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Current Trends in the Study of Religion, Film and Media
Celebrating Ten Years of JRFM

JRFM
JOURNAL FOR RELIGION, FILM AND MEDIA

JRFM is a peer-reviewed, open-access, online publication. It offers a platform for scholarly research in the broad field of religion and media, with a particular interest in audiovisual and interactive forms of communication. It engages with the challenges arising from the dynamic development of media technologies and their interaction with religion.

JRFM publishes peer-reviewed articles in English that focus on visual and audiovisual media, feature film, documentary, advertising, interactive internet-based media and other forms of communication in their interdependencies with contemporary or historical forms of religion. It critically reflects on theories and methods, studies on intermediality, phenomenological and comparative approaches to media and religion across different cultures and periods. The main focus lies on contemporary phenomena, but diachronic analysis of the interaction between religion, film and media is also promoted as an essential facet of study.

JRFM is edited by a network of international film, media and religion experts from different countries and with professional experience in research, teaching and publishing in an interdisciplinary setting, linking perspectives from the study of religion and theology, film, media, visual and cultural studies, and sociology. It was founded in cooperation between different institutions in Europe, particularly the University of Graz and the University of Zurich, and is published in cooperation with Schüren publishing house, Marburg (Germany). It is an online, open-access publication with print-on-demand as an option. It appears twice a year in May and November and encompasses generally 4–6 articles.

If you are interested in publishing in **J**RFM, please visit our website www.jrfm.eu. You will find detailed information about submission, review process and publication. We encourage papers that deepen the questions addressed by the calls for papers and free contributions within the wider profile of the journal.

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Philippe Bornet and Stefanie Knauss

The Study of Religion, Film and Media

Trends and Future Directions
Editorial

Congratulations, JRFM! With this issue we celebrate the ten-year anniversary of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* (JRFM), which has been published in cooperation with scholars and institutions in Europe and the United States since 2015. We are using this moment to take stock of current trends and consider future developments in the study of religion and media. These themes were discussed at the conference "Open Success!? Research and Publishing in Religion, Film and Media", held in Graz, Austria, in September 2023. The conference considered two topics that are shaping the work of JRFM: (1) the possibilities and challenges of Open Access (OA) publication (i.e. a journal that does not charge readers or authors) and (2) issues influencing research in this field. In its Thematic Section, this issue collects contributions in which scholars involved in the work of the journal as members of the editorial or advisory board reflect on aspects they consider to be of significance to the field in this moment and their potential to influence its future direction. The response by Giulia Evolvi places the articles in the larger context of what she identifies as current trends and challenges in the field. It is our great pleasure that the Open Section includes an article by Robert K. Johnston, whose research in theology and film has greatly influenced the field.

The journey of JRFM began in 2014 with Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati and Christian Wessely's initiative to develop and launch a diamond Open Access as a platform for research on religion and media that is intentionally interdisciplinary and while primarily focused on audio-visual media is open to analysis of how other media (bodies, clothes, books and more) interact with religion. Today, scholars from fourteen countries and with a broad range of research interests and expertise are involved in the production of two issues per year. They are published on the journal's webpage (jrfm.eu) and in the

permanent repository at the University Library at Graz (http://unipub.uni-graz.at/jrfm/) and are available as print-on-demand through a collaboration with Schüren publishing house, Marburg, Germany.

Research on religion and media is conducted by scholars affiliated with a range of disciplines, including religious studies, theology, media and communication studies, history, sociology, and others, and scattered across many universities and institutions. The highly interdisciplinary character of this research area can make it difficult to find a publication venue given the often rigid disciplinary boundaries shaping the profiles of many journals. Thus, from the very beginning JRFM was conceived as a platform for promoting exchanges among researchers in this field and for highlighting the relevance of media for the study of religion in all spheres of society and culture, and from many perspectives. Over the last decade, the journal has been received by a broad audience of readers and authors worldwide, a readership made possible not least by its OA policy. After ten years, JRFM is at the center of a vibrant interdisciplinary network of researchers.

As a diamond OA journal, JRFM has participated in the discussions around OA publishing in the humanities. The pros and cons of this (r)evolution are a regular topic for members of the editorial and advisory boards, together with stakeholders from different sectors of OA, including libraries, publishing houses, academic institutions, public research funds, and political authorities. As Christian Wessely discusses in his contribution to this issue, Open Access is not simply a tool for providing free access to research results but it also influences the way research projects are organized and documented, and is part of a broader transformation of research paradigms in the context of mediatization and digitalization in the humanities and in academic scholarship.

The first issue of JRFM, published in November 2015, offered a reflection on the range of approaches and methods used to conceptualize and analyze the multi-layered and multi-faceted interactions between religion and media. As Marie-Therese Mäder's contribution for this issue shows, the question of method (focusing here specifically on how to study the reception of media) is still relevant and will continue to occupy a field that is integrating an ever-broader range of disciplines along with their respective concepts, theories and methods.

Since that first issue, media technologies have changed dramatically. New technologies such as generative AI, increasingly pervasive social media, and media tools such as Zoom, which are all used regularly by large numbers

of individuals, will continue to influence interactions between media and religion and their study. Philippe Bornet's contribution to this issue provides an example of such developments in pointing to both the historical and the transnational circulation of images and to new connections made possible by the digitization of primary sources and research results.

In these last ten years, the institutional context for the study of religion has also changed, not least because of the elimination of some religion-related degree programs and departments of religious studies, the primary (although not exclusive) home of scholars researching religion and media. As Alexander D. Ornella's contribution shows, these changes in institutional conditions have to be taken into consideration when reflecting on the future of the field. He also points out, however, that the study of media and religion can create awareness of the importance of religion in social dynamics in the global context and could thus in turn increase enrollment numbers in relevant programs.

Another significant development in recent years that will shape the future direction of the field is the internationalization of research in religion and media with regard to the media studied and the scholars involved. Here OA publishing makes a crucial contribution. The contribution by Mirna Vohnsen explores the exciting work being done in the field of Latin American Jewish film studies, showing how religion and media studies can bring together marginalized fields, in this instance, the study of Latin American media products (which can be expanded to material from the Global South more broadly) and non-Christian religious traditions. That such work will have to grapple with the ways in which media (and their study) are involved in power dynamics is reflected in Yara González-Justiniano's contribution, which proposes a toolset for analyzing decolonial aesthetics. While applied here to examples of Puerto Rican artists and media producers, this approach can be used to study a wide range of cases. The need for diversity, within the scholarly community and among its subjects of study, is also one of the insights shared by Sofia Sjö in her consideration of a large international study of youth and religion, where she focuses on the results pertaining to interactions with media. Emphasizing the specific cultural and political contexts which shape how young people perceive and use media in the context of religion, Sjö notes that diversity amongst research subjects should not only be recognized but also actively fostered.

In her response to the articles in this anniversary issue, Giulia Evolvi first insists on methods, advocating for global and integrated perspectives

rooted in the study of contexts. The digital age has brought not only new methodological challenges and opportunities but also new topics for research, such as the relationship between religion and AI. She then highlights three themes that run through the contributions and suggest fruitful directions for future research: power dynamics that allow media to be used to promote or silence a particular worldview; decoloniality, which attends to the mediatized voice of underrepresented groups; and the reconfiguration of religion in a post-secular world, a phenomenon that often involves specific mediatization practices.

JRFM is a vital platform for exploring the relationships between religion, media and society, both in the present and in the past. Questions investigated in this field are arguably key to ensuring that the study of religion remains relevant to both students and stakeholders in the contemporary academic world. In addition, JRFM's aim to bring together an interdisciplinary community of scholars willing to cultivate a collegial spirit remains a crucial objective for the study of religion and media in general, even though it is perhaps the exception rather than the rule in today's segmented academic world. Finally, as a peer-reviewed, Open Access publication, JRFM is positioned to promote the internationalization of the field and to bring high quality discussions on religion and media to a widening audience beyond Europe. We look forward to the next ten years of exciting research published in JRFM.

Christian Wessely

Not for Free at All

Open Access Publishing and European Academia

Abstract

The political demand that all results of university research be available through Open Access was a strategic decision that stakeholders have been required to embrace. However, Open Access is cost-free only for consumers, not for producers. Authors now need to not only produce excellent content but also secure financial support. Specific interest groups, in the interest of fair access to quality-assured publication, are establishing their own Open Access publication opportunities. This article sketches the emergence of the Open Access concept, its impact on the pressure to publish and career planning for young scholars, and the effort required to operate an Open Access journal (using the *Journal of Religion, Film and Media* as an example), focusing in particular on the workload associated with publishing one year's output and the input/output relationship under current academic conditions.

Biography

Christian Wessely has been publishing articles on media and theology since 1994. After completing his doctorate in theology with a dissertation on mythological structures in the entertainment industry, published by Lang in 1995, he pursued his postdoctoral qualification. In 2004 he completed his habilitation in fundamental theology with a thesis entitled "Gekommen, um zu dienen" (Come to Serve), published by Pustet in 2005. Together with Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, he founded the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* in 2015.

A Brief History of Open Access Publishing

Open Access (OA) publication plays a crucial role in the dissemination of academic research by making scholarly works freely accessible to a global audience. This model of publishing promotes the democratization of know-

ledge, allowing researchers, students, and the general public to access and benefit from the latest scientific findings without financial or legal barriers. OA publication also enhances the visibility and impact of research, enabling greater collaboration, innovation, and exchange of ideas within the academic community. Furthermore, it can facilitate socio-economic development by providing policymakers, practitioners, and entrepreneurs with information valuable for addressing pressing global challenges. As a result, the importance of OA publication extends beyond academia, influencing aspects of society and contributing to the advancement of knowledge for the benefit of all.[1]

At least, that's the honourable and well-meaning theory which dates back to the late 1990s. Yet it was only in 2001 that sixteen individuals representing their respective organizations signed a declaration on the importance of the free distribution of knowledge, the so-called "Budapest Open Access Initiative" (BOAI).[2] Based on the documents created by BOAI, the Berlin Declaration on Open Access in Sciences and Humanities was developed in 2003. Initiated by the Max Planck Society and the European Cultural Heritage Online project, the Berlin declaration defines the goal of OA publishing. As of June 2024 it had been signed by almost 800 international institutions.[3]

In 2018, Plan S was launched by the national research councils of twelve European countries. The "cOAlition S", which is supported by the European Commission and has national research funds as its most important members, requires scholars to publish their results in an OA mode as a condition for receiving public funding. Plan S also defines a minimum of rights that are to be granted to the author, such as copyright, standardized and transparent publication fees, and certain incentives.[4]

OA publishing can have a remarkable impact on academic career possibilities. Given that in Germany (or Austria), for example, around 80 per cent of the academic staff are on temporary contracts, that job security

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1 See the statement of the European Commission concerning the OA policy at https://t1p.de/omcl1 [accessed 17 July 2024].
2 See Budapest Open Access Initiative 2002. It is remarkable that the European Commission has made Open Access mandatory for all Horizon 2020 projects and beyond; national funding agencies largely follow that example, e. g. the Austrian FWF, see Förderrichtlinien für Einzelprojekte, Version 4, 25, https://t1p.de/q0coc [accessed 17 July 2024].
3 Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities 2003.
4 Plan S Principles 2019.

helps create healthy working conditions,[5] and that the number and quality of published articles is a key factor in gaining one of those rare permanent positions, the increasing number of OA journals offers opportunities for academics to advance their career.

This article discusses the pressures resulting from the imperative to publish Open Access on both young scholars and those institutions and organizations which produce OA journals, reflecting critically on developments in the publication market since the establishment of an OA publication requirement. It uses as an example the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* to illustrate the costs of the OA model in terms of the financial and human resources required to produce a journal as well as the benefits of publishing OA, for example in terms of visibility.

The Pressure to Publish and Financial Burdens on Authors

OA publishing sounds like a positive and equitable model. To evaluate this model, we need, however, to take account of a number of factors. An important contextual element is that if they are to be offered one of those scarce permanent positions in academia, young scholars are increasingly required to have produced a high number of excellent publications, which in turn require research for which they may have had to secure third-party funding. Such third-party funding has become necessary because in most public universities the regular budget covers only the most urgent requirements such as teaching, staff, and materials.

The cOAlition S, whose members happen to be the main sources of third-party funding, have tied grants to OA publication of the results of the research they fund, bundling together the requirements to publish in high-quality journals and secure external grants. While grants generally cover at least some of the publication costs, they are difficult to obtain, even for good and, indeed, excellent researchers.

As Stephan Pühringer points out, the universities and young scholars have to pay a price for this highly competitive set-up in the scholarly community, not least in financial terms since they are now often responsible for covering publication fees. A young scholar in need of publications to secure a permanent position will find themselves either bound to publish in jour-

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5   Reitz 2024, 7.

nals with which their host institution has some sort of relationship (membership etc.) or required to raise money to pay publication fees.[6] According to Pühringer, the prevalent narrative of a fair competition within the scientific community based solely on scholarly excellence is a myth.[7] The costs of this competition are not only economic but also social, psychological, and epistemological, and, last but not least, it is detrimental to innovation.[8] This accords with a selection process tailored to the needs of the contemporary university system, with its focus on a small group of resilient experts who support the politically desired, and hence politically supported, university system. Susanne Pernicka and colleagues see a close connection between the criteria of excellence used in the competition for academic positions and the scarcity of permanent positions: "'Few permanent positions' sits well with the broad approval of the idea of 'selecting the best' and upholding 'meritocratic principles.'"[9]

Scholars who do not publish in high volume in highly rated journals may face disadvantages or even the termination of their contract. Together with the increased pressure to publish, expectations regarding where scholars publish have dramatically changed. Today, the standard is to publish articles in renowned journals, and not, as previously, to publish monographs. A publication format is highly rated if it is peer-reviewed (for quality), in English (for dissemination), and indexed (e.g. in SCOPUS, Web of Science, ATLA, ERIH). And in addition, given the requirements of funding agencies, the publication also has to be Open Access.

At this point, it is necessary to distinguish between different standards in the OA culture. The model embraced by for-profit publishers is the gold standard: articles are freely available to readers but the authors are usually charged an article processing fee if the submitted article is accepted. The size of these fees varies: they typically range from around €1,000 (PLOS One

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6   Cf. Pühringer 2024.

7   The Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), https://sfdora.org/ [accessed 1 December 2024], and the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (COARA), https://coara.eu [accessed 1 December 2024], serve as examples of a different and I think better approach. Nevertheless, the decision about a candidate for a permanent position still largely depends on the candidate's publications and network.

8   Pühringer notes the significant increase in precarious employment conditions, the high rate of dropping-out at the first opportunity among the best, opaque career prospects, and social selection. Cf. Pühringer 2024.

9   Pernicka/Reichel/Hefler 2017, 292 (translation: Wessely).

registered report article)[10] to €5,000 and more (Wiley Advanced Science).[11] Although a number of gold standard OA journals offer reduced fees for scholars from, for example, Africa or Southeast Asia, these discounts are often insufficient given the funding situation of the scholars' institutions.[12]

A journal meeting the higher diamond (or platinum) standard focuses solely on scholarly quality, disregarding economic aspects, at least in that it does not charge authors. These journals are financially dependent on institutions like libraries, universities, scholarly societies, or funding associations, which may influence the general direction of the journal. Diamond standard journals are the exception rather than the rule, even though projects like DIAMAS[13] are doing their best to change that.

The standard easiest to achieve but least recognized is the green standard, which requires the author to store their paper in a publicly available permanent repository after its publication in a traditional journal. Such repositories may be institutional (e. g. at a university), topic-centred, or a webspace provided by the author.[14] The journal in which the work was originally published may set an embargo period, so although the repository can be freely accessed, it is usually not current. Access may become a problem in the long term if the repository is not maintained.

Adding complexity to the OA environment, predatory journals capitalize on the publication strategies developed in the wake of the public commit-

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10 https://plos.org/publish/fees/ [accessed 17 July 2024]. PLOS fees vary widely, depending on topic; they can be as high as €6,000 in PLOS Medicine when the author's institution is not a member of the "journals collective action community". In this way, institutions are encouraged to join this community.

11 https://t1p.de/soiia [accessed 17 July 2024]. Wiley provides an excel file at this page which can be downloaded freely; it shows that the publisher has a portfolio of about 580 journals with a range of publication fees. Like PLOS, Wiley provides APC discounts and membership deductions.

12 Some institutions, mostly educational, provide support for individual researchers who need to publish in these journals. Several journals have contracts with institutions which ensure special conditions or even free publishing for its affiliates.

13 The DIAMAS (Developing Institutional Open Access Publishing Models to Advance Scholarly Communication) initiative, founded in 2022, seeks to address this issue by coordinating quality standards and promoting greater efficiency amongst institutional publishers; cf. https://diamasproject.eu/ [accessed 1 October 2024]. The EU-funded project will run until 2025; it is to be hoped that its results will lead to a sustainable implementation of the diamond standard. However, the great diversity of funding models is not conducive to this.

14 A self-provided webspace, however, would not be compliant with Plan S, which requires a trusted repository.
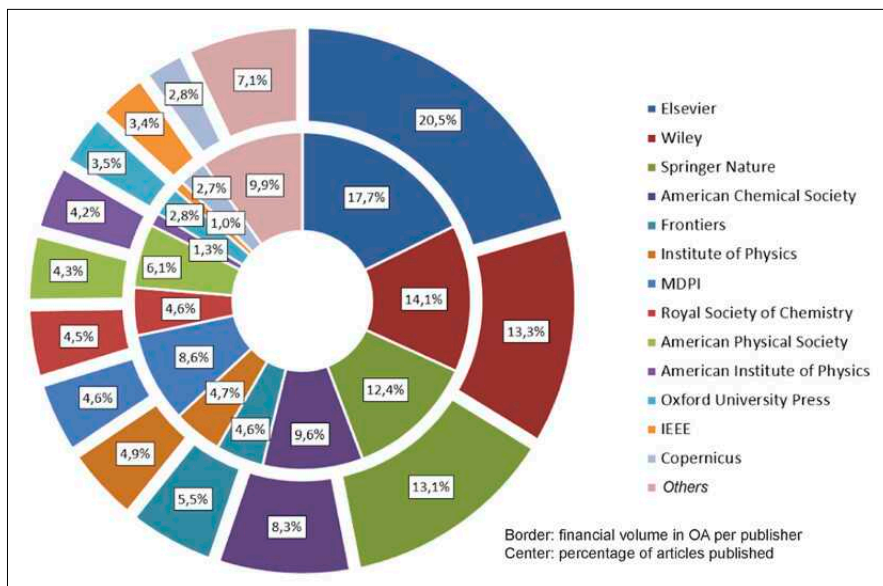
Fig. 1: Publishers' share of publications and total expenditure in percentages for the year 2023, Source: Jülich Forschungszentrum Zentralbibliothek, Open Access Barometer 2023.

ment to OA publication. They offer publication venues at cost to authors, but without providing services such as quality management, peer review, or distribution, unlike reputable gold standard journals. As a result, their model is effectively fraudulent,[15] for scholars who have used a journal with a negative reputation may be ill advised to include a potentially decisive publication on their CV.

Unsurprisingly, larger for-profit academic publishers have recognized the new environment as a business opportunity, a means not just to survive but also to thrive. In his article on author fees for OA publishing, Ángel Borrego states that "[d]espite praise for diamond OA journals, which charge no fees, most OA articles are published by commercial publishers that charge APCs

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15 Cf. https://t1p.de/nz4wc [accessed 17 July 2024]. To identify a predatory journal, one should consult the database of OA journals (https://doaj.org/) and check whether a previously unknown journal offering a publishing opportunity is listed there. Nevertheless, the principle that an author should "publish only in already established journals" is in my opinion inadequate, as it channels research trends and overly restricts the space for meaningful innovations. New journals with potential in all conceivable areas of research continue to emerge, and they certainly deserve a chance.

[article processing charges]."[16] Given that the OA movement aims to reduce overall costs and increase accessibility, the disproportionate number of profit-oriented journals charging author fees which dominate the market can hardly be called a satisfactory development. The OA Barometer of the Central Library of the Research Center Jülich shows that as of 2024, the big players amongst the publishing houses share 89 per cent of scholarly publications (fig. 1), which generates a significant narrowing and distortion of the market.

Open Access and Publishing Houses

Generally, the OA principle stands for unhindered reader access to any published content, be it in the form of a monograph or, more frequently, an article.[17] As we noted, the vast majority of OA journals are published by for-profit companies, with a few prominent major players (fig. 1). All gold and diamond standard OA journals do provide some or all of the services a publishing house provides, amongst which (hopefully) are:

- Office management and correspondence
- Peer review (at least by an editor, in the best case by one or several peers)
- Feedback for the author
- Copyediting and proofreading of the finished manuscript
- Typesetting and the organization of galley proofing
- Printing, if print or print-on-demand versions are made available
- PR and advertising
- Inventory management and distribution
- Management of contacts with libraries, bookstores, download opportunities
- Enforcement of copyright and, if applicable, billing of royalties
- Digital infrastructure to make a manuscript available online, and related maintenance

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16 Borrego 2023, 359.

17 The industry and other commercial stakeholders are thus able to access any results easily. Unfortunately, this is not true in the reverse direction – publicly funded science does *not* always have access, let alone free access, to the results of "private" research (e. g. industry-funded), even though they may have been achieved with the support of (indirect) public funding, such as tax relief.

These services do incur labour and other costs. Consequently, outside the OA market (and at least in most European countries), while the publication of an article is usually free for the author (with the costs incurred by the publisher covered by subscription fees), for the publication of a book, the author will be charged a printing subvention fee. The amount of the fee depends on the efforts the publisher will put into the publication and, to some extent, on the reputation of the author or the publishing house.[18] In the case of both monographs and articles, a reputable publisher will insist on having the submitted manuscript peer reviewed, even if the author is particularly well-known or the project extremely promising.

Since OA journals do not charge subscription fees or sell individual issues, the production costs have to be covered by other means, for example through author fees, as mentioned above. This problem arises for non-profit and for-profit publishers equally. And so we are left with a central question: Is it possible to produce a diamond standard OA journal that offers authors cost-free publication while also upholding rigorous quality controls and delivering comprehensive publisher services? And a follow-up question: Is the investment worth it?

Case Study: *The Journal for Religion, Film and Media*

To answer these questions, I will explore here the publishing process of one particular journal and consider the costs and benefits. Having collaborated in planning and publishing the diamond standard OA *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* (JRFM)[19] since 2013, I have gathered some knowledge of the intricate procedures required to establish and manage an OA journal.

Founded in 2014, JRFM is a cooperation between the universities of Graz (Austria), Munich (Germany), Hull (United Kingdom), Villanova (USA), Lausanne (Switzerland), and Åbo (Finland). It is published twice a year (May and November) and specializes in articles that focus on visual and audio-visual media, feature films, documentaries, advertising, interactive internet-based

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18 If, for example, Scrooge McDuck wanted to publish a book titled *How to Make Money and Keep It*, he would probably have a choice between publishers eager to pay him to publish with them; however, if Ottilia Averagy would like to publish her thesis on *The History of the Toenail Relic of Saint Dionysius of Latrinia*, she is likely to be less fortunate, even though the scholarly quality of her work might be significantly higher than that of Uncle Scrooge's book.

19 https://www.jrfm.eu (production and main server) and https://unipub.uni-graz.at/jrfm (permanent repository) [accessed 17 July 2024]; ISSN 2617-3697.

media and other media of communication and their interaction with contemporary or historical forms of religion.[20]

The technical infrastructure and required support are provided by the University of Graz; this includes the main server and the permanent repository. The complete production workflow is handled on the main server through the Open Journal Software by PKP.[21] The four chief editors and eight members of the editorial board consider their work for the journal part of their scholarly vocation. Usually, at least one member of the editorial board is involved in any given issue as one of the issue editors; sometimes a member of the advisory board or an external scholar with expertise in the issue's main theme may also be involved as a co-editor.

The scholarly expertise of its editors and its advisory board is the main resource required for the production of a high-quality journal. In addition, the journal production requires services and material which have to be outsourced and funded, such as professional design, backup media, hardware used by the managing editor, and the (almost, but not totally negligible) domain fees. It is also desirable that the editorial board meets regularly in person to allow for a free and dynamic exchange of ideas, which is not possible to the same degree through video conferences, although those do have their merits, especially for an international team of collaborators.

The journal collaborates with various institutions to secure funding, which is provided by the hosting institution, the Faculty for Catholic Theology at the University of Graz, as well as the Department for Religious Studies at the Faculty for Protestant Theology at LMU Munich, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Villanova University, and the significant support of the Styrian Regional Government, Department of Science and Research. In addition, the cooperation with Schüren publishing house in Marburg, Germany, covers the print-on-demand version as well as most of the advertising and PR for the online version.

A considerable effort goes into producing an issue, in terms of direct and indirect expenses and also work hours. Beyond the costs for material and services mentioned above, the substantial labour hours required for production (fig. 2)[22] highlight the extensive investment of time and human resources required to produce an issue of an OA journal.

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20 https://jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs_jrfm/about [accessed 17 July 2024].

21 https://pkp.sfu.ca/software/ojs/ [accessed 17 July 2024].

22 The numbers in fig. 2 represent the average calculated from the responses of individuals involved in the publication of the journal as requested by the author of this article in July 2024. Based on these responses, the overall work hours were estimated.

Subject	Hours per year	Hours per issue	Hours total (production of two issues/year)
Office management (including communication with authors and incorporation of corrections into proofs)	700		700
Issue editors (2)		90	360
Chief editors (4)		40	320
Review editor		50	100
Editorial Board (9)	8 (meeting)		72
Peer reviewing		70	140
Copyediting		40	80
Typesetting		24	48
IT services	20		20
Library services	25		25
Total			1,865

Fig. 2: The estimated total work hours required to produce two issues of JRFM (one year's production). The hours in bold are provided free of charge by scholars.

Importantly, the table only includes the work hours that are directly related to the production process. Not included are "optional" hours, such as for cover design, archive and backup management, or applications to be included in subject-specific indexes and databases, which are crucial for the reputation of an OA journal. The effort required for such applications varies greatly: for instance, while being listed in the DOAJ only requires demonstrating basic facts, an application for inclusion in SCOPUS requires measuring networking and, most importantly, reception (e.g. citations of the journal's contributions in other scholarly publications). Meeting these requirements, or at least creating the conditions for meeting them, demands a considerable amount of time.

Another factor which adds to the work hours involved in the production of an issue is searching for qualified and cooperative peer reviewers. With the proliferation of publishing platforms such as OA journals and with peer review now widely considered the standard for scholarly quality, the demand for peer reviewers has grown, and they, too, are under increasing pressure. Thus, substantial efforts are often required to recruit the necessary number of reviewers for each issue, especially since writing (double-blind) peer re-

views, while central to academic responsibilities, is unpaid and lacks public recognition (although it might be recognized as a service to the profession).

