study of "religion": a critical nonrealism and a critical realism.[9]

"Critical realism" is a label adopted by different positions, including theological positions,[10] and so I want to specify the sense in which I am using it. The critical realism on which I draw is a position in philosophy of science, originally developed by Roy Bhaskar (1944–2014), that recognizes the socially constructed nature of knowledge without giving up the view that one's knowledge is "transitive", which is to say, that it is *of* something whose existence is independent of one's inquiry into it.[11] Bhaskar argues that what is real is not exhausted by what human beings have conceptualized. An inquiry in, say, chemistry or anthropology requires concepts invented by human beings, but it does not follow that that inquiry is not into realities whose existence precedes those concepts. A critical realist approach to the concept of "religion", then, seeks to combine an appreciation of the deconstructive, genealogical, and postcolonial analyses of the concept with the insistence that the concept enables one to grasp, even if always incompletely, structures in the world not generated by our inquiry into them.[12] Thus, even though the concept of "religion" has a history, even though the concept has been weaponized, and even though different scholars define the term in different ways, it does not follow that the term is illusory, refers to nothing, or has no analytic value. The referential use of "religion" is not special in this respect: theoretical terms in general have the capacity to point to real things in the world. I think that the inquiries pursued in the academic study of religion – and in the humanities and social sciences generally – are best understood within this critical realist frame.

9. Kevin Schilbrack, "A Metaphysics for the Study of Religion: A Critical Reading of Russell McCutcheon", *Critical Research on Religion* 8 (2020), 87–100, https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303219900229.

10. There are several Christian theologians who have adopted critical realism, though in some cases, they draw from the "critical realism" of Roy Wood Sellars (1880–1973) or Michael Polanyi (1891–1976) rather than that of Roy Bhaskar. Perhaps the best known is Alister E. McGrath, *Scientific Theology: 2. Reality*, Edinburgh 2002. For an example of a Bhaskarian critical realist who seeks to show the value of this approach to Christian theology, see Andrew Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism: Ambiguity, Truth and Theological Literacy*, London 2013.

11. Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, London 2008; Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences*, 4th ed., London 2015.

12. The best critical realist account of religion so far is that of Christian Smith, *Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters*, Princeton, NJ 2017, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400887989. For an overview of Smith's account by a scholar working outside critical realism, see Michael Stausberg, "Real Religion from the Person Up: On Christian Smith, *Religion* (2017)", in Michael Stausberg (ed.), *21st Century Theories of Religion*, London 2024, 201–221.

Nongbri writes that my use of the realism/nonrealism distinction is not helpful. I do not agree, but Nongbri is right that there are more than two positions on the relation of discourse and reality, and a simple realism/nonrealism dichotomy can hide this. Moreover, the position that Nongbri defends is not simply the opposite of my realism. To see how his proposal differs, it helps to distinguish between how one answers two questions: (1) the ontological question about whether religions have existed where the concept was not known and (2) the linguistic question about whether scholars should continue to use the term "religion". My critical realist "yes/yes" answer is that (1) religions have existed in cultures even where the concept was not known, and therefore (2) scholars can legitimately use the concept of "religion" when studying those cultures. The opposing "no/no" answer disagrees on both points, holding that (1) religions did not exist where the concept was not known, and therefore (2) scholars should not use the concept of "religion" when studying them. Nongbri's proposal is not identical to either view. He proposes that (1) religions did not exist where the concept was not known, but (2) scholars can use the concept of "religion" when studying them. He holds, in effect, a "no/yes" position. Given that Nongbri gives a "no" answer to the ontological question, his view is also a nonrealist position, and my use of that label for his project still seems to me fitting.[13] Nevertheless, his proposal is distinct from the "no/no" position that argues

13. Galen Watts and Sharday Mosurinjohn have questioned my use of the term "nonrealism", arguing that those on whom I use it "would, when push comes to shove, generally accept Schilbrack's claim that [forms of life] are social constructions, or 'social facts', as Durkheim would say, that have a degree of internal consistency". Watts and Mosurinjohn are suggesting that my opponents actually agree with me about the ontological question that there have been forms of life in many cultures that weave together beliefs, practices, and social roles predicated on the existence of superempirical beings, disagreeing with me only about the linguistic question "whether it is appropriate to classify these various social facts under the general label *religion*". Galen Watts & Sharday Mosurinjohn, "Can Critical Religion Play by Its Own Rules? Why There Must Be More Ways to Be Critical in the Study of Religion", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 90 (2022), 326–327, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfac045. If a scholar answered yes to the ontological question, but did not want to use the term "religion" for this form of life because its participants lack the concept, then I would agree with Watts and Mosurinjohn that "nonrealist" would be a poor label for such a position. Edward Polanco's account of Nahua culture, described below, is like this. There may be a better word for religion-like forms of life. However, some critical scholars of "religion", including Nongbri, McCutcheon, and Daniel Dubuisson, propose that the term "religion" is inappropriate because, ontologically speaking, outside the influence of the modern west, there existed no such forms of life or social facts. See Russell T. McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion: Fanfare for the Common e.g.*, Berlin 2018, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110560831; Daniel Dubuisson, *The Invention of Religions*, Sheffield 2019. These critics propose that the illusion of religion is the result of those who have cobbled together unconnected elements to create the appearance that these cultures had a religion-like form of life. As Nongbri puts it, "it is not a matter of finding 'a better word for it'. The very problem is that there never was any 'it' there to begin with". Brent Nongbri, "Dislodging 'Embedded' Religion: A Brief Note on a Scholarly Trope", *Numen* 55 (2008), 456. The term "nonrealist" seems a good way to name that position.

that scholars should drop the concept of "religion", what I have elsewhere called the abolitionist answer.[14] Nongbri's proposal is that even though religions did not exist in cultures that lack the concept, one can use this concept to redescribe them. Let us call this "no/yes" position "the heuristic view".

The Heuristic View

What I am calling the heuristic view represents an important stance taken in many fields today. When scholars study the natural or social world, they develop theories, models, and maps. The heuristic view holds that one can use these conceptual devices without claiming that they accurately describe real entities in the world. The heuristic view is thus part of a family of positions, often drawing on important critiques of the correspondence theory of truth and representationalist accounts of the mind, that seek to drop *agreement with reality* as a necessary part of our understanding of how theorizing works. For example, the heuristic view resembles instrumentalist philosophies of science, which interpret entities described in theories as simply instruments for the prediction of human experiences. It also resembles pragmatist accounts that treat the truth of a theory as equivalent to whether it works, that is, to its practical value. And it resembles Hans Vaihinger's (1852–1933) Kantian-inspired "as if" philosophy, according to which human beings construct explanations to help them navigate life and treat the entities in those explanations as if they were real.[15] Critical realism distinguishes two sides for any inquiry, an epistemic side that concerns whether the inquiry produces credible results and an ontic side that concerns what is real. The family of nonrealist positions mentioned here, including the heuristic view, reject this distinction, either by dropping the ontic side as inaccessible or by collapsing it into the epistemic side.

I have said that Nongbri's heuristic view is a "no/yes" position according to which (1) religions did not exist in cultures where the concept was not known, but (2) scholars can use the concept of "religion" when studying those cultures. Nongbri is clear about the "no" side of his position, what I am calling his nonrealism: in his widely cited *Before Religion*, he writes that one of the goals of the book is to dispel the commonly held notion that any religions existed before modernity.[16] In a concise statement of the heuristic view, Nongbri says that scholars redescribing cultures outside the sphere of

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14. Kevin Schilbrack, "Religions: Are There Any?", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78 (2010), 1112–1138, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfq086.

15. Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As If": A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, New York 1924.

16. Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, New Haven, CT 2013, 8, https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300154160.001.0001.

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western modernity may use the term "religion", but if they do so, they must always avoid giving the impression that religion was really there.[17] He maintains this nonrealist view in the paper in this present special issue, arguing that my attempt to claim that "religion" can refer to real entities in antiquity is "counterproductive".[18] As he puts his view, one need only treat one's scholarly redescriptions "*as if* they represent reality [...] *as if* they are real".[19] Here, Nongbri follows Russell T. McCutcheon, who wrote that scholars are committed only to "talking *as if* there are such things in the world as religions, acting *as if* there are such things in the world as religions, and organizing *as if* there are such things in the world as religions".[20] Nongbri is equally clear about the "yes" side of his position: even though religion did not exist outside the modern West, "we may nevertheless *want* to discuss the various practices and beliefs that *modern* people tend to group together as religion, to the degree that we find these individual practices and beliefs in these ancient sources".[21]

There are situations that should motivate even realists to adopt a heuristic view. One such situation is when one's theory, model, or map concerns entities that one cannot observe even with technological help. In situations like this, one can put one's theory forward as a heuristic device, and, as long as the theory is not confirmed, one can continue to use the theory without knowing whether or claiming that the account of the world that it provides is accurate. For the realist, however, this uncorroborated status is not the nature of all theories, let alone all discourse, but rather an in-principle temporary situation that can end if the theory gets confirmed. Another situation that should motivate one to adopt the heuristic view is when one deliberately creates a model that does not correspond to any structure in the world, for example, when one divides a class into a "blue team" and a "red team". In situations like this, one's categories are simply sorting devices that do not reflect any reality about the two teams (though, once invented, the two categories may become social structures having effects on the class). Racial categories may be heuristic in this sense, that is, invented to serve the interests of those who created them but corresponding to no biological structure. In situations like these two, a heuristic device is a valuable tool.

For the critical realist, the problems arise when the heuristic recalcitrance about agreement with reality is taken as a view of human knowledge in general. There is nothing problematic about holding that a particular theory is a

17. Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 158.
18. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 205.
19. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 218–219. Italics in original.
20. McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion*, 112. Italics in original. See also pp. 11–12.
21. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 201. Italics in original.

heuristic device and that we do not know whether it accurately maps structures in the world. But realists resist the exaggeration that *all* claims about the world are merely heuristic devices, that human beings cannot know whether *any* claims agree with reality. Those who adopt this Kantian-style view create an epistemological rule for all human knowledge. They drop the notion that one can compare a theory to reality; the world becomes noumenal and "well lost".[22] The reasons often given to justify this epistemological rule, however, fail to do so. For example, nonrealists often point to the fact that all human theorizing is fallible: what people take as true may turn out to be false. Similarly, nonrealists often point to the fact that all human theorizing is perspectival: what people take as true often depends on certain tools or commitments that others lack. However, these truths do not entail that one cannot sort the theories, models, and maps that do and do not describe real entities in the world. Rather, they entail that one should adopt a fallible and perspectival realism.[23] I return to this idea below.

One last point. Nongbri sometimes writes as if scholars should adopt the heuristic view once they recognize that their work is *redescriptive*. That is, when scholars recognize that they are using concepts that do not exist in a given culture, they should adopt the view that their scholarship does not name realities operating there. But this does not follow. Nongbri is right that it is important to distinguish between descriptive uses of a concept to refer to ways that people understand themselves and redescriptive uses when scholars apply that concept to people who do not use it to understand themselves. As Nongbri says, redescriptive accounts are "an imposition" on the evidence.[24] Marking this descriptive/redescriptive distinction in religious studies is especially significant for historians, to underline the fact that the concept of "religion" is not found in the Christian New Testament, the Jewish Tanakh, the Buddhist Tripitaka, the Hindu Vedas, or other ancient sources, and for post-colonial scholars, to underline the fact that before contact with the West, the concept was not found in Japan, India, Nigeria, Mexico, and other non-Western cultures. The nonrealist inference

22. Richard Rorty, "The World Well Lost", *The Journal of Philosophy* 69 (1972), 649–665, https://doi.org/10.2307/2025059.

23. See, for example, Ronald N. Giere, *Scientific Perspectivism*, Chicago 2006; Michela Massimi, *Perspectival Realism*, Oxford 2022, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197555620.001.0001. For an insightful discussion of the human tendency to take one's map as the reality it describes, I recommend Rasmus Grønfeldt Winther, *When Maps Become the World*, Chicago 2020. Winther shares Nongbri's concerns about what Winther calls the "pernicious reification" of one's models of the world. However, it is worth noting that Winther's proposed solution is not to treat theories, models, and maps as heuristic devices but instead a position he calls "contextual objectivity", analogous to the perspectival realism I recommend in this paper.

24. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 202.

here is that when a culture lacks the concept of "religion", it must not have religion. But the fact that some people do not have a concept for X does not imply that X is not there. The fact of redescription is no stumbling block for realism.[25] Redescriptive terms are simply etic terms and, though they are "imposed", they may yet name something real. The central question about the redescriptive use of "religion" is this: when scholars redescribe a culture using "religion", are they redescribing that culture accurately? Showing that the term is being used redescriptively does not answer that question.

Resisting the Concept of "Religion"

As a *critical* realist, I recognize the benefits of making the reflexive turn to examine the concepts with which we work. One benefit is that it helps us recognize the effects that our concepts have on the world. Although we speak of "labelling" a form of life as a religion, the term is not an inert sticker like a price tag stuck to an apple. Using this term shapes how the form of life comes to be treated. In this respect, one can compare "religion" to other recently invented and politically charged terms, such as "sexual harassment" and "genocide". The realist position is that concepts such as these can name a social reality that existed before the concept was invented, but it is important for realists to remember that these concepts were developed to do something. The concepts are part of how their users manage the world. These concepts open a door for perceptual practices – and legal practices – that had not existed before. Moreover, these concepts can have looping effects when those so described who had not understood themselves in terms of a category then learn of it and change their behaviour, either to avoid the negative effects of the concept or to profit from the positive ones.

In fact, as a critical realist, I recognize the value not only of making the reflexive turn to examine the history and political uses of the concept of "religion", but also of resisting that concept. Even when one works with a polythetic definition of "religion" with its flexible and changing set of properties, "religion" nevertheless takes Christianity as its prototypical instance, and it therefore carries an aura of meanings that can distort the study of forms of life in different cultures. In addition, the category "religion", like every category, can have a flattening effect that hides real differences from view and reinscribes an understanding of the world that serves particular interests. It can therefore be an invaluable pedagogical practice to disrupt these effects by resisting the use of the English word. Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin do this by leaving the Latin *religio* and the Greek *thrēskeia*

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25. In fact, before Nongbri's first book, I explicitly argued for this very same distinction between "describing" a culture in indigenous terms and "redescribing" it in terms that its members did not know. Schilbrack, "Religions: Are There Any?", 1122.

untranslated, and this is an effective way to trip up the reader's unreflective assumption that, given the examples of religion in their lives, they already know what ancient forms of life must have been like.[26] For another example, Edward Polanco steers clear of the term "religion" in his analysis of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Nahua healing practices.[27] To avoid the assumption that a religion is about one's faith, Polanco writes instead of Nahua "devotional practices". To avoid the assumption that a God has a name and a personality, he writes instead of "life forces". To avoid the assumption that a ritual follows a rote script, Polanco writes instead of "ceremony". Putting these concepts together, a phrase such as "ceremonies to gain access to life forces as part of an interconnected set of devotional practices" helps English-speakers grasp Nahua culture while avoiding the common assumptions that if the Nahua had "a religion", then it must have doctrines, it must be something that practitioners chose to join, it must be separate from politics, and so on. In fact, think how pedagogically illuminating it could be to *reverse* this labelling practice and to redescribe Christianity, for example, as ceremonies to gain access to life forces as part of an interconnected set of devotional practices. With the same logic, one might use sorting categories from non-Christian contexts (such as the Sanskrit *dharma*, the Arabic *dīn*, and the Chinese *dao*) as terms to capture social patterns operating in the modern West.

As a critical *realist*, however, I hold that the pedagogical question whether avoiding the term is pedagogically useful is distinct from the ontological question whether "religion" names something real. Whether the term "religion" refers to a social structure operating in a given culture depends on only two things: how one defines the term and the way that the practitioners of that culture organize themselves. For this reason, if one were stipulatively to define "religion" to mean *ceremonies to gain access to life forces as part of an interconnected set of devotional practices*, then "religion" would name real social structures operating in Nahua culture. In fact, under that definition, "religion" would also name real social structures operating in other cultures where the term was not known. Given this Polanco-inspired definition, "religion" is not simply a heuristic device that exists in our minds that does not name real social structures operating in the world, but is instead a redescriptive category with transhistorical and transcultural application. In fact, this is exactly how Polanco uses "settler colonialism", another term that, like

26. Carlin A. Barton & Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities*, New York 2016.

27. Edward Anthony Polanco, *Healing Like Our Ancestors: The Nahua Tiçitl, Gender, and Settler Colonialism in Central Mexico, 1535–1660*, Tucson, AZ 2024.

"sexual harassment" and "genocide", names real social structures in multiple cultures, even when the term was not known.

It may seem that the realist/nonrealist debate is about whether "religion" names something that existed in times and places outside Western modernity, but this is not exactly correct. It is important to move this debate about the term "religion" below the verbal level, and this is why the often disparaged practice of defining religion is so important. The truth is that Nongbri's nonrealist argument depends not simply on the word "religion", but also on a particular understanding of religion that he builds into his case. Nongbri understands "a religion" to refer to a set of social practices that (1) are predicated on beliefs about supernatural entities and (2) have been disentangled from the political, economic, artistic, and other aspects of that culture.[28] By including this second property, Nongbri builds into his understanding of "religion" the post-Westphalian separation of church and state that we see, for instance, in the Constitution of the United States. This is why he says it is impossible for a religion to permeate a culture.[29] Given this understanding of the contested term, one can see that Nongbri's argument is not exactly that religion did not exist outside modernity but that religion in its modern form did not exist outside modernity. It is hard to deny that tautology. However, when one understands "religion" with my polythetic definition, or with the Polanco-inspired definition above, or with just about any scholarly definition, the social structures being described can be found outside the modern West.

The Costs of Adopting the Heuristic Position

I think that unless a scholar's work refers to things that exist independent of one's inquiry into them, one cannot describe one's theory of those things as "accurate" or "true". These terms of praise presuppose the possibility of agreement with reality. I once put this point in a way that I hoped would be arresting, and so I am glad that Nongbri quotes it: I wrote that "unless one commits to speaking of real structures in the society, that is, structures that

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28. In his book, Nongbri treats religion as a "discrete sphere", explicitly separated from nonreligious parts of a culture by the practitioners themselves. Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 1, 4. In the article in this special issue, he again speaks of "the isolation of religion as a sphere of life that is ideally distinct from other areas, like science, international relations, law, and so on, [that is,] distinguished from other, secular aspects of life". Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 201. This modern separation of cultural spheres did not exist in antiquity, and Nongbri assumes this modern separation as part of his definition of "religion". For other nonrealists assuming a definition of "religion" that automatically restricts the term to the modern world, see Schilbrack, "The Concept of Religion".

29. Nongbri, "Dislodging 'Embedded' Religion", 440-460.

operate independent of one's labels, one cannot argue that one's redescription of it is illuminating, explanatory, accurate, or true".[30]

These four adjectives capture different aspects of scholarship. For example, to claim that one's scholarship is "illuminating" uses the metaphor of shining a light on something "out there", that is, something independent of the light. This metaphor opposes the claim that historians simply manufacture or fabricate the past, that writing history is simply a project of invention or fiction.[31] To claim that one's scholarship is "explanatory", however, is to say not only that it illuminates the entity being investigated but also that it identifies the causal mechanisms that brought it about. It is not necessary for the study of religion to take up explanatory questions, but seeking explanations is central to any reductive approach. The terms "accurate" and "true" are, then, terms of praise that mean that one's allegedly illuminating or explanatory claims successfully capture the way things are.

When I wrote that statement, I thought that my opponents would object. I thought that they would insist that their scholarship *was* illuminating, explanatory, accurate, or true – perhaps not in the realist sense of referring to entities in the world, but perhaps in some alternative sense. I have been surprised when they agree with me. Russell T. McCutcheon, for example, argues that no account of the past can be said to be "any more accurate than any other"; rival historical accounts are "all on a par".[32] Arguing that there is no way to compare one's concepts to an unconceptualized world, McCutcheon also recommends that scholars drop the idea that some redescriptions can "distort" the nature of things or be "flawed". In fact, McCutcheon once criticized Nongbri for implying that there could be more or less distorting accounts of the past,[33] and Nongbri now seems to have repudiated that hint of realism. As Nongbri says, "I would not say that any redescription is (or could be) explanatory, accurate, or true". He also wants to avoid saying that some claims about the past are "fitting".[34] McCutcheon and Nongbri are here tracing out the implication of the nonrealist view,

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30. Schilbrack, "Imagining 'Religion' in Antiquity", 66.

31. The verbs "manufacturing" and "fabricating" come from Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, New York 1997, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195105032.001.0001; McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion*. McCutcheon explains that he picked the term "fabricating" for what social construction involves precisely because it implies lying. McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion*, 3–4, 9, 42. McCutcheon's departmental colleague Vaia Touna has also adopted the view that historians do not discover facts but instead fabricate the past. Vaia Touna, *Fabrications of the Greek Past: Religion, Tradition, and the Making of Modern Identities*, Leiden 2017, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004348615.

32. McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion*, 39–40.

33. McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion*, 19.

34. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 202–203.

namely, unless one can compare one's theories to entities in the world, one has to drop the notions of distortion and fit, accuracy and truth. Given how central these ideas are to most forms of inquiry, I consider this a cost of the heuristic view.

Although I previously treated these four adjectives as a set, the notion that some scholarship can be *explanatory* differs from the other terms. An explanatory inquiry seeks the causes of an event, and it often involves an account not only of what one can see, but also of mechanisms that are unobserved or even unobservable. For example, Gregor Mendel (1822–1884) hypothesized a biological mechanism that would explain the inheritance of traits. He argued that this mechanism must be assembled of parts that come in pairs, one from each parent, though at that time no one had yet seen chromosomes or DNA, which were not discovered until decades later. It is common that an explanatory inquiry depends on reference to an as-yet-unknown reality. It therefore makes perfect sense that those who drop agreement with reality from their understanding of theories, models, and maps would also drop finding explanations as a goal of inquiry. It is true that a historian can give an account of the past that includes no causal explanations. But this is a truncated understanding of what one can do, and so I consider this a second cost of the heuristic view.

