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Exploring the History of Cultural Interactions through Visual Material

Opportunities and Challenges in the Digital Age

Abstract

Since the end of the 20th century, images have been a crucial entry point for cultural studies, and sophisticated tools for their analysis have been developed. Given that images easily travel across all kinds of borders, they can be helpful guides in the study of transcultural processes. This is particularly important for the study of religion, as images – which often play a central role in rituals and are constantly recreated for each new context – reveal the influence that outside cultures exert on a tradition. In addition, digital tools have opened up new possibilities whose impact on the study of images is not yet fully recognised. Based on these observations, this article addresses the following questions: How can the study of images contribute to the study of intercultural exchange in history, and what are the current trends? What dimensions should be considered when studying images in a cross-cultural or comparative context? How did the advent of digital tools change this research framework, with what advantages and what caveats? Finally, what is the impact of the dissemination of research results through Open Access journals on cultural exchanges, especially when visual material is involved? To illustrate these different questions, we follow the history of an image published in a previous issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* (JRFM), an image that was itself the product of complex cultural exchanges and has taken on a new role since its publication in the journal.

Keywords

Historiography, Anthropology of Images, Travelling Images, Digital Media, Interculturality

Biography

Philippe Bornet is senior lecturer at the University of Lausanne, in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations. He completed a doctorate in the comparative history of religions with a study of rituals of hospitality in Jewish and Indian religious texts. After stays in Tübingen and at the University of Chicago, he is currently focussing on interactions between India and Europe and the history of Orientalism in late modernity. He has worked on Swiss missionaries in South India in the early

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twentieth century and on various topics involving the circulation of epistemic, material and visual cultures in this period. He served as treasurer of the International Association for the History of Religions from 2015 to 2020. Recent publications include, as editor, *Translocal Lives and Religion* (2021), as coauthor with C. Blaser, M. Burger and P. Schreiner, *Interweaving Histories: Itineraries between Switzerland and India (1900–1950)* (2023) and as coeditor with N. Cattoni, *Significant Others, Significant Encounters* (2023).

Introduction

Since the "visual turn" in the 1990s, the study of visual material has become a flagship approach in cultural studies.[1] For the study of religions, it has encouraged scholars to move away from texts as the preferred starting point for research and to recognise the central role of images in religious contexts: not only do they encode symbols, but they can also, for example, endow the viewer with spiritual significance, help communicate between the human world and metaphysical entities, and evoke aesthetic emotions that border on religious feelings. Images thus deserve particular attention and specific methodological tools within the study of religions. These concerns and the development of an appropriate methodology have been at the centre of the relatively new field of "religion and media", which is characterised by its interdisciplinarity and has developed quickly over the last decade or so.[2] While many studies in this field have focused on contemporary aspects, fewer works have used a historical and anthropological approach. There is, then, a large area awaiting future research: the complex role images have played in the history of transcultural encounters. For this contribution and starting from the deceptively simple observation that images easily travel from one cultural context to another, I focus on the study of historical entanglements through visual material and consider the future directions such investigations might take.

I begin by outlining some recent ideas about the historical study of cross-cultural exchange. I then discuss the particularities of studying visual material as part of these exchanges, exploring several dimensions that have been identified by visual anthropologists and paying particular attention to the

1 I would like to thank the participants of the Open Success symposium (14–15 September 2023) in Graz as well as the reviewers for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft.

2 See Morgan 2005 and Pezzoli-Olgiati/Rowland 2011 for rich sets of examples.

opportunities and challenges presented by digital tools. I conclude with the concrete example of an image published in an earlier issue of this journal to illustrate these points.

Studying the Circulation of (Religious) Images in Historical Perspective

Translocal, Entangled and Other "Connected" Histories

Recent years have seen the development of several historiographical approaches aimed at overcoming Eurocentrism and focusing on the history of exchange. Alongside the older labels of "world" and "global" history, more precise terms have emerged, such as "entangled", "transnational", "connected histories", or "cultural transfers".[3] While each term has its own specificities, they all share the goal of accounting for phenomena that have moved across borders and of transcending national boundaries.