Consequently, all OA journals grapple with the enduring challenge of securing funding to support their operations in the long term and achieve financial stability – a problem to which a perfect solution remains elusive, given that currently, funding agencies for example might finance the foundation of a journal or particular projects to improve its operations but not its long-term production.

And the Output?

The dissemination of articles from OA journals cannot be controlled after their publication. They are downloaded, included in other repositories, circulated as email attachments among professionals, read online, etc. As for JRFM, in addition to its main server, there are repositories at the authors' respective universities and a number of other free repositories which include material from each issue (select articles or the whole issue). Download numbers thus provide only limited information about the distribution and reception of the published articles and issues.[23]

The following numbers, which only include the downloads from the main server at www.jrfm.eu (rounded for the reader's convenience), show a clear tendency. The first issue, published in November 2015, generated approximately 300 downloads in the first month. Currently, the average download of 2,500–3,000 articles in the publication months (May and November) and 1,500–2,000 in each of the months in between is relatively stable. The year 2023 saw a total of 17,897 downloads of abstracts (fig. 3) and 26,043 downloads of individual article files (fig. 4), adjusted for the statistical outlier in November.[24] According to internal statistics, the journal's "bestseller" was downloaded more than 5,250 times, while other articles hover around a few hundred or fewer downloads. However, this statement is misleading, as the downloads are calculated over the entire publication period and therefore

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23 The main server at https://www.jrfm.eu has maintained detailed statistics since the system update in 2017. Thus, even though the diffusion of JRFM articles cannot be reconstructed precisely, it is possible to make an educated guess about tendencies and the journal's general development.

24 The unadjusted numbers are 25,015 abstracts and 27,916 articles downloaded. Adjustment by adding the average of the months without November as the November value.
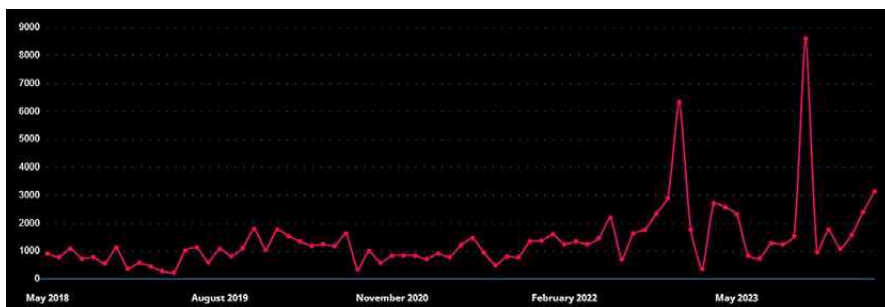
Fig. 3: JRFM download statistics (abstracts).[25]
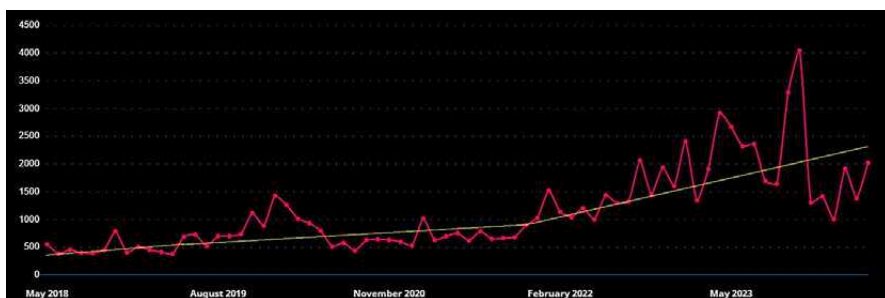
Fig. 4: JRFM download statistics (article files).

it is difficult to compare data from the latest issue with those from, for example, 2017.

The increase in download numbers undoubtedly reflects the growing tendency to use OA publication, a trend also indicative of reading behaviour. Additionally, it indicates the expanding dissemination of JRFM. The noticeable increases in download numbers occurred in close temporal proximity to the journal's inclusion in prominent indexes; a correlation is therefore likely.

The fact that the journal is Open Access has not only contributed to its increased dissemination but is also connected to its visibility beyond the Anglo-European sphere, as the geographical diversity of readers and authors has significantly increased over time. Depending on the issue topic, up to 40 per cent of the downloads are initiated outside the Anglo-European area. As for authors, in 2017 JRFM published ten articles in the thematic section, one of which was authored by a non-Anglo-European; in 2023, five of fifteen

25 The articles' statistics were only implemented with the update in May 2018, so these numbers correspond to the period between May 2018 and May 2024.

articles in the thematic section were written by authors with a non-Anglo-European cultural background.

Thus, while the publication of an independent OA journal such as JRFM requires considerable investment in terms of finances and human resources without long-term financial stability, the fact that it is freely accessible both to readers and to authors results in a broad international dissemination, significant reception (as indicated by download numbers), and diversity both in the scholars who publish in the journal and in its readership.

Conclusion

The realm of Open Access publishing is multi-faceted, with both challenges and benefits for the academic community. While Open Access does lead to a substantial increase in dissemination and visibility for authors and their scholarship, sustaining such platforms often relies on assistance from institutions like universities and their libraries, which provide server support and technical resources, and on funding by the same institutions, public or private research funds, or other institutions interested in supporting the local academic community and its research.

The main advantage of founding an independent OA journal is certainly sole control over all aspects of the journal, from the determination of editorial direction to the identification of strategic objectives and maintaining financial responsibility. However, this final aspect is also a disadvantage, because significant financial resources must be raised for production processes that have to be outsourced. Hence, it is important to create awareness of the importance of the publication at the institutional level and to convince relevant stakeholders of its unique selling points. Only as long as the institution fully supports the project and as long as basic funding is secured can such a project be operated professionally. Also, the risk of relying on the cooperation of specific individuals within the academic community should not be underestimated. Processes that work well with a particular constellation of collaborators may have to be reorganized when other individuals become involved. Thus, advantages and disadvantages must be carefully weighed up when considering OA publication as a model in general, and a specific OA journal in particular.

In some sense, the example of JRFM reflects the broader current developments of OA. The general tendency towards OA publishing is a blessing

especially for a research field that is international and intercultural, such as religious studies and theology. Providing a publication opportunity without financial barriers for scholars from all regions of the world is an essential component of an open academic culture. However, while Open Access is a noble goal and has the potential to democratize the spread of information and foster scientific advancement, it also presents numerous logistical and financial challenges that need constant attention. Initiatives such as DIAMAS play a crucial role in guiding this development in the right direction. However, the long-term success depends on the political will to permanently implement these structures. Therefore, it is essential to enhance networking and lobbying on a supranational level among the networks of diamond standard OA journals if the ideals of Open Access are to be achieved.

Off the Record

If you, dear reader, are asked to provide a peer review for an OA journal, especially one that relies on a business model that does not seek profits, we encourage you to think twice before turning down the request. Our experience indicates that it has become more challenging to find suitable peer reviewers than to find good authors, and a good journal is in urgent need of both.

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Alexander Darius Ornella

To Study Religion and Media, We Need to Teach Religion and Media

Economic Realities, Challenges, and Future Directions

Abstract

Universities in the United Kingdom, and also in the United States, Austria, and Germany, are facing increased financial pressures. This has already led to the closure of religious studies departments and courses. Course closures impact not only the study choices of students but also the opportunities for the faculty to study religion and media. In this essay, written from a UK perspective, I argue that healthy recruitment into religious studies and related degrees is a necessary foundation for consideration of future directions in the study of religion and media. Given precarious funding, it is essential to consider the value that the study of religion offers the tax-paying public and how scholars in the study of religion can demonstrate how religion shapes sociocultural and political transformations. I argue that scholars of religion and media can do much to renew public interest in the study of religion.

Biography

Alexander Darius Ornella, Dr. theol., is Senior Lecturer in Religion at the University of Hull. His research interests include technology and religion, sports and religion, and religion and visual practices. Currently he is exploring how the use of police robots might impact faith communities. He is also working on a project that explores the links between sex work and religion.

Introduction

To speculate about future directions in the study of religion and media is itself almost a religious practice, akin to divination in antiquity. Given the financial challenges many universities in countries such as the United

Kingdom, the United States, Germany, and Austria (to name just a few) are facing, any such divination needs to consider the institutional and budgetary context of the study of religion and media, that is, adequate student numbers as foundation for the funding of both teaching and research.

The study of religion and media faces a double burden of precariousness. The first burden comes from the institutional reality of how and where "religion and media" is taught. At least at an undergraduate level, the study of religion and media is often limited to select courses within a religious studies, theology, or social sciences degree. Such embeddedness means that the future of the study of religion and media is linked to the future of the courses, disciplines, or departments it sits in. The second burden is shared with many other non-STEM (**s**cience, **t**echnology, **e**ngineering, **m**athematics) courses or courses that do not have a clear vocational trajectory. Such courses are at the mercy of ever-changing governmental policies, expectations about career paths and the "value for money" that a degree offers, and last but not least, often-questionable university senior administrator decisions. This second burden might hit the study of religion and media especially hard: why should a university spend its already scarce resources to fund the teaching and the study of religion and media?

To speculate about future directions in the study of religion and media, then, means first and foremost to reflect on the question *why?* Why study religion at all? Anyone who attempts to answer this question will need to venture beyond personal interests and the stubborn pervasiveness of religion in contemporary societies. In addition, they will need to keep at least two different audiences and their concerns and agendas in mind. Understandably, students will be looking for convincing reasons to justify their financial and time commitment. University managers will want to be convinced that a continued investment in the study of religion will reap a financial return, will come with a high financial "contribution to center", and will increase their institution's student market share. In other words: perceptions of growth are slowly becoming almost exclusive drivers in university administrators' decisions about which courses to cut and which areas to label "growth areas" and funnel university resources to.

This essay is to a large extent based on my own experience of the higher education landscape in the United Kingdom and the discussions around sustainability when the study of religion was wound down at my own

institution over ten years ago, as well as similar discussions at UK universities that are currently facing course closures. The UK higher education sector is under immense pressure that affects a range of disciplines, including the study of religion, humanities, and social sciences, and at some institutions even "safe" STEM subjects. At the time of writing, around 70 universities in the United Kingdom have announced voluntary and/or compulsory redundancies, with some universities having (or wanting) to save up to £100 million over the next couple of years.[1] The University of Kent's theology and religious studies provision is one of the latest victims of these pressures.[2]

While the perspective of this article is grounded in my experiences in England, the recruitment challenges I will discuss in more detail in the next section reflect broader issues the study of religion faces across and beyond Europe. Those issues are linked to the value, or lack of value, both the tax-paying public and academia itself see in the study of religion. Samuel L. Perry addresses the challenging position the study of religion finds itself in:

> There is a curiously persistent mismatch between religion's relevance in human social life and its place in the academy. And that situation is worsening. Today, religious studies departments are fighting for their lives. Social science advisors practically (and sometimes explicitly) forbid their graduate students from studying religion for fear that it will make their employment prospects even dimmer than they already are.[3]

I argue that any speculation about future directions in the study of religion and media needs to have as its foundation a solid understanding of the study of religion's two-fold precariousness, the biases the study of religion faces from the public and within academia, and the recruitment challenges faced by the subjects and departments that are home to the study of religion and media, i.e. religious studies, theology, humanities, or social sciences. The viability of research around religion and media very much depends on the viability of the study of religion more broadly as well as the viability of those disciplines that feature classes or courses related to religion and media. An-

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1   Sandiford 2023; Mitchell 2024; UCU Queen Mary 2024.
2   University of Kent 2024.
3   Perry 2024, xv.

ecdotally, the Vice-Chancellor of one of the UK universities that announced compulsory redundancies in June 2024 stated bluntly at an all-faculty meeting that the only thing that will save universities is bums on seats, because research is mostly a loss-making business.

The success of any attempts to reinvigorate interest in the study of religion and drive up student numbers to enable research will ultimately depend on how compelling the answer is to the questions of what students can learn about society that they cannot learn elsewhere, and how that knowledge translates into clear career paths and practical and actional knowledge.

I argue that as scholars of religion and media (and readers of JRFM) collectively we have the resources, knowledge, and expertise to take back control over contemporary narratives of the decline and irrelevance of the study of religion. Rather than presenting a single answer to this complex question, this article aims to initiate a conversation on how the study of religion and media can demonstrate its value for money and justify its continued funding.

Before proceeding to the next section, I should clarify who I consider to be scholars of religion and media. I do not see the study of religion and media as the exclusive territory of – or a subfield restricted to – "religious studies". I know many scholars in religion and media whose background is in theology, sociology, cultural studies, gender studies, or media and communication studies. This clarification matters, because rather than presume there is competition between "home" disciplines (and there often is such competition, much to everyone's detriment!), we must recognize that the study of religion and media – and thus ultimately the study of religion – is enriched by its interdisciplinarity.

"Follow the Money": Recruitment Challenges

While the study of religion and media is not exclusively dependent on the financial health of religious studies (or theology for that matter), I focus on recruitment numbers for religious studies and theology, as these are probably its main financial homes. Mapping recruitment patterns for religious studies relies on publicly available data that might be inaccurate. In the United Kingdom, for example, a report by the British Association for the Study of Religions highlighted that inconsistencies when coding for religious
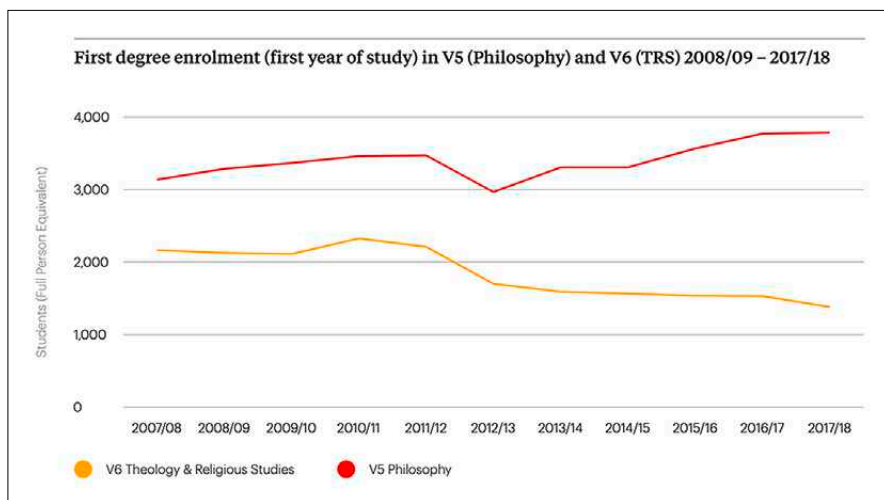
Fig. 1: First year students in philosophy and theology and religious studies in the UK.

studies courses sometimes skewed numbers between religious studies and theology. Tracking major/minor combinations involving religious studies can be equally challenging.[4]

The raising of tuition fees in England to £9,000 in 2012 had a major negative impact on the UK-wide statistics of student numbers enrolling in a course in V6 (theology and religious studies; fig. 1). A British Academy report attributed the dip mostly to a decrease in recruitment in England and stated that in Scotland, where Scottish students did not pay tuition fees, enrollment remained largely stable.[5] To date, intake numbers in Scotland remain small but stable, with overall numbers in 2022/23 similar to 2019/20 (fig. 2). Due to the relatively small cohort in Scotland and the fact that students from England, Wales, and Northern Ireland do pay tuition fees in Scotland – meaning tuition fees are not an incentive for these students to relocate for a religious studies programme – I will not continue to separate Scottish and English numbers in the remainder of this essay.

At the same time as tuition fees were raised and university recruitment significantly declined in England, pupils' interest in religion in secondary education in England/Wales/Northern Ireland continued to grow. The num-

4   Robertson/Tuckett/Schmidt 2021, 13.
5   British Academy 2019, 15.
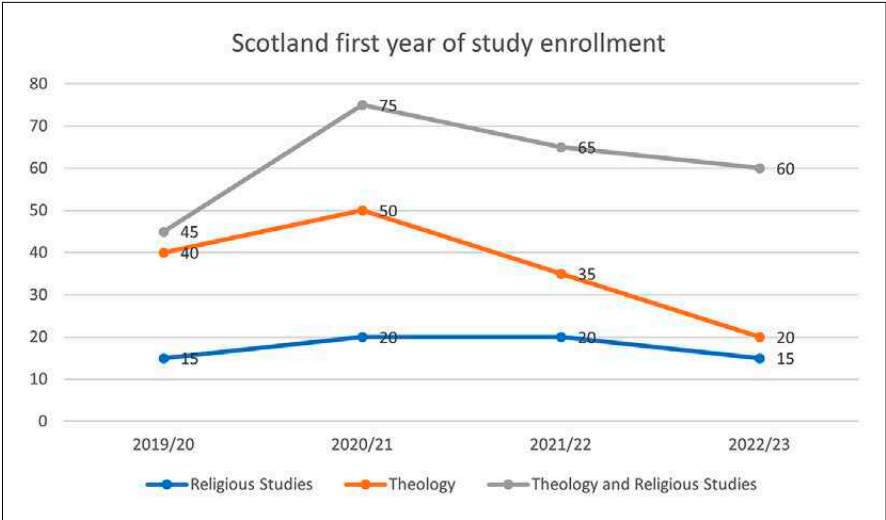
Fig. 2: First year students for religious studies and theology programmes in Scotland.

ber of pupils taking religious studies at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)[6] and A-Level[7] saw a steady increase until 2016 but then started to drop off significantly in 2018 (fig. 3). The increase in numbers up until 2016 contributed to a popular narrative that religious studies enjoys a growing interest which universities simply failed to harness.[8] Not only did the spike in A-Levels in religious studies in England not translate into increased student numbers at university level, but in light of the dramatic drop in the study of religion at secondary school since 2017/18, it is clear that religious studies has proved not to be the feeder subject universities had hoped for.[9]

Tracking recruitment patterns and generating reliable and comparable data is also complicated by the realities of the institutional "home" of religious studies degrees and their entanglement with other degree programs.[10] In some universities, religious studies is offered *alongside, with* and *in* the same department as theology programs. In other universities, religious

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6   Taken in the United Kingdom (excl. Scotland) at the age of 16.
7   Taken in the United Kingdom (excl. Scotland) at the age of 18. A-Level qualifications are used by universities as an entry qualification.
8   Religious Education Council 2021; Benoit/Hutchings 2023, 319.
9   Ofsted 2024.
10 Robertson/Tuckett/Schmidt 2021, 1–2; British Academy 2019.
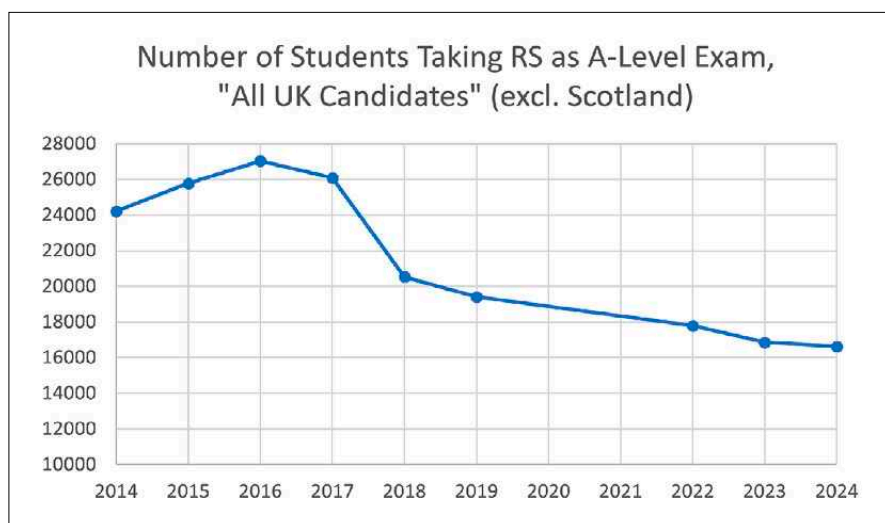
Fig. 3: Religious Studies A-Level exams, 2014–2024 (UK excluding Scotland).

studies sits under the umbrella of philosophy, humanities, or social sciences. Yet other institutions, for example in Germany, feature two flavors of religious studies in the same university: one in the religious studies department within a faculty of theology and another in a faculty of humanities or social sciences.

Degree program coding is also complicated by how degrees in theology and degrees in the study of religion are advertised. For example, the University of Oxford markets their theology and religion degree as a program that combines the study of theology and the study of religion.[11] The complexity and diversity of the "home" of religious studies and its entanglement with theology is important. While the drop in student numbers in the combined V6 theology and religious studies category seems driven by a noticeable decrease in theology entrants, religious studies did not seem to be able to convert this drop into an increase in religious studies entrants. In fact, in 2022/23, theology entrants saw a slight uptick again (from 490 to 510) while religious studies entrants dropped (from 275 to 210; fig. 4).

However, while religious studies and theology numbers declined, philosophy entrants have remained largely stable (fig. 4). Maybe religious studies can learn something from philosophy, and perhaps even benefit from a

11   University of Oxford 2024.
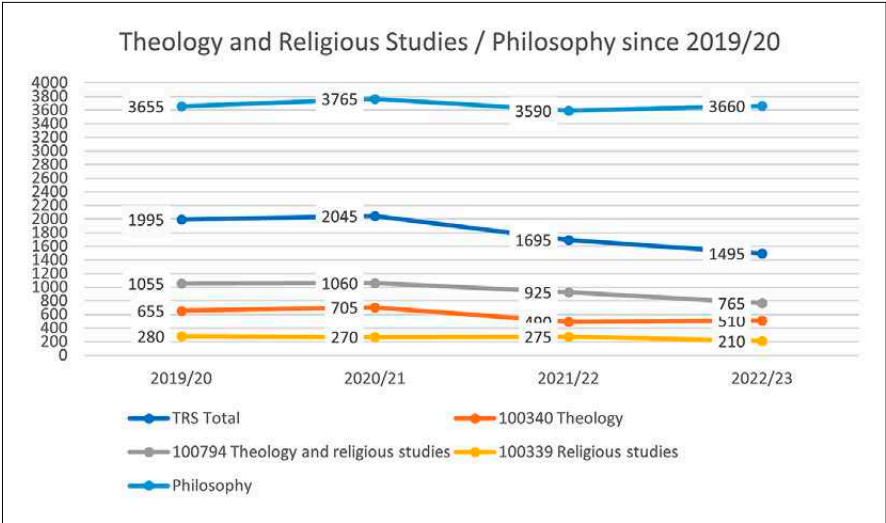
Fig. 4: Total number of first year students on a philosophy or TRS degree program across the United Kingdom.

renewed engagement with philosophy.[12] For the purposes of this article, the relatively stable numbers in philosophy matter because the ways in which philosophy, religious studies, and theology degrees are advertised by universities overlap: marketing material for all three degrees revolves around questions about the meaning of life, opportunities to explore and understand different worldviews, or the skills to think critically and challenge one's own biases. As religious studies draws on a range of disciplines, this commonality is not surprising, but it is not helpful for finding and communicating a unique selling point (USP) that sets religious studies programs apart from other degree programs. In a competitive recruitment environment in which university marketing people look for flashy USPs, the idea that religious studies students leave the university with a similar skillset to philosophy or sociology graduates, i. e. the ability to understand diverse worldviews and a range of analytical skills, might not be sufficient to persuade students to study religions and to justify the existence of religious studies degrees at universities.

Religious studies provisions are under pressure not only in England but also in some continental European countries. Germany, for example, has

12   Porcher 2024; De Jong 2024.
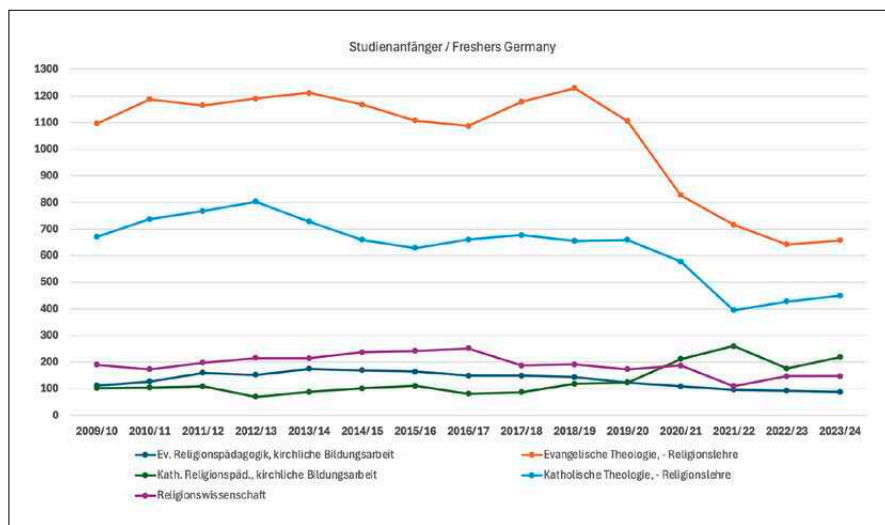
Fig. 5: Number of first year students on a religious studies or theology degree in Germany.

seen a similarly significant drop in theology entrants and a slight decrease in student numbers for religious studies degree programs (fig. 5).

At first sight, numbers for religious studies in Austria seem to go against the trend in the United Kingdom and in Germany (fig. 6). In Austria, religious studies has seen a recent increase in student numbers. However, the spike in religious studies might be linked to a relatively stable intake of students through the University of Vienna, whereas Salzburg's BA program in religious studies is currently not being advertised on the university's website.