If a heuristic view of religion in antiquity does not seek to be accurate, true, explanatory, or fitting, what exactly is its value? Nongbri proposes that even when one does not claim that one's account can have these goals, "redescriptions can be illuminating without being characterized by any of those other terms". Being illuminating, he explains, is meant in the sense of thinking "in a clearer way", but not in the sense of coming closer to the truth.[35] Merely being "illuminating" or "clearer" strikes me as a chastened goal for a historian. But how can one's claims about history be illuminating or clearer without being accurate, true, explanatory, or fitting? To be sure, that possibility exists for those who do *not* take the heuristic view. For example, given my definition, "religion" refers to forms of life composed of multiple elements such as belief in a superempirical reality, ethical norms, rites of passage, a text considered sacred, and creation narratives. It might be illuminating to use the term "religion" to redescribe a form of life in a culture that lacked religion, if that form of life were composed of only some of those elements (say, ethical norms, rites of passage, and a text considered sacred). This heuristic use of "religion" would be illuminating, however, only to the extent that it is accurate, true, explanatory, or fitting to say that this culture really has those elements. The phrase "form of life" comes from

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35. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 203. See also Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 153.

Wittgenstein and "rites of passage" from Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957); these are modern Western concepts that may not exist in the cultures being redescribed with them. If one resists the realist account and takes the heuristic view towards these elements, then one has to ask why *they* are illuminating. In the end, it seems that heuristic devices can be suggestive, they can stimulate thought, and they can generate new ways of seeing. But unless those new ways of seeing are accurate, true, explanatory, or fitting, we do not yet have a sense how they can be illuminating or clearer. Like the claim that some scholarship can be "less distorting", which, on reflection, Nongbri gave up, it seems that scholarship that eliminates the notion of agreement with reality has to drop the adjectives "illuminating" and "clearer" as well.

The difference between the heuristic ("no/yes") and the abolitionist ("no/no") views is that the latter argues that one should cease using the term "religion" for cultures outside the modern West. As abolitionist Timothy Fitzgerald says in his book *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, dozens of times, the term "religion" "has no analytic value".[36] Fitzgerald does not unpack this concept, but, typically, to "analyze" something is to break it down into its constituent elements. To say that the concept of "religion" has analytic value outside the modern West, then, means that when one dissects some cultural entity, one finds a religious element. This is my realist view: when one analyzes the political legitimation of the Mandate of Heaven, the non-dualist philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, the hallucinogen use by Amazonian shamans, the crowning of Charlemagne (748–814) by Pope Leo III (c. 750–816), the explanation of caste in the Rig Veda, or the meditation on kōans by Zen monks, one finds a religious element in each case, because these ideologies, events, and practices were connected by the participants to their beliefs about a superempirical entity. It is precisely this analysis that Fitzgerald rejects. As Fitzgerald says in a nice statement of both sides of his "no/no" position: "Religion cannot reasonably be taken to be a valid analytical category since it does not pick out any distinctive cross-cultural aspect of human life".[37] Nongbri, however, repeatedly says that on the heuristic view "religion" *does* have analytic value.[38] His proposed heuristic view permits scholars to use the term "religion", but it is not clear how, without speaking of real structures in society, the term can have analytic value. The heuristic view is that when one analyzes ideologies, events, and practices outside the modern West, one does *not* find religion. Precisely because the

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36. Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, Oxford 2000.
37. Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, 4.
38. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 201–202.

heuristic view denies the ontological claim that religion exists in these cultures, I think that those who adopt this view have to give up not only the claim that the use of "religion" outside the modern West is accurate, true, explanatory, or fitting, but also that it has analytic value.

Clarifying the Realist Position

In the previous section, I argue that the heuristic view comes with some significant costs. In his paper in the current special issue, Nongbri returns the favour and argues that my critical realism also comes with problematic implications. In this section, I want to consider three of these objections. My hope is that as I defuse each one, the realist position becomes more and more persuasive.

The most significant objection Nongbri makes is that the realist position implies that one has "direct access" to the world, that is, access to the world not mediated by our concepts.[39] I do not base my realist social ontology on any concept-free access. In fact, the "critical" aspect of critical realism is thoroughly conceptual. Nevertheless, Nongbri thinks that he sees such access implied in my use of the phrase "the molecule itself", which resembles "the thing-in-itself", Kant's name for inaccessible noumenal we-know-not-what.[40] He also thinks that he sees direct access implied in my distinction between things whose existence depends on human intentions (such as money and nations) and things that have existed independent of human intentions (such as mountains and amino acids). Making such a distinction is problematic, he proposes, since both what we call "money" and what we call "mountains" depend for their existence on human intentions, namely, the intentions involved in conceptually carving the entity out from the rest of reality.

The relation between mental concepts and material realities is an important one. Nongbri is right that if the critical realism position requires that we are able to step out of our discursive practices to know things as they are "in themselves", then this position would not be plausible. Nongbri recognizes that critical realism treats human knowledge as a social construction, but he suggests that critical realists have not realized that recognizing the linguistically mediated character of knowledge "troubles the whole idea" that human beings can ever refer to real things in the world.[41]

This objection reflects a Kantian worry that to know whether one's claims agree with reality requires knowledge about an unconceptualized or

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39. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 202–203, 208.
40. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 207–208.
41. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 208.

noumenal realm to which no one has access. To alleviate this worry, realists should be clear that by agreement with reality, they mean checking one's theories, models, and maps against entities in the phenomenal world. Consider this ordinary example. The GPS map in my car is out-of-date, and it therefore sometimes gives me bad directions. For example, its map does not include the new entrance to the airport, and I can therefore find myself driving with dozens of other cars through the six-lane entrance, beneath the giant sign for the airport, on a road that the GPS says does not exist. Because the GPS map has not been updated, it does not take into account the construction that has been recently done to the highway. It does not agree with reality. Knowing this, I treat with caution the directions my GPS gives me. As this example illustrates, the distinction that realists make between agreeing and disagreeing with reality is adjudicated by reference not to noumena but solely to this-worldly entities. The realist claim is that, *within* our experiences, we distinguish between accurate and inaccurate claims; *within* our discourses, we distinguish between things that do and do not depend for their existence on human effort. It is actually the nonrealist position that identifies reality with unconceptualized or noumenal entities. When one thinks that "reality" refers to those entities, one ends up with the idea that reality is perpetually out of our experiential and discursive reach. When one thinks that reality is inaccessible, one ends up treating the GPS assertion that *there is no entrance to the airport here* and my perception that *there is an entrance to the airport here* as if they are on a par.

A second objection has to do with the nature of a complex entity like a religion. Nongbri writes that I do not care whether the rituals, scriptures, institutions, experiences, doctrines, and other cultural elements called "a religion" are actually connected to each other:

> Schilbrack argues that the simple *existence* in ancient sources of the various practices and beliefs encompassed by modern definitions of religion is sufficient to say that religion existed in that culture, even absent any evidence of internal connection between these practices and beliefs in the sources themselves.[42]

This objection is easy to answer, because I have consistently insisted that to be a religion, the practices, beliefs, institutions, and other components that constitute a form of life have to be connected by the sources themselves: "the elements that make up a religion [must be] kin to each other, taught

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42. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 204.

by the participants as an interconnected complex."[43] In fact, I have argued that if the elements were not connected by the participants but merely by the scholar, then the abolitionists would be right that we should drop the term "religion".

It is important to see that the claim that the cultural elements called "a religion" are not connected by the participants – that connections between them are invented by contemporary Westerners – is precisely the nonrealist view. The realist claim is that despite the lack of the word "religion", there is a form, unity, or structure into which these elements are woven together, and the nonrealist position denies the existence of this form. For example, Daniel Dubuisson argues that Western scholars, shaped by Christian assumptions, have "religion" as a template in their minds, and they then look for those elements in other cultures and combine them to create the illusion that these elements have some connection to each other. As Dubuisson puts it, "the fact that it may be possible to find elsewhere, in other cultures and in an isolated state, one or other element that is comparable to one of those contained in the Western system in no way authorizes us to infer the existence of the structure itself".[44] Russell T. McCutcheon speaks of the invention of Buddhism in the same way:

> Armed with the category religion, social actors were able to invent a seemingly coherent thing called Buddhism (which was then thought to have a history and to be a causal agent) from what might have been a disparate – and thus rather differently organized and identified – collection of prior claims, actions, artifacts, and institutions.[45]

Nongbri presses this same argument:

> my point is to stress that *we as historians* group these together as "religion" and this *act of grouping* is a result of our own peculiar set of interests and not intrinsic to the ancient sources. [...] If it is *we* historians who are picking out this-and-not-that from ancient sources in order to discuss "ancient religions", then it is *we* who are generating (not "discovering") the "ancient religion" in question. It is exactly this *bundling* of some sets of beliefs and practices in our sources and not others, this *classification*, that is the issue.[46]

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43. Schilbrack, "Religions: Are There Any?", 1124–1125.
44. Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, Baltimore, MD 2003, 13.
45. McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion*, 22.
46. Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 5. Italics in original. See also p. 22.

It is for this same reason that Nongbri uses the word "impose" when he argues that pre-modern people have religions only insofar as anthropologists impose their own framework on them.[47] The realist hypothesis is that these threads of connection are present in the culture that is being redescribed; the nonrealist hypothesis is that it is the observer that creates these connections.

This realist/nonrealist disagreement about cultural connections is an especially fruitful one because it turns on an empirical question. Most scholars today understand religion as a system, complex, or network of parts. To take a well-known example, Ninian Smart (1927–2001) claimed that one often finds an "anatomy" of practice-ritual, experiential-emotional, narrative-mythical, doctrinal-philosophical, ethical-legal, social-institutional, and material-artistic elements.[48] The realist claim is that cultural elements like these are linked by the practitioners themselves and thereby create a form of life. The chanting of sutras by monks as a practice, the monastery as an institution, the "basket" of sutras as a collection of texts, the charity of laypeople whose donations sustain the monks as a virtue, the arguments that there is no self as a philosophy – the realist claim is that these elements are connected to each other by the participants and, needing a name for this social complex, one can call it "a religion". The nonrealist claim is that the participants themselves do not see any connection between the chanting, the monasteries, the sutras, the charity, and philosophical arguments, and these elements are linked only in the minds of those influenced by the concept of "religion".[49] To be sure, the answer to the empirical question whether cultural elements like these refer to, presuppose, or justify each other to form a cultural complex will vary from one context to another. But to the extent that one finds such connections in the sources themselves, one undermines the nonrealist claim that no such forms exist outside the modern West.

The third objection has to do with my use of the terms "transhistorical" and "transcultural". I use these terms to argue that "religion" names a pattern of social life that can be found not only in modern Western culture. I chose these terms deliberately to avoid the term "universal": the claim that something exists in more than one historical period or culture does not imply that it exists in *every* historical period or culture. These terms do not

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47. See, for example, Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 22; Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 204.
48. Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*, Berkeley, CA 1999.
49. Apparently, nonrealists do think that historians *can* reconstruct the past accurately in this case.

imply that being religious is part of human nature.[50] There may be some who work with such a view, but according to my definition of "religion", an individual person or culture may have no religion, and so it is a contingent matter whether a religious form of life is or is not present.

Even when the terms "transhistorical" and "transcultural" are understood in this contingent and non-universal way, however, nonrealists still reject it. As Nongbri says, "I am unpersuaded that speaking of 'transhistorical realities' will help us".[51] Similarly, Daniel Dubuisson argues that the reason why we cannot use "religion" to name a reality that exists in more than one culture is that one cannot ever situate oneself "above" one's historical situation to identify something that is transhistorically or cross-culturally the same.[52] In fact, Dubuisson claims, two different cultures will not even share a single synonymous idea.[53] But this argument against transhistorical and transcultural realities claims too much. Accepting such a rule would make it impossible to apply *any* concept from one culture to another. It would follow that before modern Europeans arrived, one cannot speak of the existence of schools in Mali, shoes in China, or farmers in Peru. The claim that the categories of one culture cannot identify transhistorical and transcultural realities puts each culture into a conceptual silo.[54] My position is that human beings in many times and places have created forms of life predicated on beliefs about superempirical entities – what one can accurately call "religions" – and they have also created what one can accurately call "art", "politics", "fashion", and "sports". Historians and other scholars of culture need concepts for transhistorical and transcultural realities to do their work. Religious studies scholars need concepts such as "myth" and "ritual", or "esotericism" and "scholasticism", to do theirs. When using a cross-cultural taxon like these, one has to specify how a particular instance is like or unlike the others. I prefer a polythetic definition of "religion" precisely to specify properties of these forms of life that are typical or common but not universal or essential to the category. However, the claim that scholars should

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50. Nonrealists often add apriorism and universalism to the realist view to make it seem less plausible. One sees this rhetorical move in McCutcheon's statement that religion is not inevitable, necessary, or natural (McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion*, 115) and in Nongbri's statement that he seeks to acknowledge cultural differences "instead of glossing them over by insisting that concepts from one particular culture and era must be universally applicable in all places and times" (Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 206).

51. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 224.

52. Dubuisson. *The Invention of Religions*, 47–48.

53. Dubuisson, *The Invention of Religions*, 133.

54. I suspect that there is a performative contradiction here and that one cannot even distinguish one culture from another without referring to transcultural realities.

eschew transhistorical and transcultural concepts would make the study of culture impossible while misunderstanding how concepts work.

Smith, Wittgenstein, and Heisenberg

Both Nongbri and I seek to connect our positions to those of other influential figures who have reflected on the relation between our concepts and realities in the world. In this section, I give a brief account of how a critical realist account relates to Nongbri's examples of Jonathan Z. Smith on religion, Ludwig Wittgenstein on meaning, and Werner Heisenberg on reality.

How to read the influential historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith is an interesting question. Nonrealists often claim that Smith shares their nonrealist view, but I think that this is false. Smith's *Imagining Religion* had a seminal role in inaugurating the reflexive turn in the academic study of religion.[55] That book treats "religion" as an invention that reflects the Christian assumptions of its creators, and its preface includes a nonrealist statement that has become infamous. Nevertheless, Smith does not say that critical reflection on the concept "religion" should lead scholars to adopt a heuristic view of it. In fact, I think that, like Talal Asad and Bruce Lincoln – and many others who reflect critically on the concept – Smith remains a realist about religion.[56]

Nongbri reads Smith differently. To bolster a nonrealist reading of Smith, Nongbri points to this quote: if scholars were to reflect on the concept "religion", Smith writes, "our object of interest would then be 'religion' as the general name of a general anthropological category, a nominal, intellectual construction, surely not to be taken as a 'reality'. After all, there are no existent genera".[57] Nongbri is right that Smith is clearly making an ontological claim and it is a negative one about what does not exist. How should we understand this statement?

I think that it helps to distinguish three classes of entities. Imagine people practicing a religion (for example, attending a Roman Catholic Mass). By my lights, each individual person is a concrete entity. By contrast, the Roman Catholic religion as a form of life does not exist in the concrete way that a person does. Some have therefore taken a nonrealist position and argued that we should not say religions exist; only religious individuals

55. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago 1982.

56. For my realist interpretation of Smith, see Kevin Schilbrack "A Realist Social Ontology of Religion", *Religion* 47 (2017), 161–178, https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1203834. For a realist interpretation of discursive approaches including those of Asad and Lincoln, see Kevin Schilbrack, "The Realist Discursive Study of Religion", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 36 (2024), 419–439, https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-bja10127.

57. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 205.

exist.[58] However, because a religion shapes the behaviour of those who practice it – it has effects on the world – I prefer to say that religions do exist, they are real, though they are emergent structures whose effects depend on being instantiated by concrete individuals. Until a religion is instantiated by someone, that form of life is merely an abstract possibility and it has no effects. To make another contrast, "religion" differs from "a religion" in that it is a name for the general anthropological category that some use to gather forms of life that share certain properties into a set. The category, "religion", does not exist as a concrete entity like a religious individual; nor does it exist as an abstract form of life that shapes people's behaviour like "a religion". It is simply a sorting device, an idea.

It seems clear to me that in the quote above, Smith is speaking of this third class of entities.[59] Apart from how concrete individuals use them, categories and other intellectual constructions do not have effects on the world. "Religion" lacks the concrete kind of existence enjoyed by people or the abstract kind of existence of the emergent forms that people bring about. The crucial point for the present debate, however, is that this negative ontological statement about "religion" does not imply that religious people or religions did not exist. According to Smith, even where those people did not themselves have the concept of "religion" for sorting different forms of life, religious people and religions already existed. The recognition that the third term, "religion", is merely an idea does not imply the heuristic view. In fact, Smith is explicit that it is "factually incorrect" to say that religions and religious people did not exist where the word was not known.[60] This is why I consider him a realist.

It is also important for debates about the concept of "religion" to have a handle on Ludwig Wittgenstein's account of meaning. Nongbri endorses Wittgenstein's account, according to which meaning arises out of how language is used by people. On this account, the meaning of a term is not stashed somehow "in" the concept as one might think of an oak tree hidden as a potential in an acorn. The meaning of a term also does not come from the term's connection to that to which it refers, as when people say "'dog' means one of those" and they point at a dog. Instead, as Nongbri rightly says, meaning depends for Wittgenstein on the give and take of social interactions as people employ the word for their own purposes. It is through

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58. This view is recommended in Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*, New York 1963.

59. Smith famously distinguishes exactly these three levels. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious", in Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Chicago 1998, 269–284.

60. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious", 269.

open-ended and evolving patterns of use that a term such as "dog" gets its meaning, and this is also why "dog" can be meaningfully used by people to refer to something very different than its original referents, as people stretch and bend and play with the concept.

Nongbri says that I must have discomfort with this account of meaning,[61] but that is not true: the above account is exactly how I think that meaning works.[62] In fact, it is because I think that meaning depends on the contingencies of use that it is no surprise that the word "religion" could evolve from its original sense in antiquity to refer to a person's scruples, to its sense in the middle ages to refer to monastic orders, and then to its modern sense to refer to a cross-cultural taxon. Nongbri proposes that I do not accept a Wittgensteinian account of meaning, because I *connect* the term "religion" to something real in the world.[63] But there is a problem here, and it is a telling one. First, I do see a connection between words and their referents, but I do not claim that the connection to a referent is how the term "religion" gets its meaning. I consider Wittgenstein's non-essentialist, social account of meaning in terms of "language games" correct, just as Nongbri does. However, unlike nonrealists, I hold that the fact that the meaning of words grows out of contingent social practices does not decide the issue of reference. That contingent social origin certainly does not make the idea of a connection between language and the world impossible. On the contrary, I think that language games *enable* the referential use of a linguistic term to name extra-linguistic things in the world. I do not draw a nonrealist conclusion from Wittgenstein's account of meaning. Moreover, the connection between "religion" and a transhistorical reality that bothers Nongbri is not really my doing. According to almost everyone on the planet today who uses "religion", the word refers to an aspect of culture found in many societies in history. One cannot appeal to Wittgenstein to object to this referential use. As Wittgenstein says, "this language-game is played".[64]

Lastly, Werner Heisenberg. With aplomb, Nongbri tells two stories from the history of science: the story of the chemical experiments on combustion that led to the concept of phlogiston and then to that of oxygen, and the story of how what are now called "atoms" were theorized with models of indivisible nuggets and then to spheres whose insides were organized like a solar system and then to fields of energy. Nongbri uses these stories to

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61. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 205–206.
62. I accept not only Wittgenstein's account of meaning, but also the "family resemblance" account of concepts that Wittgenstein applied to games, and I argue that "religion" is best understood as that kind of concept. Schilbrack, "The Concept of Religion".
63. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 205–206.
64. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd ed., London 1958, § 654.

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support the heuristic view in two ways. First, by historicizing the work of theorizing the natural world, these narratives show that these scientific accounts of what is real, taken as knowledge for a while but now abandoned, were not mere "mistakes" or "misconceptions", but were no less careful, systematic, and justified in their time than the theories that we take as correct today. As a consequence, the non-reality of the concept of phlogiston (its "failure to refer") complicates the assumption that the ideas we accept today have any real referent.[65] The study of subatomic reality similarly complicates the realist claim that theorizing requires reference to entities that exist independent of our inquiry into them. Given that the investigator's observations have an effect on the behaviour of the entities being studied (a situation that has analogies in the study of human cultures), what it means to speak of these entities independent of one's inquiry becomes a tricky question. As Heisenberg says, "the conception of the objective reality of the elementary particles has thus evaporated".[66] Heisenberg proposes, along with Paul Dirac (1902–1984) and Niels Bohr (1885–1962), that it is better to think of theory simply in terms of how things appear in human experiences and to set aside the question of what exists outside that realm. One cannot settle the question of how things are apart from us, and one does not have to settle that question for an inquiry to work. Nongbri then extends this insight to historiography: it is not only in physics but in history as well that scholars do not study things in themselves but rather things as organized by the scholars' interests, concepts, and disciplinary rules of how to read the evidence.

I agree that Nongbri's two stories do carry a substantive philosophical implication for our debate, namely, they should lead scholars to drop the goal of what might be called "objectivist realism". I borrow the label "objectivist realism" from Ronald N. Giere (1938–2020) to name the view that scientists or philosophers *can* identify (or even that they should *seek* to identify) knowledge that transcends all perspectives.[67] All investigations of the world are from some perspective or another, and a scholar's perspective is shaped, as Nongbri says, by their interests, concepts, and disciplinary rules of how

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65. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 211–212.

66. Quoted in Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 217.

67. Giere, *Scientific Perspectivism*, 4–6. Objectivist realism is equivalent to what Richard Bernstein calls "objectivism", that is, the claim that can identify (or even that one should seek to identify) knowledge that can serve as an ahistorical Archimedean point. It is also equivalent to what Hilary Putnam calls "metaphysical realism", the claim that "there is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'". See Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*, Philadelphia, PA 1988, 8; Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge 1981, 49, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511625398.

to read the evidence. Successful inquiries do not need to achieve a God's eye view.