These approaches differ from "global history" in that they are not necessarily interested in themes that are part of a history of globalisation. They are pursued through a precise and contextualised analysis of sources that document specific cases, such as biographical itineraries, ideas, or images and objects that have travelled long distances. An important source of inspiration is the historian Carlo Ginzburg, who developed the notion of microhistory and once suggested that the proper names of individuals could be used as "Ariadne's threads" to bring together disparate archival material and reconstruct a history of networks.[4] Individual cases are seen as reflections of more general and global processes, leading some to speak of a "global micro-history".[5] Similarly, Michel Espagne's concept of "cultural transfer" encourages historians to focus on "phenomena of reappropriation and resemantisation of an imported cultural good, taking into account what this process reveals about the host context".[6]

3 For an overview of these approaches, see Bayly/Beckert/Connelly/Hofmeyr/Kozol/Seed 2006.

4 Ginzburg/Poni 1981, 134: "The Ariadne's thread that guides the researcher through the labyrinth of archives is the one that distinguishes one individual from another in every known society: the name. Piece by piece, a biography emerges […] and with it, the network of relationships that surround it." Unless specified otherwise, all translations are mine.

5 Epple 2012, 45.

6 Espagne 2005.

These historiographical developments are particularly interesting for the study of images[7] because their trajectory often illuminates broader processes of global exchange, playing a role analogous to that of Ginzburg's proper names in reconstructing networks of influence, diffusion and exchange. At the same time, images pose significant challenges for historians. Not only do they have what W. J. T. Mitchell has termed a "life of their own",[8] which is not reducible to the semantic dimension of texts with which historians are more familiar, but they also exist in various immaterial ways (for example, in people's imagination and memories), thus escaping the record of historical sources. Precisely because of this, an awareness of the anthropological specificities of images is helpful in showing the significance of travelling images in the history of intercultural encounters.

The Many Dimensions of Travelling Images

In his book *Anthropology of Images*, Hans Belting notes that the study of images very often has a cross-cultural dimension. As he puts it, "images unfold their full potential only when seen in a cross-cultural perspective, for then contradictions come to light between any generic definition and definitions specific to different cultural traditions."[9] Similarly, the historian of Persian art Matthew Canepa emphasises that the complexity of images (and objects) cannot be reduced to what they "mean" in the context of their original creation.[10] In fact, they are constantly re-created for the contexts and audiences into which they are inserted. This characteristic is a central feature of "visible religion" as well, and it reveals the dialectic between a (religious) tradition and its opening up to outside influences and innovation.[11]

7 On the notion of "image" as distinguished from "medium" and "picture", I follow Belting 2011, 10–11: "I propose to speak of image and medium as two sides of the same coin, though they split in our gaze and mean different things. The picture is the image with medium."

8 Cf. Mitchell 2006, 53–55. See also Davis 1997 for rich examples from the Indian context.

9 Belting 2011, 32.

10 Canepa 2010, 19.

11 Cf. Fritz/Höpflinger/Knauß/Mäder/Pezzoli-Olgiati 2018, 198: "[The] ability of images to travel through time and space, to meet and merge in new constellations, forms the core of processes of transmission of visible religion. The dialectical relationship between tradition and innovation, between constancy and adaptation, can be identified as the central characteristic of the transmission and reception of visual sources within the framework of temporal, spatial, social and technical changes."