If current recruitment trends continue, more programs and departments will be at risk of closure. Lower student numbers will mean fewer scholars in the field at fewer institutions, likely limited to "elite" universities. How, where, and by whom the study of religion will be taught impacts the study of religion and media. Given its interdisciplinarity, the study of religion and media is already fragmented, with scholars of religion and media dispersed across disciplines or departments, e. g. film and media studies, history, philosophy, politics, sociology, law, or an (often ill-defined) humanities department. One might argue that the study of religion and media is then in a better position to survive the culling of programs and departments and that the study of religion and media is then not necessarily dependent for its survival on a distinct religious studies department as its anchor. But such
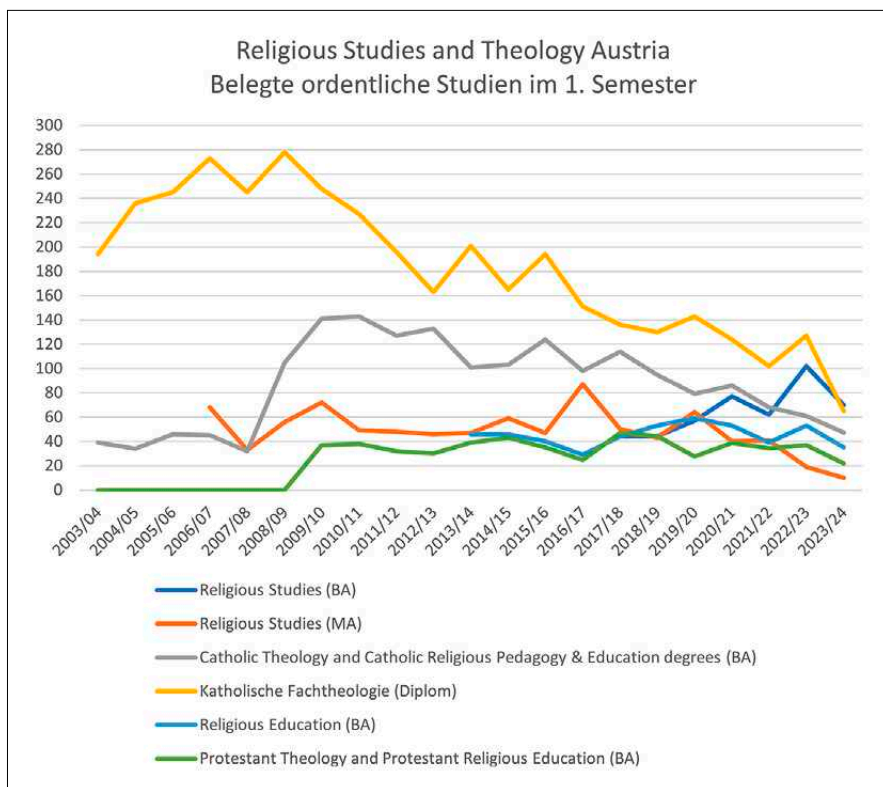
Fig. 6: Number of first year students on a religious studies or theology degree in Austria.

"embeddedness for survival" might not be survival at all. Samuel L. Perry argues that the study of religion continues to be marginalized in secular academia and consistently receives low interest and low relevance ratings.[13] Without the visibility a distinct department – or subject group – brings (and the institutional currency attached to official structures), the study of religion and media may be at risk of even greater marginalization. This marginalization might not even be exclusively due to personal biases held by decision makers; it could be a product of the very perception of the lack of relevance Perry speaks of.

The perceived lack of relevance of the study of religion extends to how its insights are taken up by other disciplines, or as Adam J. Powell puts it, "The

13 Perry 2024, 131–139.

sociology of religion may have something to say to religious studies, but I am not sure what religious studies has to say to the sociology of religion."[14] Powell's argument makes clear that scholars of religion and media cannot evade the question of what they have to say to scholars in other disciplines and, beyond academia, to the general public or policy and decision makers. Individual scholars are indeed engaged in public debates, such as Chris Deacy or Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati as cinema experts, or Robert M. Geraci who is heavily involved in the AI and ethics discourse. In current university funding models, however, student numbers are seen as directly indicative of the perception of what the field has to contribute to the wider society, and vice versa.

One of my former colleagues at the University of Hull, Dr. Bev Orton, often told students to "follow the money" when thinking about the "why" of social phenomena, social structures, or socio-political and cultural changes. A similar logic can be applied when reflecting on recruitment numbers and trends affecting religious studies:

- What are governments, taxpayers, and students willing to pay for in money and/or time?
- What is the value of studying religion?[15]
- Why is religious studies perceived as a low-value degree?
- Who has a vested interest in the disappearance of religious studies?
- Where is the money that is saved by closing religious studies programs spent?
- Does higher education need to reinvent itself, and to what extent can and should religious studies be a part of such reinvention?[16]
- Can the study of religion and media contribute to – or even spearhead – the reinvention of the study of religion more broadly?

Although the study of religion is under pressure at many institutions, the study of religion and media can provide a strong contribution to any attempts to make the study of religion more relevant and exciting again.

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14 Powell 2016.
15 Berkwitz/Wallace 2020.
16 McClymond 2020, 107.

Potentials of the Study of Religion and Media

Whether we like it or not, today student recruitment is increasingly competitive, not only between universities but also within institutions. USPs are intended to persuade potential students to choose one institution over another, or one degree program (an area labelled for investment) over another. As admissions tutor in my School, I have been involved in many conversations about the USPs of my institution and our degree programs. As Michael Stausberg argues, scholars studying religion need to become better at marketing their interest in religion to prospective students:

> We tend to think that religion ("religion") [the controversial concept] is of interest per se, but probably we must make it more interesting than it really is. (Isn't religion, or for that matter "religion," often a tedious matter?) It is not by accident that some independent scholars, who live off the sale of their books, the ticket sales for their talks, or advertisements for their podcasts, do a better job in this business of how TO MAKE RELIGION INTERESTING AGAIN.[17]

I contend that the work of the field of religion and media can make unique contributions to these efforts by unveiling the hidden presence of religion in societies and by encouraging the shift beyond the Western paradigm in teaching and research.

The Hidden Visibility

Religion (broadly understood) occupies an ambiguous and very diverse position in Western societies. In the United States, religion is highly visible and omnipresent in public life and political debates. In a number of European countries, religion is deemed mostly irrelevant (and thus often ignored and rendered invisible), and yet it continues to creep back into broader public and social discourses. With "creeping back" I do not necessarily mean that religion simply re-enters public discourse after having left it or having been pushed out, although that is one aspect of what I refer to. Rather, I mean that religion creeps back into public discourse after having been wished away and ignored – without really having gone away completely. This re-

17 Stausberg 2024, 27.

turn, or reemergence, of religion is largely ignored unless it happens more forcefully, for example in times of conflict. In the context of current crises, the polarization of politics, supremacist thinking, and a sense of being left behind by a failed state, pockets of religion are becoming increasingly visible and find their way into public and political discourses across Europe. This reemergence is carried by means of communication, mediation, and material practices, with this "hidden visibility" of religion a particularly suitable subject for scholars of religion and media. They have the tools to trace these visibilities and their social impact – and thus demonstrate that there is value in funding the study of religion.

Political discourse in Europe, for example, is ripe with religious undertones, communicated through visual images and reliance on religious imaginaries. The right-wing Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni frequently draws on the image of the heterosexual family promoted especially by the Catholic Church when conveying her political messages. Given the power and political success of such references, scholars of religion and media can demonstrate how visual-religious traditions continue to matter, not in an abstract way but very concretely, by breathing life into ideas of family, marriage, and identity with the power to shape social and legal discourses.[18] In Austria, the right-wing FPÖ promotes values it claims are based in a cultural Christianity.[19] That claim did not prevent a controversy around the election campaign slogan "Euer Wille geschehe" ("Your will be done"), which was held to be mocking the Lord's Prayer.[20] Representatives of Christian churches stated that the FPÖ was violating religious sensibilities. This example shows the remarkable capacity of right-wing parties to create narratives around sovereignty, self-determination, identity, and morality and to critique the "establishment" using religious norms, language, and images. With the recent successes of right-wing parties across Europe, the entanglement of politics and religious narratives provides religion and media scholars with plenty of opportunities for critical analysis of contemporary socio-political landscapes.

Campaign slogans are not the only opportunity for scholars of religion and media to unpack the hidden visibility of religion in political discourses. Across Europe, right-wing parties have become some of the most outspoken and vocal supporters of Israel in the ongoing Israel–Palestine conflict, sup-

18 Fritz 2018.
19 FPÖ 2024a.
20 Rauscher 2024; Religion ORF 2024.

port that is communicated through social media, blogs, websites, and press photography.[21] For scholars of religion and media, these discourses provide opportunities to explore how identities, communities, and events outside national borders impact everyday domestic politics.

Scholars of religion and media also have analytical tools to detect the presence of religion when it is more hidden from the public eye, for example when US debates about religion and politics quietly spill over into Europe, as in the case of increased lobbying of UK politicians by US anti-abortion groups.[22] Lobbying relies not only on hidden (from the public eye) communication with decision makers but also sometimes on a carefully orchestrated public media presence and strategies for engagement with the public, providing religion and media scholars with traces of how religion continues to shape policies.[23] Government-commissioned reports, too, provide religion and media scholars with material that enables them to demonstrate that how governments interact with religious groups impacts societies more broadly, i. e. beyond "the religious sphere". The Bloom Review, a report on how the UK government ought to engage with faith communities that was published under the Sunak Conservative government, is a vehicle for considering why such a review was commissioned, for what purpose, and for whose benefit (politically or otherwise), and for exploring how faith communities are labelled and which imaginaries governments use in including/excluding people of faith.[24]

European popular culture is full of visual material that blurs the lines between religion, politics, and mythology. For example, the visually rich opening ceremony of the Paris Olympics 2024 featured an extravagant Dionysius, but the background scenery of drag queens was interpreted by some Christians as a mockery of Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper. A scholar of religion and media could analyze this example from a variety of perspectives, with regard to (a) the extent to which religious and mythological visual literacy is being lost to the general public, (b) the possible overlaps between visual representations of various mythological and religious narratives, and (c) the role that mythological and religious narratives still play in attempts by European societies to explain their place in and connection to history.

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21 FPÖ 2024b.
22 Das 2024.
23 Vesa/Binderkrantz 2023.
24 Bloom 2020, 11.

Advancements in technology, too, are an area of high social relevance with which scholars of religion and media are engaging. For example, while AI has become popular for its ability to generate texts, it is also quickly expanding into the audio-visual space, with image and video creation. This raises questions around issues of trust, authority, authenticity, and bias. Scholars of religion and media who already have expertise in deconstructing the power of images and challenging visual authorities can contribute to broader academic and public discussions around the status and use of AI in society.

As these examples show, scholarship in religion and media has multiple opportunities to speak to the wider public on relevant questions and thus also illustrate its importance as a field of study, together with that of the study of religion more broadly. Scholars in the field can discuss topics that the general public has encountered, relates to, and has seen or heard about. In embracing this opportunity, they can help make the study of religion itself more tangible, relatable, and relevant.

Beyond the Western Paradigm and Visual/Narrative Traditions

The attentive reader will have realized that I have focused on recruitment challenges in European countries and ignored discussions of challenges that colleagues in other regions might face.[25] On the one hand, I have done so because the western European context is my more immediate (institutional) work environment. On the other hand, I have done so to illuminate an issue that persists in the teaching of religious studies: a deeply ingrained and normalized Western (European) perspective, which is hard to overcome. A colleague recently shared an anecdote from a 2024 conference on decolonizing the curriculum in the humanities and social sciences in UK higher education. Some participants felt that decolonizing teaching was too time consuming, with time already devoured by the various pressures of UK academia, workload requirements, threats of redundancies, course closures, and university management mandated savings.

I have been in the fortunate position of being able to teach cohorts of international students from Africa and Hong Kong, albeit in non-religious studies courses. I am immensely grateful for this opportunity, which I have found humbling and insightful. And with this experience in mind, I need to

25   Fujiwara 2005; Banda 2024.

recalibrate my comments on the state of the study of religion and media (and religion more generally):

- Religious practice continues to be pervasive on a global scale. This is nothing new, but (abstract) studies and lively discussions with people from various geographic regions and with various levels of religious practice are two separate things.
- Religion and media scholars with expertise in the transnational exchange of ideas, images, and communication through media need to make the pertinent point that what happens globally with respect to religion almost always affects local communities, even if local communities see themselves as (mostly) secular.
- Because of that connection between the global and the local and because of the transnational exchange of images and narratives, Western countries that perceive themselves as "secular" will not be able to escape religious narratives and imageries. Not because of a dichotomy between the "secular West" and the "religious other", but because religious narratives cannot be limited to an imagined "private sphere" or an imagined (and non-Western) "other". Instead, religious narratives and imaginaries spill over into social practices and are being appropriated, used, and abused by social actors. Scholars of religion and media are in a position to trace the weaving of religious narratives through social practices across contexts.

Religious studies scholars such as David Chidester or Richard King have discussed the various ways colonialism shaped the study of religion and the implications of post-colonial theory on their field for some time.[26] There is also an ongoing debate about what decolonizing the curriculum and decolonizing methodologies mean for the study of religion.[27] What strikes me, however, are my students' testimonies that Europe's colonial legacy and colonial violence are still part and parcel of their everyday life, their African identity narratives, and their continuing experience of ignorance and exploitation.[28]

In this situation, scholars of religion and media, in particular those specializing in non-Western religious and visual traditions, can provide valuable

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26 Landoe Hedrick 2024; King 1999; Chidester 2013; Chidester 2014.
27 Horrell 2024.
28 Parashar/Schulz 2021, 870–871.

and concrete entry points to deconstruct the power of Western images and mediated narratives. They can act as a resource for exploring visibility and invisibility in and beyond the West. It is not enough to merely look at visual artifacts from different geographic regions and cultural traditions, for to do so would merely perpetuate the Western gaze upon the other.

The *Journal of Religion, Film, and Media* has featured a number of examples of scholarship aiming to deconstruct Western narratives that are valuable not just for scholars of religion and media but for the study of religion more broadly. Based on his analysis of colonial images, Philippe Bornet, for example, argues that societies never develop in isolation but have been connected through media and visual practices for a long time. He proposes that the production, distribution, and consumption of images must always be understood "as part of a transnational and connected history of visual practices"[29] that oscillates between power and resistance in a context shaped by the heritage of colonial oppression. In my experience, transnational connections often remain abstract in the classroom: why would an 18-year-old British student whose primary concerns are living expenses, juggling study and work commitments, their post-academic career, and potentially tuition fees care about an image that might have circulated in a distant culture and society? Bornet makes a compelling case and provides visible and tangible evidence for why students should care and how societies and cultures are inseparably entangled.[30]

Scholars of religion and media can also demonstrate the value of listening to (or better: looking to) artists who use the visual as a medium to critically reflect on society. Such exercises in seeing and visual awareness can raise questions about how power, race, and gender play out on a social level through visual communication: who represents whom in what way? Who has power over their own self-representation? And who has the power to represent others? The *Journal of Religion, Film, and Media* has featured a number of examples, such as the visual artist Amruta Patil, who retells traditional Hindu narratives in the form of graphic novels. Rather than recounting the narrative as is, she retells the stories from the perspective of the underdog, the oppressed, and those who are left out in the stories. She aims to be a storyteller who has her "finger on the pulse of the land: local politics, local calamities and scandals. The aim of telling stories is to offer

29   Bornet 2021, 84.
30   Bornet 2021, 57.

insight into the human experience, to allay fears and traumas."[31] In this, religion is central, as she argues: "What interests me about religions is the stories they came up with as means to this end."[32] Her work offers a new look at traditional Hindu narratives and representations that allows them to speak to today's issues while also being accessible to students.

Engaging with artists such as Patil, scholars in the study of religion and media have an opportunity to lead the way in decolonizing teaching and research in religious studies and related fields. As Patil argues, "we underestimate and undermine the effect of the visual and material"[33] as well as the opportunities and challenges visual spaces bring. As scholars in the field, we can provide examples of how to make use of the opportunities of which Patil speaks to highlight issues that affect all of us – issues of power, discrimination, gender, race, sexuality – and to better understand why we are facing the challenges we are facing today.

Concluding Thoughts: The Future Is Now

The future of the study of religion and media as well as the diversity of research interests present in the field depend on student numbers not just in the study of religion but also in other disciplines related to the study of religion and media in all its interdisciplinarity. In an academic context where the study of religion is increasingly marginalized, university managers will not be the driving force behind recruitment initiatives. Instead, it will fall to scholars in the study of religion to provide a compelling answer to the question of what students can learn about society by studying religion that they cannot learn elsewhere, and how that knowledge translates into career paths and practical knowledge. Once we have that answer and can communicate it to the tax and tuition-fee paying public, we might stand a good chance of driving student numbers up again.

In this essay, I have attempted to highlight some areas where scholars in the study of religion and media are particularly suited to contributing to a renewed interest in religion more broadly, by uncovering how religious practices, ideas, ideologies, and iconographies continue to shape social struc-

31 Patil 2021, 21.
32 Patil 2021, 21–22.
33 Patil 2021, 20.

tures and political debates. In other words, they must show that how "religion" affects everyday life should also be of interest to those who are not religious or have no interest in religion. Scholars of religion and media have an opportunity to demonstrate the need for continued financial investment in the study of religion more broadly, because religious ideas continue to be mediated in secular debates and are being repurposed for various social and political agendas. Where traditional religious practice is in decline, many people flock to media (social media, influencers, podcasters) to help them answer the existential questions they face in times of crises and turmoil.

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Marie-Therese Mäder

A Variety of Reading Modes

Researching the Consumption/Reception of Media and Religion

Abstract

This article identifies three perspectives on the study of media consumption/reception in the field of religion and media and develops a trifold typology of methodological approaches. The first type considers representation in its relationship with reception, with the researcher as the primary recipient. The second type proceeds in reverse, centering on reception/consumption and attending to representation in so far as it is at the basis of reception; in this type, informants are the primary recipients. The third type concerns consumption and reception processes, with the media that is being consumed playing no significant role in the study. The conclusion addresses the limitations of the discussed types of method in the field of media and religion and advocates for combined approaches. It emphasizes the researcher's role and responsibility in the analysis and argues that future research should focus on integrating cultural contexts to better understand the dynamics of media and religion.

Keywords

Media Consumption, Media Reception, Analytical, Discourse Analysis, Quantitative and Qualitative Methods/Approaches

Biography

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Introduction

The field of media and religion is characterized by a vast array of contemporary and historical sources and practices of engaging with them and therefore deploys similarly diverse methods. Understanding religion as a

meaning-making practice in the "historical world"[1] suggests that it provides orientation for dealing with the contingencies of human life and its environment.[2] This understanding of religion necessarily embraces media, which are involved in meaning-making practices in the reception and consumption of religion. By distinguishing between immanent and transcendent spheres, religion differentiates itself from other cultural fields that also engage meaning-making processes.[3] This distinction allows religion to be understood as a communication system that, according to Birgit Meyer,

> requires intermediaries – or, in short, media – that transmit messages between "senders" and "receivers." Note that this is […] a formal understanding of media according to which in principle anything can be made to operate as a medium. Media […] shape [messages] by virtue of their technological, social, and aesthetic properties and propensities, through specific formats and forms.[4]

The term "media" is understood broadly in this field and can include audiovisual forms,[5] images,[6] clothes,[7] computer games,[8] food,[9] and music.[10] The ongoing production of religious references in media continues to enrich and diversify this field of research. What connects the various media and religious references are the people, whether religious or non-religious, who interpret and make sense of the media they receive or consume.[11] They bring diverse readings and perspectives to the same religious artifacts, symbols, and narratives. Therefore, it is essential to consider the individuals involved

1   Nichols 2010, 79; Nichols 2016, 155.
2   Stolz 2004, 67.
3   Pollack/Rosta 2015, 72.
4   Meyer 2013, 4.
5   The German book series Religion, Film, and Media (RFM) has published edited volumes and monographs in the field of film and religion for more than 30 years; see https://www.religion-film-media.org/en/book-series-2/ [accessed 25 July 2024].
6   Fritz 2018.
7   Höpflinger 2020a.
8   Radde-Antweiler 2008.
9   Fritz/von Wyss-Giacosa 2021.
10   Wilder/Rehwald 2012.
11   Mäder 2023, 211–213.

in the practices of media reception and consumption when selecting a method for studying the interactions between media and religion.

The choice of method in any field depends on the research question and the scope of the study. Approaches in the field of media and religion adopt different perspectives on the reception and consumption[12] of the media being studied. For considering methodological questions in the study of reception and consumption, two aspects are crucial: the medium itself and its consumers or receivers. If religion is understood as a particular form of communication, then the "intermediaries", i.e. the media, must be considered. This means attending not only to media representations but also to the contexts of the production, distribution, and reception of media. These intermediaries, along with the social actors involved – perhaps religious practitioners, spectators of a fantasy film that creates a religious worldview, or museum visitors viewing historical religious artifacts like Egyptian sarcophagi – determine the choice of method.

To elaborate a typology of methodological approaches, this article identifies three perspectives on practices of media consumption/reception. The first method type focuses on representation in its relationship with reception, with the researcher as the primary recipient. The second type proceeds in reverse, centering on reception/consumption and attending to media representations only in so far as they form the basis of reception; in this type, informants are the primary recipients. The third type focuses exclusively on consumption and reception processes in qualitative and quantitative procedures, with the media representation that is consumed playing no significant role in the study.

Representation in Focus

Focusing on representation helps us gain insight into the media under study. In this first method type, the researcher acts as the primary recipient, critically analyzing and contextualizing the source. Religious symbols and narratives are explored within their religious tradition or in relation to thematic aspects such as death, cosmologies, or supernatural powers. This

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12 Reception and consumption refer to different but partly overlapping practices. Reception highlights the process of interpretation, whereas consumption refers the act of engaging with media, including how, when, and where media is used or accessed. The terms are used accordingly in this article.

kind of analysis typically distinguishes between two aspects of representation which parallel the dual nature of religious references. As the scholar of religion Fritz Stolz puts it, "Symbols often have a dual character: they depict sections of reality and at the same time act as a model for it."[13] The practice of representation draws on language, including symbols, codes, signs, or other forms, to communicate meaningful models of or for the world. In the process of analysis, researchers are also the recipients of the signs they are investigating, and they integrate the codes used in the representation with their own mental or conceptual representations.[14]

As the researcher decodes media representations, they typically make explicit their methods for interpreting a source and the perspectives they emphasize.[15] This hermeneutic process is shaped by the researcher, their own context, and the framing questions that guide their perspective. For instance, they might analyze the portrayal of gender in a biblical film,[16] the use of color in *memento mori* objects like skulls,[17] or the significance of references to the donor in *ex voto* paintings.[18] These studies utilize methodological tools that are mostly descriptive-analytical, such as neo-formalist film analysis,[19] the iconological procedure,[20] or any other kind of hermeneutic image analysis in which the researcher engages with their object of study by including context to varying degrees.[21] Another method in which representation plays a crucial role is discourse analysis. This constructivist approach examines power dynamics in representational processes and asks how and by whom a discourse is defined.[22]

In summary, the methodological option discussed in this section centers on media representations, which researchers both receive and analyze. Thus, the researcher effectively assumes the role of a recipient of the media under study.

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13 Stolz 2004, 67 (my translation).
14 Hall 2013, 2–5.
15 Hall 2006.
16 O'Brien 2016, 449–462.
17 Höpflinger 2020b.
18 Pezzoli-Olgiati 2011.
19 Bienk 2014; Bordwell/Thompson/Smith 2017; Glatz 2023.
20 Panofsky 1979.
21 Lüddemann 2016.
22 Scolari 2019, 40–89.

From Consumption/Reception to Representation

The second method type starts with analysis of how media are consumed/received and then considers the media representations as the basis of consumption/reception. Such studies may be guided by different research questions and focus more on consumers/recipients as social actors who shape the meaning of media through their practices of consumption/reception. In this approach, researchers act primarily as observers of their subjects' reception processes. They may do so by directly engaging with recipients, for example, by conducting interviews, or by adopting a heuristic perspective that explores potential readings without claiming to represent actual psychological or cognitive structures.[23]

Studies of this type generally involve qualitative fieldwork where researchers observe the reception and consumption experiences of social actors, which may then be supplemented with interviews. However, researchers are not merely passive observers of these reception processes; they are themselves familiar with the media being studied through their own experiences, just as the social actors are. As researchers observe the reception processes of their subjects, they also pay attention to the media representations that give rise to their subjects' interpretations. This combined perspective may be used to analyze a video posted on YouTube or a social-media platform together with the comments left by viewers. The study then creates an analytical framework that combines the viewers' comments with an analysis of the video's representations. It categorizes the comments in relation to the video's style, formal elements, plot, story etc. For each element, the analysis of comments makes it possible to identify different reading positions and, more specifically, the religious or non-religious focus in the reception process. These various ways of meaning-making through reception can then be related to the representation, which might include religious symbols or narrative elements.[24] Examining the interface between consumption/reception processes and representation is a complex but worthwhile endeavor.[25]

Another method for attending to representation in the context of reception processes uses photo elicitation (PE).[26] PE is a method from the field of visual

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23 Mäder 2020, 351.
24 Mäder 2020, 265–266.
25 Mäder/Soto-Sanfiel 2019.
26 Pink 2021, 109–133.

sociology that includes visual sources in conversations with participants. These sources can be already existing "found images", researcher-produced images, or participant-produced images.[27] In this method, the researcher looks at the representation of the visual source, so to say, through the eyes and the reception of the social actors. The researcher's task is to listen to and understand how the social actors give meaning to representation. Therefore, it is a second-degree perception. PE shifts the dynamics in the relation between researcher and participant: "Where standard interview techniques tend to be face-to-face, the researcher and participant tend to be shoulder-to-shoulder focused on the image before them. Likewise, photo elicitation is known to shift the researcher-participant power dynamic."[28] In my own research about the role of photos in weddings, the performance of this rite of passage, and how it is remembered, PE has been applied to allow the couples to reconstruct their wedding day by means of their wedding photographs and to understand, in this process, the significance of the photos for them.[29]

In addition to field methods, semio-pragmatics are another methodological option. This approach explores various interpretative possibilities in a heuristic procedure that may occur in the relationship between the recipients, their contexts, and the representation. French communication scholar Roger Odin developed the concept of "spaces of communication" to address these diverse reception experiences.[30] A semio-pragmatic approach can be used to analyze, for example, the different perceptions, historical and contemporary, of the famous passion play that has been performed since 1634 in the German village Oberammergau.[31] Both the performance and the reception of the passion play have undoubtedly evolved over time. Reception may vary depending on the spectators and their backgrounds, or, to use Odin's terms, the spaces of communication in which it occurs. For example, a practicing Christian may engage with the play differently from a tourist who is more interested in the spectacle than its theological message, although these perspectives can also coexist in a single individual. What is significant in this approach is the awareness that the reception contexts differ and influence how the religious narrative of the passion play is experienced and inter-

27 Williams/Whitehouse 2015, 308–313.
28 Williams/Whitehouse 2015, 306.
29 Mäder 2024a; 2024b.
30 Odin 2012, 155.
31 Kessler 2002.

preted.[32] A semio-pragmatic approach explicitly takes into account the diversity of reception contexts, composed of the spectator's background and the cultural-historical context of the media. The media's meaning is exclusively constructed in relation to the reception process. However, alongside this attention to reception, analyzing the performance and representation of the passion play is crucial for understanding the varied reception experiences.