However, these two stories should not lead scholars to drop realism altogether. Realism makes a distinction between saying that a theory is justified and saying that it is true, and when realists take a theory as true, we say that it agrees with reality. When one drops the notion of agreement with reality, one eliminates one's means for distinguishing between theories that are true and those that are (merely) justified. Those who drop the notion of agreement with reality as part of their understanding of inquiry end up saying things such as "science is nothing but a social construction" or "truth is nothing but a function of power". To put this point in Roy Bhaskar's critical realist terms, every inquiry has both an epistemic dimension that consists of one's interests, concepts, and disciplinary rules and an ontic dimension that concerns whether one's results of one's inquiry agree with reality. According to critical realism, it is true, as Nongbri has insisted, that one cannot compare one's theory to a reality free of one's perspective. One compares one's theory to evidence that is also interpreted from some perspective. As William James (1842–1910) said, "the trail of the human serpent is over everything".[68] Nevertheless, to offer an account of inquiry in physics, history, or religious studies without the notion of agreement with reality is to eliminate the ontic dimension and, in that case, the work that a scholar does can no longer be called an inquiry.

The heuristic view of "religion" is part of a long-standing debate between realism and nonrealism, but I do not see that debate as unhelpful or stalemated. On the contrary, both Nongbri and I are moving away from extreme versions in this debate to find a stronger position that incorporates the insights of each. For example, Nongbri says his view does not deny that an external world exists and that the position he seeks could be called a "humble realism".[69] And my view does not deny the ineliminable effects of the inquirer's perspective, and I repudiate the goal of objectivist realism. In these

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68. William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, London 1907, 64.

69. Nongbri, "Imagining Science", 219. Many social constructionists grant that there exists a world outside human concepts, but they hold that the world has no structure apart from our concepts. Apart from our concepts, according to this view, reality is just undifferentiated, unorganized "white noise", and entities are differentiated as entities only through human mental operations. This is the view that Russell T. McCutcheon has proposed (for multiple quotes, see Schilbrack, "A Realist Social Ontology of Religion", 164–166). One sees it also in the social constructionist account of science of Karin D. Knorr-Cetina, who, like the heuristic view, argues that the entities described in the sciences emerge out of constructive operations without assuming that these operations match any pre-existing order of the real. See Karin D. Knorr-Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge: An Essay on the Constructivist and Contextual Nature of Science*, Oxford 1981.

ways, this debate shows progress in what one might call the philosophy of religious studies, that is, the study of the epistemological, metaphysical, and axiological commitments at work in the study of religion. However, insofar as the scholar adopts a materialist account of human beings as acting within structures that they may not have recognized or named, the scholar will need theoretical terms such as "religion" that name real entities operating in the world. ▲

SUMMARY

Scholars are increasingly recognizing that the concept of "religion" has evolved in its meanings over the centuries and that its contemporary use as a means of sorting cultures around the world is a product of relatively recent European interests. One response to this issue has been to propose that scholars should understand "religion" as a heuristic device, that is, as a tool invented in western modernity but not as a concept that names a transhistorical and transcultural reality that has existed "out there" in the world before the term was invented. In this paper, I clarify and critique the heuristic sense of the term. I argue that the costs of a heuristic understanding are severe and that an alternative, realist understanding of the concept is better. On this realist view, a "religion" names a form of life based on belief in superempirical realities, whether or not the term "religion" was known to those practicing it.

"Wenn es nur einmal so ganz stille wäre…"

On Doing History of Religions, China, and Buddhism Today

ESTHER-MARIA GUGGENMOS

Esther-Maria Guggenmos is Professor of History of Religions at Lund University.

esther-maria.guggenmos@ctr.lu.se

Introduction

> Wenn es nur einmal so ganz stille wäre.
> Wenn das Zufällige und Ungefähre
> verstummte und das nachbarliche Lachen,
> wenn das Geräusch, das meine Sinne machen,
> mich nicht so sehr verhinderte am Wachen –
>
> Dann könnte ich in einem tausendfachen
> Gedanken bis an deinen Rand dich denken
>
> und dich besitzen (nur ein Lächeln lang),
> um dich an alles Leben zu verschenken
> wie einen Dank.[1]

These lines, written more than 120 years ago by Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) and widely disseminated thereafter, resonate with the longing for a "new way of seeing", a "Neues Sehen" – the longing to understand, to perceive the world as it is, to ponder what it means "to be".[2]

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1. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Das Stunden-Buch*, Leipzig 1927, 9–10.
2. The concept of "Neues Sehen" is reflected in works such as Rainer Maria Rilke's "Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge", in which the main figure states: "Ich lerne

Can one fathom who is addressed in these lines? The context of the surrounding poems reveals Rilke's search for a God beyond established metaphors, that echoes but goes beyond a Christian mindset. Because of its haziness, it feels more apt. The most desired clarity remains concealed, ambiguity seems to be part of the *conditio humana*, a "must".[3]

Coming from Chinese Buddhism, Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄 (d. 866 CE), the founder of the *Linji* 臨濟 lineage of Zen- or Chan 禪-Buddhism, comes to my mind. Zen-Buddhism has a track record in Europe as one of the major forms of Buddhism, along with Tibetan and early Theravāda traditions. A thought from the records of Master Linji found its way into the English-speaking world as a popular saying: "If you meet the Buddha, kill him." The passage goes as follows:

> If you want to see and understand the Dharma as it is, do not be confused by others. Inwardly and outwardly, kill whatever comes your way: kill Buddhas, kill ancestors, kill Arhats, kill parents, kill relatives, and then you will start to be liberated from the constraints of things, having penetrated through it be naturally free.[4]

What a vigour and aggression. It is hard to kill any form of conceptualization. Mental habits are most persistent to change. Liberation, *mokṣa*, needs determination. This is, what the Linji school is known for – radical means.

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sehen. Ich weiß nicht, woran es liegt, es geht alles tiefer in mich ein und bleibt nicht an der Stelle stehen, wo es sonst immer zu Ende war." Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 6, Frankfurt 1966, 710.

3. In contemporary academia, we are cautious to abstain from essentializations and recently studied extensively the notion of ambiguity, and the question of how much ambiguity societies can tolerate. Does one tend to label culturally unfamiliar and differently structured preferences in decision-making as ambiguous? Or do some cultures hold a larger psychological tolerance for ambiguity than others? Is it a sign of a high tolerance of ambiguity if in Chinese art history, the aesthetic ideal of estimating white spaces prevails that makes important spots being painted in detail while large spaces remain untouched by ink and colour? See for example Adam B. Seligman & Robert P. Weller, *Rethinking Pluralism: Ritual, Experience, and Ambiguity*, Oxford 2012, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199915262.001.0001; Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islam*, Berlin 2011; Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, New York 2021, https://doi.org/10.7312/baue17064; DFG-Forschungsgruppe 2600: Ambiguität und Unterscheidung. Historisch-kulturelle Dynamiken, 2018, Universität Duisburg-Essen, https://www.uni-due.de/forschungsgruppe_2600/, accessed 10 September 2024. See also the report by Wolfgang Streitbörger, "Lernen, mit Mehrdeutigkeit zu leben", *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, 30 December 2019, https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/ambiguitaetstoleranz-lernen-mit-mehrdeutigkeit-zu-leben-100.html.

4. Original: 欲得如法見解，但莫受人惑。向里向外，逢著便殺：逢佛殺佛，逢祖殺祖，逢羅漢殺羅漢，逢父母殺父母，逢親眷殺親眷，始得解脫，不與物拘，透脫自在。Records of Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄 (d. 866 AD): *Zhenzhou Linji Huizhao Chanshi yulu* 鎮州臨濟慧照禪師語錄, T. 1985, XLIX: 500b22–26.

The Buddhism it advocates opts for not being attached but at peace with the outer world and its conceptions.

Waning romanticism at the beginning of the last century has much to offer for the history of religions. The wisdom and light of the East shall be uncovered, presuppositional hermeneutical assumptions are taken for granted that culminate in phenomenological approaches. There is a sacred grid that gives shape to all phenomena. The sacred "shows itself" (*med*., φαίνομαι). With an anthropological constant at hand, comparison becomes easy. Scholars like Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) were able to compose fascinating works weaving distant civilizations together in a meta-narration which represented the accomplishments of the discipline by that time.

Over the past century, distances have shrunk and time contracted. The world seemed increasingly manifold, and hesitance grew together with the awareness to be part of a diversity structured by "European" thought. Eurocentrism became traceable, postcolonial attempts were the order of the day. "What are the hidden secret structures behind the world?" as a question receded into the background. "Wherever analysis leads, we gnaw through it step by step", became the new agenda.[5]

Comparisons like the one between Rilke and Linji in my introduction have become anachronistic. The humanities are increasingly losing their voice in the orchestra of the sciences. How to tune after somebody who does not produce a "la", but a whole rainbow of tones on different scales? And what can be expected from the history of religions, from the focus on China and Buddhism today? I would like to reflect on this in the following.

Biographical Notes

No research topic unfolds independently of the researcher's personal experiences. For all our striving for interpersonally communicable results and a certain ideal of objectivity, the topics we engage in, especially in the humanities, are designed to respond to how we experience the world around us on a large and small scale. Convincing hermeneutics today are aware of the need for the author to reflect on his or her own role in the field. And while there is often little space left in articles to reflect on biographical matters, I

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5. The general shift in the self-definition of religious studies as it became part of cultural studies and the various "turns" associated with it led in German *Religionswissenschaft* to a series of introductions that try to line out the new identity of the subject against its historical background: Burkhard Gladigow, *Religionswissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft*, ed. by Christoph Auffarth & Jörg Rüpke, Stuttgart 2005; Udo Tworuschka, *Einführung in die Geschichte der Religionswissenschaft*, Darmstadt 2015; earlier ones: Fritz Stolz, *Grundzüge der Religionswissenschaft*, Göttingen 1988, with a second edition in 1997; Klaus Hock, *Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft*, Darmstadt 2002; Hans G. Kippenberg & Kocku von Stuckrad, *Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft*, Munich 2003.

would like to take this opportunity to introduce some biographical reflections before the following thematic discussion.

I am grateful to my parents and all my immediate and extended family who nourished and accompanied me all these years. When I was about to graduate from school, the world seemed quite well-composed. I had set out to study theology, as I thought: it might wise to think about life, its meaning and purpose, before tackling it. At the same time, I also was concerned that abstract thought might not be satisfying in the long run. One should have gained some practical knowledge after finishing one's studies. As it was not possible to study subjects with fixed schedules such as mathematics or physics at the same time, I chose Sinology. It held the fragrance of work, and one could do a "Sinicum" – ancient Chinese was offered. After Latinum, Graecum, Hebraicum, this was in line with my appreciation of the ancient. We started with about 2000-year-old turtle shells with divination cracks – it took serious effort, but I experienced it also as fascinating, challenging my detective skills as well as mnemonic abilities.

Theology in Münster provided me with a comprehensive *tour d'horizon européen*: What does one do to texts – biblical and beyond – when interpreting them? What were the big philosophical questions across centuries, and how do they link to morality and ethics? We went for a walk through European history with a focus on Christianity – in its early phase including the Middle East – and we included practical matters, the history of pedagogy, group interactions, and rhetoric. Theology meant going through an education that brought the holistic ideals of humanism to perfection. It included other religions – a natural overlap with my Chinese studies as it occurred to me. I became curious about this world out there. As a student assistant at the seminar of religious studies with Annette Wilke, I assisted in shaping the then emerging bachelor's programme in religious studies.

After three years of studying, a scholarship for a one-year-stay in Taiwan gave me the opportunity to explore temples and monasteries. I was curious: How does a monastery function in East Asia? Talking to religious specialists, Buddhists were most open to my questions. Whether during interviews, in the Buddhist youth club, or while potato peeling in the monastery's kitchen – it was fascinating for me to learn about Buddhist life. And I started to wonder: What does an average Buddhist believe in? Do believers hold a certain pride in distancing themselves from their tradition as in Europe? With which movements do they identify? How far is their daily life affected by Buddhist resources? My enthusiasm may have been contagious: With students of religious studies in Münster we travelled to Taiwan in 2005 and

together wrote a little book concentrating on the sensual dimensions – the aesthetics – of religions in the Museum of World Religions in Taipei.[6]

The question of what such urban dwellers believe in when calling themselves Buddhists remained with me as I moved to Belgium. A generous four-year PhD-scholarship had enabled me to study with Ann Heirman at one of the very few Sinological institutes in Europe that focus on Chinese Buddhism. I explored questions like: How is "Buddhism" situated in people's lives? What is its *Sitz im Leben*, to stay with Gunkel?[7] What does "Buddhism" bring to modern, urban lives – not in an ideal world, not on the countryside, but here – in modern society? This fascination with the common man and its relation to religion, especially Buddhism and Christianity is what accompanies me until today.

In Erlangen, I was honoured to help building up the IKGF, a research consortium focusing on divination and conceptualizations of the future between Asia and Europe.[8] Intense years of exquisite international research exchange followed. Michael Lackner gave my research wings and made me understand what it means to build and live an intellectual *fluidum* in which thoughts can flourish and innovation happens. Dinners, travels, tea-times, research groups, and lots of conferences – numerous scholars met in and through Erlangen for the first time and discovered new approaches to their own research.[9] Topics of divination have thus become more visible in academia, we integrated new words, ideas, and practices into our intellectual worlds and have come a little closer to a less Eurocentric self-understanding. This is, I would say, post-colonial in its best sense.

What made Erlangen a great place seems also to be a characteristic of Lund – for which I am truly delighted to be with you. Coming here entails an encounter with the humanities, with theologians and scholars of

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6. Annette Wilke & Esther-Maria Guggenmos, *Im Netz des Indra: Das Museum of World Religions, sein buddhistisches Dialogkonzept und die neue Disziplin Religionsästhetik*, Münster 2008.

7. In how far this concept is still influential in current exegesis has been traced in Samuel Byrskog, "A Century with the *Sitz im Leben*: From Form-Critical Setting to Gospel Community and Beyond", *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 98 (2007), 1–27, https://doi.org/10.1515/ZNTW.2007.001.

8. Internationales Kolleg für Geisteswissenschaftliche Forschung (IKGF): "Schicksal, Freiheit und Prognose: Bewältigungsssstrategien in Ostasien und Europa", funded by the BMBF, Friedrich-Alexander Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, 2009–2023.

9. Scholars of this project are to date connected via the *International Society for the Critical Study of Divination*, the *International Journal of Divination and Prognostication*, and the series *Prognostication in History*. A recent issue of the journal contains reflections on the impact of the IKGF such as my own "When the Fox Meets the Hedgehog, Scholars Meet Practitioners, a New Language for Shaping the Future Emerges, and the Humanities Show Genuine Relevancy: the IKGF Erlangen", *International Journal of Divination and Prognostication* 5 (2024), 19–26, https://doi.org/10.1163/25899201-bja10008.

Religious Studies, and across faculties. The History of Religions has an inspiring research seminar. At the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies and beyond, you can meet fantastic colleagues from all over the world – an international atmosphere without which I hardly can imagine any good research happening today. I experience support for research ideas, often competent and efficient organization and flexibility. And I am curious and still discovering what being in Lund might entail. With the intent of inspiring our exchange, I, therefore, line out in the following the topics that motivate my research today.

"Das Zufällige und Ungefähre" – Politics of Religion in East Asia

While I hold great respect for the history of my subject and the personalities connected to it, and while I love to ponder the aesthetics of religion and other fields of discourse, I am convinced this can be no excuse to shy away from our world as it is. I consider the politics of religion in China and East Asia important. Understanding historical connections and rationalities is essential for a balanced perception of the present, and it is also important to perceive the current situation of people in China, of intellectuals, young people, Buddhists and Daoists, ethnic groups like Uighurs and Tibetans, and monotheistic communities like Muslims and Christians. As we live a comfortable life, it is our responsibility, I feel, to be informed, to recognize connections and argumentations, while standing with our convictions. Researching religions today cannot equal privatisation. The reflection about resilience in this context is on the agenda in East Asian Studies here in Lund – and that is a precious reflection also in my view. Religion has a public dimension, internationally, in Europe, and here in Sweden.

Given the current political situation in East Asia, historical knowledge seems to be of growing importance for contemporary research. Resorting to "traditional Chinese culture" (*zhongguo chuantong wenhua* 中國傳統文化) in order to legitimize itself as a world-power is one of the characteristics of China today that shapes the increasing control of religious life on the Mainland. I follow and teach topics related to the politics of religion. Recently, it is especially established terms of Western research like the "Silk Road" or the "Sinicization" of religions that surface in contemporary politics.[10] It seems that the nostalgic vibes of these terms – well rooted in traditional Western scholarship – are taken up to serve political and economic interests. At the same time, religious, especially Christian, life and thought are part of a vivid intellectual sphere in China and a public Chinese theology is

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10. The current developments that go along with the sinicization of Chinese religions are well documented in Richard Madsen (ed.), *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below*, Leiden 2021, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004465183.

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emerging. I enjoy the exchange with Sino-Christian Studies and the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies at Tao Feng Shan in Hongkong.

Two Subjects

Political developments come and go with the tide of time. They might come with sharp regulations regarding religious life, but they are not necessarily the driving force behind its development. Therefore, I will introduce two topics of my current research in the following that I consider to be indicative of current religious change in Greater China. These are the topics of Life Education and recent changes in the history of emotions.

Longing for Silence? Life Education as a New School Subject in Greater China
"Life Education" – mostly referred to as *shengming jiaoyu* 生命教育 in Chinese – is a school subject that over the past twenty years has been rising simultaneously all over Greater China in order to cope with a comparatively high rate of juvenile suicides in an educational system geared towards success and career. It intends to provide children with orientation in life and includes moral, philosophical, and practical elements like health education. Depending on the region, it can integrate religious thought and practice or be part of religious education as in the case of Hongkong, but also be conceptualized without any explicit religious notions as in the case of Mainland China.[11] Following John Lee, Life Education in China is meant to "provide a non-cognitive aspect of student development and adopts a humanistic,

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11. The case of Mainland China is different from Taiwan as well as Hong Kong. In Taiwan, religious education was in the past decades and is to this date officially not integrated into the curriculum since school education is regarded as secular. In Mainland China, atheism is part of its communist heritage. A state-driven secularization process emphasizes moral, civil, and ethnic elements instead of religious education. See Zhenzhou Zhao & Nazim Aman Hunzai, "Religious Education in China: Religious Diversity and Citizenship Building", in Kerry J. Kennedy & John Chi-Kin Lee (eds.), *Religious Education in Asia: Spiritual Diversity in Globalized Times*, Abingdon 2022, 12–27. When in the first decade of the twenty-first century a revival of religious life was witnessed, calls for opening public education to broader teaching about religious diversity arose. See Hirotaka Nanbu, "Religion in Chinese Education: From Denial to Cooperation", *British Journal of Religious Education* 30 (2008), 223–234, https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200802170151; Zhiyan Teng 滕志妍, *Shisu shidai de zongjiao yu xuexiao jiaoyu guanxi wenti yanjiu – zhengce jiedu yu anli toushi* 世俗时代的宗教与学校教育关系问题研究－政策解读与案例透视 [A Study on the Relation between Religion and School Education in the Secular Age. Interpreting Policies and Analyzing Cases], doctoral dissertation, Northwest Normal University, 2009. Since 2012, religions are again under close state supervision and the promotion of Life Education has been described by scholars as a "state-controlled substitute for religious education". See Satoko Fujiwara, "Religion and Education in East Asia", in Liam Francis Gearon & Arniika Kuusisto (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Education*, Oxford forthcoming. A first overview about current practices of Life Education and historical traces can be found in Esther-Maria Guggenmos, "Life Education in Contemporary Greater China – Are Religions Back as Players in Public Education?", *Religions and Christianity in Today's China* 14 (2024), 38–41.

developmental, and caring approach that values subjectivity, individuality, and spirituality".[12] In Taiwan, five elements of Life Education have been defined over time that comprise religious, health, career, ethical, as well as "life-and-death" education.

The rise of the subject is interesting in a double perspective: On the one hand, for the first time in decades, public education and religion meet in Taiwan. After the Second World War, both nationalists as well as communists saw education as public and set it apart from knowledge about religion as well as the influence of religious players. Is this relation about to change in Taiwan? On the other hand, European societies are transforming through flows of migration. In contemporary Europe, secular spaces increase, organized Christian belief fades away, and faith-based communities and spiritual practices diversify. Compared to other countries, Sweden introduced knowledge about different religions into the school curriculum early, already in the 1960s. Other parts of Europe still offer confessional religious education that is diversifying. In Sweden, there is an ongoing reflection on how to present different cultures and religions adequately and how the presentation of non-Christian religions is structured on ideas once established by Christians for understanding non-Christians.[13] In other parts of Europe, recently growing religious communities develop their agendas in new confessionally bound curricula. In this context, it might be enriching to see how in East Asia a new subject evolves that with a similar intent aims at providing students with orientation and tools of meaning-making in their lives.

Let us have a short look at a current Life Education coursebook from Taiwan. It is one of the possible textbooks for Life Education in secondary high schools in Taiwan. If one flips through the pages, one discovers a reflection-centred approach where "Western" and East Asian elements intermingle. The book closes with a chapter on spirituality and self-cultivation. At the beginning, one finds categorizations such as the one shown in Figure 1 – a page describing four ways of "Western intellectuals" to describe the value of people, namely scientific, moral, artistic, and religious ones.

One will also find stories of people benefitting society and finding joy in this. Just by looking at the illustrations, it is obvious that these actions reflect religious motifs – the elderly man shown in this reprinted newspaper article of the textbook (see Figure 2) has put a sticker on his vehicle that

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12. John Chi-Kin Lee, Stephen Yam-Wing Yip & Raymond Ho-Man Kong, "Introduction: Life and Moral Education in the Greater China Region", in John Chi-Kin Lee, Stephen Yam-Wing Yip & Raymond Ho-Man Kong (eds.), *Life and Moral Education in Greater China*, London 2021, 4.

13. Jenny Berglund, "Swedish Religion Education in Public Schools – Objective and Neutral or a Marination into Lutheran Protestantism?", *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 11 (2022), 109–121, https://doi.org/10.1093/ojlr/rwac018.