These insights are an invitation to consider images as guides to the study of processes of intercultural exchange and, for the study of religions, to explore the dynamics of traditions that are constantly reinventing themselves through the borrowing and appropriation (and sometimes rejection, as in iconoclasm) of visual material. In what follows, I draw on Belting's emphasis on the notions of image, medium and body to raise questions that can be particularly fruitful for a cross-cultural historical analysis of visual material.[12]

First, there is the image itself and with it, a comparative "iconological" analysis in order to highlight similarities and differences between its various versions, its relations to other images or representations, its respective sources and contexts. Important questions include: What are the image's main features and how does it relate to other similar images? Is the influence of one image on the other explicit? What elements have been added or removed from one version to another? Examples range from the acculturation of a familiar image such as that of the Virgin Mary to suit a new target viewership,[13] to the "hijacking" of a religious image for non-religious (for example, commercial or political) purposes,[14] or to aesthetic factors involving an artist's own technique and style.

Second, there is the medium that carries the image and what that says about its possible reception across cultures: Are we dealing with paintings, drawings, engravings, photographs, films, digital images circulating on social networks, images produced in one or a few copies or perhaps mass-produced? This question is particularly important for issues of cultural exchange, since some media have been extraordinarily efficient in moving images from one context to another, others less so. One need only think of Guy Stroumsa's study of the role of the transition from scroll to codex in the spread of Christianity in Antiquity[15] or of David Morgan's study of the mass printing of images by religious societies in the 19th century.[16]

A third dimension is that of the bodies that perceive images (and of images as bodies). For historical studies, this aspect requires carefully consid-

12 Belting 2011, 9–36. See Fritz/Höpflinger/Knauß/Mäder/Pezzoli-Olgiati 2018, 20 for an application to the study of "visible religion".

13 See examples in Gruzinski 2001 and Bornet 2023.

14 See Pinney 2004 on the (re)use of images of Indian gods in anti-colonial politics or Subrahmanyam 2010 for a study of how Christian art was reinterpreted at the Mughal court (and conversely, how Mughal art influenced European artists).

15 Stroumsa 2016.

16 Morgan 1999.

eration of historically and culturally specific conceptions of the body, and especially of what *seeing* means in contexts that encounter (or clash with) each other. For example, in his remarkable study of the role of images in the conquest of Mexico, Serge Gruzinski analysed the lives of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, contrasting the "image-signifying" – that is, the image as a pedagogical tool brought in by the missionaries – with an image seen as a source of potential transcendent power, as it was reframed in the local context.[17] The challenge is to give an account of seeing in different cultural and historical contexts without essentialising cultures: not only can a "visual culture" change over time (in a single context), but different "visual cultures" can coexist within the same context.[18]

A fourth set of questions concerns the actors involved in the circulation of images from one context to another, and especially the relational power between them: Who is responsible for the "transfer" (mental, material) of an image from one location to another? Who arranges a particular display, and with what intentions? By whom and when is the image meant to be seen?[19] One example is the analysis of the role of visual items (paintings, maps, postcards, photographs etc.) in helping colonial actors achieve hegemonic goals, and concurrently, the derived – and sometimes subversive – uses of the same images by local actors.[20]

These dimensions are certainly not exhaustive, but they all open up fruitful questions for the history of visual material moving across cultures and time. They help bridge the micro level represented by a specific source image and the macro level of the more general or global processes of cultural exchange that are involved.

Digital Tools and Images

In recent years, digital media and tools have brought significant changes to both the circulation and study of images. New technologies have accelerated the dissemination of images and their reception by many audiences in unprecedented ways. Images are reproduced, adapted, or appropriated on

17 Gruzinski 2001, 66.

18 In this sense, the risk of essentialism is not entirely absent from Diana Eck's classic – and otherwise very insightful – study of *darśan* in India (Eck 1998).