Thus, the approaches that draw on this methodological type do not focus only on how audiences make meaning of media, but also consider the stylistic, narrative, symbolic, and sensory characteristics of the media consumed, and relate them to the audience's responses.

Consumption/Reception in Focus

A third method type focuses on the consumer and on how they receive media. The researcher enquires about the effects of the media consumption and how the recipients make meaning of the media. Quantitative and qualitative methods may be used to process the responses. Quantitative studies are interested in statistically significant responses, whereas qualitative studies look for patterns in individual responses. The results of quantitative studies are often presented in statistical charts and diagrams. Qualitative studies discuss their findings by comparing similarities and differences across the participants' reception experiences. Studies may focus on different media formats or the demographics of participants, in particular their various religious, cultural, or geographic backgrounds.

In contrast to the second method type, which attends to representation in the analysis of consumption/reception, audience studies of this third type are mainly interested in reactions to representations rather than the representations themselves. Thus they do not consider the formal means and narratives of the media in their analysis. Instead, the process of consumption/reception is analyzed solely through audience responses. For example, in a qualitative reception study of the Indonesian television program SALIHA (2017),[33] the only information provided about the program is that a Muslim beauty video blogger describes it "a place of inspiration for Muslim woman in fashion as it features combining Muslim clothes in a fashionable way or

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32 Mäder 2020, 36–62.
33 Fauzi/Fasta/Jeyakumar/Jeong 2020, 150–151.

how to use a modern Hijab style but still following Islamic teachings."[34] Through in-depth interviews and a focus group, the study then investigates the participants' readings of the show.[35]

Likewise in the relatively new research field of digital and online media – such as video games, social media, and the Internet – qualitative audience studies are frequently employed.[36] For example, a qualitative study of the MMO (massively multiplayer online) game World of Warcraft (WoW) conducted 22 in-depth online interviews with players of the video game. The researchers asked "if, how, and why online gamers reflect on such religious-spiritual narratives in the game, and what influence this has on their (non) religious worldviews."[37] The study identified three different responses to religion or "religious reflexivity"[38] through analysis of the gamers' reception, but it did not analyze religious representations within the game.

It is worth mentioning that in the case of digital and social media, consumers also produce narratives by creating content, such as videos for TikTok or characters for video games. This mixing of the roles of producer and consumer is expressed in the term "prosumer". Consequently, a reception study may in fact address both the production and consumption processes if it examines the experiences of "prosumers" in gaming and social media interactions.

These examples of qualitative reception studies illustrate that studying responses to religious references in the media can provide valuable insight into how religion is (re)constructed through media reception. Qualitative studies of reception explore the varied reactions of different audiences, such as religious and non-religious viewers or practitioners of different religious traditions.[39]

In contrast, quantitative reception studies generate knowledge about the more probable and less probable responses to media. For example, a study which I undertook with a colleague considers viewers' identification with a religious character in a documentary film.[40] It assesses the recipients' responses to the religious characters using a two-by-two between-subjects

34 Fauzi/Fasta/Jeyakumar/Jeong 2020, 142.

35 Hall 2006.

36 Johns 2012; Tsuria/Yadlin-Segal/Vitullo/Campbell 2017.

37 Aupers/Schaap/Wildt 2017, 154.

38 Schaap/Aupers 2017, 1755–1757.

39 Grahmann 2021, 188–218.

40 The study that my Spanish colleague María T. Soto-Sanfiel and I conducted is based on two documentaries, one about an American member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

factorial design. The two independent variables are *country*, where the study took place (Spain/Switzerland), and *religion*, as represented in the documentaries (Muslim/Mormon, specifically Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints).[41] Viewers' identification with a character was shown to be significant for the narrative's ability to persuade. Viewers were more likely to identify with (1) someone whose experiences were familiar, (2) someone they found likable.[42] The results indicate that the level of identification varied depending on the religion depicted. Additionally, the cultural context, either Spain or Switzerland, significantly influenced the degree of identification.

In the field of digital religion, quantitative studies are often carried out online, as in the case of a study of yoga practices taught through Facebook. The surveys used in the study examine whether regular posts and personal online coaching contribute to promoting spirituality.[43] Two Likert scales measure the level of spirituality before and after the practice on Facebook.[44] The results illustrate that Facebook is a suitable platform for consolidating faith and spirituality among believers and for spreading and communicating messages and practices.

Another study based on an online survey asked young people aged between 15 and 20 about their use of the Internet for religious purposes.[45] In total 1,100 individuals answered the survey, which recruited participants through the Swedish social network site LunarPlatform in 2007. One of the study's conclusions was that religious socialization continues to take place offline. The "offline faithful" young people were "by far the most frequent users of religious websites and discussion groups."[46] Thus the study connects online consumption of religion with offline religious affiliation.[47]

None of these three studies includes formal analysis of the media representations themselves. Their focus is instead on how the audiences re-

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Saints who lives in Nepal, the other about an Iranian Muslim woman who lives in Iran. See Soto-Sanfiel/Mäder 2020.

41 Soto-Sanfiel/Mäder 2020, 9–12.

42 Soto-Sanfiel/Mäder 2020, 5.

43 Pandya 2019.

44 The participants chose one of 6 measures to indicate their response to a statement (15 in total). For example, statement: *I feel God's presence*; possible responses: *many times a day*; *every day*; *most days*; *some days*; *once in a while*; *never or almost never*.

45 Lövheim 2018.

46 Lövheim 2018, 213.

47 See also the contribution by Sofia Sjö in this issue, 95–104.

spond and the differences among audience members (religion, nationality, activity on Facebook) that may influence their responses in statistically significant ways. As can be seen from these examples, quantitative studies tend to generalize the reception process. Consequently, they often do not address or only indirectly address how meaning is made of media representations.

In Conclusion: Methodological Challenges in the Study of Media and Religion

As demonstrated, each of these three method types used in the study of media and religion addresses different aspects of reception. In this conclusion, I will highlight four broader issues that pertain to all three types of reception/consumption study identified here and are of particular significance for the methodological advancement of the field.

(1) Each method type proposed here has its limitations and produces gaps. No single method can fully capture all the dimensions of reception and consumption that are of interest in the study of media and religion. These limitations arise not only from the method itself but also from the diversity of possible subject matters and audiences. The inherent complexity of religion often requires simplification of the research design, which constrains the scope of its findings. Nevertheless, each study contributes to a larger body of research and is part of a broader cumulative effort.

(2) Methods are flexible and adjustable; they can be mixed and matched, and they can and need to be adapted to the object of research. Different research methods exist "along a continuum from positivism (i.e., scientific research that claims objectivity) through radical interpretivism (i.e., scholarship as art)",[48] as the communication scholar Laura L. Ellingson writes. She notes,

> While disciplinary and professional conventions remain dominant forces, the success of some work that moves around, beyond, through, and alongside traditional work always benefits the field, because it reminds us of the constructed nature of all such norms and practices.[49]

48 Ellingson 2009, 4.
49 Ellingson 2009, 16.

Rigorous methods enable systematic and comprehensive analysis, but they can also limit the scope of findings. Methods are often part of a methodological canon, defined by disciplinary boundaries or fashions. This is true also for reception studies. It is crucial to remember that methods are not ends in themselves; their purpose is to be effective in addressing the research question. If they do not serve this purpose, they have missed their mark. In the interdisciplinary field of media and religion, the application of a combination of methods is often more effective than limiting the study to a single method recognized in media studies or the study of religion, because a multi-method approach may better capture the object of study.

(3) The first and second method types examine not only how social actors create meaning in the process of consumption, but also the representation strategies employed by different media and their effects on the reception of religion. The results of such studies are then presented in specific formats, often including – in addition to text – images, film stills, drawings, or charts taken from or relating to the media being studied. Therefore, it is crucial to consider how the chosen representation(s) of results can contribute to the mediated presence of religion. For instance, the researcher must consider whether film stills included in their article reproduce stereotypes about a religious tradition.

(4) Last but not least, researchers themselves are also recipients or consumers of media. Their hermeneutic perspectives shape the research design, selection of sources, formulation of survey questions, interpretation of results, interactions with social actors, and presentation of findings.[50] Therefore, each study of reception/consumption should begin with a critical self-examination of the researchers' own positions, including their personal reception of the source and their relationship with the social actors or groups they study. Researchers play an active role in analyzing reception/consumption, and this comes with a responsibility that must be taken seriously. As noted above, their responsibilities are not only towards the participants in the study, but also towards the sources that are being studied. The media often play an ambivalent role in how, for what purpose, and in which contexts religion is portrayed, and thus researchers need to justify their choice of media sources. Studies that reflect on the cultural context of media consumption/reception and all the implications this entails certainly represent promising avenues of enquiry within the field of media and religion.

50 Mäder 2022, 13.

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Philippe Bornet

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.

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

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

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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 re-semantisation 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]

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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-

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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

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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

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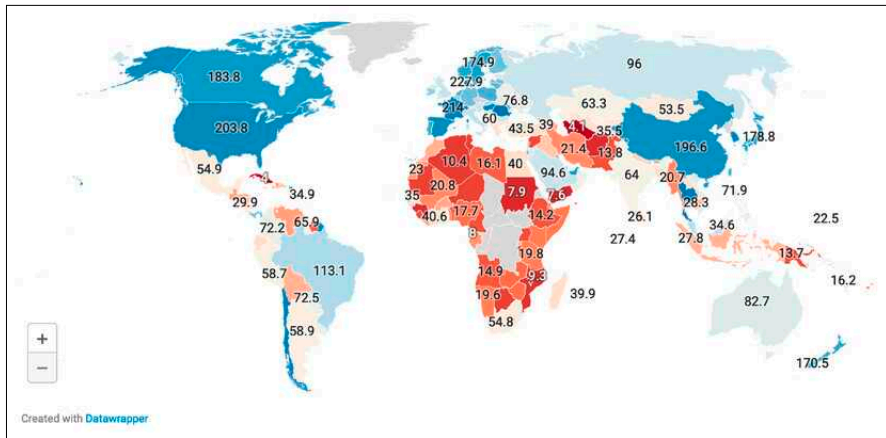
Fig. 1: Map of the world according to Internet connection speed (2024); numbers indicate Mbps. Source: https://t1p.de/f2ygu [accessed 12 November 2024].

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.

2. Der Swami von Schirale (Kanara).

Fig. 2: Swami of Shirali, Karnataka, the guru of the Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmin Math, Pandu-rangashram (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

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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]

PANDURANG
पां डु रं ग

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.

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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.

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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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Yara González-Justiniano

A Flor de Piel

Exploring Latin American Decolonial Aesthetics for Religious Studies: Sensing Puerto Rican Media

Abstract

A current opening for research in the field of religion, film, and media is the interpretation of cultural production through the sensing and knowing that stems from decolonial approaches. In this article, I argue for the use of a Latin American decolonial aesthetics in this field of study, specifically in exploring examples from Puerto Rican art and media that incite community-making practices in association with a religious/theological imagination. I provide a list of eight key characteristics of decolonial aesthetics and introduce the expression *a flor de piel* (brought to, or sensed on, the surface) to describe the type of sensing that these works of art produce in an embodied dialectics between the medium and its audience.

Keywords

Decolonial, Aesthetics, Puerto Rico, Art, National Identity, Latin America, Sensing

Biography

Yara González-Justiniano is Assistant Professor of Religion, Psychology, and Culture with emphasis in Latinx Studies at Vanderbilt University, USA. Her most recent book, *Centering Hope as a Sustainable Decolonial Practice: Esperanza en Práctica* (2022), wrestles with the issue of how hope can look in the midst of socioeconomic crises.

Introduction

A starting point for reflection that is characteristic of Latinx theologies and of decolonial theory/theology is *lo cotidiano*, everyday's repetition which is "an amalgamation of experiences in the quest for human fulfillment".[1] Many of these quotidian experiences and practices are captured in Latin American artistic productions, some of which are deemed decolonial when they paint,

1   Varela Ríos 2021, 98–99.

denounce, expose, critique, and/or reform colonial oppression and its histories. When describing something as "decolonial" within this article, I refer to the "relentless analytic effort to understand, in order to overcome, the logic of coloniality."[2]

A current opening for research in the field of religion, film, and media is interpretation of cultural production in light of the sensing and knowing that stems from decolonial approaches. In this article, I argue for the use of Latin American decolonial aesthetics in this field of study, specifically examples from Puerto Rican art and media that incite community-making practices associated with a religious/theological imagination. Art tells us something about society, but not every artistic expression articulates decoloniality. Puerto Rican theologian Luis N. Rivera Pagán claims that there cannot be any academic integrity in research on Latin American identities and spiritualities if the research does not consider the importance of cultural and artistic productions in the collective religious imagination of the people.[3] He says,

> We need to learn to perceive in the different cultural creations those that express with aesthetic excellence and existential depth a community's anguish and aspirations, those that *bring to the surface* [*traen a flor de piel*] the atrocious and terrifying wrinkles of the historical expression of religiosity and, simultaneously, the exceptional reserves of faith, hope, and love that arise from the spiritualities of our people.[4]

The phrase *a flor de piel* can be translated here as brought "to the surface". However, this translation misses the nuances in the Spanish, which conveys the idea of something revealed, raw, and sensitive seeping out of one's skin/flesh. It is this type of sensing, knowing, and being in one's experience that a decolonial aesthetics brings to the study of religion and spiritual practices. Rivera Pagán states that the writers who unearth coloniality and provide alternatives to its imagination have been "sharper and cleverer than social scientists, who have been slower with stripping themselves from European epistemological and hermeneutical paradigms."[5] Rivera Pagán focuses on literature; in this essay I discuss a plurality of art forms.

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2   Mignolo 2011, 10. See also Isasi-Díaz/Mendieta 2012.
3   Rivera Pagán 2017, 47.
4   Rivera Pagán 2017, 48 (my translation and emphasis).
5   Rivera Pagán 1999, 94.

Decolonial Aesthetics Functioning a *Flor de Piel*

In this section, I consider four examples from Puerto Rican art and media where decolonial knowing sits *a flor de piel*.[6] These examples integrate Walter Mignolo's call for a decolonial aesthesis, where the emphasis is on sensing and questioning the ways we organize how we think. Mignolo writes,

> decolonial art (or literature, architecture, and so on) enacts these critiques, using techniques like juxtaposition, parody, or simple disobedience to the rules of art and polite society, to expose the contradictions of coloniality. Its goal, then, is not to produce feelings of beauty or sublimity, but *ones of sadness, indignation, repentance, hope, and determination to change things in the future*.[7]

To aid with the identification of decolonial aesthetics in works of art and cultural productions I highlight here eight key characteristics. These features are a product of my assessment of recurring approaches to decolonial theory and aesthetics. Their identification has been partly inspired by the works I engage with in this article.[8]

Decolonial aesthetics
- critiques and/or names colonial oppression,
- stays close to the lived practices of people/nature,
- challenges hierarchy and propriety,
- is accessible and intelligible to the subject being represented,
- articulates a message which is not hidden,[9]
- generates affect in the recipient,
- reveals and/or favors connection and complexities,
- reaches for alternative worlds, cosmovisions, and/or realities.

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6   I engage with scholars whose frameworks and interlocutors stem from both decolonial and postcolonial theory; this does not mean I am engaging with these fields interchangeably.

7   Mignolo 2013 (my emphasis).

8   See Alves 2002; Cusicanqui Rivera 2020; Medina 2021.

9   The message is an explicit and understandable response to colonialism and oppression. This does not mean that something that is not intended to generate decolonial sensibilities cannot be used to do that. For example, theologian Héctor Varela Ríos (2021) reads Francisco Oller's painting *El velorio* through a decolonial lens, not to mourn the past or even to remember it but to form a new liberative meaning for the present.

These key characteristics serve a practical approach that enables the researcher to identify decolonial aesthetics in actual artworks. The examples discussed in this article reflect several of these characteristics.

Decolonial aesthetics, which questions colonialism and coloniality, prioritizes collectivity over individualism. A decolonial discourse that remains within the structures of Western cognitive logic, without wrestling with the flesh, place, and experiences of the subjects from which it extracts knowledge, is disingenuous at best. The field's relevance should not be to focused on "elevating and dignifying" the colonial subject by moving them from the margins to the center; it must foster the transformation of the problems of centrality, individualism, and upward mobility that decolonial discourse identifies. The struggle for decolonization involves fighting intrinsic individualism practices intertwined with an illusory discourse of community. The task is daunting, for we must search for human/nature's dignity, liberation, and flourishing, which colonialism stifles.

Artists shape and reflect the cultural imagination of the past, present, and future. In examples from Puerto Rican media, artists tie the feeling, representation, and resistance of words and images of socioeconomic and political crisis together with the cry for national identities. Art reveals where the colonial logic lives. Decolonial aesthetics depict the colonial body and mirror it back to us.[10] Sensing happens in the body. In *Sensing Decolonial Aesthetics in Latin American Arts*, Juan Ramos looks at the intersections of poetry, music, and film that allow the recipient to "sense otherwise" by challenging/undoing "what we now call coloniality or the distribution of the sensible."[11] In her interpretation of feminist decolonial theorist María Lugones, philosopher Denise Meda Calderón writes, "As a coalitional theoretical approach, decolonial aesthesis invokes a cosmological sense to recognize re-creative communal socialities that enliven resistance."[12] I believe this recognition matters for the study of religion in colonial contexts, especially in the subfield that examines the relationship between media and religion.

The sensitivity produced by visual, musical, and literary forms of art not only awakens the senses and creative imagination but also leads people to understand the need to intuit differently. For example, Puerto Rican ethno-

10 Engaging with literature and decolonial theory, Teresa Delgado (2017, 70) says that "literature as a descriptive source for theology demonstrates the 'is'."

11 Ramos 2019, 9.

12 Meda Calderón 2023, 25.

musicologist Julissa Ossorio Bermúdez argues that music is action since it "establishes visions and paradigms" that, when contextualized, transform the crisis in its realities and lay out new paths to follow.[13] This claim can also be made for other artistic expressions. Emphasizing the 1960s as a temporal framework for decolonial cultural analysis, Juan Ramos proposes that Latin American aesthetics embodies feeling by means of the affective contamination described by theorist Félix Guattari in terms of the transcendence of art. Ramos argues that Latin American artists established the paradigms of these sensibilities (this affective contamination) as practices that enable academic decolonial discourse and through their aesthetics help enflesh it. Ramos says that "[m]oving beyond experiences and encounters with artworks implies exposing ourselves to other geopolitical and temporal ways of knowing and sensing. Our affective response to these encounters cannot just be to sense as we do, or as we are comfortable sensing, but indeed to sense otherwise."[14] The distance between academic scholarship and on-the-ground practices often leaves scholars of religion and theologians engaging with an imaginary community and poised to identify transcendence in the gaps in practice. Art and media work bridges the gulf between academic discourse and the (missing) body.

Decolonial Aesthetics in Puerto Rican Art and Media

In this section, I briefly discuss the novel *Mangle*, the film La Pecera (The Fishbowl, Glorimar Marrero, PR 2023), and two music videos, Latinoamérica (Calle 13, PR 2011) and Despierta Borinqueño (Vin Ramos, PR 2022), to analyze a decolonial aesthetic where the feelings – those mentioned by Mignolo as previously cited – arise from exposure to colonialism and colonialities and from existential/religious claims that embrace the complexity of life. My research centers on the contexts of faith communities and the diversity of their expressions, leading me to analyze aspects of social groups, such as popular culture or art, that academic discourse has tended to compartmentalize or deny the opportunity to be a dialogue partner. By focusing on popular culture and art we can acknowledge social development in conjunction with the needs and challenges of the macrosocial. The

13 Ossorio Bermúdez 2017, 61.
14 Ramos 2019, 218.

separation of the sacred and the secular in Christendom resists certain expressions of culture through a hegemonic imaginary of divine ascendance, and in coloniality anything that challenges this separation is demonized. For example, aspects of Puerto Rican racial and ethnic identity have been transmitted and shaped by a discourse of the harmonious integration of African, Spanish, and Indian heritage. However, there is no discourse of harmonious integration of these cultures' religious traditions vis-à-vis Christianity. A recent illustration of this tension can be found in the novel *Mangle*. It tells the story of Enrique Collazo, a hero of mythical proportions destined to save the island of Puerto Rico. Author Andrés Sanfeliú Cruz integrates multiple religious traditions when in order to receive full initiation into his powers Enrique must become one with the island spirit of the *Cemí* (Taíno Indian) and Orishas (African Diaspora) while he struggles with his Christian faith (Spanish).[15]

In his work *Diálogos y Polifonías*, Luis Rivera Pagán illustrates the struggle for freedom from a spirituality of imperial domination. He shows how academic thought engages with processes of liberation by first identifying the voices that are contained in the historical and religious discourse and then continuing on towards acceptance and embrace of the multiple voices and practices that challenge oppression. Rivera Pagán aims to embrace and reveal the theological polyphony that creates a people, and he argues that culture – in his analysis, Puerto Rican culture – is one of those formative voices. Art and artists reveal what is *a flor de piel* in this polyphony. Rivera Pagán says that "[f]rom their imagination and intelligence arises a bold and tenacious effort to free our religious imagination from colonial vestiges and forge genuine and broad horizons for our community and personal identities."[16] In *Mangle* this polyphony challenges hierarchy and propriety – one of the characteristics of decolonial aesthetics listed above – revealing the cultural weight of imperial domination, as named by Rivera Pagán.

Another dimension to interpreting the impressions embedded in one's skin through art and brought to light by polyphony is most intimately explored in *Poetics of the Flesh* by Puerto Rican theologian Mayra Rivera. In this book, Rivera traces a theological genealogy of flesh where the body is the primary site of knowledge. She looks at Jesus's "I am" statements, which suggest "patterns of coexistence" because these statements are, she says,

15 Sanfeliú Cruz 2021.
16 Rivera Pagán 2017, 53.

Fig. 1: Buried beating heart. Music video still, Latinoamérica (Calle 13, PR 2011), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkFJE8ZdeG8, 00:05:15.

"woven with otherness. The 'I am' is one and many."[17] She argues that the "flesh is conceived as formless and impermanent, crossing the boundaries between the individual body and the world."[18] The lyrics of the song "Latinoamérica" by the music group Calle 13 resemble such a sequence of "I am" statements as well as ways in which these crossings of flesh are embodied across Latin America. In the song, the word "soy" is associated with different cultural, social, or religious references in Latin America. The video for the song portrays people in different places in Latin America performing the same action, though the lyrics speak in the singular, "I am" Latin America. An image of a beating heart accompanies the initial beats of the song, and then we see the first face looking into the mirror and saying "soy". The video ends with the same heart beating beneath the earth, now sprouting roots (fig. 1). This song has several characteristics of decolonial aesthetics, including drawing from the lived experiences of people, critiquing colonial oppression, and generating affect on the recipient by showing the "patterns of coexistence" in its images rooted in people and land.

Mayra Rivera recognizes that the body produces/has knowledge and argues that the effects of colonialism can be traced in the genealogy of the body and flesh. She writes,

17 Rivera 2015, 26.
18 Rivera 2015, 2.

The world shapes me without my knowledge or consent. Touching flesh yields no unmediated sense or knowledge, however. The dynamic, evolving multiplicity of all the elements that constitute my flesh are never fully present to me. But their long histories – which are always already social and material – leave their marks in my body. The socio-material elements of my own history interlace with the sediments of my ancestral past. Indirectly, obscurely, and partially – my flesh remembers things I never knew and will never know. I can never fully grasp flesh. It is dynamic, indeterminate. Not knowing is not a weakness, I remember Glissant saying. But not wanting to sense the entanglements of our relations is. We cannot fully know it, but "we imagine it through poetics."[19]

Puerto Rican scholar Roberta Hurtado works with the themes of flesh and body similarly to Rivera. She talks about scars as communicating coloniality – its visible effects – and describes flesh, *la piel*, as "the physical experience [that] pulsates with sentience."[20] This embodiment is also reflected in the film La Pecera, in which writer and director Glorimar Marrero tells the story of Noelia, a young woman who is dying of cancer. The film is set in Puerto Rico in 2017, in the weeks before Hurricane María. "This film *is* painful", was my first and lasting reaction when I saw it, an affective response that characterizes decolonial aesthetics. It depicts the pain of the character, but her constant pain, given its context and the film's visceral visuals, provokes pain in the spectator throughout the film. Noelia's body represents the island of Puerto Rico and is a metaphor for the relationship between colonialism, ecological violence, and the sick body. Noelia is dying days before the greatest natural catastrophe in recent Puerto Rican history (fig. 2). The final scene is her funeral. Her naked body is lying in a bathtub in a beautiful backyard, then the film cuts to black, and the credits begin to roll accompanied by the violent sound of the hurricane winds. At the movie theater, no one moved; we sat in silence as if waiting for the feelings that were *a flor de piel* to leave our bodies, so that they would not follow us back home.

Scholars of religion and media will look at video and other media where a religious world unfolds and almost instinctively begin identifying themes and systems with existential and theological implications. Art creates and

19   Rivera 2015, 110, referencing Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.
20   Hurtado 2019, 44.

Fig. 2: Noelia on the floor. Film still from the trailer for La Pecera (The Fishbowl, Glorimar Marrero, PR 2023), https://youtu.be/Yyvi8RePYt4?si=fHeoxs64DQnymqJj, 00:00:24.

re-creates the networks of our complex realities and imaginaries and by creating an external space and temporality it allows the beholder to experience a sense of self and community. In decolonial aesthetics, religion cannot be relegated to a personal experience without acknowledgement of how it organizes structures and cosmovision. Meda Calderón, following María Lugones's work on decolonial aesthetics, says that "[i]t is precisely through seeing coloniality that we can track the concealed social arrangements and see the worlds of sense that do not conform to the colonial/modern system."[21] This characteristic of decolonial aesthetics is also apparent in the music video Despierta Borinqueño (Wake up Puerto Rican), curated in 2020 by the artist Vin Ramos (fig. 3). "Despierta borinqueño" is a line from Puerto Rico's revolutionary anthem written by Lola Rodríguez de Tió in 1868. The lyrics urge the Puerto Rican people to wake up from the Spanish colonial grip. The video, released during the Covid-19 pandemic, shows artists, dancers, and teachers mimicking the lyrics (many of them are in tears), pleading *wake up*, because Puerto Rico is dying and Puerto Ricans are being displaced. The different people shown represent a sector of Puerto Rico's population, all singing the same song but with only one voice. The video urges people to see the signs and warns them not to let fear rob them of their liberty and a dignified life. Though institutional religion is not an explicit theme in this video, the "concealed social arrangements" Calderón points to are implicit in the song, since Puerto Rican colonial history

21 Meda Calderón 2023, 23.

Fig. 3: The actress playing Mariana Bracetti is sewing the black Puerto Rican flag; in the corner a sign language interpreter is translating the song. Music video still, Despierta Borinqueño (Vin Ramos, 2022), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEcAe4mYfGM, 00:03:16.

dates to the Spanish project of political and religious conquest. The video takes a century-old anthem that still carries vestiges of colonial struggle and applies it to the contemporary moment, thus reflecting decolonial aesthetics' capacity to critique colonial oppression. The combination of visual elements, music, and the memory of cultural history tingles one's skin, a sensing *a flor de piel*.