*Figure 1. Illustration of different views by Western intellectuals "on the central values of humans" (*dui「ren」de hexin jiazhi 對「人」的核心價值*), Pan Xiaohui 潘小慧 (ed.), Shengming jiaoyu 生命教育 [Life Education], Taipei: Ouxin 謳馨 2021, 38.*

Figure 2. Newspaper article for student inspiration with Pure Land Buddhist background. Pan Xiaohui (ed.): Shengming jiaoyu, *Taipei: Ouxin 2021, 63.*
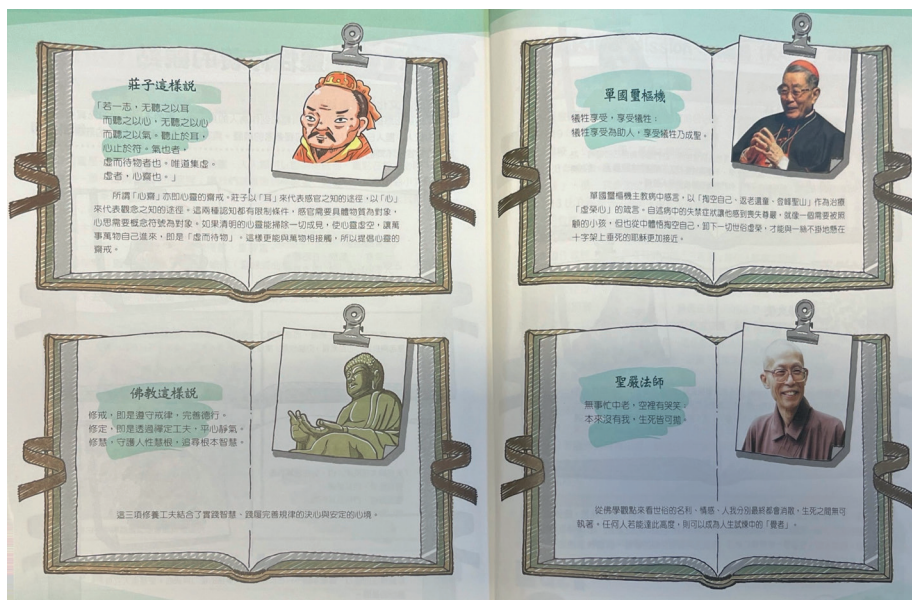

Figure 3. Religiously explicit passages towards the end of the book. Pan Xiaohui (ed.), Shengming jiaoyu, *Taipei: Ouxin 2021, 112–113.*

reads "*Namo Amituofo* 南無阿彌陀佛" – "Praise be to Buddha Amitabha", which is common for Pure Land Buddhists.

Only on the final pages of the textbook (see Figure 3), there are more religiously explicit wisdom quotes from historical and public religious figures. Besides a quotation of Zhuangzi (BCE, historicity and dates uncertain), referred to as one of the founders of Daoism, we find in our example a Roman Catholic cardinal, a quotation from a Buddhist sūtra and from an Engaged Buddhist leader. Again, the Engaged Buddhist is not denoted as such, but background information is largely omitted – probably with the aim in mind to inspire more than to inform.

This short excursion shows that the entanglement between religion and culture is complex and has to be seen against its historical background. With the advent of Chinese modernity around 1900, major shifts in mental maps occurred across East Asia. Probably through the translatory efforts of Japanese *literati*, the term "*zongjiao* 宗教" was introduced into East Asian languages as a neologism for the hitherto unknown word "religion" and "a self-consciously 'religious' field was opened in China, [driven] both by Christian missionaries and by secularizing political reformers and revolutionaries".[14] In Imperial China, the emperor was considered Son of Heaven, and the legitimacy of the state was based on a shared cosmic framework. Untouched by this, local religious life unfolded in so far as it did not interfere with state and rulership legitimacy. A social movement had to be considered "orthodox", otherwise its "heretical" nature could be seen as potentially endangering the state. With the rise of the nation state in the first half of the twentieth century, we see a new dichotomy arising that replaces the orthodox-heretic binary: The new term "religion" came in contrast with "superstition" (*mixin* 迷信).[15] Being officially recognised as a "religion" leads to the general protection of religious activities until today, while forms of "superstition" go along with persecution in Mainland China. "Religion" in

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14. Vincent Goossaert & David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, Chicago 2010, 10. On the emergence of *zongjiao*, see also Vincent Goossaert, "1898: The Beginning of the End for Chinese Religion?", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 65 (2006), 307–336, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911806000003; Vincent Goossaert, "L'invention des 'religions' en Chine moderne", in Anne Cheng (ed.), *La pensée en Chine aujourd'hui*, Paris 2007, 185–213; Tim H. Barrett & Francesca Tarocco, "Terminology and Religious Identity: Buddhism and the Genealogy of the Term *Zongjiao*", in Volkhard Krech & Marion Steinecke (eds.), *Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe: Encounters, Notions, and Comparative Perspectives*, Leiden 2012, 307–319, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004225350_022; Mitsutoshi Horii, *The Category of "Religion" in Contemporary Japan: Shūkyō and Temple Buddhism*, Cham 2018, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73570-2; Christian Meyer, "*Zongjiao* als chinesischer Religionsbegriff? Genealogische Anmerkungen zu seiner Entwicklung seit der späten Qing-Zeit", *China heute* 39 (2020), 206–217.

15. See Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity*, Cambridge, MA 2010.
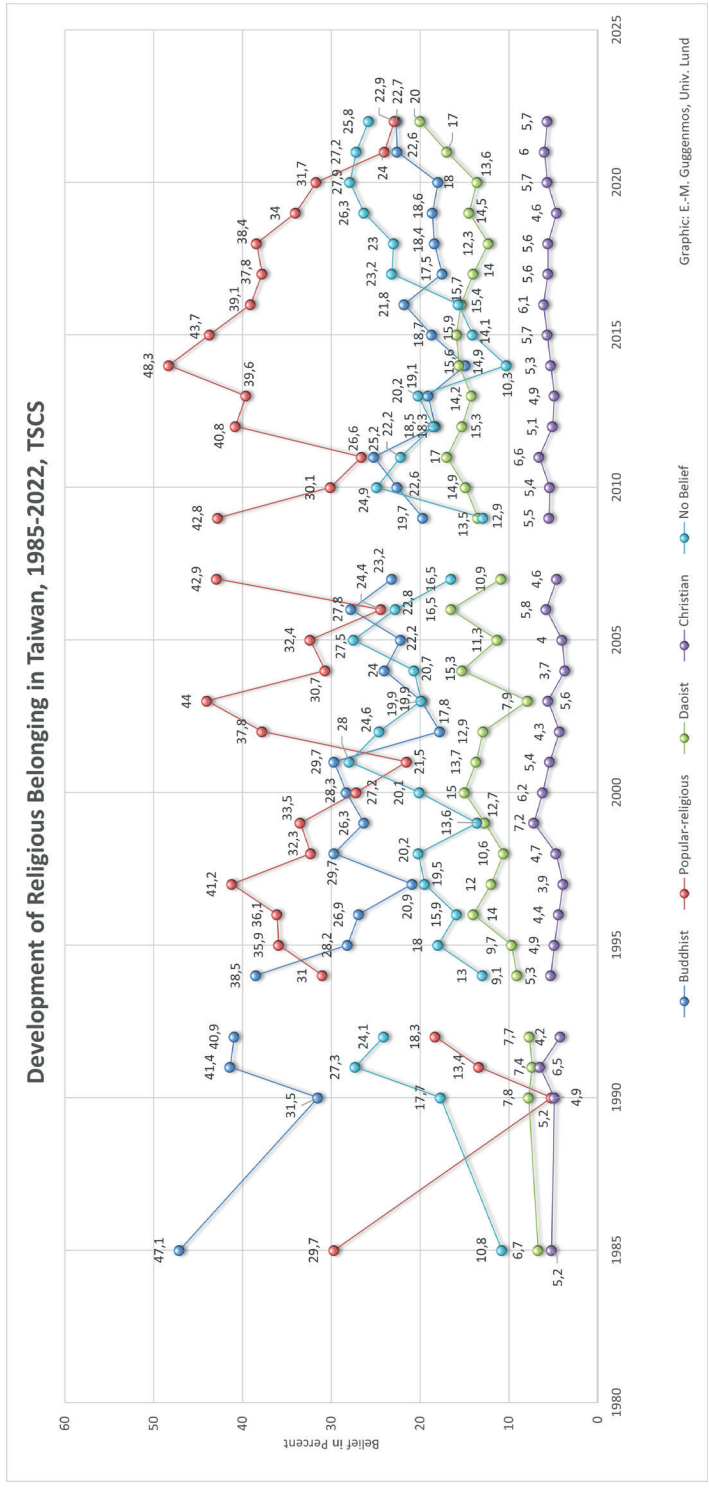
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Figure 4. Development of religious affiliation in Taiwan 1985–2022 according to the Taiwan Social Change Survey *conducted by Academia Sinica.*

this frame served a concrete function and did not reflect socially grown categories of distinction. Whether it was nationalists or communists, "religion" was something seen with caution and suspicion, of colonial flavour, and certainly nothing that would be directly associated with moral and value orientation – an orientation, "Confucianism" in its variations and the connected civil service examinations had secured over centuries. With different results, both sides aimed at the renewal of morality among citizens and regulating religion was a necessity, a "political civilizing project" that replaced the established mode of local social organization known as popular religion.[16] Whether in Taiwan or in Mainland China today, moral education and classes about citizenship are therefore part of regular public education. That "religions" could be of essential importance for the moral orientation of citizens is an idea that is less familiar to the intellectual history of Imperial China that has reverberated in subsequent times.

This cultural history is of direct impact on religious affiliation in Taiwan today, as shown in Figure 4. It shows the answer to the question "What religion do you believe in?" in Taiwan over the last thirty years according to the *Taiwan Social Change Survey*. It is characterized by its volatility – belonging is not something constant and this has to do with the fact that "religion" is not linked to a strong identity marker in Taiwan. Traditionally, "religious practices" are chosen in concrete situations by lay people in connection with the expected efficacy (*ling* 靈) and exclusive religious belonging is something for experts, like priests, but not for commoners.[17]

While the concept of religion took its time to become rooted in East Asia, in the course of the twentieth century Christians and Buddhists became more present in society. Protestants and also Catholics engaged in their missionary activities in public education.[18] They fostered social change through the transformation of the educational landscape, enabled the education of women, and offered physical education and sports up to Western medicine. With the May Fourth Movement in 1919, Chinese intellectuals called for reform, critically evaluating traditional sources as well as colonial influences.

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16. See Goossaert & Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, 167–198.

17. The graph stabilizes over the past ten years. During this process, the option to distance oneself from "religion" seems to grow, while the popular religious option is obviously waning. To what degree this reflects a recent secularization process lies beyond the scope of this article.

18. For a first overview of this development, see for example Kathleen L. Lodwick, *How Christianity Came to China: A Brief History*, Minneapolis, MN 2016, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt19qgfm7. For the case of Swedish missionaries, see research in Chinese by Wang Jianping 王建平 and the English mongraph by Erik Sidenvall, *The Making of Manhood among Swedish Missionaries in China and Mongolia, c. 1890–c. 1914*, Leiden 2009, https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004174085.i-192.

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The victory of the forces of the Chinese Communicst Party in 1949 led to the expulsion of missionary societies from China.

Likewise, Buddhism in the first half of the twentieth century saw a reform period in which monks such as Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) engaged in the reorganization of the monastic community and in reflecting Buddhist doctrine under the premises of Asian modernity. The reformation of the monastic community went along with a new orientation towards society. Engagement in social service and educational activities was now seen as crucial. Lay people started to be taken seriously as practitioners and meditation practices were introduced to a broader public. This major movement in East Asian Buddhism is today often labelled as the start of "Engaged Buddhism"[19] – and I am delighted that the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies in Lund will be able to provide a course on this subject in the coming year together with the University of Denver.

It is against this background that research on Life Education in relation to religious agency wins its topicality.[20] On the one hand, East Asian moral education has a long-standing tradition broadly independent from religious players but rich in Confucian heritage. On the other hand, religions in the past and present – Christian missionaries, Buddhist organizations and contemporary organizations active in Life Education – help to realize educational goals and shape the worldview and mindset of pupils. Political trust in religious organizations seems to increase in the case of Taiwan, religious agents are more confident in shaping the future of Hong Kong due to their colonial heritage, while on the mainland social and educational engagement is not formally affiliated with religious players. This amalgam leads to oscillations and notions of ambiguity across Greater China with Life Education proving to be a lens through which we can trace the transformation and reformulation of the religious field in contemporary East Asian societies.

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19. On the concept of Engaged Buddhism and its practice, see Esther-Maria Guggenmos, "Engaged Buddhism in Taiwan? On the Profile of Contemporary Buddhism in Taiwan", in Anita Sharma (ed.), *Buddhism in East Asia: Aspects of History's First Universal Religion Presented in Modern Context*, Delhi 2012, 226–251. A more recent overview with a focus on American movements is also available in Ann Gleig, "Engaged Buddhism", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, 28 June 2021, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.755.

20. We approached the relation between religion and education in a first, small symposium in 2023. See Esther-Maria Guggenmos, "Report: Symposium 'Shaping the Outlook on Life – Education and Religion in Chinese Contexts'", *Religions and Christianity in Today's China* 13 (2023), 23–26.

"Das Geräusch, das meine Sinne machen" – Consumerism and the History of Emotions

The second topic I would like to present in this context concerns the history of emotions. Globally, the transformation of the religious field during the twentieth century has seen a general shift. After religious life expressed itself through the options of nation-state models, we see that the global markets offer new opportunities from around the 1980s onwards. Religion is no longer shaped institutionally through the state. Consumption-driven capitalism and neoliberalism lead to the emergence of new forms of a rising "spirituality". François Gauthier recently embarked on the endeavour to describe this transformation and sees in it an "axial shift" reminding us of fundamental changes once elaborated by Karl Jaspers.[21] Within this spectrum of social change where "consumerism and neoliberalism are the background against which to think religious change",[22] the private self becomes, with Eva Illouz, "publicly performed and harnessed to the discourses and values of the economic and political spheres".[23] Global capitalism in the religious field manifests itself as a distinct emotional culture.

I first came across these changes in the history of emotions when I traced a Chinese Buddhist divinatory ritual across dynasties. Written in China in the late sixth century, the *Sūtra on the Divination of the Effect of Good and Evil Actions* (*Zhancha shan'e yebao jing* 占察善惡業報經, T. 839) delivers an instruction to ritually throw dice in order to determine one's karmic debt with the intent to find out about the degree of repentance needed to attain liberation. Inspired by Indian sources but moulding the procedure into a Chinese mindset, the apocryphal scripture was designed as an individual practice – which makes it hard to trace it historically. It has been practised, forbidden, and later been reintegrated into the Buddhist canon. For about a decade, I worked on and off on different aspects of this ritual, the text and its cultural history. Doing so, I became aware that this ritual and the development of its practice reflect major changes in the history of emotions. The ritual's characteristic is that it statistically produces incoherent throws that are interpreted as consequences of an impure mind in need of purification. During its practice, one must overcome the repulsion that inevitably unfolds when obtaining answers through the throw of dice that do not match the question one has in mind. By sticking to the ritual, a mindset is fostered that helps advance further in Buddhist practice.

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21. See François Gauthier, *Religion, Modernity, Globalisation: Nation-State to Market*, Abingdon 2021, 288. The term "Achsenzeit" was coined by Karl Jaspers in 1950 in his *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*.

22. Gauthier, Religion, *Modernity, Globalisation*, 287.

23. Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, Cambridge 2007, 4.

The text starts by settling itself in the age of the *semblance dharma*, an apocalyptic time when the world enters its final stage. This time is emotionally challenging, a time of suffering that easily leads to the rise of negative emotions, namely covetousness, anger, jealousy, and arrogance (*tan* 貪, *chen* 瞋, *jidu* 嫉妬, *woman* 我慢). People seek their personal advantage, worry about daily needs, and are described as fearful and weak (*qieruo* 怯弱) about the course of the world. According to the text, these negative emotions result in being caught in regret and a *web of doubts* (*yiwang* 疑網), both of which hinder spiritual progress and cause the disappearance of the Buddhist teaching in the world. In this situation, the sūtra suggests that through ritual practice the unstable emotions be countered by establishing new mental attitudes of sincerity and respect (*zhixin jingli* 至心敬禮).

The process of gradually gaining conscious control over emotions is accompanied by a framing that crosses sensual spheres. Acoustically, it shall be quiet. Visually, it shall be beautifully decorated. On an olfactory level, one shall "seek to collect fragrance and flowers." One shall purify one's own body by bathing and actively build up a new acoustic realm through chanting. In that way, "single-minded, respectful worship" (*yixin jingli* 一心敬禮) is about to start.

In the first half of the seventeenth century, the late Ming dynasty, we know about a scholar-monk, Ouyi Zhixu 藕益智旭 (1599–1655), considered one of the four eminent monks of his time as well as the ninth patriarch of the Pure Land school. Characteristic of his writings is the way he creatively embraces different Buddhist and other Chinese traditions when engaging with schools – ranging from Pure Land, over Tiantai, to Chan traditions – and commenting on Confucian or Daoist classics while refuting Jesuit writings.

Ouyi Zhixu's disciples kept records in which he is described as performing the above-described divinatory dice ritual. As a monk, he is committed to its practice, throws its dice, takes the results seriously, answers through desperation and tears, and draws practical consequences: After casting the lot of a Śrāmaṇera, a novice monk, he returns his monastic precepts at the age of 34. He would not be mature enough to hold his monastic obligations as he failed in following them in the past, is his interpretation of the throw of dice. Consistently, he returns the precepts until he receives the result of purity of body, speech, and mind – this is twelve years later, in 1645. Meanwhile, he keeps up his practice of the *Zhancha*. Emotional struggles and practical consequences that he subscribes to for years – this ritual is shaping Ouyi Zhixu's outlook on life and that entails a deep emotional involvement in its practice.

Especially in the *Lingfeng zonglun* 靈峰宗論, which compiles various personal writings of Ouyi Zhixu, the significance of dealing with and overcoming emotions by throwing dice becomes obvious. The ritual is intended to encourage sincerity (*cheng* 誠, *zhixin*) and self-recognition including shame (*cankui* 慚愧) about one's past and present actions. Ouyi experiences the practice of this ritual as something that helps him gain stability in his faith and overcome doubts and worries. He describes his decision to give up his precepts in a letter to a group of monks:

> At Xihu, I performed the ritual four times [for] seven [days each], but did not receive the mark of purity. Last year, I performed the ritual two times [for] seven [days each], but did not receive it. This year, I entered the mountains, performed the ritual once [for] seven [days], and even one day I did not receive it [i.e. the mark of purity]. While performing repentance, afflictions and habitual energies appeared, and I felt abnormal. Therefore, I decided to settle my mind. I completely abandoned the pure precepts of a novice monk and became a disciple only who has taken the three refuges.[24]

If we look at contemporary practices, such an intensive dedication of a single person is rarely a socially shared experience. Monastics at Pushou Temple of Wutai Mountain where the dice ritual was included in the regular curriculum neither report on similar intensive practices nor do they talk about any practitioners that can report anything comparable to Ouyi Zhixu. In contrast, a new social form of organization seems to prevail: the dice ritual is practised individually but learned and discussed in groups. In addition, the emotionally challenging element of constant rejection by non-matching results leads to ritual redesign and reinterpretation.

In contemporary Taiwan, urban dwellers gather under the guidance of a diviner who offers this method among others. Familiar with and flexible in handling numbers and interpreting divination results, he cherishes this ritual as a way of communication with the Bodhisattva addressed and sees himself as helping this communication by unfolding the interpretation of results. For him, one thing is certain: The annoyance of the ritual stems from a problematic translation of the assumed Indian original.

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24. Original: 乃西湖禮四七。不得清淨輪相。去年禮二七不得。今入山禮一七。又一日仍不得。禮懺時煩惱習氣現起。更覺異常。故發決定心。盡捨菩薩沙彌所有淨戒。作一但三歸弟子。In: *Lingfeng zonglun* 靈峰宗論, T.17:10974–10975. The translation partly follows Beverley McGuire, "Seeing Suchness: Emotional and Material Means of Perceiving Reality in Chinese Buddhist Divination Rituals", in Barbara Schuler (ed.), *Historicizing Emotions: Practices and Objects in India, China, and Japan*, Leiden 2018, 265, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004352964_010.

"A bodhisattva, the personified expression of compassion, would never have tortured you like this", he is sure. Consistently, he changes the interpretation into more open formats, including past lives and the unexpected. He assembles a group that undergoes training sessions and enjoys dicing. The ritual is playfully practised, and the exchange among group members is socially entertaining. One-to-one consultations are possible. Far from the emotional journey that Ouyi describes in his writings, the followers of this group engage in a relaxed and vivid exchange, train the interpretation of results, and rather abstain from becoming too emotionally involved. Should I sign this lease? Should I open that business? And if it gets more serious maybe: Is my private relationship the right one for me? The group practice has emotional in-depth moments, but these normally do not last long. The attractivity of the practice connects to the refreshing experience of jointly exploring new patterns of thought and action.

Above, I started with the hypothesis that global capitalism in the religious field shapes a distinct emotional culture. What we witness here through the repeated reinvention of a dicing ritual might reflect this general shift, I dare say.

The practice of the dice oracle illustrates how emotions surface ritually in the form of consumable units, of a saleable size, able to be exposed and discussed in the public. The pressure of decision-making becomes negotiable in the procedure, contradictory emotions processable, and moral responsibilities alleviated and integrated into karmic argumentations. In these discourses, the boundaries of the private erode and the emotions shared unfold in the context of a capitalist setting. "The sound of the senses", as Rilke called it, changes, and the longing for "silence" can turn into a threat to the one addicted to the playful immersion in the rolling of dice. The participants in this ritual become used to emotions as evoked on purpose, as played with. The consumer is engaged in various, not necessarily coherent affective acts – and one recognizes that the social media addict might delight in this activity hanging out in a fragmented world of interactions driven by what Eva Illouz calls "emodities" – marketable, well-proportioned units of emotions.