19 Cf. Fritz/Höpflinger/Knauß/Mäder/Pezzoli-Olgiati 2018, 25.

20 See the various cases explored in Jay/Ramaswamy 2014 and Gruzinski 2004, in particular chapter 12, on objects.

a larger scale than ever before, moving almost instantaneously from one group or culture to another and reaching new audiences with great ease.[21] Not only the circulation of images but also their study has been impacted by new technologies that present both opportunities and challenges. One major change is that archival material that was once oceans away and difficult to access is now instantly available in a browser. The availability of digitised images (and objects) online is extremely helpful to historians. It allows a corpus to be expanded by collecting versions of a given item located in different repositories, which supports the analysis of differences and distribution, for example, across all kinds of borders. As Sumathi Ramaswamy has stated:

> As more and more of the vast repositories of art works across the world get digitized, images are no longer restricted to the walls of the museum or exhibition gallery, nor do we have to necessarily visit these brick-and-mortar edifices scattered around the globe, sometimes at great cost. Instead, at the click of a mouse, we can apparently summon up seemingly any image into our living rooms or onto our computers or phone screens. […] In other words, in the age of the digital, every one of us is a curator, or has the capacity to become one.[22]

In addition, and although there are not yet many actual applications, algorithms that compare images can reveal patterns within a large corpus. The result can suggest research hypotheses leading to the identification of chronologies or networks, much like recent methods in "distant reading", that is, the automated analysis of large corpuses of texts to highlight textual trends such as style or patterns.[23]

However, this technological development is not without its pitfalls. First, there is the risk of downplaying the physical qualities of an image (or object), from smell to touch, as if its digital representation is exactly the same as the original. A second danger is the fact that not all institutions, archives, and countries have the same access to resources for making documents (and especially images) available online. There is therefore a great risk that

21 For example, Campbell 2013.

22 Ramaswamy 2018, 49.

23 The concept comes from Franco Moretti's work. For an example related to images, see Wevers/Smits 2020.

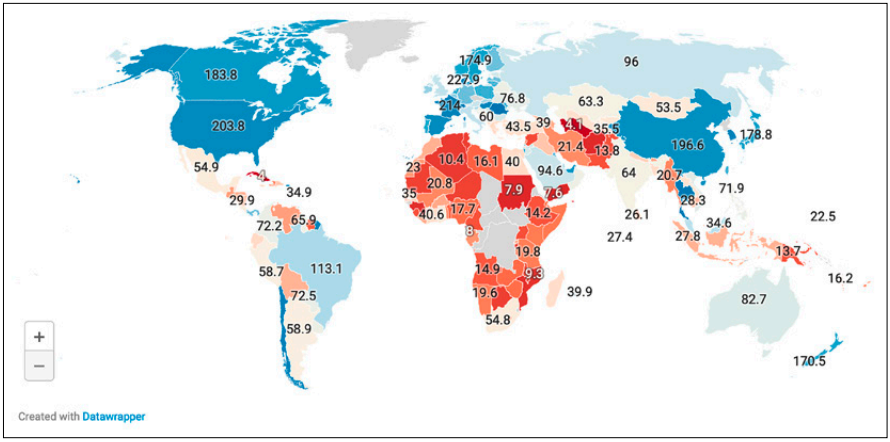

Fig. 1: Map of the world according to Internet connection speed (2024); numbers indicate Mbps. Source: https://t1p.de/f2ygu [accessed 12 November 2024].

documents that have not been digitised because of a lack or absence of funding will simply be excluded from research projects. This concern may be exacerbated by the current tendency to move all research online and to cut budgets that could be used by researchers to travel to physical archives. As a result, some documents become more visible and others are silenced, creating an unfortunate source effect that may well reproduce asymmetries between political or institutional entities reminiscent of the colonial past. Moreover, although the situation is improving, not everyone has equal access to the same digital tools. Working with digital versions of images privileges those who have access to fast Internet, in a "digital divide" that again reflects asymmetries of the colonial era (fig. 1).[24]

Finally, digital images are subject to the constraints of copyright, which favours the widespread dissemination of copyright-free material and makes it more difficult for researchers to work on contemporary (or recent historical) objects. This creates another implicit bias, in pre-selecting which images are readily available to researchers and potentially influencing the research topics themselves.