In contexts of social displacement, visual art and music help people connect and heal the wounds that the disruption of colonialism has left in the community. The displacement and separation from the communal bond caused by colonialism has ruptured social, psychological, and spiritual ties. My aim in engaging with decolonial aesthetics is to recognize where an illustration of sustainable hope converges at the communal level with the scaffoldings of society and material conditions. When this scaffolding converses with others institutions that shape society, it shows that artistic expressions not only point out but also promote ways of organizing society equitably and fairly.[22] Juan G. Ramos warns against falling into the melancholia of an unfulfilled promise of decolonialization, referring specifically to Latin American

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22 Though I am not able to explore the nuances of religion, hope, and community within this article, this is work I have done at more length in my book *Centering Hope as a Sustainable Decolonial Practice. Esperanza en Práctica* (2022).

literature of the 1960s.[23] I would add a warning against the temptation to fall into a sense of despair and apathy. The examples discussed in this article show glimpses of the decolonial future that exists within the colonial realities. An aim of decolonial aesthetics is to allow for the imagination of practices of agency and social participation that evoke a collective approach. Such an approach would point toward social and creative reform through the embodiment of existential and transcendental ideals of community. Moving forward and generating life and change while experiencing the weight of injustice and its saturation of all aspects of life can seem a hopeless task. Understanding the world that is, while also dreaming of a world that could be, can create a generative and creative space. To resist this type of apathy we must create structures and strategies where the work carried out by the community is psychologically, physically, spiritually, and economically sustainable.

Implications

Decolonial aesthetics open spaces, both discursive and physical. Though art and artists exist in a world of contradictions, the examples we find in artistic imagery and imagination offer constructive paradigms for liberating change. Art and artists function as curators of practices and casters of portents. Theorist and artist Adolfo Albán Achinte, in response to Latin American art being mediated by the universalized categories of Western aesthetics which coloniality imposed, frames Westernization as an alleged emancipation of beliefs with a quasi-salvific character.[24] Therefore, the only response to this emancipation, in order to awaken Latin America's creativity, is to take back the pre-modern beliefs that the certainty of modernity took, "so that the telluric constructs meanings, emotions flutter without pre-established limits, imagination penetrates us to the core, and the enigmatic becomes a possibility of peering into other ways of existing."[25] The application of a decolonial perspective on religious aesthetics not only identifies which existential or theological concerns are depicted but also shows the ways in which art re-creates our present and claims a future by disrupting colonial restraints. Ramos understands that

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23 Ramos 2019, 219.
24 Albán Achinte 2013, 447–449.
25 Albán Achinte 2013, 449–450 (my translation).

decolonial aesthetics emerges from practice, from an investment in linking *poiesis* (as doing) to *aisthesis* (as sensing). In this vein, decolonial aesthetics is simultaneously a way of understanding decolonial thinking through artistic practice and artistic practice through decolonial thinking.[26]

In considering sensing through the lens of decolonial aesthetics, the field of religious studies and media studies will be able to understand the scaffolding of colonialism by interrogating the structures of spiritual and religious oppressive discourse and practices. There is a substantial and material difference between the communities we tangibly build and those we extract from the imaginary or the imagined community. Though easily abstracted, *a flor de piel* describes a knowing from a sensation on the body, in its flesh. Knowing arises onto that first layer of skin and is not only felt but also visible. It orients. Following Mayra Rivera's line of thinking, decolonial aesthetics demands scholarship that obliges us to sense the entanglements of our relationships.

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26 Ramos 2019, 29.

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Sofia Sjö

Young Adults, Digital Media, and Religion
Broadening the Scope

Abstract

Looking at youth and young adults when researching religion and media is an approach that can lead to important results. Young people are often on the forefront of media developments and are likely to impact how religious groups utilize and incorporate media in their practices. Building on the findings of an international project and earlier research, this article highlights three interconnected areas worthy of more attention in the study of religion and media: the limitation of most studies to specific settings and university students and thus the need to expand this demographic; the importance of studying online and offline religion as interconnected and related; the need to study not only religion and media but also how media might contribute to individuals leaving their religious identity behind and provide spaces for atheist identities and communities.

Keywords

Young Adults, Religion, Digital Media, Digital Religion, Religious Identity

Biography

Sofia Sjö is the Research Manager at the Donner Institute for Research into Religion and Culture and holds the title of Associate Professor in the Study of Religions at Åbo Akademi, University, Finland. Her research interests include religion and film, religion and media, digital religion, and religion and youth.

Introduction

From 2015 to 2019, I had the opportunity to be a part of an international project focusing on the religious, spiritual, and secular worldviews of young adult university students in 12 countries around the world, among them Finland, Turkey, Canada, Peru and India. The project – Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective (YARG) – brought together around 40 researchers and research assistants. It collected both survey and interview data and tested out a new method for studying worldviews, the Faith Q-Sort. Its

results were noteworthy. They illustrated both recurring features and note-worthy differences regarding worldviews among young people the world over.[1] The study highlighted five global "worldview prototypes", but it also illustrated, for example, how being spiritual had different connotations in different settings, tied more to religion in one area and to a secular perspective in another.[2] Though media was not the main topic of the YARG study, it was an integral part of it. Questions regarding media were brought up in both the survey and the interviews. Several articles[3] and an edited volume related to media and religion[4] came out of the project.

The study of youth, religion and media is a fast-growing field. As changes in media use are often first present in younger generations, focusing on youth helps one see trends regarding the use of media in religious life too. Research has highlighted, among other things, how media can be used by young people to challenge authorities, build community and explore religious identities.[5] However, though current research in this area is rich, it also has limitations. In this article, I will highlight some of the findings of YARG, in particular the need for more varied perspectives in future research, which will help media and religion research stay relevant. Building on the findings from the project and related research, I will discuss three interlinked areas deserving of greater attention: (1) the need to explore and compare diverse settings and participants, (2) the usefulness of connecting research into religion online with research into religion offline to capture contemporary religious behaviour, and (3) the necessity of acknowledging that media can be part of religious life, by providing new ways to connect and learn, but can also be a way out of religion.

Varying Settings and Participants

Conducting a study in 12 different countries requires many kinds of resources. Though the YARG project illustrated the usefulness of studying a

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1   For an overview, see the main findings published in Nynäs/Keysar/Kontala/Golo/Lassander/Shterin/Sjö/Stenner 2022.
2   Nynäs 2022.
3   See for example Moberg/Sjö/Golo/Gökçe/Fernández Hart/Cardenas/Benyah/Jó 2019; Moberg/Kheir/Gökce 2020.
4   Moberg/Sjö 2020.
5   For an overview see Moberg/Sjö 2023.

variety of settings with varied cultural, religious and political backgrounds, this breadth cannot generally be asked of research projects. However, one can take to heart the reality that looking beyond one's usual setting is instructive. A comparative approach has long been a core feature of the study of religion.[6] Though comparisons always come with challenges – how do we know we are talking about the same things? how do we translate instruments in a reliable way? how can we incorporate knowledge from varied settings?, to mention just a few concerns – they do generally emphasize how much we can learn by looking beyond the sites we know.

An important, though hardly surprising, finding of YARG was that the setting, with its varied religious, cultural and political contexts, matters.[7] We do see some general trends that are prominent in all the gathered material. However, contextual aspects cannot be ignored, particularly when we are dealing with media and religion. The young adult university students we studied were all part of the millennial generation often described as digital natives – they have grown up with digital media and are avid users of digital tools.[8] For most of them digital media is thus a natural and accepted part of their everyday lives.[9] On this point the students are similar across the countries studied. Still, their specific situation clearly shapes aspects of religion and media and also the way religion and media are combined.

This situational difference can best be illustrated by a quick comparison of two of the studied settings: China and Ghana. While China was one of the less religious contexts in the sample according to several factors, Ghana was clearly the most religious. Both countries have a rich media landscape. However, the social media used, the presence of religion in media, and the way digital media is deployed for religious purposes all vary. In Ghana, digital media is one of many ways the participants get information about religion or are religiously active. Participants report regularly listening to religious sermons online and sharing devotional messages through social media.[10] The restrictions and strict control of both digital media and religion in China means that religion is not particularly present in Chinese media. Still, here too, participants report using media to find information about

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6   See for example Freiberger 2019.
7   Nynäs/Keysar/Shterin/Sjö 2022.
8   Margaryan/Littlejohn/Vojt 2011.
9   Sjö/Moberg/Lövheim/Lagerström 2020, 35–37.
10   Golo/Sjö/Benyah 2020.

religion. However, the kind of media used differs: asked about sources of information, China participants mention print media and courses on religion at university more often than online media.[11]

We thus cannot assume that university students who are active users of digital media are always similar. A closer look at their backgrounds highlights the reality that university students in different settings around the world can differ a great deal.[12] In some of the countries explored in YARG, the students were generally younger, in their late teens or early twenties in the case of, for example, China. But in Sweden there were a good number of older students, closer to their thirties, who were therefore dealing with different life situations and expectations. One thus needs to be careful not to generalize from findings in one country setting.

An additional challenge is that in many studies of young adults, media and religion, the sample is made up of university students.[13] This is understandable, as they are often found right outside the academic researcher's door and thus make for a convenient subject group. They are also of interest because they are members of a privileged group and more likely to take up influential roles in the future. However, university students are not representative of all young adults. Ideally studies should embrace young adults with diverse educational, economic, religious and social backgrounds and life experiences, even though doing so will require significant effort. Luckily some studies have done so,[14] and more are hopefully to come.

Connecting the Online and the Offline

As noted by Heidi Campbell and Mia Lövheim, religion online and offline are connected in various ways and thus the two areas should be explored together.[15] The findings of the YARG study, too, highlight the close relationship of the online and offline worlds in the religious lives of young adult university students. In the results of the survey, which included questions

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11 Sjö/Moberg/Nynäs/Tang 2020.
12 Klingenberg/Sjö/Moberg 2022.
13 A simple search for these terms online provides a plethora of titles where the sample comprises university students.
14 A well-known study of young adults and religion where media also plays a part is Smith/ Snell 2009. Other noteworthy studies are Arweck/Penny 2015; Bromander 2012.
15 Campbell 2012; Campbell/Lövheim 2011.

on religiosity and media use,[16] we can see a correlation between degrees of religiosity and the likelihood of using the Internet for religious or spiritual purposes. While the young adults overall did not report using the Internet much for religious purposes, those that identified as more religious used it comparatively more often.[17]

This connection is evident not only in an analysis of the survey results, but also in the interviews conducted with a smaller sample of the participants. The participants seek information about religion online, follow religious experts, listen to sermons and lectures, share religious texts and reflections on social media, and take part in maintaining sites for the distribution of religious information. However, all of this is usually reported as being done in connection to the participants' religious lives offline. Online lectures are reflected on with friends and religious professionals offline. Keeping connected to international networks of like-minded people online also enriches one's religious life offline.[18]

Though the participants in the YARG study come across as active users of the Internet and social media, it must be noted that they are at the same time critical users. They are aware of the problems with social media, they are critical of the information they find online, and they are thoughtful about how they express their religiosity online.[19] This is particularly the case in more secular settings or where religion tends to be debated. Some of the participants reported avoiding discussions of religion online as they felt those discussions tended to become aggressive and unconstructive,[20] mirroring findings in earlier studies.[21] Others reported carefully considering whether to express their religious beliefs on social media. They were aware of the image they were building, what others might think, and how this might influence both their online and offline lives.[22]

16 The questions included, "Do you consider yourself as belonging to one or more religious groups, communities, or traditions?" "Regardless of whether you consider yourself as belonging or close to a particular religious group, community, or tradition, how religious would you say you are?" "In the past month, how frequently did you use the following media?", "If you ever use the Internet, for which of the following activities do you use it?". For the full survey see for example Moberg/Sjö 2020.
17 Sjö/Moberg/Lövheim/Lagerström 2020.
18 See for example Golo/Sjö/Benyah 2020; Kheir/Moberg 2020.
19 See for example Golo/Sjö/Benyah 2020; Sztajer/Sjö 2020.
20 See for example Sztajer/Sjö 2020.
21 See for example Herbert 2013.
22 See for example Dahl/Sjö/Moberg 2020.

Young adults today are thus largely, and independently of where they are from, living "onlife", that is to say, they live in a hyperconnected reality where it does not make sense to make a strict separation between life on-line and life offline, to borrow Luciano Floridi's concept.[23] However, the cultural and religious setting still clearly matters. In a situation where religion is visible both offline and online, expressing and exploring religion online is less of an issue. While here too a reflective approach to digital media can be observed, a user might not reflect to the same extent on how their religious life online is comprehended by others, both offline and online.[24] In other settings, often those where religion is less present offline, one's religious identity online may be something to be considered and presented more carefully. This variation illustrates the need to thoroughly explore the role social media plays in religious identity construction today, for it highlights the complex reflections that may be behind what seems like a simple post. A lack of religious posts online thus does not necessarily reflect a lack of a religious life either online or offline; it might be indicative of careful online religious identity construction.[25]

Non-religion and Media

Though media often is a resource in religious life today, particularly for younger generations, as religion and media scholars we must not ignore the role media plays in critical attitudes towards religion and in leaving religion. Non-religious perspectives and secular worldviews as expressed in media are an understudied field compared to the quickly expanding area of religion and media research. However, if we want to explore not just religious worldviews and media but also worldviews more broadly, looking at expressions of secular viewpoints in media is essential.

YARG underlined the prevalence of secular perspectives and worldviews among the young adult university students taking part in the project. The participants were asked to assess their religiosity on a scale from one to ten. The mean for all participants was just below four. Ghana stood out with

23 Floridi 2014.

24 See for example Golo/Sjö/Benyah 2020.

25 For a more in-depth reflection on social media and identity negotiations, see Tagg/Seargeant 2016.

the highest mean, at just under seven. At the other end, we find Sweden, Canada, and Russia with a mean below three.[26] In the identified worldviews – explored with the new Faith-Q-sort method – secular worldviews were prevalent.[27] The study did not identify a great deal of difference regarding the prevalence of media use among those identifying with different worldviews, but a closer look at the interviews underscores the role media can play in forming critical views on religion.

Recent research on atheism online has highlighted the role of atheist YouTubers[28] as well as the centrality of media more generally in the construction of atheist or expressively non-religious identities.[29] Atheist YouTubers were also of interest to participants in the YARG study, some of whom used media to explore non-religious worldviews. Particularly in the sample from Peru, a more critical perspective on religion was expressed in the interviews, and in these views, digital media also played a part, as the participants reported coming across critical perspectives via the Internet and social media.[30]

The cultural and religious setting is evidently a central issue for future research into expressions of non-religious or anti-religious feelings and opinions. While holding a non-religious viewpoint is in some settings unproblematic, in others it means one is the odd one out. This also means that for those with atheist views, media may be a more significant resource in some parts of the world, such as a society strongly shaped by religion, than in other parts of the world, such as already very secular societies. In this case too, the connection between the online and offline is essential to explore.[31]

Conclusion

The YARG project, like others before it, highlighted the need to explore the specific role of media exposure and use when studying contemporary worldviews. The study underscored the importance of considering settings with different cultural, religious and political backgrounds, of connecting

26 Klingenberg/Sjö/Moberg 2022, 25.
27 Nynäs/Keysar/Lagerström 2022.
28 Isomaa 2022; Lundmark 2023.
29 Evolvi 2019; Scheidt 2021.
30 Fernándes/Cardenas/Moberg 2022.
31 For an example of current research focusing on the online and offline, see Evolvi 2019.

the online and the offline, and of considering the role of media in different forms of worldviews, be they religious, spiritual or secular.

One essential aim of YARG was to take on the methodological and theoretical challenges in exploring worldviews from a transnational perspective.[32] I would argue that future studies of media and religion also need to take on these challenges. How do we integrate people from diverse contexts and different academic settings into our projects? How do we move beyond contextual specificities in comprehension of both religion and media and find a common framework? What are the ethical and practical challenges related to exploring religion both online and offline?

Though YARG has provided many noteworthy insights, the material from the project, particularly in relation to digital media, is quickly becoming dated as new technologies and uses develop. There is thus a need to look ahead and, building on what we have learned, make plans for future endeavours. Though a new study across twelve countries may not be feasible, bringing together scholars, theories, methods and insights from different settings is certainly a worthy aim.

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32 This next step is explored in the final volume associated with the project: Nynäs/Illman/ Novis-Deutsch/Fernández-Hart 2024.

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Mirna Vohnsen

Trends, Challenges and Developments in Jewish Latin American Film

Abstract

This article surveys the specialized field of Jewish Latin American film, detailing its foundational years, current challenges and potential future developments. Beginning with the field's origins and early pioneering work, it tracks how scholars have addressed Jewish representation in Latin American cinema, underscoring milestones such as the emergence of interdisciplinary approaches and comparative studies. The article presents the challenges and opportunities that the field faces, including difficulties in accessing films, the impact of global streaming platforms on academic research and assessment of the role of women in film. By highlighting future research directions, the discussion offers insight into how Jewish Latin American film can deepen our understanding of cultural, religious and social dynamics, both within the region and in a global context. It concludes that despite being a focused research area, Jewish Latin American film has the potential to significantly contribute to the broader field of religion, film and media by expanding the scholarly focus to cover a region that has often been marginalized in global academic discourse.

Biography

Mirna Vohnsen is a Lecturer in Spanish at Technological University Dublin, Ireland. She is the author of *Portrayals of Jews in Contemporary Argentine Cinema: Rethinking Argentinidad* (2019), co-author, with María Belén Rabadán Vega, of *Eva Perón: A Reference Guide to Her Life and Works* (2021) and co-editor, with Daniel Mourenza, of *Contemporary Argentine Women Filmmaker* (2023), among other studies.

Introduction

The recent expansion of research within the field of religion, film and media has extended beyond the traditional Western focus on the United States and Europe, encompassing additional regions. This shift is significant, as

it recognizes the diverse cultural and religious narratives that have shaped distinct ways to represent cultural identities of the global South in film. This article examines research on Latin American Jewishness and Judaism in cinema in order to highlight the trends, challenges and future developments in this distinctive and burgeoning area of study. Latin America is home to sizeable Jewish communities, with Argentina housing approximately 171,000 Jews and Brazil around 90,000, making them the fifth and ninth largest Jewish populations in the world, respectively.[1] These two countries, along with Mexico, boast the largest film industries in the region. While Argentina began depicting the Jewish experience in its cinema as early as the 1930s, followed by Mexico in the 1970s and Brazil in the 1990s, it was not until the late 20th century that the portrayal of Jewish life, culture and characters gained significant momentum across all three countries.

The societal, religious and political changes undergone by the Latin American nations over the past 40 years have precipitated a notable increase in the production of films and television series that depict minority groups, including Latin American Jews, that had previously been underrepresented. As a result of these developments, the cinematic exploration of cultural and religious identities within the Latin American Jewish communities has garnered considerable scholarly attention, although it remains in its nascent stages. This area of study continues to grow, opening new lines of inquiry as more films and shows portraying onscreen Jews and their experiences are produced. Although the study of Latin American Jewishness and Judaism in film occupies a marginal position within the fields of religion and media studies and Latin American film studies, pioneering scholars and filmmakers have laid a solid foundation. Future research is set to expand through increased accessibility to online platforms, the growing involvement of women in the film industry, the exploration of documentaries, as well as transnational and intercultural approaches, thereby enriching our understanding of Jewish Latin American experiences in film. For most of the 20th century, Latin American films largely overlooked the religious aspects of Jewish identity, but expressions of the Jewish faith have become more conspicuous in the 21st century. This historical lack of religious representation has resulted in most critical studies focusing on the cultural aspects of Jewishness rather than on Judaism itself, a noteworthy trend that has characterized this research area since its inception.

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1   Staff 2023.

Foundational Years

If, as Marvin D'Lugo, Ana M. López and Laura Podalsky note, "Latin American film studies as a serious field of intellectual and artistic inquiry is still fairly young",[2] the scholarly exploration of Jewish-related films in Latin American cinema is even more nascent, with the first papers written in the 1990s.[3] In fact, the 1990s together with the first decade of the 21st century can be considered the foundational years of Jewish-themed Latin American film scholarship. Salomon Lotersztein's reflection on the scarce representation of Jewishness and Judaism in films despite the notable participation of Jewish filmmakers, actors and screenwriters in Argentine cinema is perhaps the first scholarly contribution to this field.[4] It was followed by Nora Glickman's essay examining the representation of Argentine Jewishness during times of authoritarian government.[5] Glickman compares a film with a novel, suggesting that through the process of self-referential writing, screenwriter Aída Bortnik and writer Mario Goloboff come to terms with their own Jewish Argentine identity. While the significance of these two critical studies should not be overlooked, the foundational and productive work of Tzvi Tal and Carolina Rocha added a crucial transnational dimension to the scholarly discourse. Like their predecessors, Tal and Rocha initially approached Jewish-themed films through the examination of national cinemas. Tal published an article on the Brazilian film OLGA (Jayme Monjardim, BR 2004), discussing the allegorical representation of Jewish-German Olga Benário Prestes, who lived in Brazil and was deported to Nazi Germany, where she died.[6] His analysis reveals how the film strips the protagonist of her Judaism and communist ideology, transforming her into a holy Christian figure. Rocha focused on the celebrated "Ariel trilogy", composed of the films WAITING FOR THE MESSIAH (ESPERANDO AL MESÍAS, AR/ES/IT 2000), LOST EMBRACE (EL ABRAZO PARTIDO, AR/ES/IT/FR 2004) and FAMILY LAW (DERECHO DE FAMILIA, AR/ES/IT/FR 2006), all directed by Jewish Argentine filmmaker

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2   D'Lugo/López/Podalsky 2018, 1.
3   Beyond the Latin American context, the field of Jewish film studies began to take shape in the 1980s, primarily concentrating on two areas: Holocaust representation and the depiction of Jews in films. See Abrams 2012, 15.
4   Lotersztein 1990.
5   Glickman 1996.
6   Tal 2006.

Daniel Burman, to discuss Jewish masculine identity.[7] In 2008, Rocha revisited the trilogy to examine how Jewish and non-Jewish inhabitants of Buenos Aires relate to the urban space.[8] However, in the same year, Tal inaugurated a transnational approach by crossing both national and ethnoreligious borders in order to compare cinematic representations of Jewish and Palestinian identities in Argentine and Chilean cinema.[9] Tal returned to a nation-based approach to offer a panoramic view of Jewish representation in Argentine cinema, discussing numerous films but delving mostly into Cheese Face – My First Ghetto (Care de queso – Mi primer ghetto, Ariel Winograd, AR 2006) and To Build a Homeland (Hacer patria, David Blaustein, AR 2007) to equate the Jewish family with the Argentine family.[10] Rocha, for her part, adopted a transnational approach with her article "Jewish Cinematic Self-Representations in Contemporary Argentine and Brazilian Films".[11] As the title suggests, the article focuses on Jewish-Brazilian and Argentine filmmakers who depict their own Ashkenazi communities in São Paulo and Buenos Aires, respectively, in order to explore Jewish identity in 21st-century Latin America.

The foundational period of Jewish Latin American film has been characterized by scholarly works that focus on cinematic representations deeply connected to the filmmakers' personal experiences, with autobiographical elements prominently featured in the films. This autobiographical emphasis has consistently shaped the actual presence of Jewishness in Latin American film since its inception. Additionally, the dynamic interplay between critical approaches that prioritize either the national or transnational dimensions of Jewish Latin American cinema has been a defining trend, continuing to influence studies in this area to the present day.

Recent Research

With authors hailing from disciplines such as literature, cultural studies, history, women's studies, Jewish studies, Latin American studies and film

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7   Rocha 2007.
8   Rocha 2008.
9   Tal 2008.
10 Tal 2010.
11 Rocha 2010.

studies, the field has witnessed a pronounced increase in interest since the 2010s, alongside an expansion in thematic and theoretical diversity. In addition to the growing number of peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, the period from the 2010s onwards has seen the emergence of interdisciplinary works that offer a comprehensive Latin American perspective through the publication of two special issues, an influential edited volume and two monographs. Raanan Rein and Tzvi Tal edited the first special issue of *Jewish Film & New Media*, devoted to the representation of Jewish Latin Americans in film and television.[12] The evocative title of the introductory essay, "Becoming Part of the Moving Story: Jews on the Latin American Screen", suggests a process of inclusion that situates Jewish representation and involvement within the narrative fabric of Latin American cinema. This special issue highlights the richness of these depictions, addressing diverse themes such as the directorial work of Jewish women in documentary film production, the concept of *tikkun olam* in the works of transnational Jews, the portrayal of Jewish characters as Others who are concurrently an integral part of the nation in an Argentine telenovela, the scrutiny of Jewish religious rites in Mexican and Chilean cinemas, and the theme of collective memory in Argentine films. This special issue paved the way for subsequent publications that also adopted a Latin American perspective. Such is the case for Nora Glickman and Ariana Huberman's edited volume *Evolving Images: Jewish Latin American Cinema*, a seminal work in the field.[13] The volume comprises 15 essays that delve into a wide array of topics, including Jewish identity, incidental Jewishness, memory, violence, sports, Jewish religious revival, the portrayal of Israel in the Latin American imaginary, displacement, interfaith relations and Jewish urban spaces. This groundbreaking publication, which brings together scholars from the Americas, Europe and Israel, incorporates a wider geographical perspective by including essays that focus on North American and Spanish films. Thus, it expands the scope and impact of the scholarship on Jewish Latin American cinema and opens new research avenues, so that the esteemed scholar of Latin American literature and Jewish studies Stephen A. Sadow confidently asserted on the back cover of the book that it "creates a new field of research".