The shift from "emotion" to "emodity" in the context of consumer capitalism is a change that I consider of significant impact on religious life and the attractivity of established religious rituals. This is by no means restricted to East Asia but affects religious life on a global scale. I would love to explore this topic jointly in a comparative perspective. François Gauthier expands his research to Indonesia, a Muslim-majority country of the so-called Global South, for testing new models in the sociology of religion. But how would his ideas sound in the Chinese-speaking world? In her essay on

"Cold Intimacies", Eva Illouz mainly remains within the American context of a therapeutic culture that evolved from the impact of C.G. Jung (1875–1961). Could a Taiwanese diviner serve a similar function as Oprah Winfrey, whom Eva Illouz reflects upon? What is the impact of consumer capitalism upon religious life in Greater China and under mainland conditions, how can it be understood in democratic and merchandizing-oriented Taiwan? The major shift in the history of emotions that comes along with forms of consumer cultures will to a large extent shape the global future. Through my research on the aesthetics of religion – the sensory dimensions of religion – and the history of emotions, I therefore intend to enrich through a global perspective our current reflections in the sociology of religion. Ritual contexts such as the one above that can be traced in the *longue durée* are promising candidates for such an endeavour. At the same time, this kind of research needs what one might call a "Resonanzboden" (Hartmut Rosa) – the inspiring intellectual life here in Lund is a great prerequisite for this.

"Wachen" – An Existential Awareness

Reflecting on the necessity and the possibility of an agenda for the coming years has been a pleasure. Not being forgetful about the current politics of religion including the realities of fellow humans while trying to fathom religious life under the conditions and maybe auspices of Chinese intellectual and social history, is a task that hopefully will lead to a slightly better understanding and a more equal representation of world cultures in the international discourse. At the same time, this is meaningless without the exchange across borders as we explore new vocabulary in the study of religions and more comprehensive approaches to religious life that I connect to the study of the aesthetics of religion.

In that sense, I would hope that together with Rilke we are able to nourish our longing for silence, do not retreat to the soothing comfort of the capitalist production of unwanted knowledge, but have the courage to tackle the topics that knock on our doors. Doing religious studies, one enters in my experience a precious forum of thought and might undergo an analytical turn in thinking. I look forward to genuine conversations and joint endeavours. And I look forward to exchanges with students, who are often even closer to this sense of what drives us all, the fragrance of life. May the study of the history of religions be something that broadens horizons and leads into the plains of intellectual wit. ▲

SUMMARY

This article is a revised version of the inaugural lecture delivered on 5 October2023, on the occasion of the author's appointment as Professor of History of Religions at Lund University. It opens by depicting fundamental changes in the study of the history of religions in the twentieth century, followed by biographical notes, including her research on lay Buddhism in urban Taiwan, the emphasis on sensual dimensions of religious practice and the aesthetics of religion, and international academic networking in the analysis of practices of prognostication between Asia and Europe. Three areas are outlined that are central to the author's current research. It is pointed out that a focus on religion in contemporary society certainly includes a healthy awareness of current developments in the politics of religion, particularly in East Asia. In addition, the article addresses two fields of research that the author is currently engaged in: (1) The emergence of "Life Education" as a school subject in Greater China and the pedagogical shift that goes along with it. Particularly in Taiwan, this new subject is tailored to create a space for juveniles to develop self-reflection and life orientation in a success-oriented society while a new trust in religious organizations leads to the organizations' active engagement in these developments. The author is especially interested in how the transforming relationship between religion and public education gains special relevance in a comparative perspective between Asia and Europe. (2) Religious change in East Asia is evident in Buddhist ritual practices that are impacted by a consumer society that moulds emotionally profound experiences into marketable and distinct units that Eva Illouz has termed "emodities". Religious practices are subject to change in our contemporary world as they are reshaped by a growing global digitalized consumer culture. Tracing these changes leads to a deeper understanding of the underlying forces that distinctly reshape contemporary religious life.

"Neither of the East nor of the West"

Crossing and Dwelling in Islamic Studies

OLIVER SCHARBRODT

Oliver Scharbrodt is Professor of Islamic Studies at Lund University.

oliver.scharbrodt@ctr.lu.se

The Sound of Theological Silence

In the early 1990s, Catholics and Protestants in my hometown began to organize more systematic interfaith meetings. Although being a fairly small town, it had a large migrant population given the presence of a major pharmaceutical and chemical company. In the German context, this means a migrant population primarily originating from Turkey. These early interfaith meetings involved the local Turkish Sunni Muslim mosque and also included representatives of the Alevi community. Alevis are part of a religious community from Eastern Anatolia and primarily of a Kurdish background. Alevism is often described as syncretistic and as combining elements of Shia Islam, Sufism – Islam's mystical tradition – and pre-Islamic shamanistic practices. Alevism is named after Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, who plays a central role in Alevi religious devotion.[1]

In one of the first interfaith meetings, one representative of the local Alevi community was supposed to introduce the beliefs of his religion. However, he clearly struggled to do so and admitted that he did not really know what their actual beliefs were or from where to obtain information about them. He was visibly embarrassed about this. For him, his Alevi identity did not

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1. Markus Dressler, *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam*, New York 2015, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199969401.001.0001.

revolve around theology, doctrines, and beliefs, but around something else. The central ritual for Alevis is called *cem*, which is a kind of ritual dance that forges a sense of community and a connection with the transcendental. The *cem* ritual is accompanied by music and also used to solve conflicts within the community. Community creation as an embodied ritual experience is therefore central to Alevism.[2] For the local Alevi from my hometown tasked with introducing the beliefs of his religion, his Alevi identity revolved around and was articulated in this ritual, which was more important than his religion's theology.

The encounter of Protestant and Catholic Christians with Alevis in my hometown illustrates the clash between a religious paradigm that prioritizes theology with another religious paradigm in which theological considerations were not that central and did not constitute the foundation of Alevi religious identity. Alevis certainly have beliefs, but do not necessarily reflect about these in the manner of Christian theology. This anecdote also illustrates the limitations of what Jan Hjärpe calls the "Schleiermacher model" in theology.[3] Named after the German Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), the model articulates a conception of religion as interior spiritual experience that has been fundamental to both post-Enlightenment Christian theology and the non-confessional study of religion. For Hjärpe, the Schleiermacher model also entails a particular approach to theological training. It starts with teaching Christian doctrines (systematic theology) and their practical application (practical theology), includes learning the original languages of the normative texts of Christianity and their interpretation (exegesis), and finally contains instructing in church history. Hjärpe is critical of how this model is applied to other religions when teaching and researching them. In the case of Islam, standard textbooks would usually start with the Prophet Muhammad as the founding figure, present the foundational authoritative textual sources and their interpretations, introduce the formation of different schools of thought and sects, and conclude with questions of ethics and rituals. The main problem of this approach lies for Hjärpe in the assumption that theological considerations central to Christianity are equally relevant to other religions. The example of Alevism shows that this is not necessarily the case.[4]

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2. Hege Irene Markussen, *Teaching History, Learning Piety: An Alevi Foundation in Contemporary Turkey*, Lund 2012, 47–67.

3. Jan Hjärpe, "Essentialism or an Anthropological Approach: The Role and Function of the Scientific Study of Religion in a Historical Perspective", *Numen* 62 (2015), 307–311, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685276-12341367.

4. Hjärpe, "Essentialism or an Anthropological Approach", 309–310.

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This article takes its cue from a contemporary anthropologist of religion: Thomas A. Tweed.[5] Based on his ethnographic research among Cuban Catholics in exile in Miami,[6] Tweed develops his own theory of religion. With much intellectual self-irony, he admits the far-reaching ambition of this task and that there are objections against such an endeavour because so many attempts have been made before. He defends the value in both seeking to define religion and keeping this concept itself, despite being a term of Western origin that can only be applied to other cultures and societies with enormous difficulties. I shall not discuss his own definition of religion,[7] as I find the wider issues he addresses in his book around the concept more relevant. What he seeks to do is to define religion not as an abstract concept with rigid boundaries but as something dynamic, associated with transformation and moving across boundaries, with mapping, building, and inhabiting the world. For him, religion is something connected to *crossing* and *dwelling*. Religions are not "parallel tracks" but "a flowing together of currents".[8] Religions are part of the creation of physical and social spaces, of homes or homelands, and create dwellings in providing spatial and temporal orientation. Equally, "religions are flows, translocative and transtemporal crossings",[9] connecting people with other times and other places, literally and symbolically.

Tweed's intervention reminds us to critically engage with the term and how it is used and understood. Religion and its modern reception as a concept is based on the secular/religious divide and on the exclusion of certain epistemes and paradigms. Rather than coming up with a new definition myself, I suggest adopting a critical and self-reflective stance to the theoretical assumptions and their cultural provenience that shape the academic study of religion in general and of Islam in particular. What could be some of the consequences of applying Tweed's dynamic, fluid, and confluent understanding of religion that recognizes intellectual and cultural positionality when studying Islam as both a historical and human phenomenon? How can this be done in the context of Islamic Studies? I will make an attempt by examining three themes that have shaped my own research interests in the intellectual history of Islam, Islam as translocal phenomenon, and the material culture of Islam: ambiguity, multi-locality, and aesthetics.

5. Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*, Cambridge, MA 2006.

6. Thomas A. Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami*, New York 1997, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195105292.001.0001.

7. "*Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries.*" Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 54. Italics in original.

8. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 60.

9. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 158.

A Culture of Ambiguity – Thinking Islam

Two recent contributions suggest an intellectual climate of ambiguity as central to understanding Islamic intellectual history. Thomas Bauer's book *A Culture of Ambiguity* is the first intervention making this point,[10] followed by another contribution within English-speaking academia, namely the posthumously published book *What is Islam?* by Shahab Ahmed (1966–2015).[11] The approach and propositions of both books are quite similar, though their authors' agendas differ as do some of their conclusions. Bauer's main premise is that pre-modern Muslim societies and their intellectual life exhibited a strong tolerance towards ambiguity and accepted conflicting claims to truth. This cultural ambiguity became manifest in language, literature, and other textual or verbal discourses, but also in acts of daily-life and of religious worship.

Bauer discusses different areas of Islamic intellectual and cultural life where this tolerance towards ambiguity was evident. A plurality of Islamic discourses was accepted and efforts were made to reconcile conflicting worldviews without vindicating one at the expenses of the other. Islamic jurisprudence traditionally accommodated different legal principles and sources of law and considered a variety of legal interpretations as equally valid. Islamic discourses on politics were not just based on conceptualizations in theology and jurisprudence. Political discourses were more informed by panegyric poetry and treatises on successful statecraft, so-called "mirrors for princes". These two latter genres of political discourse incorporated pre-Islamic literary and political traditions and co-existed with theological and jurisprudential reflections on politics in Islam without always agreeing with them. Pre-modern Islamic exegesis conceived the Quran as deliberately revealed by God as an ambiguous text. Hence, exegetical praxis was always an exercise in probability and never arrived at complete certainty. Finally, the tolerant and inclusive ethos of Muslim societies was evident in their material culture: architecture, art, and aesthetic conventions more generally incorporated with pride the heritage of non-Muslim cultures.[12]

The aim of Bauer's book is to open the eyes of historians of Islam to the significant tolerance towards ambiguity as a particular cultural achievement of pre-modern Islamic intellectual life. This tolerance marks the capaciousness of Islamic thought and allowed the co-existence of conflicting views: one could live with contradictions, inconsistencies, and ambiguities. In addition, the cultural and intellectual sources of Islamic thought and

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10. Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams*, Berlin 2011; Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, New York 2021.

11. Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, Princeton, NJ 2016.

12. Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität*, 41–53.

Muslim societies were not solely the Quran and the example of the Prophet Muhammad but also non-Islamic sources in philosophy, ethics, politics, and literature that preceded Islam. Equally, Bauer points out that the genres of Islamic discourses were not just theology and jurisprudence but Islam was also discussed, represented, and theorized in philosophy, poetry, literature, and material culture. Religious and non-religious elements were thereby blended in Muslim societies, made possible by their tolerance towards ambiguity. Bauer seeks to avoid the Islamization of Islam ("Islamisierung des Islams"); an approach that reduces the Muslim world to acts and discourses of piety and that marginalizes non-Islamic elements as deviations.[13]

Ahmed's book makes a similar intervention. He approaches Islam as "*a human and historical phenomenon of exploration,* [...] *of ambiguity and ambivalence,* [...] *of relativism, and* [...] *of internal contradiction*".[14] Rather than compartmentalizing different discourses as mystical, philosophical, juristic, and theological, and thereby as contradictory and mutually exclusive to one another, Islam is expressed in its discursive diversity. What appears contradictory, inconsistent, or ambiguous is implicated in a discursive process that seeks to define what it means to be Islamic. Ahmed conceives Islam as "*hermeneutical engagement*",[15] in which theologians, jurists, mystics, philosophers, and poets are equally involved. Despite the different epistemes they are working with and their intellectual competition, these different knowledge traditions were not mutually exclusive. Muslim scholars combined them, employing the particular intellectual assumptions of each tradition and conventions of the literary genre and engaging in seemingly contradictory discourses. As a jurist they would clearly state that the consumption of alcohol is prohibited, while in their poetry they praise the intoxication that the consumption of wine produces.

Islamic intellectual traditions have developed different strategies to make contradictions coherent and meaningful. For Ahmed, Muslims developed an epistemological hierarchy that distinguishes between different registers of truth. There are higher and lower levels of truth; the latter are for the common people while access to and understanding of the former requires sufficient philosophical sophistication, esoteric initiation, or theological erudition. Intellectual elitism allowed for the co-existence of different truth regimes. Related to this hierarchization of truth, private and public modes of meaning-making were established. Different discursive, social, and physical spaces existed to allow Muslim actors to pursue their various

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13. Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität*, 192–223.
14. Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 303. Italics in original.
15. Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 345. Italics in original.

hermeneutical engagements with Islam. This spatio-social segregation of discourses provided space for their co-existence.[16]

Both Bauer and Ahmed seek to alert readers to the capaciousness of pre-modern Islamic thought and culture. The differences in their conclusions are perhaps best illustrated by the question whether a wine goblet can be called Islamic. For Bauer, the answer is clear: talking about an Islamic wine goblet makes as much sense as talking about Christian adultery.[17] Ahmed disagrees. A wine goblet can be called Islamic not only because Muslims have always drunk wine since the beginning of Islam. He refers to the prevalence and long history of wine drinking in Muslim societies as a collective act expressed in poetry, literature, and material culture, which makes it Islamic.[18] Bauer still follows a distinction between religion and the secular.[19] For him, referring to a wine goblet as a piece of Islamic metalwork in a museum is an example of Islamizing secular aspects of the social life in Islamic history. Ahmed, however, rejects this religious/secular dichotomy as potentially reducing what is Islamic to a set of restrictive normative practices. However, Ahmed's suggestion is not unproblematic either. To approach "*whatever* Muslims say or do as a potential site or locus for expression and articulation of *being Muslim*" reduces Muslim actors to their Muslimness and ignores the intersectionality and different layers of their identities.[20] Muslims are not only and not always Muslims and do not engage in meaning-making by solely referring to Islam.

Both are interested in moving scholarly engagement with the pre-modern intellectual world of Islam outside of the Schleiermacher model, which focuses on theology and law (the Islamic equivalents to systematic and practical theology), and considers philosophy, mystical, and esoteric traditions and material culture as standing outside of Islam because of their alleged non-Islamic origins or for being somehow heterodox. What can their approaches and suggestions, primarily informed by the pre-modern Muslim world, tell us about studying the intellectual history of modern Islam?

The Egypt-born Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) was a pivotal figure in the intellectual reform of Islam in the nineteenth century and has been influential on a diverse range of intellectual and ideological movements in modern Islam. Both liberal Muslim thinkers and Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood would consider him as one of their intellectual

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16. Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 367–386.

17. Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität*, 194. See also Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 409–410.

18. Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 57–71.

19. For Ahmed's critique of this binary see Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 197–211.

20. Quote from Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 538. Italics in original.

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precursors.[21] Not only his reception history is quite diverse. Abduh has been portrayed by posterity as a beacon of Islamic orthodoxy who defended Islam against its modern detractors and proved its conformity with modern science.[22] He has also been described as a lax Muslim, a freethinker, and agnostic.[23] Various labels have been attached to him in order to make sense of him as an intellectual figure. Abduh has been pigeonholed as either a defender of orthodoxy or an opportunistic exploiter of religion because of his contradictory religious and intellectual inclinations. Yet, these efforts to attach a clear label to him do not sufficiently recognize how he was steeped in Islam's culture of ambiguity that operated with different registers of truth.

Abduh's student Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865–1935) is otherwise sceptical of Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam. Yet, he attributes Abduh's ability to master the culture of ambiguity to his background in Sufism. Writing about his teacher's involvement in mystical Islam, Rida admits that

> he considered it necessary to conceal everything he has obtained from the fruits of Sufism. He adapted to the qualities and conditions of the people he associated with. It was like this: among philosophers, he was a philosopher; among jurisprudents, he was a jurisprudent; among literati, he was a litterateur; among historians, he was a historian; among officials and judges, he was the most capable official and the most just judge. He talked with each group and each individual according to how he viewed their capacity, while holding onto truthfulness and independent mindedness.[24]

Abduh's complex literary *oeuvre* equally illustrates how he mastered the intellectual parameters and linguistic conventions of different scholarly genres, how he operated within different registers of truth, and knew how to address different audiences in line with their abilities and expectations. He wrote mystical treatises for fellow mystics, provided a philosophical commentary on Islamic theology to rehabilitate philosophy in the eyes of theologians, was active as a political journalist throughout his life, issued legal injunctions as grand mufti of Egypt at the end of his life that conform to mainstream Islamic jurisprudence, produced catechisms that confirm Sunni

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21. Oliver Scharbrodt, *Muhammad 'Abduh: Modern Islam and the Culture of Ambiguity*, London 2022, 1–8.

22. Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Ta'rikh al-Ustadh al-Imam al-Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh*, vol. 1, Cairo 1931, 974.

23. Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and 'Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam*, London 1966, 14.

24. Rida, *Ta'rikh*, 126. My translation.

notions of orthodoxy for young Muslim students, and gave public lectures on the Quran to encourage lay Muslims to study it.

Multi-Locality – Islam in Motion

Crossing boundaries is a key element in Tweed's approach towards religions, which understands them as translocative and transtemporal. Tweed develops his theory based on his frustration with existing approaches to religions, which he does not consider helpful in investigating transnational religious communities. In his case, he wanted to understand the complex spatial emplacements of a Cuban Catholic community in exile in Miami. Space has been a key category in the study of religion since its emergence as a field of study. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) emphasized the spatial separation between sacred and profane as key in defining religion. Sacrality is thereby imposed on certain spaces or certain matters as part of a social imaginary.[25] Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) built on the differentiation between sacred and profane and presented it as central to what is considered a religious experience: the sacred breaks into the continuity of profane space and time and makes it meaningful. Eliade calls the manifestation of the sacred hierophanies, which become archetypical events commemorated in religious holidays or rituals or sacred spaces demarcated from profane space.[26]

We can observe a wider spatial turn in Cultural Studies, influenced by developments in Marxist and postmodern human geography by figures like Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991), Doreen Massey (1944–2016), and Yi-Fu Tuan (1930–2022). Tuan distinguishes between place and space – a distinction which resonates with Eliade's notion of the ordering power of the religious spatial imagination. For Tuan, space is open and unordered, but also threatening and vulnerable. Space becomes place when it is ordered and made meaningful.[27] Massey counters the perception of space as just being an objective reality or an empty vessel and argues that space in its social imagination and physical reality acquires certain properties.[28] Equally, Lefebvre is interested in the production of space in its physical dimension, but also as spaces of social interactions and relations: how spaces are created, imagined, and discursively constructed.[29]

25. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, New York 2001, 36–46.

26. Mircea Eliade, *Die Religionen und das Heilige: Elemente der Religionsgeschichte*, Frankfurt 1997, 21–38.

27. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Minneapolis, MN 1977, 6–18, 85–100.

28. Doreen Massey, *For Space*, London 2005.

29. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford 1991, 26–67.

In the study of religion, Kim Knott has picked up these threads and applied them specifically to the investigation of the emplacement of religions. For Knott, space, following Lefebvre here, possesses physical, social, and discursive dimensions. It consists of buildings and streets that change and transform, are demolished and rebuilt. Not only the physicality of space is dynamic but also discourses and spatial imaginations that are created around it. Finally, spaces are marked by the flow of people that changes the demographic composition of places. Religions possess all three elements. The physical emplacement of religions occurs in buildings, sites, and places used by religious communities. The social dimension of religious spaces is evident in the communities and networks created around them, who convene and interact in a particular locality but also take the communities beyond their specific locality. Finally, religious communities are engaged in discursive constructions of spaces assigning meanings to places and marking them as special and significant. Place is thereby neither conceived as mere local context or "passive container"[30] that hosts particular religious communities nor regarded as static locality demarcated by fixed boundaries of a nation or community. To overcome the impression of a static and localized approach to the study of religious communities in a particular place, Knott prefers an understanding of space that is dynamic and multi-dimensional.[31]

I would like to illustrate how space configurates people, ideas, and networks physically, socially, and discursively by using an example from my fieldwork among Twelver Shii Muslim communities in London.[32] The foundational event for Twelver Shiism is commemorated every year in a period called Ashura. During the first ten days of the Islamic month of Muharram, Shiis remember the murder of the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad – Husayn – who rose against the ruling Muslim dynasty and was killed together with his supporters in Karbala, southern Iraq, in 680 CE. For Shiis, his death marks the ultimate martyrdom not just in Islamic but in human history: a righteous man stood up against tyranny and oppression and paid the ultimate price.

Shiis perform a number of rituals during this period which is the peak of the Shii calendar: memorial lectures re-narrating the events of Karbala, recitations of eulogies of Husayn and his family and supporters, and

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30. Kim Knott, *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis*, London 2015, 7, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315652641.

31. Knott, *The Location of Religion*, 127–130.

32. Oliver Scharbrodt, "Creating a Diasporic Public Sphere in Britain: Twelver Shia Networks in London", *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 31 (2020), 23–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2019.1643098.

different types of self-flagellation such as rhythmic chest beating or using chains, razors or swords. All these ritual activities are meant to articulate their grief or to partake in the suffering of Husayn. The events of Karbala are re-enacted in passion plays or in artwork such as statues and paintings that narrate or depict the tragedy of Karbala. One ritual is public mourning processions on the day of Ashura when Husayn was killed and forty days later (Arba'in). These processions are important articulations of communal assertion in the public and have played such a role throughout Shii history. During the procession, events are re-enacted, eulogies recited, and people self-flagellate. How is such a procession transposed to London? For several decades now, Shiis have held processions in London on the days of Ashura and Arba'in. These processions have been held not on the outskirts of London with a significant Muslim population but in the very heart of the city around Marble Arch and Hyde Park.