24 See Zaagsma 2023 for an exploration of the "politics of digitization" and of the location of the "global South" therein.

Fig. 2: Swami of Shirali, Karnataka, the guru of the Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmin Math, Pandurangashram (1847–1915), Anonymous, 1883. Source: *Bilder-Tafeln zur Länder- und Völker-Kunde mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der evangelischen Missionsarbeit*, Calw: Calwer Missionsverlag.

An Example

To illustrate these different aspects, I will follow the history of an image published in a previous issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* (JRFM)[25] that was itself the product of complex cultural exchanges and which received a new role after its publication in the journal (fig. 2). The image was reproduced in an article in which I traced the translocal history of several images published in a book released by the Calwer Missionsverlag in 1883, *Bilder-Tafeln zur Länder- und Völker-Kunde*. The book attempted to show its viewers the world exclusively through images, with almost no text. In the article, I sought to highlight how images produced in a distant context with specific intentions were given a new role by their very appearance in the 1883 volume – a book with a deliberate Christian evangelical subtext.

25 Bornet 2021.

One image in particular caught my attention, that of the religious leader of a *maṭh* (monastery) in Karnataka, which conveyed a sense of majesty and authority – the opposite of what one might expect from a missionary depiction of local religions. As we learn from an article in the *Calwer Missionsblatt*, which had first published the image and provided some context (see below), the original image was based on a photograph taken by a missionary of the Basel Mission.[26] The swami in question can be tentatively identified as Pandurangashram (1847–1915, head of the community from 1863 to 1915), the guru of the Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmin Math in Shirali (Karnataka). The fact that he agreed to pose for a photographer suggests that he did not mind his image being taken by a Christian missionary, indeed that he welcomed the idea of appearing in a new medium, probably a sign of his own openness to modernity (as reflected in a vast project to modernise his religious site). The pose evokes the image of a saint: the guru is in the centre, dressed in his traditional attire, with ritual attributes and exuding serenity and authority.

In his study of a parallel example in Nathdwara (Rajasthan), Shandip Saha has demonstrated that the introduction of photography in the mid-19th century gave rise to a new and more realistic style that was used to represent religious themes and figures. This included the portraits of temple gurus, who were themselves regarded as the living images of Krishna on earth.[27] The resulting pictures served a variety of purposes. For example, they could function as devotional objects, guiding the religious practice of devotees. They could be used as the basis for the production of derivative objects, such as postcards that pilgrims would take home.[28] The "photographic" style itself became a new standard, to the extent that portraits of religious figures were frequently painted from photographs or, at the very least, in a realistic style evocative of photographs.[29] Furthermore, from the early 20th century onwards, the accessibility of printed photographs (and other

26 Anonymous 1879, 34. The first Christian missionary to arrive in this village was a certain [Wilhelm] Nübling (1846–1919) of the Basel Mission, in 1878. His colleague, the missionary Ludwig Gengnagel (1845–1901) paid further visits to Shirali.

27 Saha 2023, 173: "Painters in Nathdwara […] saw photography as an opportunity for greater creative expression. Mahārājas [the title of the temple's gurus] could be photographed for studios, and the negatives would then be used as the basis for more detailed and embellished paintings of the mahārājas at a later date."

28 However, as Saha (2023, 166) noted, "pictorial representations are not subject to the same guidelines concerning ritual bathing or clothing as their sculptural counterparts."

29 Saha 2023, 173.

pictures that could be produced on a large scale) created new possibilities for non-elite religious practitioners (especially non-Brahmins and women), which led to a decline in the significance of specialised Brahmin priests.[30]

In the present example, it is evident that photography was embraced as a valuable and fitting medium for representing religious figures such as the guru. A number of historic photographs of Pandurangashram have survived, and several painted portraits appear to have been executed either from a photograph or in a style reminiscent of photography (fig. 3). This relationship with photography documents – as in the case of Nathdwara's temple – a willingness to produce an image of the spiritual master that was as realistic as possible, in an effort to facilitate the connection between the guru and the devotees.[31]

Fig. 3: Painting of Pandurangashram (1847–1915), undated, source: in Gopal S. Hattiangdi, *Pandurang, Pandurang* (Bombay: no publisher, 1965), appendix 1.