12 Rein/Tal 2014.
13 Glickman/Huberman 2018.

While the classification of Jewish Latin American film as a field of research remains contentious, it is gaining increasing acceptance among scholars. This is exemplified by the special issue of *PostScript* entitled "Jewish Identities in Latin American Cinema", edited by Patricia Nuriel and Luca Barattoni, an interdisciplinary contribution that advances the scholarship and unambiguously refers to Jewish Latin American film as a distinct field.[14] Through seven essays, the collection addresses issues of Jewish rural settlement in Argentina, the Shoah, public and private space, violence, belonging and Jewish immigration to the Americas. The noteworthy contribution to the special issue on LGBTQ+ Jews by Gabriela Jonas Aharoni opens a new path of exploration that has received scarce scholarly attention in the context of Jewish Latin American cinema.[15] Lastly, two monographs have advanced the field further. I published a nation-based study on the interplay between Jewish ethnic identity and Argentine national identity in film,[16] while Stephanie Pridgeon adopted a transnational approach to examine cinematic representations of the participation of Jewish Latin Americans in left-leaning revolutionary groups during the 1960s and 1970s.[17] A further recognition of the importance of this field was demonstrated by the inclusion of articles on Jewish Latin American film and television in the prestigious journal *AJS Perspectives: The Magazine of the Association for Jewish Studies* in 2023.[18] These articles were featured alongside contributions that did not focus on Latin American films, stressing the relevance of and academic interest in this area of study.

As this overview attests, the field of Jewish Latin American cinema has evolved significantly over recent decades and continues to expand, incorporating new perspectives that respond to broader issues of multiculturalism, identity politics, religion, and social integration in Latin America. However, against this rich scholarly backdrop, challenges have become evident in recent years.

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14 Nuriel/Barattoni 2019.
15 Aharoni 2019.
16 Vohnsen 2019.
17 Pridgeon 2021.
18 Goldfine/Vohnsen 2023; Kantor 2023.

Challenges and Future Developments

A first significant challenge for the study of films in general is the accessibility of cinematic materials essential for detailed analysis. In the past, films could be acquired through VHS or DVD, but the current landscape presents difficulties in obtaining some films, particularly those that are not widely distributed or archived. Various Latin American cinemas have launched online platforms showcasing national films, such as Argentina's CINE.AR (http://www.cine.ar/), Mexico's Cine en línea (https://cineenlinea.filmoteca.unam.mx/) and Chile's OndaMedia (https://ondamedia.cl/). Unfortunately, these platforms do not gather all the films produced in their respective countries, limiting their utility for comprehensive research. Video-sharing platforms such as Vimeo and YouTube may host some Jewish-related Latin American films, but the availability of these films is often inconsistent, posing a significant challenge not only for sustained scholarly research but also for student instruction. Similarly, major streaming platforms such as Netflix, Disney+ and Prime Video do not make content permanently available.[19] Despite their shortcomings, these streaming platforms have contributed to increasing the visibility of Latin American Jewish communities, reaching audiences outside Latin America. Notable examples include the Amazon Prime–produced series Yosi, the Regretful Spy (Iosi, el espía arrepentido, Daniel Burman, AR 2022) and The End of Love (El fin del amor, Erika Halvorsen / Tamara Tenenbaum, AR 2022), the Netflix series Community Squad (División Palermo, Santiago Korovsky, AR 2023) and the Netflix-produced film Rest in Peace (Descansar en paz, Sebastián Borensztein, AR 2024). The influence of these platforms on the direction of academic inquiry is significant, as researchers may increasingly rely on series and films available on them to overcome the hurdles associated with traditional film acquisition. As such, while the growing interest and scholarly contributions have enriched the field of Jewish Latin American cinema, the evolving digital landscape presents both challenges and opportunities that must be navigated to sustain and advance this area of research.

Another challenge and opportunity lies in the insufficient attention given to date to the role of women in film. As Jewish Latin American cinema

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19 Netflix explains on its website, "Though we strive to keep the titles you want to watch, some titles do leave Netflix because of licensing agreements", https://t1p.de/41rmu [accessed 24 June 2024].

continues to evolve, it is crucial to place greater emphasis on the presence and contribution of women both behind and in front of the camera. The increasing participation of women in the Latin American film and television industry is likely to introduce innovative perspectives on the portrayal of Latin American Jews, the aesthetics of films, the exploration of new themes, and women's experiences, prompting changes that will impact scholarly research. Films such as Sisters (Hermanas, Julia Solomonoff, AR/ES/BR 2005), Camera Obscura (La cámara oscura, María Victoria Menis, AR/FR 2008) and The German Friend (El amigo alemán, Jeanine Meerapfel, DE/AR 2012), which are directed by women and place Jewish women at the forefront of their narratives, have already garnered some academic attention.[20] The already-mentioned Argentine series The End of Love, with its feminist critique of Orthodox Judaism, has the potential to expand Jewish Latin American film by offering new perspectives on the intersection of gender, religion, feminism and cultural identity. Research could focus on how the series challenges traditional representations of Orthodox Judaism, exploring themes such as religious authority, gender roles and the tension between individual autonomy and communal norms. Additionally, an examination of the series' cultural impact will help us understand how it engages with contemporary feminist discourses and contributes to ongoing debates about religious modernity, secularism and the representation of minority religious communities in Latin American media. As more films and television series tackle gender-related themes and their interplay with religion, new avenues of research will likely open up. By the same token, the exploration of LGBTQ+ identities within Jewish communities is a topic that thus far has received limited scholarly attention but is likely to attract more focus in the coming years. A film like Transmitzvah (Daniel Burman, AR 2024), which was recently screened at the Cannes Festival and critically examines the intersections of tradition, religion and gender, is expected to draw considerable academic attention. This focus could both broaden the representation of diverse Jewish identities in Latin American cinema and prompt the integration of new theoretical frameworks into the study of Jewish Latin American films.

A less explored yet critically significant format in Jewish Latin American cinema is the documentary film. Despite its relatively limited scholarly attention, this genre holds substantial potential for academic inquiry. Docu-

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20 Goldfine 2018; Michelotti 2018; Rocha 2019; Vohnsen 2023; Rocha 2023.

mentaries provide a unique and powerful medium for chronicling Jewish life in Latin America, offering nuanced insight into the intricate interplay of religion, culture, memory and history. The scholarly works of Daniela Goldfine, Carolina Rocha, Ariana Huberman, Stephanie Pridgeon and Débora Kantor have already begun to highlight the value of documentaries in this context.[21] Through their meticulous analysis of real-life events and personal stories, these scholars show that documentaries serve as invaluable resources for recognizing the multifaceted nature of Jewish identity in Latin America. Indeed, Huberman is currently drafting an article on documentaries about conversion to Judaism in Latin American societies for the forthcoming *Handbook on Judaism and Film*, which will be published by Oxford University Press in 2025. Works on documentaries will enhance our awareness of Jewish life in the region and also contribute to discussions on diaspora studies, religion, politics and transnationalism.

Comparative studies examining representations of Jews in film alongside those of other ethnic groups that have settled in Latin America remain relatively scarce, largely because there are fewer films that portray other minority communities, although this trend is gradually shifting. This type of scholarly work promises valuable insight into how these groups are represented and interact with the majority culture. Expanding this research path to include depictions of other ethnic groups that have a significant presence in Latin America – including Arabs, Asians and Afro-descendants – could enrich our understanding of the multicultural tapestry of the region and especially of its cinematic representation. These types of studies can reveal common themes and divergent experiences among different communities, shedding light on how each group contributes to and is shaped by the national culture. Moreover, these comparative approaches, which could explore how minority groups assert their identities and resist marginalization, can elucidate socio-political issues such as assimilation, multiculturalism, social cohesion and religion. By examining the cinematic depictions of interethnic interactions, scholars can gain insight into the processes of cultural exchange, conflict and cooperation that characterize Latin American societies. In addition, this type of research can contribute to the theoretical frameworks of film studies, ethnic studies, religious studies and cultural studies. It can enhance our awareness of how films function as cultural texts that reflect, construct and challenge social realities. This expanded

21 Goldfine 2011; Rocha 2014; Huberman 2018; Pridgeon 2018; Kantor 2020.

focus promises to deepen our appreciation of the region's rich cultural diversity and the complex interplay of ethnicity, culture, religion and power in its cinematic landscape.

Lastly, comparative studies that extend beyond the confines of Latin America present a promising avenue. Historically, the transnational perspective in this field has primarily involved comparative analyses of various Latin American cinemas. Notably, Nora Glickman has been a trailblazer in broadening this approach to include US cinema, thereby setting a precedent for more expansive transnational inquiries.[22] Glickman's pioneering work exemplifies the potential of this research focus to encompass comparative studies that juxtapose the cinematic representation of the Latin American Jewish experience with that of other diasporic communities in countries and regions such as Canada, Europe and Australia, where Jews have a substantial presence. Such comparative studies will shed light on the unique and shared aspects of depictions of Jewish diasporic identities across different cultural and socio-political landscapes. By examining the representation of the Latin American Jewish experience in film in relation to portrayals of other global Jewish diasporas, scholars can uncover how historical, cultural and political contexts shape the cinematic depiction of Jewish identity and community life. This comparative framework allows for a more nuanced awareness of the interconnectedness and distinctiveness of Jewish experiences worldwide as portrayed in cinema. By analysing how different films depict Jewish communities across various global contexts, scholars can identify patterns of adaptation, resilience and cultural exchange that transcend regional boundaries. This provides key perspectives on how diasporic communities navigate issues of identity, belonging and representation in different national and cultural contexts, thus enhancing our understanding of global Jewish experiences as reflected in film.

Closing Remarks

Overall, the study of Jewish Latin American cinema is poised to continue its growth and diversification. By building on the foundational work of pioneering scholars and embracing new comparative and interdisciplinary approaches, this field will certainly offer valuable perspectives on the interplay

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22 Glickman 2018.

of ethnicity, culture, religion and media. The focus on Jewish identity in Latin American cinema provides significant understanding of how religious, ethnic and cultural identities are visually constructed and negotiated. This understanding can be extended to other ethnic groups, helping scholars analyse how media shapes and reflects complex identity dynamics. Concurrently, the emphasis on Jewish Latin American films highlights the importance of studying minority religious representations in regional cinemas. This recognition may encourage scholars to explore other underrepresented religious groups in various cinematic traditions, broadening the scope of religion and media studies. Furthermore, the inclusion of gender and LGBTQ+ perspectives in the study of Jewish Latin American film can be expanded to examine how gender and sexuality intersect with religious identities in cinematic representations across different cultures. In sum, although Jewish Latin American film is a relatively niche field, it holds significant potential to enrich the broader discipline of religion, film and media by bringing scholarly attention to a region that has often been overlooked in global academic discourse.

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Giulia Evolvi

Ten Years of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*

Methods, Theories, and Current Trends

Abstract

Responding to the articles in the 10-year-anniversary issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*, this article provides some methodological and theoretical considerations for the field of religion and media. First, it addresses qualitative and quantitative approaches, evaluating the impact of digital tools and artificial intelligence on the analysis of data. Second, it discusses issues connected to power, focusing on decoloniality and secularization in the study of religion. Lastly, it traces trends in the field of religion and media, discussing the theory of (hyper)mediation and the role of religion within social movements and in connection with other cultural issues.

Keywords

Digital Religion, Secularization, Decoloniality, Artificial Intelligence, Hypermediation

Biography

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Introduction

Religion has always been mediated, as religion and media scholar Stewart Hoover[1] has argued. This idea is significant for this anniversary issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* (JRFM), which over the last ten years has published articles and reviews on religion and a variety of media forms,

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1   Hoover 2006.

including films, music, video games, images, and technology, thus demonstrating a range of examples of religious mediation. This article discusses religion as a cultural system[2] that employs media to disseminate messages, connect people, and produce new meanings. The articles in this issue point to a broad definition of "media" as encompassing every object or technology used to create meaning, in line with the theoretical approach of mediation.[3] This description is consistent with the work of Birgit Meyer[4] on religion and materiality, mentioned in some of the articles. Meyer's approach involves taking as "media" all objects that help people move from immanence to transcendence and experience religion through mediation. This topic is central to this issue, and also to JRFM in general. The journal's contribution to the field of religion and media is, in my opinion, to offer reflections on how people produce meaning through religious mediation, and how scholars can detect these meanings by studying media production, media consumption, and media texts.

Such in-depth analysis of the role of religious mediation is evident in the article in this issue by Philippe Bornet, who considers pictures as religious media that can travel in time and space, and in this case, even by means of publication in JRFM. Yara González-Justiniano explores art and media in Puerto Rico, but similarly focuses on embodied and material practices, using the expression *a flor de piel* (brought to the surface) to conceptualize the mediation experience. The notion of art as a medium for the experience of religion is also explored in Mirna Vohnsen's article, which assesses scholarly engagement with Jewish Latin American films. Sofia Sjö reflects on the mediation of religion as described by the results of a global project on youth, showing the significance and overlap of online and offline religious practices, including for those who claim no religion. Study of the religious medium is explored by Marie-Therese Mäder, who presents three types of method, focused on media content, consumption, and reception, respectively. The remaining two articles consider the current state of academic publications and teaching, with Christian Wessely focusing on the opportunities and challenges of Open Access for journals like JRFM and Alexander Darius Ornella discussing the teaching of religion and media within the current academic landscape, where humanities and social sciences are often underfunded

2   In this article I largely deploy Clifford Geertz's definition of religion; see Geertz 1983 [1966].
3   Martin-Barbero 1993.
4   See for example Meyer 2006.

and disregarded. I see both these articles as connected to the concept of religious mediation in that they show modes of dissemination and communication that help determine the role of religion in contemporary societies.

These articles not only showcase empirical research in the field of religion and media but also discuss facets of contemporary academia and the participation of the researcher in collecting, analyzing, and communicating data. In the first section, I discuss methodological approaches raised in this issue, emphasizing the contribution of digital tools and artificial intelligence. I then explore how these articles present the issue of power, in particular in connection with decoloniality and secularization. And finally, I delineate some current trends that will be relevant for framing the future study of religion and media.

(Big) Data, Interviews, and Artificial Intelligence

Religion entails multi-layered symbols and meanings that are complex to explore. When it comes to religion and media, the object of study can vary; it might concern, for example, material practices, embodiments, visual aesthetics, media content, or technological adaptations. As a result, to understand how religious meanings are produced and consumed and how religion travels and evolves, I often advocate for the use of multi-method approaches that consider various types of media. For example, we can combine visual analysis with textual/discourse analysis,[5] or conduct digital ethnography with a focus on offline contexts.[6] In this way, the researcher can try to capture the complexity of religious phenomena that exist across media boundaries and travel through different platforms.

It is for this reason that I appreciate the efforts in this issue of JRFM to raise and discuss various methodological approaches in the study of religion and media, most specifically in Mäder's article. Starting from the premise that the task of the scholar is to untangle religious meanings, Mäder presents three possible methodological perspectives, focusing on (1) media representation, (2) media texts together with consumption, (3) and audience studies. In so doing, the article outlines possibilities for both qualitative and quantitative studies, which are both crucial for scholars in the

5   Machin/Mayr 2012.
6   Postill/Pink 2012.

field of religion and media, who are increasingly considering approaches based on big data analysis.[7] While Sjö's article does not address methodology so specifically, her reflections on the selection of interviewees for a 12-country study are thought-provoking. To analyze youth in countries that are very different in terms of their religious landscape and access to technology – such as Ghana, China, and Sweden – the researchers mostly approached university students, who are neither representative of the entire population of the country nor identical across countries in terms of their "student" characteristics. Such reflections identify the possible limitations of a particular study and more broadly call on scholars to recognize challenges in data collection.

Further challenges faced by scholars of religion and media are highlighted in Bornet's attention to digital tools. With additional input from artificial intelligence, academics can today create large datasets with an increasing number of tools, from text archives to software for creating pictures, from algorithms organizing data to programs to create large datasets.[8] Here, I propose, is one means to tackle the challenge, noted above, of studying complex religious phenomena across platforms. Scholars are already analyzing the relationship between religion and AI,[9] often seen as a new frontier in the study of religion and media. AI can be both an object of study and a tool for data collection and analysis.

The richness of the possibilities offered by digital tools, especially AI, is encumbered with ethical implications. If literature reviews, data collection, and data analysis can be performed by digital tools, what role is to be reserved for researchers? This issue of JRFM shows that the study of complex subjects like religion and media needs planning and contextual awareness. As the articles discuss and demonstrate, researchers need strategies for understanding the peculiarities of particular phenomena; these strategies, I believe, should be designed by scholars, with digital tools as their assistant. On the basis of the articles in this issue, I now turn to how scholars can address critical themes in order to produce good scholarship on religion and media.

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7   An example of big data analysis combined with qualitative analysis can be found in Elwert/Evolvi/Neumaier/de Wildt 2023.
8   For examples of digital approaches in social sciences see Rogers 2024.
9   See for instance Singler 2020.

Relevant Aspects in Religion and Media: Power, Decoloniality, and Secularization

Alongside its attention to method, this issue of JRFM demonstrates how scholars of media and religion can conceptualize pressing questions that are present in empirical case studies from different geographical contexts. One prominent issue that emerges from all the articles concerns power. Closely connected to the question of power, several articles tackle issues around decoloniality and secularization, which I will discuss in this section.

Power and religion are often involved – religious institutions and individuals may seek power or be entangled in power dynamics. Religions create discourses that are deeply connected with power. One example of this entanglement is discussed in Bornet's article, which presents a case study of image circulation that shows how actors have the power to create and diffuse media. This article can be put in conversation with the work of Heidi Campbell[10] regarding how groups negotiate media use, as religious institutions will often evaluate whether they should adopt a new medium. Bornet's example suggests that certain leaders and groups can choose to participate in the creation of media, but, I would argue, not all religious groups have this kind of power and therefore must develop strategies for gaining some control of the mediation of their practices and beliefs.

Bornet discusses the global circulation of pictures, making cross-cultural comparisons and focusing attention on the global context of religion and media, an object of inquiry made all the more relevant by online exchanges and rapid diffusion through the Internet. Global perspectives in the field should consider decolonial approaches, which often highlight the hybrid nature of religious practices.[11] In this issue, González-Justiniano does excellent work in discussing the aesthetics of media production in Puerto Rico. The article shows not only the potential hybridity of cultural productions but also how media can be tools for religious resistance against a dominant colonial power. Similarly, even if not so closely focused on decoloniality, Vohnsen's article explores the study of transnational contexts outside the traditional "Western" understanding of religion and media. Choosing empirical cases that have been overlooked or marginal-

10 Campbell 2007.

11 See for example Bhabha 2004.

ized within the field of religion and media can bring greater attention to the global context.

If we are to consider power, especially in a global perspective, we will inevitably find ourselves discussing the position of religion in contemporary societies. While in the 1970s and 1980s several scholars predicted seculari-zation as inevitable, more recent work has argued that religion continues to have a powerful role in the public sphere, especially in contexts beyond Europe.[12] For this reason, I particularly welcome Sjö's mention of the study of atheist and non-religious youth: the decline of traditional forms of religi-osity does not mean that religion should be sidelined in academic research; indeed, the phenomenon of people abandoning religion should be included in the field. Mediation is particularly relevant here, as a venue for alternative religious knowledge.[13]

Ornella's article addresses the decision by universities in several coun-tries to cut the teaching of religion and eliminate departments of religion which suggests that the study of religion is not considered relevant. This sidelining of the study of religion is, in my opinion, a consequence of how academia has been conditioned to think that religion no longer has power, even though it remains a key to understanding cultures, societies, and poli-tics. The scholar's power is often dependent on publication, as is noted in Wessely's article on Open Access publication and the need for institutional support and awareness. Authors' power to publish is not absolute, for it may be conditioned by type of publication, geographical location, and insti-tutional support. Access to religious-knowledge production and consump-tion is uneven. Power holds a significant place in global perspectives and understandings of religion in contemporary societies, but it also affects academia and will likely determine future trends in the field of religion and media.

Current Trends and Next Steps

Ten years is a significant timeframe for the study of religion and media, given in particular the rapid development of digital technologies and the increased possibilities for the communication of religion. JRFM's publication

12   For discussions about secularization see for instance Casanova 1994; Taylor 2007.
13   Herbert 2011.

history is a testimony to how a field develops in acknowledging new leanings and germane topics. Where technological developments and religious evolutions will lead us next is not easy to predict, but the articles in this issue help us recognize current trends in the field.

First, I started this article by discussing the idea of mediation and its connection to material objects and embodied practices. Elsewhere[14] I have argued that mediation in today's digital society is increasingly fast-paced and traverses boundaries between platforms. The concept of *hypermediation* captures the idea that digital tools can bring us "beyond" a linear practice of mediation. They can offer scholars new venues for (big) data analysis and give religious groups novel opportunities for spreading their messages.

Second, studying power means studying groups that challenge powerful institutions. This approach is connected to decolonial perspectives that focus on how marginalized groups push back against certain colonial imaginaries, as discussed in this issue. In this sense, directing greater scholarly attention to the theoretical concepts of counter-publics or alternative publics[15] will help us explore religious groups that exist at the margins of powerful institutions but use media to creatively imagine different societies.

Third, and connected to the previous point, religion can and does function as a framework for action and social change. While the study of social movements has often overlooked the role of religion,[16] religion is undoubtedly entangled with politics, as well as with issues of gender, sexuality, nationality, migration, and belonging. The production of mediated aesthetics and discourses can serve as a form of resistance. Therefore, in the future the field of religion and media will probably have to continue to focus not only on global perspectives and issues of power, but also on the discursive production of groups that merge religion with other cultural and social issues. This issue of JRFM does excellent work in underlining how religion continues to be positioned within today's academia and society, in particular in defining the essential role of the scholar of religion and media in recognizing and reading, contextualizing and investigating religious meanings in today's media.

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14 Evolvi 2018.
15 See Fraser 1990; Warner 2005.
16 Snow/Beyerlein 2018.

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Open Section

Robert K. Johnston

The Meaningful Meaninglessness of Multiverse Movies

Everything Everywhere All at Once (Daniel Kwan / Daniel Scheinert, US 2022), Camus, and Qoheleth

Abstract

Until recently, in Western culture the "multiverse" has most typically been limited to the abstractions of theoretical physics or the imagination of comic-book writers. However, in Everything Everywhere All at Once (Daniel Kwan / Daniel Scheinert, US 2022), the multiverse functions differently, becoming a deeply affecting metaphor particularly suited to the Asian-American immigrant experience but also suited more generally to the absurdity and chaos of contemporary life. The multiverse functions in the movie as a symbol of life's vanity, its absurdity, which paradoxically throws both characters and viewers back on the need for kindness and love. After unpacking the film narrative, this article moves to an inter-textual dialogue with two philosophers who also note the need to recognize life's meaninglessness in order to live meaningfully: Albert Camus and the unknown writer of Ecclesiastes.

Biography

Robert K. Johnston is Senior Professor of Religion and Culture at Fuller Seminary, USA. He has published in a variety of fields, including theology, selected Old Testament topics, evangelical theology, theology and film, and theology and culture. His recent books include *God in the Movies* (edited with Catherine M. Barsotti, 2017), *God's Wider Presence: Reconsidering General Revelation* (2014), *Don't Stop Believin': Pop Culture and Religion from Ben Hur to Zombies* (edited with Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, 2012), and *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (2nd ed., 2006). He is editor of *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline* (2007), an Old Testament general editor of the Understanding the Bible Commentary Series for Baker Books, coeditor of both the Engaging Culture and the Exegeting Culture series for Baker Academic as well as the Religion and Film series for Routledge. A past president of the American Theological Society and the recipient of two major research grants from the Luce Foundation, Johnston is an ordained minister in the Evangelical Covenant Church.

Introduction

Over the last decade or so, the "multiverse" has moved from the fringes of Western culture to its center.[1] This shift is a result of scientific advancement, particularly in theoretical physics, but in significant ways it has taken place also thanks to the universe of Marvel movies (the MCU). The notion that we live in a cosmos with multiple universes is not only discussed in most university physics departments, but also now pervades popular culture, even if most scientists are sure that the MCU has not gotten its science entirely right.

In 2022, Marvel Studios announced their next five-year plan, to comprise sixteen movies and multiple shows, all bound together by the concept of a "Multiverse Saga". Having already begun with Black Widow (Cate Shortland, US 2021), it is scheduled to conclude in 2027 with The Avengers: Secret Wars (no director announced yet). Or to give a second example, after losing much of its dynamism, the Spider-Man franchise has rebooted with three multiverse stories in which multiple spider-men appear, satisfying customers and critics alike, who find the franchise re-energized.

There are multiple definitions of the "multiverse", which is more a group of ideas than a coherent theory at present, but we might generalize by saying that the concept of a multiverse proposes that there are an infinite number of universes that exist side by side with the universe we live in. These all have their origin in the fraction of a second surrounding the Big Bang, which occurred billions of years ago. The presence somewhere of every possible universe can help some come to terms with the infinitesimally small chance that our universe had the right circumstances for life to develop. If there is literally an infinite number of universes, with their totality encompassing all possibilities, then it is not improbable that our universe is supremely life-friendly, having the very precise, necessary conditions for life to begin. Our universe just happened to win the lottery, even though the odds of that happening were enormous.

Though physicists do not believe that we can ever access these other universes directly, there are several lines of scientific argument supporting this idea of a multiverse. Quantum mechanics, with its understanding that

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1   An earlier version of this article was first given as a public lecture at Gonzaga University, Spokane, WA, on 27 September 2023, as part of its annual Faith, Film, and Philosophy conference.

events can only be described in terms of probabilities, suggests that reality might split off and create new universes where all possible alternate events might happen. If in one universe you decided to speed through a traffic light turning red, in another universe the driver slammed on the brakes. Max Tegmark, a theoretical physicist at MIT, is a leading advocate for this explanation, arguing that "everything that could in principle have happened here did in fact happen somewhere else".[2]

Others believe the multiverse to be the result of cosmic inflation, the theory that in the instant before the Big Bang, our universe expanded exponentially – it radically inflated, its energy igniting a fireball of particles and radiation in the process. This cosmic inflation ended 13.7 billion years ago in our part of the cosmos, but other inflations might also have occurred. Moreover, if these universes touched momentarily at birth, this might have left detectable "imprints" on our universe from other universes. And in fact, Laura Mersini-Houghton, a physicist/cosmologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, claims that one predicted dent can actually be observed in our universe.[3]

The Multiverse in the Movies

Tellingly, Daniel Scheinert and Daniel Kwan, the writer-directors of the 2023 Oscar winner EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE (US 2022), who call themselves "the Daniels", explain that their multiverse movie was inspired by both the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics and the idea that cosmic inflation created infinite bubble universes.[4] Here science and popular culture have come together.

That said, though many, if not most, physicists today believe the multiverse to be likely, there is no current scientific support for "verse jumping", a staple of the Marvel universe. In fact, to travel between our cosmos's universes would be scientifically cataclysmic according to current scientific projections. In the real world there are no wormholes that allow for other Spider-Men to join Miles Morales. However, such metaphorical, or poetic, license is perhaps necessary if the multiverse is to be used in our culture's

2 Tegmark 2004, 464.
3 Mersini-Houghton 2022.
4 Johnson 2023.

storytelling. Somehow, we need access to these alternate realities, for otherwise our narratives will falter.