The poster in Figure 1 announcing the Arba'in procession of 2013 juxtaposes and configurates different physical spaces. One can see the main site of the procession of London, Marble Arch, which is an important landmark of the city. In the background, we see the dome of the shrine of Husayn in Karbala, where he is buried. The poster connects these spaces symbolically: while many Shiis would perform a pilgrimage to the shrine of Husayn in Karbala, the procession becomes a symbolic re-enactment of the pilgrimage connecting the Shii diaspora in London with the shrine. Equally, the procession itself brings different ethnic communities together and combines their ritual practices: Iraqi and Iranian self-flagellate or wave the national flags of their countries and South Asian Shiis carry replica coffins of the martyrs of Karbala or include a horse in the procession that represents the horse Husayn rode.

Comparing the signage of banners in the processions of 2013 and 2014 (Figures 2 and 3), significant changes in how political issues of a transnational nature are addressed and communicated to the wider non-Muslim public in London also become evident. The procession in 2013 included general statements around freedom from oppression and justice as being core values that Husayn sought to establish in his revolt and for which he was killed. The slogans on banners at the 2014 procession responded directly to the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and are used to denounce terrorism in the name of Islam more generally. Hence, we can observe not only the simultaneity of different spaces (the shrine of Husayn with the procession in London) and different times (the killing of Husayn in 680 CE and its contemporary public commemoration). Different layers of meaning for diverse audiences are also created: traditional diasporic elements in terms of the
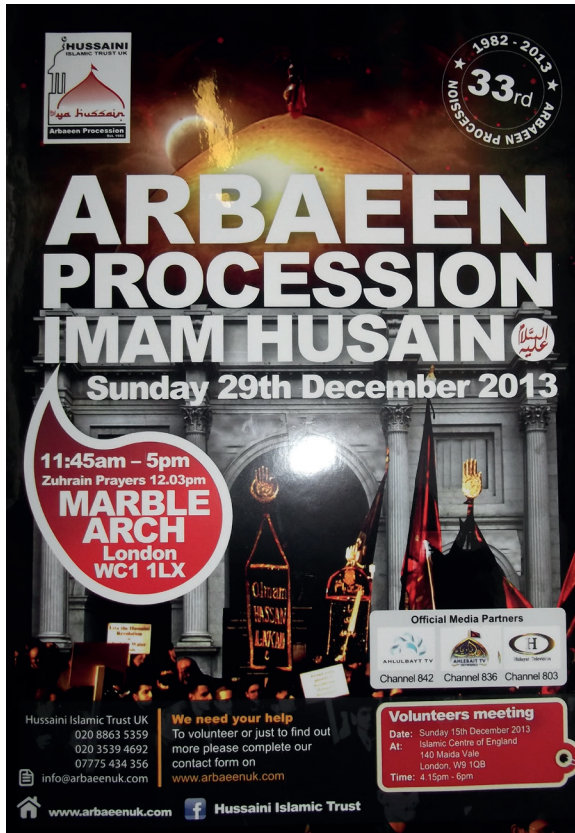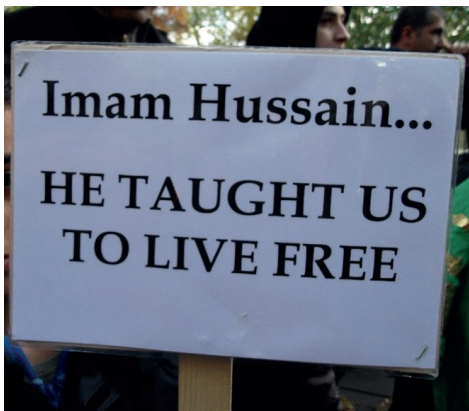
Figure 1. Arba'in poster of 2013.

Figures 2 and 3. Slogans at Arba'in processions in 2013 and 2014.

rituals performed or objects carried around during the procession replicate similar processions in Iran, Iraq, or Pakistan. At the same time, Shiis use the procession as a public demonstration to present themselves as victims of radical and militant forms of Sunni Islam that have been made responsible for the rise of global terrorism since 9/11.

Aesthetics – Sensing Islam

Religious rituals such as public mourning processions are also embodied and sensory experiences. This takes me to the final part of the article. At a conference on aesthetics and religion, a colleague mentioned research on Islam to one of the keynote speakers. The speaker responded with surprise at the suggestion that someone could work on aesthetics in Islam: "of course, in Islam, there is no real aesthetics. There is no imagery, no figurative representation [...] just a little bit of calligraphy." This common and quite popular perception outside and within academia that Islam does not have an aesthetic tradition reminds us of the trappings of the Schleiermacher model: essentializing religion and taking one particular articulation as normative or reducing Islam to particular normative articulations, as Bauer and Ahmed have pointed out as well. On the contrary, there is a rich artistic and aesthetic tradition in Islam.[33]

However, I would like to take the notion of aesthetics further by undertaking a kind of rewind from Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) to Aristotle (384–322 BCE) and follow here Birgit Meyer's scholarship. The Kantian understanding of aesthetics has been most significant in modern philosophy and defines it as a reflection on beauty and art, the individual encounter with the sublime, and the awe it creates. The definition mirrors Schleiermacher's understanding of religious experience as equally subjective and beyond rationalization. Aristotle, on the other hand, provides us with a more generic understanding of aesthetics as embodied, sensory experiences of the world. Aesthetics comes from *aesthesis*, which means perception and sensation, as the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762) also emphasized in his influential reappraisal of aesthetic philosophy.[34] Meyer's work is particularly significant, applying an understanding of aesthetics as embodied, sensory experience to the study of religion and understanding religions as "aesthetic formations".[35] In this sense, aesthetics is understood

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33. Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction*, Edinburgh 2004.

34. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, Hildesheim 1970.

35. Birgit Meyer, "From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Styles of Binding", in Birgit Meyer (ed.), *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, New York 2009, 6–11, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230623248_1.

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as the ability of the body to experience objects through its senses and have bodily sensations through their particular constellation. The embodied sensory experience of the world shapes how humans acquire and construe knowledge of it. Such an aesthetic experience of the world is thereby not just individual and subjective but intersubjective as shared experiences and thereby plays a crucial role in the formation of socialities. Meyer prefers the term "aesthetic formation" to underline the dynamic and processual nature of socialities that the term "community" does not sufficiently encapsulate, since it suggests a certain static and homogenous constitution. Aesthetic formations form subjects and their identities and also socialities based on shared and collective identities. Given that rituals, material culture, and cultural production are key components in the aesthetic formations of religions, Meyer suggests a performative understanding of community formation. Religious socialities as aesthetic formations are performative articulations of embodied experiences. Social formations – such as specific religious communities – are thereby created by a shared aesthetic style that distinguishes different religious communities from one another.

Meyer already points at the political dimension of aesthetic formations in the manner in which shared aesthetic styles create collective religious identities while equally demarcating them from others. Her vantage point is equally shaped by her research interests in global forms of Protestant Christianity and the limitations of research approaches to contemporary forms of Protestantism, such as Pentecostalism. Such research activities are implicitly shaped by Protestant theological assumptions, which favour intellect over experience and the spiritual over the material and thereby focus on theology, ethics, and inner experience.[36] Meyer seeks to counter this overemphasis on the intellectual and spiritual side of religion by highlighting the material side of religious formations that is manifest in their aesthetic side: images, symbols, rituals, and similar elements that are more significant when understanding contemporary forms of Christianity. Her interest lies in the notion of mediation – how religions as aesthetic formations bridge the divide between human and divine.[37] Equally, she seeks to delineate the dynamics of the global marketplace of Pentecostal and other Evangelical forms of Protestant Christianity, who compete over adherents and therefore engage in an "aesthetics of persuasion".[38]

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36. Birgit Meyer, "Aesthetics of Persuasion: Global Christianity and Pentecostalism's Sensational Forms", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109 (2010), 743–750, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2010-015.

37. Meyer, "From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations", 13.

38. Meyer, "Aesthetics of Persuasion", 754–758.

Meyer's contribution is extremely helpful in bringing aesthetics into discussions on the formation and articulation of individual and collective religious identities. However, her work is still shaped by concerns of Protestant theology: how religions as aesthetic formations use sensual forms to overcome the chasm between God and humanity. Other roles for aesthetic formations have been explored in the context of Judaism, for example. The role of rituals in forging collective memory has been identified by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1932–2009).[39] The Jewish calendar with its ritualized remembering of key mythico-historical events of Judaism and their roots in Biblical narratives illustrate how aesthetics cannot only be an embodied sensory formation to mediate between the divine and human but can also facilitate the embodied and sensory participation in myth. Jewish life has been kept alive and its memory sustained not through the study of chronicles but through rituals associated with the past. Rituals are embodied re-actualizations of the past and an aesthetic internalization and articulation of collective memory. Rituals are thus understood as sensual constructions of memory. As an embodied practice, memory is experienced through the senses while memory is equally used to make sense of these sensory experiences. The sensual base of memory thereby connects the interior and the exterior, since the sensory encounter with material culture through the body forms and performs memories and links the past to the present.[40]

Understanding aesthetics as an embodied and sensory articulation of collective memory is equally relevant to Islam. Shii Islam possesses various rituals associated with Ashura, the ten days in the Islamic calendar when Shiis remember the killing of Husayn. Public processions, as discussed previously, are both public communal assertions and embodied and sensory experiences which demark boundaries and articulate a sense of religious belonging. I would like to refer to one example that I have come across more recently during my fieldwork among Shii communities in Kuwait in the spring of 2022. Mosques, like churches, have a pulpit, or a *minbar* as it is called in Arabic, where the religious scholar sits and gives a sermon. The pulpit is elevated for practical reasons to make the speaker visible and audible to the entire congregation. The spatial elevation also reflects power relations: only a religious scholar would ascend to the pulpit to give a sermon as it is not accessible to lay people. However, in Kuwait, I observed something new: after the sermon when the speaker had descended from the pulpit, people approached the pulpit and touched and kissed it. I asked the person who acted as my gatekeeper why these people are doing so. He replied: "This

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39. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Seattle, WA 1996.
40. S. Brent Plate, *Walter Benjanim, Religion and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion Through the Arts*, London 2005, 132–139.

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is the pulpit of Husayn – it is as if he was with us here." He took me to the pulpit and told me to touch it and to kiss it: "Smell it! It is the smell of Husayn, the smell of paradise." The pulpit was not just a pulpit but an object of ritual veneration whose presence was consumed by using various senses: the wooden craftwork of the pulpit itself, its smooth surface, and its smell of sandalwood. Its material presence in the congregation marked the symbolic presence of Husayn within the congregation and also allowed congregants to internalize the blessing of Husayn's presence by touching, kissing, and smelling it.

Figure 4. Pulpit with knots in Kuwait.

Other rituals are also associated with pulpits in Kuwait. I saw many pulpits to which various knots were attached (see Figure 4). Individuals had made particular vows in order to have their wishes granted and attached these knots in order to receive the blessing of their wishes. Knots act transculturally as symbols of vows. In the English language, one says "tying the knot" when making the marriage vow. In Kuwait, individual Shiis hope that Husayn would help them in having their wishes granted. There is a particular procedure at play, which involves the entire community: individuals would tie a knot around the pulpit for Husayn to grant them a wish. Another community member would then untie the knot later for the wish to be granted and make a new knot for their own wish. Hence, knot-tying as part of making a vow is not just an individual act but requires communal support in order for the wishes to come true and hence creates a sociality around the physical presence of the pulpit within the mosque.

Decentering Islamic Studies

Let me conclude with a few reflections on how ambiguity, multi-locality, and aesthetics can contribute to decentering Islamic Studies. Defining religions such as Islam as multi-local and transtemporal currents moves Islamic Studies as an academic discipline rooted in Western intellectual traditions outside of its historical Eurocentric cultural positionality. Seeing Islamic Studies as "neither of the East nor of the West" (Quran 24:35) challenges the dichotomy between "secular" outsider or etic approaches to the study of Islam as a Western academic exercise and Muslim insiders themselves, who become the object of study. Jan Hjärpe warns about the dangers of essentializing Islam and imposing theological frameworks stemming from Christianity on Islam. Islam's culture of ambiguity also challenges notions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, which are still dominant in Islamic Studies. Rather than considering one articulation of Islam as normative, representative, or mainstream and other articulations as deviant, insignificant, or marginal we need to recognize competing normativities in Islamic intellectual history, which co-existed for centuries and interacted with diverse religious, cultural, and intellectual currents. Finally, the distinction between "normative Islam" and "lived Islam" does not help us in understanding either normative discourses in Islam or Islam as a lived tradition. This distinction still assumes a certain hierarchization between what Islam actually says Muslims should believe and do and what Muslims actually believe and do. In reality, we encounter a plethora of normativities throughout Islamic history, at odds or at ease with one another, and a diversity of lived experiences among Muslims who do not necessarily position themselves against these

normativities but renegotiate them when it comes to defining what it means to be Islamic. ▲

SUMMARY

What does it mean to do Islamic Studies within Religious Studies? Taking the cue from Thomas A. Tweed's intervention, this article discusses new theoretical and methodological approaches in Religious Studies and their relevance to researching Islam. Such approaches cross geographical, disciplinary, and intellectual boundaries while equally being emplaced in particular socio-cultural contexts that inform their perspectives. In order to overcome statist, normative, and essentialist understandings of Islam, the article explores three key themes: ambiguity, multi-locality, and aesthetics. When we approach the intellectual history of Islam, not only its diversity and plurality become obvious but also its culture of ambiguity, which is at ease with contradictions and inconsistencies. Recent reflections on diaspora religions decentre Islamic Studies from the Middle East and allow for exploring the multiple transnational connections between Muslim minority and majority contexts. Such approaches illustrate the multi-locality of Islam. Finally, the article explores what it means to approach Islam as an aesthetic formation in which rituals as embodied experiences and material sensory culture are central in forging and articulating Muslim individual and collective identities.

Björn Asserhed. *Gardens in the Wasteland: Christian Formation in Three Swedish Church Plants*. Bromma: Enskilda Högskolan Stockholm. 2024. 288 s.

Bidrar 2020-talets församlingsplanteringar till att vända den trend av krympande medlemssiffror som många kyrkor i dag upplever? Vilka utmaningar står planteringarna inför när det gäller relationerna till etablerade lokala församlingar och till det omgivande sekulära samhället?

Det är exempel på för dagens kristna kyrka relevanta frågor som behandlas i Björn Asserheds avhandling. Han utgår från iakttagelsen att den kristna kyrkan i Sverige förlorat sin roll att förmedla sociala normer och skapa moralnarrativ. När andra institutioner i stället gör detta ges inte mycket utrymme för transcendens. Därmed blir gudstro förvisad till den privata sfären. Asserhed pekar på församlingsplanteringen som en strävan att bryta denna trend.

Begreppet församlingsplantering har vuxit fram under de senaste tre decennierna. Asserhed skiljer mellan församlingsplanteringar, nya församlingar och etablerade församlingar. Det är en viktig distinktion för att kunna historiskt beskriva de etablerade församlingarnas attityder till nya initiativ. I en doktorsavhandling från 1995, *Livsstil eller organisation: En studie av några kristna gemenskapsgrupper i 1980-talets Sverige* beskriver Knut Frohm de så kallade gemenskaper som växte fram under 1970- och 1980-talen och som på många sätt liknar nutida församlingsplanteringar. De upplevdes av sin samtids samfund som starka hot – nu initieras planteringar ofta av just samfunden. Han visar dock att en viss rädsla att förlora medlemmar fortfarande finns kvar.

Asserhed nämner inte Frohms studie. Däremot lyfter han fram avhandlingen *Church Planting in Sweden in the 21st Century: A Model for New Methodist Churches* från 1999 av Peter Svanberg som den enda signifikanta undersökningen av svenska församlingsplanteringar. Forskningen på sentida svenska

församlingsplanteringar är mager, därför fyller Asserheds avhandling en viktig lucka, även om det finns flera studier från andra länder, vilket framgår av avhandlingens forskningsöversikt.

När Asserhed betraktar företeelsen församlingsplantering landar han i fyra forskningsfrågor som kan sammanfattas på följande sätt: Hur uttrycks kallelse och intentioner i församlingsplanteringarna? Vilka praktiker går att finna? Hur formas människorna mot en levd kristen identitet? Vilka kulturella spänningar behöver planteringarna förhandla?

I avhandlingen beskriver han hur tre församlingsplanteringar i varsin medelstor stad söker vägar att bli relevanta i den svenska kulturen, att bli trädgårdar i en sekulär ödemark. Han har undersökt dem i huvudsak med hjälp av intervjuer och fältstudier under 2020–2021, och läsaren får bekanta sig med deras olika sätt att beskriva sin kallelse, identitet och praktik samt sina kulturmöten. Asserhed finner i församlingsplanteringar tacksamma forskningsobjekt, då de ofta är innovativa i att finna nya former för tro och liv. Denna kreativitet ser han som viktig för att vitalisera den kristna kyrkan. Den uttrycks i villighet att ta risker och i ungdomlighet.

Asserhed finner att alla de tre församlingsplanteringarna ser sin kallelse som missionell; de är kallade och utsända till människor i en starkt sekulariserad kontext, till platser där traditionella ecklesiala strukturer har krympt eller försvunnit. Deras formativa praktiker är inriktade på tjänst i specifika områden, de vill vara innovativa i att vara kyrka, vara kulturellt relevanta, och de inkluderar i olika grad väckelsemötets, konventikelns och det sociala arbetets former – om än i ny skepnad men ändå inte helt olik pionjärtidens praktiker.

"Industristadens" församlingsplantering uttrycker sin missionella kallelse genom att samlas i stadens kulturbyggnad där de är tydligt exponerade för många människor. Den stora, kostsamma och centralt belägna

mötesplatsen är viktig, eftersom deras primära praktik är samlingar i en form som påminner om det traditionella väckelsemötet. I missionskallelsen ligger också ett stort engagemang på sociala medier.

I "Hamnstadens" församlingsplantering möter vi församlingsplanterare med en kallelse till socialt arbete bland människor i utanförskap. Deras missionella telos visar sig i att de är beredda att överskrida kulturella barriärer för att betjäna främlingar. De har sålt den kyrkobyggnad de fick "ärva" av en frikyrkoförsamling och hyr en lokal med skyltfönster för att synas och lättare fullgöra sin kallelse.

I "Katedralstaden" har församlingsplanteringen över huvud taget ingen kyrkolokal, utan deras samlingar hålls under den varma årstiden i en park, i övrigt i hem eller som bönepromenader med upp till trettio personer närvarande. Att vara nära de människor som bor i närsamhället är av stor betydelse. Smågrupper i konventikelns form, där tron kan utforskas utifrån en närmast metodistisk förebild, är därför centrala i denna församlingsplanterings missionspraktik.

Det är missionella argument som motiverar planteringarna att mötas på platser utan liturgiska referenser. Församlingsplanterarna understryker i stället vikten av nära relationer, vilka tillsammans med valet av musikgenrer utgör medel att nå målen.

Särskilt intressant är att läsa om de kulturella spänningar Asserhed identifierar och som skapar behov av förhandlingar med den "sekulära ödemarken" om hur kristen tro kan levas i just denna kultur. De tre planteringarna förefaller influerade av en pietistisk livshållning med idéer om ett moraliskt rent liv. Men de driver inte denna hållning utan kan snarare uppfattas som tillbakalutade med inställningen att den helige Ande efter hand ger varje person insikt, att det är en fråga om tid för växt och mognad. Detta möjliggör för människor att uppleva sig som helt inkluderade utan att ens identifiera sig som kristna. Den inställningen tycks underlätta

förhandlingar med andra subkulturer om exempelvis relevans, individualism och makt.

Ger avhandlingen någon vägledning om vilka formativa praktiker som bäst stödjer och motiverar postmodernitetens människors formativa livsbanor in i en församlingsplantering? Asserhed betonar att studien inte avsett att jämföra församlingsplanteringarna. Men det går ändå att ana – åtminstone om man läser med undertecknads färgade glasögon – fördelar i formeringen av församlingsplanteringen i Katedralstaden. Planterad i en ekumenisk mylla och med bidrag från andra församlingars vattenkannor förefaller den ha förutsättningar till det som Asserhed pekar på som eftersträvansvärt, exempelvis hållbarhet över tid. Han ser i församlingsplanteringarna över lag – och stöder sig då på forskare som Mattias Neve och Pete Ward – möjligheter att genom att delta i en ekumenisk teologisk reflexion bidra till att den kristna kyrkan vare sig blir ett museum eller bara en spegling av den samtida kulturen. För att kunna säga mer om planteringarnas funktion och potential behövs dock fortsatt forskning, vilket också Asserhed framhåller i sin mycket läsvärda och i tidigare internationell forskning väl förankrade avhandling.

Som en källa för reflexion bland församlingsutvecklare om begrepp som balans mellan anpassningsbarhet och kristen integritet, prestation, hållbarhet, moral, kulturöverskridande och demokrati utgör den forskning som Asserhed presenterar redan i dag ett gott bidrag.

Arne Olsson
TD, Uddevalla
DOI: 10.51619/stk.v100i3.26539

Erik Aurelius. *Jesu liknelser*. **Skellefteå: Artos. 2023. 165 s.**

En recension av denna bok inleds lämpligen med en kortversion, som säger det viktigaste: Köp! Läs! Inspireras!

Erik Aurelius, professor emeritus i biblisk teologi i Göttingen, biskop emeritus i

Svenska kyrkan och disputerad i Gamla testamentets exegetik i Lund, vänder sig i denna bok till "alla som är intresserade av den speciella form av förkunnelse och litteratur som Jesus liknelser utgör – med förhoppningen att läsaren ska få lust att tänka vidare själv" (s. 11). Samtidigt pekas predikanter ut som en målgrupp som särskilt funnits i åtanke. Bokens kanske allra största förtjänst är hur väl den träffar den nivå som en genomsnittlig predikant kan behöva. Liknelserna sätts in i sina ursprungssammanhang – ofta både hos den historiske Jesus och i evangelistens sammanhang – och tolkas både där och in i nutid. Detta görs på lättillgängligt sätt och i lättillgängligt format utan att relevanta svåra problem förbigås; för sådana hänvisas den intresserade läsaren till fördjupande litteratur. Aurelius är tydlig med att han inte tillför "egna forskningsbidrag av betydelse" (s. 10), samtidigt som hans tolkningar är mycket väl förankrade i aktuell forskning.