In a second step, the photograph was engraved for publication in a missionary magazine, the *Calwer Missionsblatt* (1879).[32] This engraving was necessary for technical reasons; the technology to print photographs in halftone would not be available until the turn of the century. Concurrently, the notion of "modernity" conveyed by the realistic and accurate dimensions of the photographic medium was effectively negated through the photograph's rendering as an engraving. The swami was presented to a European audience of mission supporters as an example of an archaic, exotic religion.

30 Taylor 2005, 201.

31 As a sidenote, this raises the question of the impact of the introduction of photography (possibly by Christian missionaries) on the visual representation of the guru and the long-distance spread of his image.

32 Anonymous 1879. I warmly thank Shantish Nayel for locating that article.

The article in the *Calwer Missionsblatt* commented negatively that such swamis were like "gods on earth". It hypothesised that the fact that the swami agreed to be photographed was a sign that he was no longer fully convinced of his own divine grandeur and inaccessibility.[33]

This assumption was erroneous – pictorial representations of deities in India are generally regarded as (almost) equally as valid as sculptures or other forms of representation.[34] Moreover, photography (and cinema for that matter) is not inherently a secular medium, far from it, as the subsequent history of this image demonstrates.

A third phase was the republication of the image in the *Bilder-Tafeln zur Länder- und Völker-Kunde* in 1883.[35] This version removed the image from its specific local context to illustrate not this particular swami from Karnataka but the role of Brahmin leaders in Indian religions in general. It was located in the book next to images showing topics as diverse as sacrifices to Kali, Hindu ascetics, religious festivals and the work of Christian missionaries in India. It contributed to the Orientalist construction of traditional India and Hinduism for a Western audience.

The next two steps are particularly revealing. In 2021, I published the scholarly article on the subject. JRFM is an Open Access publication, and the article – and the image – attracted the attention of a scholar, Professor Frank F. Conlon, who had been working on the community gathered around the tradition represented by this swami. Conlon in turn contacted a member of the community, M. Bondal Jayshankar, who then contacted me. It seemed that this image of the beloved guru was not yet known in the community. I was asked if I could send a large version of this picture printed on cardboard through the mail, which I did. It ended up in a small museum/temple of the community (fig. 4).[36]

I subsequently discussed the matter further with a member of the community who, on the basis of a comparison between slightly later photographs and this engraving, expressed uncertainty about whether the figure was really Pandurangashram. This doubt triggered further research into the circumstances of the contact between the missionaries and this

33 Anonymous 1879, 34: "It is only surprising that the Swami decided to sit for a photographer (our picture is drawn from a photograph taken on the spot), *perhaps a proof that he is no longer entirely convinced of his own divine sublimity and inaccessibility*" (my emphasis).

34 Taylor 2005, 201–202.

35 Anonymous 1883, Tafel 69.

36 See https://t1p.de/pj9do [accessed 12 November 2024].

Fig. 4: The image framed and located in a small museum of the Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmin community, Shirali (Karnataka), https://t1p.de/pj9do [accessed 12 November 2024].

particular community in Shirali in the 19th century. The matter remains unresolved.

This case study provides an excellent illustration of the complexities inherent in researching the history of the circulation of images in a religious context. The aforementioned dimensions are all integral to comprehending the case in question. An iconological analysis of the image is of great importance. It includes studying the way the scene is constructed, the clothing and attributes of the figures depicted, and the relationship of this image to other similar images (such as other photographs or paintings of the guru).