The reason for the importance of the multiverse in our culture's storytelling goes beyond such scientific projections, however intriguing they might be. Several lines of thinking seem particularly significant. Phil Lord co-wrote SPIDER-MAN: INTO THE SPIDER-VERSE (Bob Persichetti / Peter Ramsey / Rodney Rotham, CA/US 2018), which featured the death of Spider-Man and the introduction of a new Afro-Latino teenage Spider-Man, who was also bitten by a radioactive spider. (In the film he gets his Spidey costume at a shop run by the creator of the Spider-Man comics, Stan Lee.) Lord's script weaves into its storyline a Spider-Woman, Gwen Stacy, an older disillusioned Peter Parker, a hard-boiled Spider-Man Noir, an anime-styled Peni Parker, and even a Spider-Ham, Peter Porker. Lord believes that the fractured lives of people today help explain sociologically why such metaphorical, or poetic, use of the multiverse has proven so compelling. He says, "I think we're living multiple lives in parallel dimensions [...] all the time [...]. We're living an online life – or lives. Then we're living a work life that's on a screen [...]. Then there's a home life, and then one with your friends. Trying to resolve those things is [...] something we're all thinking about all the time."[5] The multiverse has become a metaphor for the chaos and disconnection of our lives today, a chaos and disconnection exacerbated for many by the extended isolation and insecurity caused by Covid-19.

Besides this sociological reason for the multiverse's connection to many today, there might also be a psychological reason for the multiverse's popularity, thinks Lord. Whether because of nature or nurture, many feel drawn to exploring possibilities that have passed us by or are yet to be. What might have resulted if just one thing had happened differently or if one choice had been made differently? The multiverse provides us with access to our potential other selves. As human beings, we are storytellers, and as such we are drawn to imagining other possible outcomes for our lives. This was the power of the turn-of-the-millennium's cult classic LOLA RENNT (RUN LOLA RUN, Tom Tykwer, DE 1998) – a movie structured like a pinball game that reboots three times until a satisfying ending results. Multiverse movies have simply ramped up such storytelling, adding more alternatives, more sci-fi, more spectacle. There are endless possibilities.

Of course, not all multiverse movies have been able to carve out these deeper connections. At times, the multiverse seems little more than a gadg-

5   Phil Lord, quoted in Page 2022.

et in the screenwriter's toolbox. It has been used simply as a plot device, to bring back into the fray favorite characters who have died, to substitute younger or more diverse heroes, or to alter the trajectory of plot lines that are headed toward a dead end. Sometimes the reason for the multiverse seems to be little more than spectacle, following the too-typical Hollywood pattern that if one spectacle is good, two is better and a plethora is best (think of the sequels to The Matrix [Lana Wachowski / Lilly Wachowski, US/ AU 1999]).

Even Daniel Kwan, one half of the Daniels, expressed in an interview the fear that rather than strengthening a storyline, the multiverse might actually water it down, undercutting the pathos of suffering or death or the heroics of a rescue. When everything can happen, does anything ultimately matter? There is no need for the audience to feel anything deeply. The story can be kept at arm's distance. As a result, Kwan argued, "The audience detaches. There's no connection to it, because it doesn't feel like any of it mattered in the end."[6] When such a multiverse movie does work, however, when connection is made with its audience, it can prove powerful, both culturally and aesthetically. And there is no better example at present than the Daniels' Academy Award winner Everything Everywhere All at Once.

Everything Everywhere All at Once

The movie tells the story of a Chinese family in America who live above the laundromat run by wife and mother Evelyn (Michelle Yeoh). Driven by her immigrant's dreams of a better life, Evelyn finds her hopes soured by the mediocrity of her life, a life made all the worse by an unfeeling IRS auditor (Jamie Lee Curtis), a judgmental father (James Hong), who opposed her marriage and emigration and is visiting from China, and an angry daughter, Joy (Stephanie Hsu), who has brought her lesbian partner over to the house only for Evelyn to introduce her to her judgmental father as simply a "friend". Evelyn has no time for her sweet husband, Waymond (Ke Huy Quan), who believes the only way left for him to get her attention is to serve her with divorce papers, though he loves her and wants to be with her.

It is only after this extended setup that what seems to be her husband Waymond, but actually is "alpha Waymond", who has dropped in from another

6   Daniel Kwan, quoted in Page 2022.

Fig. 1: Waymond and his fanny pack. Film still, Everything Everywhere All at Once (Daniel Kwan / Daniel Scheinert, US 2022), 00:29:22.

universe, challenges Evelyn to save the cosmos by defeating Jobu Tupaki, a malevolent force throughout the multiverse who turns out to be Evelyn and Waymond's nihilistic daughter, Joy. In the 90 minutes that follow, audiences experience a helter-skelter, mad dash through a host of bizarre, humorous, and sometimes gross-out worlds as Evelyn tries to save the cosmos.

We see Waymond fighting successfully using his fanny pack as a nunchuck (fig. 1), a chef with a raccoon under his hat, which is a reference to the movie Ratatouille (Brad Bird / Jan Pinkava, US 2007), the IRS agent playing the piano with her feet because her fingers are hot dogs, two talking rocks in an alternate universe that will not support life, and on and on. However, these ridiculous multiverse mini-plots never lose the movie's focus in service of the main question: What is the meaning of Evelyn and her family's life? The absurd is not the point; it serves the point. And the point is that each family member needs to understand that their life is not a problem to be solved but a gift to be enjoyed and treated kindly.

As the movie ends, Joy still wants to leave the family, and her grandfather is still judgmental, telling his daughter to allow Joy to go. However, Evelyn will not let her, having discovered new strength in herself. She says to her father, "How could you let me go? How on earth did you do it so easily?" (01:59:43–48) Then, after reaching out with a new acceptance to Joy's partner, Evelyn tells Joy, "I still want to share [life] with you. I will always want you here with me." Joy has her doubts and responds, "Why? … You can be

anything anywhere … Here all we get are a few specks …" To which Evelyn responds, "Then I will cherish those few specks." (02:06:45–02:07:33)

The film's answer to the paradox of life is the title to Part Three of its narrative, "All at Once". Nothing matters, but everything matters. The paradox is central. Laughter. Raccoons. Waymond's smile. Hands holding each other. All are part of the final scene. The Wangs are a family, even if the IRS agent still has a problem!

Rather than deny the multiverse's relativizing of life's significance, the Daniels brilliantly make its problematic the foil against which life's fragile beauty shines ever more brightly. From the disappointment of Part One, to the infinity of possibilities of Part Two, the movie ends with an appreciation of the Wangs' small corner of the multiverse in Part Three. There is a battered optimism to the movie, so much so that tears are common among those viewing it. Life is meaningless, absurd. However, it is simultaneously meaningful, wonderful. "Two are better than one. […] A threefold chord is not easily broken" (Eccles. 4:9–12, NRSV, used throughout).

Analyzing the Narrative

In unpacking the movie's story, it is useful to consider more closely how the multiverse functions in EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE. Drawing on Wesley Kort, let me suggest four aspects that seem relevant, each corresponding to one aspect of the narrative whole:[7]

(1) The movie's humorous portrayal sets the *tone* for the movie, providing a necessary counterbalance to the sense of disappointment that is central to the movie's plot line.

(2) Rather than deny that the multiverse undercuts the significance of human action, the relativism of everything is made a central plot point. In the

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[7]   For a discussion of these four elements of a fictional story, see Kort 1975. Kort argues that the power and meaning of a story (as well as its relationship to religion) can best be understood by analyzing the story in terms of these four constitutive parts. "Plot" and "character" for Kort are defined typically. "Tone" has to do with the implied narrator's (for film, this would be the filmmaker's) attitude toward the story's subject and audience. "Atmosphere" is more than the emotional element of the story. Rather, it is the unchanging backdrop against which the narrative is played out (e. g., the Holocaust in THE ZONE OF INTEREST [Jonathan Glazer, UK/PL/US 2023]).

movie, the reality of the multiverse is a given, its presence central to the movie's *atmosphere*.

(3) To deepen the story's meaning, the actors' personal stories of disappointments and dreams are purposely allowed to bleed into their *characters'* storylines, creating, as it were, still another alternate "universe" for the audience to consider.

(4) Rather than simply portraying meaninglessness, the movie paradoxically and simultaneously embraces love's meaningfulness. This paradox of life's meaningless meaningfulness (or meaningful meaninglessness) summarizes the arc of the movie's *plot*.

Tone

Humor is key to the success of the Daniels' movie. We laugh when characters turn up with hot dogs for fingers and must play the piano with their toes (fig. 2), or when the IRS agent played by Jamie Lee Curtis is deadpan in her interaction with Evelyn. We laugh when Waymond (not Raymond) seeks to connect with his wife, whom he loves, by trying to serve her with divorce papers, when one of the universes is built off Evelyn misremembering the movie title Ratatouille as "racca-cooney", so that a raccoon manipulates the chef like the rat in the Pixar movie, and when Joy has outlandish costume after outlandish costume, and when Julie Andrews sings, "A cupful

Fig. 2: Evelyn and Deirdre, the IRS auditor, with hot dog fingers. Film still, Everything Everywhere All at Once (Daniel Kwan / Daniel Scheinert, US 2022), 00:58:13.

of sugar makes the medicine go down". Rather than treat the multiverse simply as a serious scientific hypothesis, Everything Everywhere All at Once creates space for all its viewers by portraying life's absurdity absurdly.

Atmosphere

Nonetheless, the movie is also wrestling with a serious topic: Does life have meaning, and if so, what is it? In posing the question, the filmmakers use the multiverse to encourage viewers' reflection. The multiverse pervades everything in the movie. It is the given, the "background" – the atmosphere – for everything else. Thus the title, Everything Everywhere All at Once. The multiverse's seeming relativism turns Joy into a nihilist. Its presence threatens Waymond's niceness. If everything is allowed, then nothing seemingly matters. As the writer of Ecclesiastes recognizes, "Vanity of vanity. All is vanity" (Eccles. 1:2). Why should Evelyn care? Yet, she does. In Everything Everywhere All at Once, the multiverse provides the backdrop against which the Daniels explore what possible meaning life can have.

In the absurdist fashion typical of the Daniels, the primary symbol the film uses to frame this question is the "everything bagel" (fig. 3). Joy, who has become Jobu Tupaki, the colorfully dressed, wily force of malevolence, shares with her mom,

Fig. 3: The "everything bagel" as Jobu Tupaki's headpiece. Film still, Everything Everywhere All at Once (Daniel Kwan / Daniel Scheinert, US 2022), 01:33:11.

I got bored one day, and I put everything on a bagel. Everything, my hopes and dreams, my old report cards, every breed of dogs […] and it collapsed in on itself […]. When you really put everything on a bagel, it becomes this. It's the truth – nothing matters […] it feels nice doesn't it. If nothing matters, then all the pain and guilt from making nothing of your life goes away […] sucked into a bagel (01:00:10–01:01:42).

The multiverse calls everything into question. However, is nihilism, for the Daniels, the ultimate truth?

Character

Perhaps what has been commented on most about Everything Everywhere All at Once is not the film's tone (its humor) or its atmosphere (the givenness of the multiverse) but rather the characters we meet, along with the backstories of the actors playing Evelyn and Waymond. The filmmakers brilliantly complicate and deepen the film's focus on the main characters by having the actors' personal lives bleed into the movie's storyline.

Thus, the actor playing Waymond, Ke Huy Quan, is the accomplished Asian-American child actor who played Short Round in Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom (Steven Spielberg, US 1984) and Data in The Goonies (Richard Donner, US 1985). However, few roles are written in Hollywood for Asian-American men, so after landing only a small number of parts as he became an adult in the 1990s, Quan was totally overlooked for acting roles for 19 years. It was as if he did not exist. As with Waymond, despite his positive spirit and giftedness, he was simply ignored, that is, until Everything Everywhere All at Once came along. For his role in the movie, Quan received a standing ovation at the Oscars, as well as the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor. Does life imitate art, or art life? Given his life story and his role as Waymond, *Time Magazine* recognized Quan as one of the 100 most influential persons in the world in 2023.

Similarly, and perhaps even more profoundly, Michelle Yeoh, who plays Evelyn, is widely recognized within the guild for her superior acting. Nevertheless, she has been relegated throughout much of her career largely to second-tier martial arts movies, where her physical skills are demanded, but little else. This fact is the setup for one of the many inside jokes the movie provides. Evelyn, seemingly a woman with few, if any, physical skills, is nevertheless asked to save the universe by defeating the evil "monster" Jobu.

However, since Evelyn is also Michelle Yeoh, one of the greatest female action stars of all time (do you remember CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON [WO HU CANG LONG, Ang Lee, TW/HK/US/CN 2000]?) and someone who, like Tom Cruise, actually does her own stunts, it is no surprise that Evelyn proves fully equal to the role she is called upon to play.

In the movie, Evelyn is deeply dissatisfied with the lack of meaning in her own life. Her choices have seemed not to work out. Her anger is front and center as she takes stock of her life. Nevertheless, when she is called upon to save the multiverse and is thus exposed to the pool of alternate Evelyns in the infinite web of branching paths she might have taken, she discovers Evelyns who are stronger, richer, healthier, and happier than she is. She meets herself as a glamorous Hong Kong movie star, a master chef with strong knife skills, an advertising sign twirler, a Beijing opera star, and a kung fu disciple, not to mention a piñata and a rock in a desert landscape. With so many different roles to play, Yeoh is finally able to use her formidable acting talent more fully. The wide range of acting jobs denied to her over the years is open to her all at once, and Yeoh simply excels. It is not just Evelyn we cheer, but Michelle Yeoh as well. Again, the Academy proved wildly appreciative of Yeoh's performance, and like Quan, she won an Oscar and received a standing ovation for her performance. Once again, art imitates life, or is life imitating art?

Plot

Finally, after considering the film's tone, atmosphere, and characters, we turn to its plot. The movie's plot turns out not to be primarily about the meaninglessness of life given the multiverse, but about meaninglessness's meaningfulness. It is not just about "everything everywhere", but also about "all at once". Though what we find in our lives might be precious "little" (Joy is brutally honest), with Evelyn it is still "precious". Even on the helter-skelter of life, Waymond is right: kindness is the better way. If Evelyn can throw googly eyes at her enemies while hugging them, so can we. We should laugh at life's raccoons. Life is often silly and ridiculous, but it is also sweet and sentimental. Nothing we can do ultimately matters (as Jobu Tupaki says, "Eventually it all just goes away." [01:49:47–53]); we cannot produce meaning by our own effort. Yet, we can accept our portion in life. We can work with all our might (doing laundry and taxes) and love our family. We can be kind to others. Problems will remain, but love and kindness while engaging with life are the way forward. We will always have the IRS. However, that does

not mean nothing matters. "Absurdity of absurdity. All is absurd", as one translation of verse 1:2 of Ecclesiastes reads. Yet, we can choose love.

Beginning/Ending

In unpacking the narrative of Everything Everywhere All at Once, I have used its constitutive narrative parts, tone, atmosphere, character, and plot, even while recognizing these are but critical constructions of any story. I could also have looked at the beginning and ending scenes. Here, the Daniels took a huge risk that handsomely paid off. Despite its foray into the multiverse with all its splashiness and dizzying complexity, the movie begins and ends more intimately. It is actually a mother/daughter intergenerational movie about the difficulty of learning to accept and love one another despite different values, experiences, and orientations. We might even say the story is about Evelyn initially being unable to cross the generational divide and accept her daughter, Joy, with her partner, but finally, as the movie closes, learning to be kind and to love.

Given all that takes place between these bookends that reveal a very traditional plot, it is to the filmmakers' credit that the sentimentality and predictability work so well. I would argue, in fact, that this small, traditional, immigrant, intergenerational, family story works well for most viewers precisely because of the zaniness of the extended multiverse in the middle. The multiverse allows the film to escape being maudlin, or perhaps better, to be maudlin without audiences rejecting it. Likewise, the frenetic chaos of the multiverse (in which most everything that you can think of that could happen, happens) works because it is anchored in a family's struggle to find meaning in life, a family that is not too different from that of any of its viewers. *The Atlantic*'s podcast, *The Review*, says it so well: "The essential magic of the movie is that the ridiculous multiverse plot is in service of the everyday story."[8] The film never loses this more personal orientation.

An Inter-textual Dialogue

Until recently in our culture, the "multiverse" has largely been limited to the abstractions of theoretical physics or to comic-book stories, where it has been used to explain major changes without undercutting the original. However, in

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8   Townsend/Li/Sims/Kornhaber 2022.

EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE the multiverse functions differently. It becomes a carrier of primary meaning, a deeply affecting metaphor, a metaphor particularly suited to the Asian-American immigrant experience but also suited to the absurdity and chaos of contemporary life that we all feel. The multiverse functions for the Daniels as a gigantic symbol of life's vanity, its absurdity, which paradoxically throws viewers back on the need for kindness and love. Although life might present itself as absurd, we can choose to engage with it despite its uncertainty. It seems trite to say life is about answering the silliness of life with love, but EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE does just that, and such a redemptive and sentimental claim works for many of its viewers.

Having made such a claim about the film's center of power and meaning, let us turn to engage the film with others who have described life's meaningless meaningfulness similarly. Film criticism often uses an outside perspective, or critical theory, to gain insight into a film's story. Some use feminist theory, others queer theory or postcolonialism or psychoanalysis to help unpack a movie's power and meaning. However, one can also use inter-textual dialogue. We can be helped in our reflection on the Daniels' movie by putting EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE in dialogue with two "philosophers": first, Albert Camus, and secondly, Qoheleth, the anonymous author of the book of Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew scriptures. Like the Daniels, both struggled successfully to find life's meaning given its absurdity.

Albert Camus

Albert Camus, the French philosopher and writer, presented a compelling case for the need for love given life's absurdity.[9] He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957 but, ironically, died while still in his forties in a car crash. As with the Daniels, he believed that the universe was absurd – irrational and silent. Nevertheless, even in a meaningless universe, he believed, we need to act in a meaningful manner. Our basic humanity should cause us to rebel because of the injustice and disrespect for the human condition that we experience around us. Rather than numb ourselves with entertainment on account of the futility of life ("eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die"),[10] he

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9   For an overview of Camus' life and work see Zarotsky 2013; Meagher 2021.

10   This is a paraphrase typical of some Ancient Near Eastern writing, though in its particular wording it is a combination of two passages from the Hebrew scriptures, Ecclesiastes 8:15 and Isaiah 22:13.

argued that we should acknowledge the hopelessness of our condition but still choose to resist. To live, he believed, was to defy futility.

This also is Evelyn's eventual stance following her experience of the multiverse, and also Waymond's. Joy had hoped her mother and father could show her something that would refute the meaninglessness of our universe. Having fallen at one point in the movie into a universe that was inhospitable to life, the mother and daughter, Evelyn and Jobu Tupaki, become talking rocks. Joy/Jobu tells her mother,

> Small stupid humans. It's like our whole deal. For most of our history, we knew the earth was the center of the universe. We killed and tortured people for saying otherwise. That is until we discovered that the earth is actually revolving around the sun, which is just one sun out of trillions of suns. And now look at us, trying to deal with the fact that all of that exists inside of one universe out of who knows how many. Every new discovery is just a reminder we're all small and stupid. And who knows what great new discovery is coming next […] to make us feel like even smaller pieces of shit […]. I've been trapped like this for so long […] experiencing everything (01:40:42–01:41:47).

Absurdity of absurdity. All is absurdity. Yet, when Joy adopts nihilism because of the multiverse's absurdity, believing that eventually it all just goes away, Evelyn refuses to let Joy go. Although Joy might be stubborn, aimless, and a mess, just like her mother, Evelyn loves her and wants to be her mother. "Stop calling me Evelyn", she tells Joy as she reaches out to hold her (02:03:00–05). Joy tries to resist, but a tear also slides down her cheek (fig. 4). It does not make any sense, but Evelyn wants Joy with her. The movie ends with laughter, a raccoon, and a kiss. Absurdity may be king, thought Camus, "but love saves us from it".[11]

In his journal, Camus noted that if he "had to write a book on morality, it would have a hundred pages and ninety-nine would be blank". On the last page he would write, "I recognize only one duty, and that is to love."[12] For him, love was more than a confrontation with the world's absurdity; it was a refusal to be broken by it. This also is Evelyn's stance. Having been challenged by the nihilism of Joy's "everything bagel", Evelyn nonetheless chooses to love her family, Waymond and Joy.

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11 Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935–1942*, quoted in Lombardi 2020.
12 Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935–1942*, quoted in Lombardi 2020.

Fig. 4: Evelyn and Joy hugging as the movie ends. Film still, Everything Everywhere All at Once (Daniel Kwan / Daniel Scheinert, US 2022), 02:08:59.

Camus' best-known essay is on the myth of Sisyphus, a metaphor for the absurdity of life.[13] Sisyphus pushed a boulder up a hill knowing that it would inevitably come rolling back down. Here, for Camus, is the human condition. There is nothing we can do to change life's constraints. Nevertheless, there remains the need for what a eulogist labeled Camus' "stubborn humanism".[14] Given the silence of the world, unintelligent and indifferent, we must choose to love as an act of rebellion. Even if life remains pointless and futile, for Camus, as for Evelyn, Waymond, and Joy, we must continue to love.

Ecclesiastes

Life's futility, its absurdity, is also a central motif for the writer of Ecclesiastes, though as with Camus and the Daniels, this is not the end of the story.[15] The anonymous author of this book in the Hebrew scriptures calls himself Qo-

13 Camus 1991, 1–24.
14 John Paul Sartre's eulogy for Camus, quoted in Sherman 2009, 207.
15 See Fox 1986, 409–429. See also Johnston 1976, 14–28; Tamaz 1996, 28–42.

heleth, or the Teacher/Philosopher. If we realize life's meaninglessness, argues Qoheleth, we paradoxically can discover its meaningfulness. He believes that all life is absurd *and* that joy in life is both good and possible. As with Camus, there is both an extended negative evaluation and a positive call. Although life might be useless, "a living dog is better than a dead lion" (Eccles. 9:4).

In making his paradoxical case, "vanity" – or "absurdity" – is the framing device for Qoheleth, the organizing center, just as it is for the Daniels. It is that which gives Ecclesiastes its unique character. In this way, Qoheleth invites conversation with Everything Everywhere All at Once, where the multiverse's "absurdity" functions similarly.[16]

"Vanity of vanities", begins the Teacher (Qoheleth), "Vanity of vanities. All is vanity" (1:2). *Hebel*, the word in the original Hebrew translated as "vanity", has two clusters of meanings: "absurd, useless, empty, meaningless" and "fleeting, ephemeral, fragile", "a chasing after the wind" (1:14). Repeated by Qoheleth several dozen times in just a few short pages, *hebel* is the key to unlocking the book's meaning. It is similar in Everything Everywhere All at Once, where the multiverse and its primary symbol, the everything bagel, lead the Wang family to discover their true portion in life.

Whatever nonsense you can think up, somewhere out there in the multiverse it exists. What this means for the Daniels, as Joy concludes, is that "everything gets washed away in a sea of every other possibility" (01:29:40–55). The multiverse is "just a reminder", as Joy graphically puts it, that "we're all small and stupid" (01:40:42–01:41:18). Our attempt at making our lives meaningful, as Qoheleth comes to realize, is simply "an unhappy business" (1:13); there is "nothing to be gained under the sun" (2:11).

Those familiar with Ecclesiastes will have already recognized some of this article's repeated usage of Qoheleth's observations on life, for they summarize Everything Everywhere All at Once well. Like this movie, Qoheleth believed life to be absurd. It did not take the multiverse to make him aware; a careful observation of creation, together with a reflection on the opening chapters of Genesis, was enough. According to this biblical sage, you will fail if you believe life is a problem to be solved. Rather, it is a fragile gift to

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16 After a draft of this essay was delivered at Gonzaga University, Matthew Ringe sent me his insightful article "Falling (into) Meaning: *Everything Everywhere All at Once* and Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes)", which has now appeared in *Interpretation. A Journal of Bible and Theology*; see Ringe 2024. Although we develop the inter-textual dialogue somewhat differently, Ringe's conclusions are largely consistent with mine, also finding in Qoheleth a dialogue partner for Everything Everywhere All at Once.

be appreciated and enjoyed. Qoheleth's paradoxical view of life finds our attempts to create meaning in life to be meaningless, even absurd. Nevertheless, life is simultaneously "meaningful". Qoheleth, like both Camus and the Daniels, has a battered optimism.[17]

Any pretension to produce meaning by our own efforts as Qoheleth understands it is undercut by at least three factors: first, by the universe's seeming indifference and amorality – too often wrong is rewarded and right overlooked (3:16; 4:1–4; 7:15–18; 8:9–14; 11:14). Secondly, though life suggests order, we are unable to know what is good for us or what will follow. Although God "has put a sense of past and future into [our] minds [...] [we] cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end" (3:11); "[...] who knows what is good for mortals while they live the few days of their vain [ephemeral] life, which they pass like a shadow" (6:12; see also 11:5). Thirdly, our common destiny is death (2:15–16; 3:19–21; 6:6; 8:7–8; 9:2–6). Amoral, unknowable, short – the perfect trifecta. For Qoheleth, life's meaninglessness is a given. Certainly, this is also true for both Evelyn and Joy, their journey into the multiverse only confirming this judgment, while also pushing them beyond their understandable pessimism and cynicism.

It is Evelyn who first finds through her experiences of the multiverse reason to accept with kindness and love her small portion of life in the United States, her family and laundromat. Joy (despite the irony of her name) struggles until the end with her portion in life (it seems but a "speck"). Nevertheless, even Joy appears to tear up as the story ends and her parents show their love to her. In Everything Everywhere All at Once, a deep humanism ultimately triumphs. Evelyn's overlooked husband, Waymond, is partly the reason for this ultimate transformation, though he recognizes, "I was too sweet for my own good." (01:44:30–01:46:30) As Ecclesiastes is aware, it does not work to be either too good or too bad (7:15–18).

Central to Evelyn's conversion is the spotlight that the multiverse shines on her family and laundromat. Evelyn's foray into the multiverse helps her see Waymond for who he is, someone who has chosen kindness over "fighting" as his strategy for living authentically. When Waymond says, "In another life, I would have liked just doing laundry and taxes with you", Evelyn finally can hear him for who he is and responds by giving her husband a hug. Similarly, after Evelyn tells her daughter, "I will always want you here with me", and Joy quizzes her mother, "Why? You can be anything anywhere …

17 Cf. Johnston 2004.

Here all we get are a few specks…", Evelyn responds spontaneously, "Then I will cherish these few specks." (02:06:25–02:07:35) Evelyn's encounter with the meaninglessness of the multiverse paradoxically allows her to see her family in a new light. Even the reality that taxes remain the one sure thing in life cannot detour her.