Efter en inledning om liknelserna i Jesu förkunnelse och i senare forskning – där det också tydliggörs att somliga liknelser torde vara "elevarbeten" – behandlas de liknelser som ingår i *Den svenska evangelieboken* grupperade i kapitlen "Fyndet", "Nåden", "Målet", "Motståndet", "Utsidan och insidan", "Meningen", "Väntan" samt "Grunden". Avslutande register gör det lätt att hitta både liknelser och andra anförda bibelställen.

Ett par exempel kan anföras på hur liknelser behandlas. Om den förbryllande liknelse som Aurelius benämner "Fyra slags åker" (Mark. 4:3–20 med paralleller) nämns att den anges syfta till att åhörarna *inte* ska förstå – ett särdrag som sällan uppmärksammas efter förtjänst. Vidare påpekas att terminologi och tematik i uttydningsdelen passar väl så bra till den tidiga kyrkans situation som till Jesu liv. Slutsatsen blir att liknelsen mindre handlar om sådd och skörd utan mer är en liknelse om liknelser.

Om liknelsen om den dåraktige bonde som ville förfoga över livet (Luk. 12:16–21), den enda liknelse där Gud förekommer som agerande person i själva liknelsen, konstaterar Aurelius att detta är den "motspelare" som liknelsens huvudperson behöver. Bonden agerar som om han själv suveränt kunde hantera sin existens. Tolkningen tar in att människor inte sällan ännu agerar så, hur förmätet det än är.

Liknelserna har poänger att bära fram. För att uppnå detta kan huvudpersoner konstateras vara moraliskt tvivelaktiga (Matt. 25:14–30/Luk. 19:11–27, Matt. 13:44, Luk. 18:1–8 och Luk. 16:1–8 nämns) eller berättelsedetaljer märkliga (Matt. 25:1–13 nämns). Framställningen lotsar läsaren fram till att förstå vad i det uppseendeväckande som är betydelsebärande. Emellanåt blir det påtagligt att tolkningarna utgår från en annan svenskkyrklig traditionsström än den pietistiska (Luk. 14:16–24 nämns), samtidigt som den läsare som måhända studsar över sådana formuleringar får författarens tolkning väl motiverad. Den läsare som inte håller med får i stället något att ta spjärn mot.

Finns då inget att anmärka på? Ett par formella inkongruenser kan nämnas: *Jesu liknelser* i titeln avviker från den i löpande text vanligare formuleringen "Jesus liknelser" (och annan icke-latinsk genitivböjning). Det är inte heller konsekvent genomfört i vilken utsträckning noter innehåller titeln på anförda verk eller hänvisar till en tidigare not med vars hjälp boken identifieras. Innehållsligt kan knappast påräknas att alla läsare ska hålla med om varje tolkning, men författarens tolkningar är alla försvarbara utifrån liknelsetexter eller liknelseforskning. De randanmärkningar som boken väcker är således försumbara, och kortrecensionen kan upprepas: Köp! Läs! Inspireras!

Magnus Evertsson
TD, Kristianstad
DOI: 10.51619/stk.v100i3.26540

Eusebios av Caesarea. *Konstantins liv*. Skellefteå: Artos. 2023. 262 s.

John-Christian Eurells översättning av *Konstantins liv* ges ut bara ett par år före

i 700-årsjubileet av konciliet i Nicaea 325. Detta mycket kända kyrkomöte var inte bara unikt genom att biskopar från hela den kristna världen samlades för att fatta beslut i dogmatiska och kyrkorättsliga frågor; det var också det första kyrkliga konciliet som sammankallades av en romersk kejsare. På mindre än tjugo år hade kristendomen gått från att vara en förföljd religion i Romarriket till att bli den av kejsaren gynnade religionen. I denna förvandling var Konstantin I (272–337), eller den Store, en central figur, vilket naturligtvis gav honom en viktig plats i kristet historieberättande.

Den allra viktigaste personen för förmedlingen av Konstantin var Eusebios (ca 260–339), biskop av Caesarea i Palestina. Eusebios författade *Konstantins liv*, ett verk i fyra böcker, efter kejsarens död, och syftet var aldrig att ge någon neutral beskrivning av härskaren. Författaren lyfter i verket själv fram att han inte kommer att behandla vare sig kejsarens insatser i krig eller hans lagstiftningar, utan fokusera på dennes gärningar gentemot kyrkan ("det som relaterar till honom som Guds vän", s. 46). Berättelsen går tillbaka till Konstantins ungdom och, i en av flera intressanta paralleller till Mose, talas det om hur han som en god människa växte upp bland illasinnade – det vill säga hedningar som ville de kristna illa. Hans väg till makten beskrivs naturligtvis endast i positiva ordalag. Berättelsens hjälte är obenägen att ta till våld, men gör så vid behov, som när han besegrar sina rivaler. Angående den tidigare medkejsaren Licinius (ca 265–325) skrivs det till exempel: "Han ansåg det vara både fromt och heligt att röja en människa ur vägen för att rädda resten av mänskligheten" (s. 70). Verket behandlar Konstantins välgärningar gentemot den kristna religionen, såsom religiösa reformer och byggandet av kyrkor. Det är tydligt hur Konstantins gärning hos Eusebios blir del av ett större narrativ; en idé av världshistorien som en kosmisk kamp mellan goda och onda krafter.

Eurell har gjort ett mycket fint arbete med översättningen av det här verket. Han lyckas mycket väl med det som kan vara svårt i översättning av antika texter, nämligen att återge dessa i god nutidssvenska, utan att det blir styltigt och högtravande. Jag uppskattar också författarens kapitelindelning, vilken ter sig mycket rimlig och förenklar läsningen. Användandet av fotnoter i översättningen är väl avvägt – de är inte för många och för långa, vilket bör undvikas i den här typen av text, men de som finns med bidrar till förståelsen av texten.

Översättningen föregås av ett inledningskapitel som ger en god introduktion av populärvetenskapligt slag och fungerar mycket väl för att kontextualisera verket. Inte minst uppskattar jag diskussionen om varför det över huvud taget var intressant för en kristen biskop att skriva en sådan här text, och Eurell ser möjliga förklaringar i (1) den kontrast mellan förföljelse och tolerans som Eusebios upplevde, (2) att Eusebios uppskattade den vikt som Konstantin lade vid endräkt och (3) det faktum att Konstantin värdesatte Eusebios arbete.

Det finns aspekter som med fördel hade kunnat fördjupas ytterligare i inledningen. Eurell gör en god poäng om att Konstantin "förtjänar att studeras på sina egna premisser snarare än för att finna argument för eller emot vissa samtida kyrkliga fenomen" (s. 11), och i anslutning till detta hade jag önskat se fler referenser till den vetenskapliga diskussionen om Konstantin, inte minst med avseende på hur vi bör förstå hans omvändelse och den betydelse han hade för kristendomen (den så kallade "konstantinska vändningen"). Att vi inte finner någon längre vetenskaplig diskussion är naturligtvis helt i sin ordning i en populärvetenskaplig bok som denna, men just med tanke på att det är Eusebios skildring som vi får läsa, vore det värdefullt att ställa denna mot några av forskningens rön om Konstantin. Visserligen presenteras en bibliografi i slutet av inledningskapitlet, vilket är till hjälp för den som vill fördjupa sig, men jag menar att vetenskapliga bidrag borde ha varit mer synliga i texten. I fotnoterna refereras det till antika

källor, vilket i sig är positivt, men i en rekonstruerande behandling av ett ämne, såsom när författaren återger Konstantins liv och gärning, vore det önskvärt att andra än klart vinklade källor använts. Författaren är naturligtvis inte omedveten om källornas tendenser; han gör till exempel klart vikten av att inte läsa *Konstantins liv* med okritiska ögon, och gör själv vissa kritiska påpekanden, såsom att kejsaren antagligen inte var så intresserad av att fördjupa sig i teologiska frågor som Eusebios vill göra gällande. Dock finns det andra aspekter av framställningen som gärna hade fått granskas mer kritiskt: Stämmer det till exempel att Konstantin införde förbud mot att utöva "hednisk" religion och lät riva hednatempel, eller går Eusebios här längre än vad kejsaren själv var villig att göra? Kejsarens högsta prioritet verkar ju trots allt ha varit enhet och religiös tolerans.

Förutom *Konstantins liv* översätts ytterligare tre texter, nämligen ett tal av Konstantin med titeln "Till den heliga skaran", det lovtal Eusebios höll till Konstantin då denne varit regent i trettio år samt ytterligare ett tal som hölls vid invigningen av Heliga gravens kyrka i Jerusalem. Att inkludera dessa texter framstår som relevant, då de är klart relaterade till det huvudsakliga översättningsobjektet, framför allt "Till den heliga skaran", som i vissa manuskript inkluderats som en femte bok i *Konstantins liv*. Det är synd att dessa texter endast får en mycket kort introduktion och inte, som huvudverket, kontextualiseras och förklaras i inledningen. I synnerhet är "Till den heliga skaran" en mycket intressant text som förtjänar en mer fördjupad behandling. I detta långa tal är stora delar polemiska, men Konstantin presenterar också sin förståelse av Guds skapelseordning, frälsningen och en rad andra ämnen. Här skulle man som läsare vilja veta mer om vad syftet med det här talet kan ha varit, och jag hade gärna sett en diskussion om vilka källor som Konstantin bygger på, liksom hur han använder dem. Vi återkommer också till frågan om vad som går att härleda till Konstantin själv. Eusebios skriver specifikt i *Konstantins*

liv att kejsaren skrev sina tal på egen hand, utan att ta hjälp av talskrivare, och åter hade en kritisk vetenskaplig diskussion utifrån tidigare forskning varit av intresse.

Det är glädjande att dessa texter, som är av så stort kyrkohistoriskt värde, fått sin första översättning – och en mycket väl genomförd sådan – till svenska. Detta är en bok som lär bli väl mottagen av många patristiskt intresserade läsare i Norden.

Katarina Pålsson
TD, Lund

Klaus Fitschen, Nicole Grochowina & Oliver Schuegraf (red.). *Lutheran Identity: Cultural Imprint and Reformation Heritage.* **Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus. 2023. 171 s.**

Den här antologin har getts ut av den historiska kommissionen inom det Lutherska världsförbundets (LVF) tyska nationalkommitté. Upprinnelsen till boken var en digital konferens i februari 2022 kring temat luthersk identitet. Studieprocessen om luthersk identitet initierades vid LVF:s tolfte generalförsamling i Windhoek 2017.

Boken ger en fin inblick i en pågående studieprocess. Bredden av perspektiv är stor och den speglar den lutherska identitetens kulturella mångfald i dagens globaliserade värld. Innehållsligt är det nog det allmänna prästadömet som sticker ut som en förbindande länk mellan flera olika perspektiv. Det lyfts fram som anledning till att homogenitet är omöjlig, som förutsättning för allas delaktighet i Guds mission, som befrielse från generaliserande dogmatism, som identitetsskapande för hela LVF, men inte minst som källa till konflikt och att det därför tidigt underordnades en mer hierarkisk ecklesiologi.

LVF:s generalsekreterare Anne Burghardt betonar i förordet att identitet inte bör förstås som gränsdragning och att den behöver vara mångfacetterad i en världsvid kyrka. I utgivarnas inledning spelar däremot den

nödvändiga globala karaktären av luthersk identitet en underordnad roll. Här förankras den i reformationstidens europeiska kontext som först senare sägs bli utmanat *utifrån*.

Boken är indelad i tre avsnitt. Den första delen har rubriken "Identity?". Sociologen Hilke Ribenstorf ger i sitt bidrag en överblick över identitet som individuellt och socialt fenomen. Vidare visar historikern Susanne Lachenicht att *konfessionell ambiguitet* var vanlig redan under den konfessionella tidsåldern (1540–1648) och att gränser mellan konfessionella identiteter aldrig är entydiga. Den interkulturella teologen Claudia Jahnel betonar i samspråk med teologer från globala syd att *all* teologi – och därmed också luthersk identitet – är kontextuell och färgad av sin kulturella och sociala omvärld.

Bokens andra del, "Lutheran Identity/ Identities?", bjuder på fyra kyrkohistoriska perspektiv. Jennifer Wasmuth behandlar den helige Andens betydelse i luthersk teologi sedan 1900 och visar hur Rudolf Ottos (1869–1937) tes om Andens försvagning differentieras av de samtida teologerna Christian Danz och Christian Henning. Nicole Grochowina fokuserar i sitt bidrag på det allmänna prästadömet och dess radikala praktik bland bönder och döpare under den tidiga reformationen. I Klaus Fitschens kapitel är det luthersk diaspora som står i centrum och han visar hur det politiska skyddet var helt avgörande för att det lutherska skulle kunna få samhällelig betydelse, men att till denna dag diasporaexistensen är det normala. I ett kortare avslutande kapitel ställer Christian Volkmar Witt den grundläggande frågan om det finns *en* luthersk identitet och om den inte alltid är konstruerad. Han visar hur olika former av luthersk identitet – från Brasilien, Namibia och Polen – ifrågasätter institutionella "stabilitetsmyter".

Bokens avslutande del, "Perspectives from the Worldwide Communio", samlar fem teologiska röster från olika kontexter. Chad M. Rimmer ger en skiss av de olika lutherska identiteterna som samsas under LVF:s tak. Evangelisk frihet gör en mångfald av

identiteter nödvändig och i de pågående processerna behövs både en ekumenisk och en interreligiös öppenhet. Kenneth Mtata uppmärksammar i sitt bidrag betydelsen av afrikanska perspektiv för reformationen från första början, men inte minst också i debatterna inom LVF. Bland annat är afrikanska perspektiv viktiga för förnyelsen av en luthersk förståelse av pneumatologi. Wilhelm Wachholz beskriver därefter luthersk teologi i Brasilien med sitt motto "Låt Gud vara Gud" som ett viktigt tredje spår mellan katoliker och pingstvänner. Den måste dock vara beredd att utveckla sig bortom sin tyska prägel och kontinuerligt översättas in i nya kontexter. Gottfried Rösch ger läsarna en inblick i rysk-tyska lutheraners betydelse för förändringen av lutherskt kyrkoliv i Bayern. De behövs för att etniska begränsningar ska övervinnas. Interkulturell teologi hjälper med en adekvat förståelse av denna nödvändiga förändring. Boken avslutas med Jerzy Sojkas korta reflektion över den lutherska kyrkans förändringsprocess i Polen efter murens fall. Han värdesätter den nya delaktigheten i de världsvida samtalen inom LVF och Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) som lett till nya strukturer, till exempel för diakoni och mission, vigning av kvinnor och en positiv luthersk självförståelse – från att ha varit främst antikatolsk.

Den röda tråden i boken är samhörigheten mellan det teologiska arvet och den kulturella kontexten, vilket speglas i bokens underrubrik: *Cultural Imprint and Reformation Heritage*. Men denna samhörighet lyser i historikernas redogörelser med sin frånvaro, även om de innehåller fascinerande inblickar i den tidiga reformationens historiska detaljer i tysk kontext. Genom att delen som rymmer dessa bidrag får samma titel som boken framstår den som normerande för förståelsen av luthersk identitet. Det som sägs i första delen om identitet och i tredje delen om det "världsvida" riskerar då att ses som icke centrala tillägg, adiafora så att säga.

En insikt som jag tar med mig är att luthersk identitet, precis som all annan

teologisk och konfessionell identitet, inte har en statisk läromässig kärna utan är rörlig och ideligen förhandlas på nytt i det levda livets kulturella och hermeneutiska processer. All teologi är i viss mån interkulturell. Men det är bara en handfull bidrag i boken som förmår att hålla ihop den kritiska (inter)kulturella reflexionen om identitet med de identitetsformande innehållsliga frågorna. Det sker till exempel när Jahnel visar hur lutheraner i Latinamerika utifrån sin kulturella kontext väljer andra läromässiga betoningar än tyska lutheraner, när Lachenicht visar hur fenomenet transkonfessionalitet hänger ihop med det allmänna prästadömet, när Witt påpekar att reformationens klassiska teman med nödvändighet måste förbli rörliga i olika sociokulturella tolkningar, när Rimmer ser öppenheten för lokala variationer i Augsburgska bekännelsens femtonde artikel som anledning att se ekumeniska, interreligiösa och interkulturella aspekter som en självklar del av kontextuell luthersk identitet och inte minst när Mtata demonstrerar den intima samhörigheten mellan text och kontext genom sin gedigna reflexion över kontroversen mellan tysken Hanns Lilje (1899–1977) och zimbabwiern Josia B. Hove (1907–1976) under LVF:s formativa fas. Detta är exempel på den viktiga insikten om *all* teologis interkulturella och kontextuella prägel, och med tanke på det hade bokens underrubrik med fördel kunnat lyda *Reformation Heritage in Cultural Imprint*.

Kanske är det meningsfullt att boken som helhet inte lyckas visa på den nödvändiga förbindelsen mellan kulturell prägel och reformatoriskt arv. På så sätt speglar den en bestående klyfta mellan teologer som ser kontext och kultur som en central del av teologisk reflektion och dem som ser det som något som inte berör teologins eller identitetens kärna. Och så överraskades jag av att vissa enligt mitt tycke centrala lutherska teman som rättfärdiggörelse av nåd allena och den lutherska teologins dialektiska prägel knappt förekommer alls. Vad gäller kontext saknas det förstås en röst från de lutherska kyrkorna

i Norden som haft avgörande betydelse i utformandet av lutherska identiteter.

Michael Nausner
FD, Örebro
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Victoria S. Harrison & Tyler Dalton McNabb (red.). *Philosophy and the Spiritual Life*. Abingdon: Routledge. 2024. 179 s.

Antologin *Philosophy and the Spiritual Life* erbjuder nya religionsfilosofiska perspektiv på tre tematiska områden: andlig praktik och filosofisk förståelse, filosofiska reflektioner om att leva ett andligt liv samt filosofiska problem gällande det andliga livet. Dessa tre teman strukturerar antologins tio bidrag.

Vid sidan av i sammanhanget traditionella metafysiska och epistemologiska angreppssätt på religion och tro (*belief*), introducerar denna samlingsvolym religionsfilosofiska perspektiv på det andliga livets *praktik*. Författarna argumenterar för praktikens centrala betydelse för förståelsen av det religiösa, i ljuset av filosofiska analyser av det andliga livets etiska, estetiska, fenomenologiska och religiösa element.

Redaktörernas introduktion ger oss en bakgrund, i form av en historisk genomgång av det andliga livet och dess relation till filosofi och religion, som introducerar motiv och program som antologin önskar initiera i religionsfilosofin.

Bokens första del, om andlig praktik och filosofisk förståelse, består av tre bidrag. Mark R. Wynn framhåller att studiet av det andliga livet öppnar upp religionsfilosofin för nya frågor och metoder. I linje med Wynn betonar John Cottingham att den andliga praxisen föregår den religiösa tron (*religious belief*). Douglas Hedley diskuterar etiska och estetiska element av filosofins andliga utövande i den (neo)platonska traditionen utifrån William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) poesi, som en strävan att nå det Goda. Därutöver behandlar Wynn, Hedley och, i bokens

andra del, Daniel D. de Haan relationen mellan filosofi och det andliga livet i diskussion med Pierre Hadots (1922–2010) inflytelserika syn på filosofi och andliga övningar under antiken. Därigenom bidrar författarna med religionsfilosofiska perspektiv till forskningen inom filosofins historia i Hadots fotspår, men pekar också polemiskt bortom Hadot, mot nya – religionsfilosofiska – perspektiv på relationen mellan filosofi och andlighet.

De tre bidragen i antologins första del etablerar ett angreppssätt till det andliga livet som försöker öppna fältet utanför den teistiska och kristna teologiska kontexten inom religionsfilosofin. Religionsfilosoferna i denna antologi är inte teologer med filosofisk agenda eller filosofer med teologisk agenda. Utgångspunkten är snarare, så som Wynn skriver i förordet med hänvisning till det 40 000 år gamla arkeologiska fyndet av Lejonmannen från Hohlenstein-Stadel i Tyskland, att se det andliga livet "inte i teoretiska termer utan i det erforderliga affektiva och perceptuella orienteringssättet i sinnevärlden" (s. xiv, min översättning). Bokens första del tillhandahåller således en filosofisk förståelse av andlig praktik som inte är teologiserande eller böjd mot en viss religiös denomination. Det andligas möjlighet att uppta eller uttrycka sig i religiösa, filosofiska, etiska och estetiska formationer som erbjuds här, upplöser frågan om distinktionen eller icke-distinktionen mellan det andliga och det religiösa samt öppnar religionsfilosofin för studiet av själva filosofin som en andlig praktik. Antologins första del etablerar härmed ett pluralistiskt angreppssätt till det andliga livet, vilket i bokens andra del utvidgas med pluralistiska perspektiv och exempel på det andliga livet utifrån frågor rörande självkännedom och identitet, relationen mellan människan och det gudomliga, andliga förebilder (*spiritual exemplars*) och självtransformation.