Of greater significance, however, is the medium through which the image is conveyed. The photographic medium was evidently embraced by a religious community that was proud of being "modern" and saw no objection to utilizing this medium for ritual purposes. The transition from photograph to engraving and its publication in a European missionary journal constituted a significant development. The change of medium resulted in a radical alteration of the message conveyed by the image.

Furthermore, the example illustrates the function of observing the interactions between diverse visual cultures that are situated within the context of missionary activities. From the perspective of members of the Chitrapur Saraswat community, the picture was (and still is) more than just an illustration; it evokes powerful emotions and can serve as a source of inspiration and support for connecting with a spiritual master. Protestant Christian missionaries, for their part, sought to reduce the image to a mere illustration of their negative views of other religions, thus neutralizing or "killing" it (again alluding to Mitchell's notion of images as living entities).

What then of the fourth dimension outlined earlier, namely the actors who co-produced the image, contributed to its circulation and consumed it, and their possibly divergent intentions? Here these actors include a religious community and its guru, Christian missionaries, the target audience of missionary propaganda publications, and the audience of academic specialists. They all occupy different positions in terms of agency, power, and access to resources, which need to be accounted for.

Finally, the digital framework has contributed in no small way to this story. The availability of the image in an online archive containing issues of the *Calwer Missionsblatt* facilitated the research process. Similarly, photographic and pictorial representations of Pandurangashram are accessible online through the community's own website, facilitating comparative analysis. The availability of these images may be an indication that both the mis-

sionary society and the Indian religious community are well connected. In contrast, a similar study of the depiction of religious authority figures among low-caste groups during the same period would likely have faced particular obstacles in terms of the accessibility of non-missionary sources online.

The publication of the article in an Open Access journal (JRFM) contributed to the further history of the image. Not only did it reach a wide academic community interested in a variety of cultural contexts and disciplines, but it was also "revived" by being brought to the attention of a religious community. This episode demonstrates how Open Access journals can facilitate intercultural exchange, for at least in the humanities, academic studies are never produced in a social and political vacuum and can have an impact on human communities themselves.

Conclusion

While the propensity of images to travel is nothing new, it is only recently that scholars have recognised the need to address their multiple dimensions. Doing so often requires a multidisciplinary approach and therefore collaboration between scholars specialised in different area studies and from different fields: art historians, historians of religions, media specialists, anthropologists, for example. Only then can images – as well as objects and other non-human entities – become important players for writing parts of a global history of contacts between religions and cultures. The study of travelling images has the potential to bridge the micro and global levels, to transcend the compartmentalisation of knowledge according to identity categories such as nation or religion, and to show the complexity of forms of domination in colonial contexts.[37]

The currently available digital tools can be considered a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they make a vast quantity of images from a multitude of sources available, enabling the dissemination of these images through digital networks and the analysis of extensive image collections. However, they also present challenges, in particular those associated with a tacit selection process that is influenced by differences in funding capacity and by copyright.

37 Cf. Gruzinski 2004, 325: "The complexity of the issues and forms of domination at work in the Iberian globalisation often appears better [in] objects than in written sources."

The field of "religion and media", which is inherently collaborative and interdisciplinary, is a particularly conducive setting for such studies. By challenging the dominance of textualist approaches and by recognizing the complex nature of images (independently of whether they are artistic, religious, etc.), this field offers perspectives that can counteract Eurocentric tendencies. Recent studies in the field appear to gravitate predominantly towards contemporary phenomena, frequently employing sociological methodologies and analytical frameworks. In order to understand the present, however, it is essential to make comparisons with the past – for example the "digital turn" can be fruitfully compared with other similar shifts in history, such as the invention of the codex or the advent of printing. In this respect, much remains to be done in the study of religion and media in history, and the results are likely to be of interest to scholars of religion as well as historians interested in processes of globalisation. While several recent studies have explored the complex and sometimes surprising trajectories of (religious) images, much remains to be done.

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