Den andra delen, vilken innehåller filosofiska reflektioner om att leva ett andligt liv, består av fyra bidrag. Daniel D. de Haan behandlar det andliga livets exempel utifrån frågor om självransakan och filosofi som livshållning hos Sokrates (ca 470–399 f.v.t.), i relation till de delfiska maximerna "Känn dig själv" och "Måtta i allt". Gwen Griffith-Dickson bidrar med en diskussion om varats icke-dualism – med hänvisning till den sydasiatiska advaita-traditionen – som en förutsättning för det mänskliga och det gudomligas gemenskap, utifrån två skilda exempel: en anonym senmedeltida mystik text och en text om det gudomligas och det mänskligas relationalitet, skriven av en iransk ayatolla som mördades under den iranska revolutionen 1979. Ian James Kidd utvecklar ett religionsfilosofiskt förslag för studiet av tvärkulturell och historisk mångfald av andlig exemplaritet (*spiritual exemplarity*); en teknisk diskussion som strävar efter att erbjuda religionsfilosofiska resurser till religionsvetenskapliga forskningsfält som rör frågor om kulturella och historiska förutsättningar för andliga traditioners framväxt och spridning utifrån tongivande individers andliga liv som förebild. Victoria S. Harrison och Rhett Gayle fokuserar på självtransformation och andliga förebilder (*spiritual exemplars*). Harrison och Gayle (om)formulerar självets begrepp i relation till en strävan för självtransformation – att bli ett bättre själv – som kan vara religiöst eller andligt motiverad, men behöver inte vara det. Genom att tillgå exempel som erbjuds av exemplariska andliga och religiösa förebilder visar författarna hur urskiljningen av gott och ont frambringas på den transformativa resan, i kontrast till den moraliska uppfattningen som annars ligger till grund för urskiljningen mellan gott och ont.

Bokens tredje del, om filosofiska problem gällande det andliga livet, består av tre bidrag. Gorazd Andrejč angriper frågan om självtillskrivning av helgonskap och förespråkar en "luthersk-episodisk uppfattning om helgonskap" (s. 125, min översättning) som ett alternativ till helgonskapets starka realistiska metafysik; att helgonskap är en permanent egenskap. Jonathan Hill diskuterar spänningen mellan gudomlig oändlighet

och leda. Hill nyanserar oändlighetsbegreppet och lämnar frågan öppen, som en utmaning till teologin, varför de saliga inte skulle tröttna på att vara i Guds närvaro för evigt. Fiona Ellis behandlar problemet med uppfattningen att det andliga livet nödvändigtvis innebär ett fjärmande från begäret. Ellis lokaliserar denna syn i en uppfattning om begär som självuppfyllande (egoistisk) kontra begär som en strävan bortom sig själv. Ellis argumenterar att begäret är inneboende i det andliga livet, då det strävar för någonting mer än sig själv; en transformation.

Problemen gällande det andliga livet som dryftas i den tredje delen känns forcerade och konstruerade. De ställs upp och diskuteras som problem, men i själva verket tycks dessa problem vara mer en halmdocka än handla om praktiska problem för det andliga livet. Även om författarna var på sitt sätt ifrågasätter metafysiska antaganden om det andliga livet och på så vis närmar sig frågor om det andligas integration i vardagslivet, skulle antologins problematiserande del tjäna på att utöka det begreppsanalytiska angreppssättet med existentiella och fenomenologiska perspektiv.

Philosophy and the Spiritual Life är en ambitiös samlingsvolym som sätter det andliga livet på den religionsfilosofiska agendan, i synnerhet inom den anglosaxiska filosofiska kontexten. Antologin visar att religionsfilosofin har resurser att angripa frågor om religion och andlighet utifrån utomteologiska undersökningsområden och, inte minst, att bidra med perspektiv på andlighet som en utomreligiös företeelse, integrerad med och i samspel med mänsklig erfarenhet som helhet.

Ervik Cejvan
FD, Lund
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Sten Hidal. *Esaias Tegnér: Skalden och biskopen*. Skellefteå: Artos. 2023. 232 s.

Esaias Tegnér (1782–1846) dröjer sig kvar i stadsbilden. Det är inte bara Stockholm som har sin Tegnérlund eller Växjö sin Tegnérgata. I Säffle finns en Tegnérskola och i Uppsala Tegnérparken. Även om namnet finns kvar börjar referensen bli tömd på innehåll. Vem vet längre vem den friherre Claes Rålamb (1622–1698), som (lite ironiskt) fick ge namn åt den gård som i sin tur skulle ge namn åt en park vid Norr Mälarstrand, var. På samma sätt med den Tegnér, vars minne fortfarande gömmer sig i det urbana landskapet.

Gator, skolor och parker fick en gång namn efter berömda svenska män (och en och annan kvinna). Tegnér var en gång en av dessa namnkunniga som gjorde nationen stolt. Rentav översatt till det tyska kulturspråket. I dag är det de lokala celebriteterna som får ge namn åt bussar, gränder och regionaltåg. Det nationella har fått träda tillbaka för det lokala. En dag kommer även dessa lokala berömdheter att bemötas av en ointressets axelryckning.

Tegnérs nedstigande från parnassen till glömskans gråa skuggtillvaro beror givetvis på smak. Den poesi som firades under det tidiga 1800-talet framstår i dag lätt som tillgjord och uppblåst. Endast somligt av den förmår röra vid vår tids hjärterötter. Men Tegnérminnets öde visar också på förändrade samhällsformer. Nationalskalder pratar vi inte längre om. Det är andra trådar som binder samman samhällets osynliga gemenskapsväv. Möjligen skulle man kunna säga att efterglöden kring Tegnér brunnit ut ovanligt långsamt.

Till de institutioner som vårdar minnet av den en gång så firade poeten, och som genom den ännu pågående utgivningen av hans samlade verk står för en avsevärd kulturgärning, hör Tegnérsamfundet. Dess preses, professor emeritus Sten Hidal, för oss elegant in i Tegnérs diktarvärld i monografin *Esaias Tegnér: Skalden och biskopen*. Detta är

Hidals andra monografi om Tegnér. År 2020 utkom *Tegnér och kristendomen*. Den nu utkomna volymen har ett behändigt format. Framställningen är kronologiskt disponerad. Med hjälp av korta biografiska avsnitt får vi följa Tegnér i spåren; från barndomens värmländska prästgård, över den kreativa tiden som lundaprofessor till det turbulenta livet som biskop i Växjö. Bokens centrala delar består dock av analyser av Tegnérs viktigaste poetiska arbeten. Stort utrymme ägnas åt den en gång så välbekanta diktcykeln *Frithiofs saga*, som nästa år firar 200 år. Den som tidigare var obekant med Tegnér får här ta del av en förnämlig introduktion till såväl hans författarskap som den tid i vilken han var verksam.

Av särskilt intresse är de delar där Hidal visar på Tegnérs användning av den antika historien i sin tolkning av den egna samtiden. Tegnér var i detta avseende långt ifrån unik. Det var så det gick till i den tidens bildade samhällsskikt. I antiken var det väl inredda hus de bebodde; samtiden var en ödemark. Det nya samhället som växte fram tolkades inom ramen för den antika historien och de insikter som den klassiska bildningen förmådde ge. Den klassiska retoriken – Ciceros (106–43 f.v.t.) tal, Thukydides (ca 460–ca 400 f.v.t.), Aristoteles (384–322 f.v.t.) etik – var självklara utgångspunkter. Här blir Hidals kommentarer till Tegnérs poesi till viktiga vägvisare i denna för många obekanta miljö.

Tegnérs rikliga brevproduktion smyger sig här och var in i framställningen. Här får vi möta den människan som de många monumenten och offentliga inskriptionerna döljer. Under en yta av kvickheter anar vi den person som plågades av sjukdom, som oroade sig för barnens välgång och som drevs av en många gånger otyglad, anstötlig passion. Om Tegnérs poesi inte alltid åldrats väl upphör inte brevskrivaren fascinera. Kanske har breven blivit det arv som består? Ett slags tillfällighetslitteratur som stått emot tidens korrosion. Här öppnar Hidals monografi dörren till en nyansrik och överraskande värld.

Kanske kan vi med tiden vänta en tredje monografi, den där brevskrivaren Tegnér står i centrum?

Erik Sidenvall
Professor, Lund

Fredrik Portin & Kamilla Skarström Hinojosa (red.). *Jesus och politiken.* **Göteborg: Makadam. 2024. 264 s.**

I antologin *Jesus och politiken* samlas forskare kring frågor om hur Jesus har påverkat och kan påverka politiska aktörer samt hur Jesus politiska aktörskap kan förstås i dag.

Redaktörerna beskriver syftet med antologin som tudelat, nämligen att "lyfta fram hur bibliska berättelser och värderingar tolkas och används för att stödja politiska positioner, men också att föreslå tolkningar som får politisk betydelse i vår tid" (s. 18–19). De påpekar att det i Jesus ord och gärningar finns potential att utmana den politiska makten, inte bara för den kristna kyrkans politiska aktörskap utan för "det *allmännas* väl" (s. 17, kursiv i original). Hur denna potential kan uttryckas i dag beskrivs som ett underliggande tema för antologin.

Efter inledningskapitlet följer tio bidrag, varav hälften är skrivna av systematiska teologer. Petra Carlsson Redell skissar en teologi för kristen aktivism. Hon använder bland annat Pussy Riots aktion i Kristus Frälsarens katedral i Moskva 2021 som ett exempel på teologiskt skapande, en aktivistisk och performativ kraft som kan förändra världen. Björn Vikström analyserar nationalistiska populisters bruk av Jesus och vill samtidigt lyfta fram resurser i den judisk-kristna traditionen som kan användas för att motverka gränsdragningar mot "de andra". Vikström diskuterar huruvida Jesus kan förstås som populist (bland annat då han kritiserade eliten och vände sig till de breda massorna), men lyfter också fram den måltidsgemenskap Jesus praktiserade som en kontrast till populism då den förde med sig en uppluckring av

gränser mellan människor. Arne Rasmusson redogör i sin tur för hur Jesus använts för att motivera anarkistiskt tänkande och lyfter särskilt fram Dorothy Day (1897–1980) och Jacques Ellul (1912–1994). Joseph Sverker fortsätter på ett liknande tema och skildrar tre tänkare som på olika sätt förhåller sig till Jesus och anarkismen: Michail Bakunin (1814–1876), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) och Lev Tolstoj (1828–1910). Sverker menar att alla tre ser Jesus politiska aktörskap som samhällsomvälvande och genom kapitlet lyfts bland annat ickevåldet som Jesus politiska metod fram. Johanna Andersson undersöker hur Jesus förhöll sig till rådande mansideal och diskuterar om och hur Jesus hållning kan utgöra en resurs för att utmana och förändra dagens mansideal.

Litteraturvetaren Beata Agrell undersöker i sitt bidrag Jesus som litterär gestalt, specifikt i rollen som *trickster*, en gränsöverskridande karaktär som medlar mellan gudomligt och mänskligt samt utmanar fasta kategorier. Bibelvetaren Kamilla Skarström Hinojosa utgår i sitt bidrag från René Girards (1923–2015) teori om offrets samhällshelande funktion. Hon påpekar att Jesus undervisning och död enligt Girard ska ses som ett avtäckande av syndabocksmekanismerna, samtidigt som Jesus inte gav lärjungarna verktyg för att fortsätta motståndet mot dessa mekanismer. Skarström Hinojosa menar att sådana verktyg ges i Dödahavsrullarna (specifikt Gemenskapsregeln). En annan bibelvetare, Hans Leander, ställer sig frågan huruvida Jesus kan inspirera till en samhörighet som överskrider etniska och nationella gränser, något han kallar "ett kosmopolitiskt aktörskap". Idéhistorikern Klas Grinell skriver om Jesus i Koranen och hur Jesus används i olika muslimska traditioner. Här skildras hur Jesus eskatologiska dimension användes av IS för att motivera och legitimera våldshandlingar, men även hur författaren Mustafa Akyol framhåller Jesus som inspiration för muslimskt samhällsengagemang. Antologins sista bidrag kommer från religionsvetaren Fredrik Portin och docenten i psykologi Lisa

Rudolfsson. De argumenterar, utifrån teologen David Tombs forskning, för att Jesus under sitt sista dygn utsattes för sexuell förödmjukelse och eventuellt våldtäkt. Utifrån psykologisk forskning om sexuellt våld och tortyr argumenterar de vidare för att Jesus därför var handlingsförlamad under korsfästelsen. De menar att en sådan tolkning av korsfästelsenarrativet kan skänka tröst till dem som i dag utsätts för sexuellt våld.

Jesus och politiken är en teologisk bok där flera författare framhåller att de skriver utifrån och för att svara på akuta samhällsfrågor, vilket ger antologin relevans. Denna begränsas dock till viss del genom bokens stundtals normativa anspråk. Vad är till exempel det "*allmännas* väl" och vem bestämmer det? Emellanåt infinner sig vidare en otydlighet i vad bidragen diskuterar: Jesus som politisk aktör (en komplicerad fråga av flera anledningar) eller hur Jesus används av politiska aktörer (mindre komplicerat och något som skulle kunna knyta an till en bredare debatt inom till exempel internationell och svensk bibelvetenskap). Även om flera bidrag betonar att syftet inte är att fånga in den historiske Jesus samt svårigheten att skilja mellan politik och religion i antiken, saknar jag en en diskussion om hur vi alla läser Bibeln utifrån givna förutsättningar och i en tolkningskontext. De olika "jesusar" som framträder i antologin, för att använda Tomas Franssons terminologi i *Inte bara kyrkans: Jesus i kulturen* (2012), står i varierande grad i relation till vad vi kan säga om den historiske Jesus. "Jesusarna" i flera bidrag är som hämtade från vad bibelvetare som Yvonne Sherwood och James Crossley beskrivit som västerländska tolkningstraditioner av modellen *den liberala* eller *den radikala Bibeln*, där politiker och andra läser in sina egna eller samtida värderingar i Bibeln eller karaktären Jesus. Detta är ju på ett sätt helt i linje med antologins syfte, men en utförligare diskussion om bibeltolkningens premisser och tolkarens ansvar hade stärkt helhetsintrycket.

Antologin fungerar på många sätt som ett smörgåsbord där den som intresserar sig

för ämnen som politiska bibelbruk, skärningspunkten mellan teologi och politik eller teologins bidrag till samhällsdebatten kan finna förkovring. Jag uppskattar att flera bidrag knyter an till dagsaktuella händelser och perspektiv, till exempel Rysslands anfallskrig mot Ukraina, IS legitimering av våld, populism, destruktiv maskulinitet och sexuellt våld, inte minst i kölvattnet av #metoo. Antologin kan fungera som inspiration för bland annat präster och teologer som önskar diskutera teologins och bibeltolkningens uppgift och möjlighet i vår samtid. Vidare uppskattar jag att flera bidrag vill utmana bibeltolkningar som använts för att legitimera våld, upprätthålla strukturellt förtryck eller för att stärka aktörers ideologiska syften. Boken hade vunnit på att ännu mer knyta an till det bibelvetenskapliga forskningsfält som under många års tid berört liknande frågor.

Hanna Liljefors
TD, Lund

Matthew Thiessen. *A Jewish Paul: The Messiah's Herald to the Gentiles*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. 2023. 208 s.

För Matthew Thiessen är det fundamentalt att behålla det konstiga och svåra i Paulus brev; i våra försök att göra Paulus begriplig i vår tid riskerar vi att göra våra tankar och idéer till Paulus tankar och idéer. Thiessen inleder *A Jewish Paul* genom att kort redogöra för de fyra huvudsakliga perspektiven på Paulus: det lutherska, "new perspective", det apokalyptiska och "Paul within Judaism". Ingen Paulusbok kan längre undvika att positionera sig i förhållande till dessa och Thiessen medger att hans läsning av Paulus i huvudsak lutar mot "Paul within Judaism", men att det också finns värde och sanningshalt i alla tre föregående perspektiv. Trots detta menar Thiessen att tolkningen han presenterar i denna bok egentligen ligger närmare Apostlagärningarnas perspektiv på Paulus än ett modernt sådant.

Kapitel 1–4 fungerar som en introduktion till Paulus och hans historiska kontext. Här argumenterar Thiessen för en helt igenom judisk Paulus utifrån, bland annat, Apg. 21 och 1 Kor. 7:19. Thiessen menar att placeringen av Apostlagärningarna före Paulus brev i det kanoniserade Nya testamentet gjordes med intentionen att ge läsarna en tolkningsnyckel för Paulus brev, och anser därför att Paulus alltid bör läsas mot Apostlagärningarna. Vidare diskuterar Thiessen 1 Kor. 7:19: "Omskärelse eller förhud, det är likgiltigt, vad som betyder något är att man håller Guds bud." Traditionellt sett har denna vers tolkats som att Paulus upphäver omskärelsens status som Guds bud, och i stället menar att det är en produkt av mänsklig tradition. En sådan tolkning står dock i rak motsats till Paulus judiska identitet och lagobservans som framhävs i Apg. 21:17–26, menar Thiessen. I stället föreslår han att Paulus poäng i 1 Kor. 7:19 är att varje Kristusföljare ska förbli i det stadium i vilket han eller hon blev kallad till Gud. Denna tolkning ligger även i linje med det Paulus skriver om äktenskap tidigare i 1 Kor. 7.

Thiessen fortsätter sedan genom att peka på judendomens mångfald under andra templets tid. Detta blir grundbulten i hans argumentation om att Paulus aldrig övergav judendomen, eller övergav ett judiskt sätt att leva. Thiessen menar i stället att Paulus genomgick ett slags konvertering *inom* judendomen – han bytte helt enkelt judisk inriktning från farisé till messiansk (men fortfarande till viss grad även fariseisk) jude. Thiessen visar även på den mångfald i frågan om icke-judarnas plats i Guds frälsningshistoria som fanns bland judarna under andra templets tid för att peka på att Paulus varken var unik i sin uppfattning eller på något sätt positionerad utanför judendomen.

Efter de inledande fyra kapitlen fokuserar Thiessen på frågan om Paulus och icke-judarna. Varför vände sig Paulus endast till icke-judar i sin mission? Vilket problem i det icke-judiska samhället skulle en judisk messias lösa? Thiessen menar att Paulus själv

har en tydlig utläggning om vad som konstituerar icke-judarnas tillstånd och/eller problem i Rom. 1:18–32. Problemet här, menar Thiessen, är att moderna bibelöversättningar har lagt till egna överskrifter till texten som får det att verka som att Paulus beskriver hela mänskligheten, när de egentligen endast beskriver icke-judar. New Revised Standard Version, till exempel, ger perikopen överskriften "The Guilt of Humankind", och Bibel 2000 den ännu mer otydliga "Ett liv utan kunskap om Gud". Denna tolkning är inte ny, utan delas av en mängd tidiga kyrkofäder som också läste Rom. 1:18–32 som syftande till icke-judar.

Thiessen ger sig sedan i kast med frågan om Paulus syn på Abraham och omskärelsen. Texter som Gal. 5:2 och Fil. 3:2 har tidigare tolkats som ett avfärdande av omskärelse från Paulus. Thiessen håller inte med. I stället menar han att Paulus inte ansåg icke-judars omskärelse vara en förbundsomskärelse med tillhörande förmåner. När en icke-jude låter omskära sig ser Paulus detta endast som ett kosmetiskt ingrepp som därtill kan orsaka skada för vederbörande. Thiessen baserar denna tolkning på Gal. 4:21–31, där Paulus läser Abrahams narrativ i Första Moseboken som en allegori. Både Ismael och Isak är omskurna, men endast en av dem får arvet. Detta innebär alltså för Paulus att omskärelse i sig inte garanterar en del av arvet, och att galaterna som funderar över omskärelse kommer att sluta upp som Ismael snarare än Isak. Varför? Jo, för att de inte blev omskurna på den åttonde dagen och faktiskt inte kan bli judar.

Detta betyder dock inte att icke-judarna kan strunta i att bli en del av Abrahams säd, menar Thiessen. I stället anser han att Paulus argumenterar för ett slags pneumatisk genterapi. Thiessen kopplar detta till stoisk filosofi och konceptet *krasis*, som innebär en fullkomlig och perfekt sammanblandning av två element. Genom tron får icke-juden del av Jesus *pneuma*, vilken både omger och blandas med icke-judens egen *pneuma*. Därmed har Gud ingripit i icke-judens tillstånd och

förändrat dess genetiska kod, så att denne nu delar genetisk kod med Messias, och eftersom Messias tillhör Abrahams säd, tillhör nu även icke-juden Abrahams säd.

Denna förvandling leder sedan in i Thiessens nästa argumentationsled: Paulus, Messias och "de heliga". Thiessen identifierar "de heliga" med de mindre gudomarna, ibland kallade änglar, som florerar i den hebreiska bibeln, och menar att "de heliga" som Paulus skriver om är människor som fått del i och av Messias *pneuma* och som har påbörjat en gudomliggörande process. Messias *pneuma* som har ingjutits i icke-judarna möjliggör denna process genom att fylla dem med en kraft som gör det möjligt för dem att leva moraliskt rena liv i väntan på den slutliga uppståndelsen.

A Jewish Paul är en fantastisk liten bok. Thiessen lyckas både introducera Paulus och det rådande forskningsläget för nybörjaren, parallellt med att leverera genomarbetade argument och intressanta tolkningar för den mer beläste. Thiessen låter Paulus förbli konstig, samtidigt som han befäster dessa "konstigheter" med Paulus samtida filosofi samt judisk teologi och bibeltolkning. Med humor och en ständig glimt i ögat kritiserar Thiessen självsäkert tidigare giganter inom Paulusforskningen, och bevisar samtidigt att man inte behöver mer än 200 sidor för att förstå Paulus.

Fanny Granhagen Gottfridsson
TK, Lund

Jean de Bernières-Louvigni. *Det fördolda livet med Kristus i Gud: I urval av en karmelitnunna samt språkligt reviderade av Per Åkerlund och en karamelitnunna.* Skellefteå: Artos. 2024. 216 s.

Corrinne Chong & Michelle Foot (red.). *Art, Music, and Mysticism at the Fin de Siècle: Seeing and Hearing the Beyond.* New York: Routledge. 2024. 251 s.

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Kurt Villads Jensen & Davide Scotto (red.). *Riccoldo da Monte di Croce: Missionary to the Near East and Expert on Islam.* Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien. 2024. 386 s.

Ulf Jonsson. *Med tanke på tron: En introduktion till fundamentalteologin. 2. Jesus från Nasaret.* Skellefteå: Artos. 2024. 196 s.

Karin Rubenson & Karin Tillberg (red.). *Vigd till tjänst: Om ämbetet i Svenska kyrkan.* Stockholm: Verbum. 2024. 497 s.

Daniel Wihlborg & Katarina Pålsson (red.). *Svenskt Patristiskt Bibliotek: 8. Teologi efter Nicaea.* Skellefteå: Artos. 2024. 238 s.