Qoheleth also comes to believe, "I know there is nothing better for [us] than to be happy and enjoy [ourselves] as long as [we] live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil" (3:11–13). It is a hard lesson, but like Qoheleth, Evelyn and even Joy are eventually able also to learn it:

> Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken (4:9–12).

As the Daniels end their movie, we see hands being held, husband and wife being reconciled. The couple kissing. A tear appearing in Joy's eye. The family of three finding a new strength. Nothing matters. The family is surer about this than ever. Jobu/Joy is correct: "Eventually it all just goes away." Yet, the "few specks" they have been given as their portion are to be cherished while they are present. Here also is Qoheleth's advice:

> Go, eat your bread with enjoyment […]. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain [absurd/futile/useless/ephemeral] life […] because that is your portion in life. […] Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol [for the early Hebrews, the place of still darkness], to which you are going. (9:7–10)

A Final Footnote

It is worth noting in closing the differences between Qoheleth, on one hand, and Camus and the Daniels, on the other. Qoheleth bases his optimism in a creator God, not simply in the human creature. Both Qoheleth's

stance and that of the Daniels demand a faith in something beyond life's demonstrated absurdity. But while the Daniels, like Camus, find in the nature of the human a positive call, Qoheleth turns to the creation theology of the Hebrew scriptures, finding God (even if he remains mysterious and silent) to have created us and thus to have given us our innate value. Basing his reflections on the first eleven chapters of Genesis, Qoheleth wants us to "Remember your creator" (Eccles. 12:1). He believes we can eat our bread with enjoyment and drink our wine with a merry heart, "for God has long ago approved what [we] do" (9:7–10). Critics agree that here Qoheleth is referring to the Genesis account of the creation of the universe with humankind as its apex, where God looked at this creation and saw that "it was very good" (Gen. 1:31).[18]

However, while Ecclesiastes mines a religious impulse in writing what he does, the Daniels place their faith in a human sympathy. It is the common struggle of humanity (as Camus writes near the end of *The Fall*, "we are in the soup together"[19]), not eternity written in our hearts, that motivates Evelyn and Waymond's battered optimism.

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18 In Qoheleth's short treatise, there are perhaps a dozen references that can be traced to the opening pages of Genesis. One might even suspect Ecclesiastes to be a midrash on the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Like Genesis, for Qoheleth, light is "good" (Gen. 1:3–4); we come from dust (Gen. 2:7) and return to the ground (Gen. 3:19); we are inclined to sin (Gen. 3:1–13); woman is man's companion (Gen. 2:21–25); knowledge is limited (Gen. 2:17); work is tiring (Gen. 3:14–19); death is a tragedy (Gen. 3:19,24); God is sovereign (Gen. 3:5); and life is "good" (seven times in the first chapter of Genesis). In particular, one should note Ecclesiastes 9:7–10, where God is said to have "long ago approved what you do" (God created humankind and called it "very good", Gen. 1:31), and Ecclesiastes 12:1, where Qoheleth writes, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth." Scholars also note that *hebel* ("absurd") has the same root in the Hebrew language as Abel, the name of Adam and Eve's son who is murdered by his brother. Cf. Dell 2021; in particular, see chapter 12, "Exploring Intertextual Links between Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1–11".

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Media Reviews

Edgar Edel

Animated Film Review
THE BOY AND THE HERON
(Hayao Miyazaki, JP 2023)

Hayao Miyazaki, co-founder of Studio Ghibli and one of animation's most respected figures, has captivated audiences for decades with his meticulously crafted worlds and profound narratives. After announcing his retirement following KAZE TACHINU (THE WIND RISES, Hayao Miyazaki, JP 2013), Miyazaki's return to filmmaking with KIMITACHI WA DŌ IKIRU KA (THE BOY AND THE HERON, Hayao Miyazaki, JP 2023) was met with global anticipation. Released in Japan on 14 July 2023, after nearly seven years in production, the film eschewed common marketing strategies: no trailers or extensive promotions – just a poster featuring a hand-drawn heron. This unconventional strategy only heightened interest, contributing to Studio Ghibli's most successful box office opening in Japan to date.

Internationally titled THE BOY AND THE HERON, the original Japanese title, which translates to "How Do You Live?", arguably captures the film's introspective themes and literary roots more accurately. Loosely inspired by Genzaburō Yoshino's novel *How Do You Live?* (1939), Miyazaki's work interweaves this question with elements from John Connolly's novel *The Book of Lost Things* (2006), ultimately creating a unique, complex narrative that extends beyond a straightforward adaptation. At its international premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2023, THE BOY AND THE HERON was introduced by Guillermo Del Toro, who extolled Miyazaki's profound legacy, likening him to even Mozart and Van Gogh.[1] This admiration was echoed in the film's accolades, as it won both the Oscar for Best Animated Feature and a Golden Globe. Notably, THE BOY AND THE HERON faced tough competition from SPIDER-MAN: ACROSS THE SPIDER-VERSE (Joaquim Dos Santos / Kemp Powers / Justin K. Thompson, US 2023), a highly acclaimed work in its own

1   Yasmin 2024.

right. Yet producer Chris Miller commented on their Oscar loss: "Well, if you're gonna lose, might as well lose to the GOAT".[2]

The Boy and the Heron tells the story of 12-year-old Mahito, who, after losing his mother in a tragic hospital bombing during the Pacific War, moves with his father to the countryside to live on the estate of his father's new wife – his mother's younger sister. His father, who manages a military aviation factory, is engrossed in work, and Mahito, feeling isolated, struggles to adjust to his new family and surroundings. At school, he clashes with classmates and, in a moment of deep despair, turns to self-mutilation, retreating further from those around him. Amidst this turmoil, Mahito encounters a peculiar grey heron that can speak and claims his mother is still alive, trying to lure him into a strange tower on the estate. When his stepmother suddenly vanishes, Mahito ventures into the tower to find her. What started as a search for the lost soon becomes a deeper journey of self-discovery, leading Mahito into a surreal world filled with fantastical creatures like ominous man-eating parakeets and small fluffy beings called Warawara, representing unborn human souls.

Miyazaki's signature style animates this world, blending the familiar with the surreal in a way that feels distinctly Ghibli. Long-time fans of Miyazaki will even recognize nostalgic image references to earlier Ghibli films. Emphasis on the beauty of imagery, particularly in scenes that stand as works of art beyond plot advancement, is central to Studio Ghibli's animation aesthetics, influenced profoundly by Miyazaki's vision. The film's visuals, from the serene Japanese landscapes to the vibrant otherworldly realms, resemble paintings, reflecting Ghibli's dedication to detailed, contemplative art. This visual language invites viewers to slow down and immerse themselves in its richness, with each frame seemingly layered with meaning that encourages deeper engagement. Studio Ghibli's commitment to hand-drawn animation continues in The Boy and the Heron, retaining its distinct aesthetic in an industry increasingly driven by efficiency. Although some scenes incorporate computer-generated elements, the hand-drawn artistry remains dominant, setting the film apart from both contemporary animations and Ghibli's previous release Āya to Majo (Earwig and the Witch, Gorō Miyazaki, JP 2020), a 3D production directed by Miyazaki's son Gorō. In an era where animated films increasingly rely on digital perfection, this commitment to traditional hand-drawn animation stands as a quiet act of resistance. Complementing this allegiance to tradition, composer and longtime Miyazaki collaborator Joe Hisaishi once

2   Sharf 2024. "GOAT" is an acronym for "Greatest of All Time".

again provides the score, enhancing the film's visual storytelling. Hisaishi's music guides the audience through Mahito's emotional landscape, creating an experience as evocative through sound as it is through imagery.

At its core, THE BOY AND THE HERON is a profound meditation on grief and the search for meaning amid loss. Rather than following a conventional narrative of healing, Mahito's journey offers an imaginative and introspective engagement with the unknown. Ghibli's tradition of inviting personal interpretation is evident here, though THE BOY AND THE HERON stands out for its complexity. The film's rich symbolism raises many unanswered questions, and while visually arresting, it lacks the cohesion and momentum that defined Miyazaki's past classics. Mahito's stoic demeanour further challenges the audience's emotional connection. Instead, viewers are encouraged to project their own interpretations onto his experiences. This approach might alienate some, including regular Ghibli fans, who may feel distanced by the film's introspective nature: The titular question of the film – "How do you live?" – is subtly woven into the story, prompting personal reflection without prescribing answers. At the same time, Miyazaki's use of complex symbolism adds layers of meaning that resist simplistic interpretation while occasionally drifting into ambiguity. This complexity may leave viewers oscillating between emotional engagement with the characters and analytical consideration of the film's broader implications. As a result, some viewers could find themselves unable to provide a definitive answer to the central question based solely on their cinematic experience.

The film revisits themes that define Miyazaki's œuvre – nature, childhood, the impact of war, the search for meaning in a chaotic world – but in THE BOY AND THE HERON, he explicitly engages with mortality. There is a sense that Miyazaki, now in his eighties, is reflecting not only on the impermanence of life but also on his own legacy as a filmmaker and storyteller. Mahito shares autobiographical similarities with Miyazaki, including a relocation to the countryside during wartime and a father connected to military aviation. The question of the legacy of Studio Ghibli – founded by Miyazaki alongside Isao Takahata and Toshio Suzuki in 1985 – is subtly explored through the film. According to producer Toshio Suzuki, Miyazaki intended THE BOY AND THE HERON as a message to his grandson: "It's his way of saying, 'Grandpa is moving on to the next world, but he's leaving behind this film.'"[3] In this context, it's also relevant to note that Miyazaki's son

3   Sharf 2017.

Gorō has directed Ghibli films as well, though they are often seen as lacking the depth and charm of his father's works. With The Boy and the Heron, Miyazaki seems to grapple with the question of succession, within both his family and his studio – a theme that adds a bittersweet layer to Mahito's journey. This personal connection is enriched by the metaphysical nature of Mahito's adventure, which explores and then blurs the boundaries between life and death. The fantastical realm Mahito enters thus symbolizes the cyclical nature of life and the seamless bond between past and present.

Ultimately, Miyazaki's refusal to offer easy answers or clear resolutions makes The Boy and the Heron one of his most intellectually and emotionally challenging films to date. Yet, for those willing to engage, the film offers a rare cinematic experience. Miyazaki's choice to leave certain threads untied reflects his understanding of art as a conversation rather than a conclusive statement. He challenges the audience to engage with the film on an emotional and intellectual level while offering a work of art not to be understood but to be experienced. Through this journey, Miyazaki presents animation not merely as a medium for escapism, but as a lens through which to explore existence's most profound questions. In a cinematic landscape increasingly defined by clear-cut narratives, The Boy and the Heron invites viewers to sit with uncertainty, to question rather than resolve, and to find beauty in the fleeting, the ambiguous, and the unknowable.

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Anna-Katharina Höpflinger

Song Review
The Beatles, "Now and Then"

1967–1970 (2023 Edition), Apple Records / EMI / Universal Music Group, UK 2023

In November 2023, a new Beatles song was released as a single and on a new version of the compilation album *1967–1970* (first released in 1973). "Now and Then" is performed by all four Beatles – George Harrison, John Lennon, Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr. But how is that possible? Lennon was shot and killed in 1980, and Harrison died of cancer in 2001. How can dead musicians continue to perform?

The answer is AI. But let's rewind: *Abbey Road* (Apple Records/EMI/Universal Music Group), the last album the Beatles recorded together in the studio, was released in 1969; they released their final album, *Let It Be* (Apple Records/EMI/Universal Music Group), in May 1970,[1] after the band had split up the previous month. From 1995 to 1996, the three still-living members released the *Beatles Anthology 1–3*, a retrospective of their work and music. This album featured two brand new songs to which Lennon had contributed, namely "Free as a Bird" (on *Anthology 1*) and "Real Love" (on *Anthology 2*), both of which were also released as singles. Parts of these songs were taken from a music tape that Lennon had recorded in New York in the late 1970s. His wife, Yoko Ono, had given this tape to the other band members in 1994.[2] On the 1995/96 releases, Lennon's arrangement from the tape is combined with music tracks that the other three members newly recorded. A third song on the Lennon tape was also meant to be included, but in this instance the techniques for improving the old sound material were too

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1   For the history, albums and relevance of the Beatles, see for example Womack 2009.

2   For an enjoyable short film that recounts the production of "Now and Then" see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APJAQoSCwuA [accessed 20 December 2024].

limited. By 2022/23, however, technologies could enhance the quality of the recording of Lennon's voice and music from the 1970s to the extent that it could be used for a new song. With the audio tracks from the Lennon tape, parts of the guitar riffs that Harrison had recorded for "Now and Then" in 1995, and music composed by McCartney and Starr in 2023, a new song was created, a song on which all four members of the Beatles, living and dead, played together.

The lyrics of this song were written almost entirely by Lennon and focus on a person, love or friendship that is leaving the singer: "I know it's true / it's all because of you / and if you go away / I know you'll never stay." The accompanying video clip was produced by director Peter Jackson, known for his Lord of the Rings (US/NZ 2001–2003) and Hobbit (US/NZ 2012–2014) trilogies.[3] The clip is divided into three parts: after a visual introduction of the band, the song's production is staged in the middle section as a fantasy in which all four Beatles come together in the studio. Here film footage from the Beatles in the 1960s is combined with footage from 1995 and 2023. For example, we see Lennon and Harrison as young men making music together with the elderly Starr and McCartney. The clip thus imagines a kind of time portal by means of which the Beatles could be reunited in 2023. There are also encounters between their younger and older selves. For example, the young George Harrison plays guitar with the older George from 1995, and the young Ringo Starr helps Ringo from 2023 play the drums.

In the final part of the clip, footage is used to form a reverse journey through the history of the Beatles, leading us back to the Beatles' childhood. The clip ends at a concert. The four band members fade from the stage; only the drum kit and the microphones remain, in front of a backdrop bearing the band's name.

The song and accompanying clip form a memorial to the deceased band members, with the dead playing music together with the living – thanks to the latest technology. The lyrics, which initially thematise a lost love or friendship, shift their meaning in the context of this new form of production. They become an address to the dead: "Now and then / I miss you / oh, now and then / I want you to be there for me / always to return to me."

The third part of the clip, which presents a biography of the band, can be seen as an obituary for the dead members and for the band as a whole. The

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3   The music video is on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Opxhh9Oh3rg [accessed 24 December 2024].

Fig. 1: The young John Lennon in front of the orchestra playing in 2023. Music video still, Now and Then, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Opxhh9Oh3rg, 00:02:42.

middle part of the videoclip is even more complex: here we see a counter-world, liminal on several levels. First, time is suspended: young band members from back then make music together with the older band members today; we hear John Lennon from the 1970s, traces of the 1990s and new parts from the 2020s. Secondly, a bridge is built between the deceased and the living. In the videoclip, the deceased join the living visually in the recording studio and create a new song together. The clip bridges the gap between everyday and non-everyday life. It is set in a recording studio, an everyday space. But there the dead are also active. John Lennon conducts the orchestra (Fig. 1), for example, or helps tidy up the instruments; he is thus involved in everyday activities. The deceased are sometimes more active than the living and are allowed to fool around while the living seem serious and introverted. Perhaps the staging of age – the dead are forever young – plays a role here, but I suggest that the living are remembering and perhaps even mourning, while the dead are happy to be back in "life".

The clip resonates with older concepts of the afterlife. The idea that the dead can actively intervene in the existence of the living has been an important part of the religious history of Europe since the Middle Ages. The Beatles' new song is therefore not just an obituary for the deceased band members; it is also a performance of a certain conception of the afterlife. This afterlife is staged as worldly: the dead come into the recording studio. They are not spooky ghosts but express themselves in song and music, on

the visual level in old footage and the reassembly of various filmic parts into a new whole. This connection between the living and the dead is made possible by AI technology that was also used to improve the quality of the sound recording in the documentary series THE BEATLES: GET BACK (Peter Jackson, UK/US/NZ 2021). Technology thus links transcendence and immanence and enables this innovative coming together of the dead and the living. This creation can be used in remembrance and as homage, but it is also problematic, from the creation of deep fake images and sounds to the issue of whether the dead *should* be brought back to "life". Would Lennon have agreed if he could?

The imagined afterlife that the videoclip stages is a harmonious coexistence of the dead and the living, a utopic reunion of one of the most famous bands in the world, although their collaboration was not always as harmonious as the video suggests. In this sense the clip forms a transcendental promise for fans of the band. This staging of the deceased may seem macabre to some, but for many fans it is an important moment. The Beatles have accompanied the fans through their lives, orienting them and giving them pleasure. A comment on YouTube by a person identifying as *junhosmiles_1990* sums up the significance of the new Beatles song:

> I was 14 years old when the Beatles made it big. Today, I'm 73. Their songs were the soundtrack of my high school and college years. Their impact, their contributions, their influence on music, on our culture for decades, are simply peerless. Thanks to 21st century technology we can see them together again … What a tribute![4]

This new song is a typical Beatles song, but it is also more: it is an obituary, a memory, an imagination of harmony, a utopian idea of music and of popular culture. It makes reference to the European history of religion. It demonstrates how technology can create transcendence. But it also raises questions about our use of that technology and about our responsibilities to the dead.

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4 For this comment see YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Opxhh9Oh3rg [accessed 24 December 2024].

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Jochen Mündlein

Book Review
Jesse Russell, The Political Christopher Nolan

Liberalism and the Anglo-American Vision

Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023, 171 pages, ISBN: 978-1666906196

Jesse Russell offers in his new book a nuanced analysis of the political dimensions in Christopher Nolan's films. Across seven chapters, the author discusses selected films: Memento (US 2000), Batman Begins (US/UK 2005), The Dark Knight (US/UK 2008), The Dark Knight Rises (US/UK 2012), Inception (US/UK 2010), Interstellar (US/UK 2014), and Tenet (US/UK 2020). In a concluding chapter, Nolan's film Insomnia (US 2002) is revisited and contrasted with the main body of films under discussion.

Russell, a Professor of English at Georgia Southwestern State University, adopts a distinctly political perspective on Nolan's work, tracing the films' messages in interplay with societal and political developments in the United States. The foundation of his political reading lies in the neoliberal and neocapitalist ideology of the United States, coupled with the experience of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Russell addresses the political transformations following 9/11, including the presidencies of Bush, Obama, and Trump, as well as key political and societal events such as the Iraq War, the financial crisis in 2008, and U.S. anti-terror policies, situating Nolan's films within this broader context (pp. ix–xvi).

Russell places particular focus on Nolan's Batman trilogy (pp. 19–73), which forms a distinct, self-contained body of work within the director's filmography. Chronologically crafted, these films highlight facets of political ideology and agendas in the United States that are closely tied to the collective experience of fear and the response to Islamist terrorism. The tri-

logy's strong connection to real-world events is underscored by its setting – Gotham City – which serves as a symbolic reference to the United States.

Russell interprets the character of Bruce Wayne, alias Batman, in the first part of the trilogy as a narrative representation of the United States' response to the traumatic experience of terrorism post-9/11 (p. 20). The film portrays Wayne's trauma following the murder of his parents and his journey towards overcoming it, culminating in the creation of Batman as a symbol of (political) hope in a world marked by corruption. Wayne's development into Batman is viewed as a form of collective representation. As a child, Wayne witnesses the arbitrary murder of his parents and subsequently develops a profound fear of bats. He must find ways to cope with and overcome this fear.

This process of overcoming takes Wayne to the East. In these Asian countries, he encounters poverty and eventually meets the League of Shadows, an underground organisation that trains him in techniques of hand-to-hand combat, deception, and symbolic representation. Russell interprets Wayne's journey to the "Orient" as a meeting of the ancient world of the East with the technologically advanced West (p. 28). The League of Shadows is read as a group of ideological extremists intent on destroying Gotham, symbolising the United States or the "West". Wayne, as the vanquisher of these Eastern terrorists, embarks on a journey of understanding the old world and integrating its skills. His return to Gotham and the creation of Batman are particularly significant, as they rely heavily on military equipment. Russell interprets this militarisation of Batman as a form of anti-terrorism. Bruce Wayne's transformation into Batman is seen as a resolution of his fear of bats, which Russell frames as a liberation from the United States' experience of powerlessness post-9/11 (pp. 19–35).

The confrontation between East and West is, according to Russell, deeply influenced by economic motives (p. 30). The League of Shadows' critique of Gotham and the USA is directed against the hyper-capitalist system of the United States. At the same time, Batman's fight against the League of Shadows represents a rejection of the perverted communist ideology espoused by the League. The political messages in Nolan's work, Russell argues, are fundamentally critiques of economic systems. Furthermore, Russell highlights the close relationship between religion and politics embodied in the character of Batman. On the one hand, evil is linguistically charged with religious connotations (pp. 22, 67). Batman's adversaries often present themselves through religious imagery, such as devils or mythological be-

ings emerging from the world's hidden shadows. On the other hand, the conclusion of the second film in the trilogy is interpreted as a Christian act of redemption, with Batman sacrificing himself. His return in the third and final film of Nolan's series is then seen as a reimagined resurrection of the protagonist.

Russell's interpretation of the Joker in the second film of the trilogy is particularly intriguing (pp. 39–51). On one level, the Joker represents chaotic, uncontrollable, and terrorist threats that become invisible within Gotham's impoverished working class, exposing the darker side of neoliberal policies and problematic counter-terrorism efforts. The relationship between the Joker and Batman is portrayed as one of mutual dependence: the Joker exists only because Batman has irrevocably changed the world through his surveillance and pursuit of criminals. On another level, the Joker is heavily imbued with religious significance, embodying absolute evil. He operates outside economic and political systems, undermining the capitalist structure and stripping it of its supremacy, as exemplified when he burns half of the Mafia's wealth. Both the Joker and Bane, the antagonist in the trilogy's third film, are seen as creations born out of Batman's anti-terrorism efforts.

From Russell's political perspective, Nolan's films collectively portray the triumph and superiority of the neoliberal, postmodern United States as a stand-in for the West (pp. 72–73). While the films consistently critique the political and economic status quo, Nolan's resolution suggests that, ultimately, the existing system represents the best of all possible options. The morally driven pursuit of improvement and the return to ethical values and norms serve as justification for the neoliberal and neocapitalist policies of the United States. To maintain and legitimise this system, even the hero's use of deception is deemed an acceptable means to protect the world.

The concept of the "noble lie" runs as a central theme throughout Nolan's work. Russell refers to Plato's political concept of creating a false but necessary myth, which he sees explored in Nolan's films. According to Russell, this "noble lie" highlights the importance of stabilising political and economic systems: the hero's sacrifice occurs within the framework of this "noble lie". It is through ignorance and deception that the salvation of the United States and the free Western world is ultimately achieved. In Nolan's films, political and economic ideology is elevated to a universal principle, which is then expanded into space in Interstellar.

Russell's conclusion that the neocapitalist and neoliberal political system of the United States is presented as Nolan's ultimate solution to combating

terrorism, climate change, and human frailty falls short (pp. 131–142). The films' reference to the U.S. political system is undeniable. However, the narratives also depict the transformation of the protagonists and the openness of their endings. For instance, the Batman trilogy concludes with the definitive disappearance of Batman. This could be interpreted as a critical impetus towards dismantling the existing anti-terror policies. In the Batman films, evil only ever vanishes temporarily.

Similarly, in Interstellar, humanity is saved, and the American flag symbolises expansion and colonisation in the vastness of space. Yet Nolan's films remain open-ended, leaving questions about what the new world will look like after leaving Earth or following the staged death of Batman.

Russell provides an engaging political examination of Nolan's films through his highly detailed analysis. He frequently highlights the intricate interplay between various cultural systems and ideas, incorporating elements such as motifs from religious traditions, economic concepts, and social family structures. Interpreting the films as an ultimate endorsement of the neoliberal and neocapitalist ideology underpinning U.S. politics and the global order is certainly a thesis supported by the films. Russell himself acknowledges that this interpretation is explicitly his own and notes that Nolan does not view his films as political works (pp. 72–73).

In his discussion of the films, Russell allows for a variety of critical perspectives and compiles relevant reception sources. The work stands out for its thoroughness, depth, and multifaceted approaches. Against the backdrop of Donald Trump's renewed election, it will be fascinating to see how Nolan might address such developments in his films, and how Russell might interpret these films in turn, in a continuation of his analyses.

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Maximilian Rosin

Series Review
THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RINGS OF POWER, Season 2
(Amazon Studios, US 2024)

More than twenty years after the release of THE LORD OF THE RINGS (Peter Jackson, US/NZ 2001–2003), the most successful fantasy film trilogy of all time, we return to Middle-earth with two seasons of the series LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RINGS OF POWER (Amazon Studios, US 2022–present). Set well before the events of Peter Jackson's films, the series tells the story of the rise of the Dark Lord Sauron and his plot to subjugate Middle-earth through Rings of Power.

The first season familiarises us with locations and protagonists of what is to be a five-season series. The kingdom of the humans of Númenor, the honourable realms of the elves and the underground halls of the dwarves are at the centre. The first season has thus set the stage for the great confrontation between these realms and the antagonist Sauron in the second season, the focus of this review.

The world of Middle-earth is a creation of J. R. R. Tolkien, who touched a wide audience of readers with numerous novels and sketches. His works are characterised by a deep religiosity and metaphysical questions.[1] An adaptation must inevitably relate to this – the way in which the series so far does so will be outlined below using key aspects. Three overarching religious themes are evident: the understanding of creation, apocalypticism, and the function of the religious practice of the peoples of Middle-earth.

THE RINGS OF POWER implicitly draws on an extensive creation mythology and cosmology that Tolkien developed in his complex work *The Silmarillion*. The beginning of creation is marked by the creation of the universe by a deistic god called Eru Ilúvatar. The universe includes angelic beings called

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1   His approach can be described as "concealed christianity", see Flieger 2005, 36–37.

Ainur, who in turn sing the world of Middle-earth into being. The complete future of the world is already contained in this music of creation, whereby the adversary of God – an Ainur named Melkor – also plays dissonances. But even these discords complete the harmony of Eru Ilúvatar's creation.[2]

This metaphysical framework is illustrated by the title track in the opening credits of The Rings of Power, Season 1 and 2. Key players in the series are symbolically depicted in sections of a painting made of sand – a metaphor for time – which is reminiscent of the opening credits of the fantasy series The Wheel of Time (Amazon Studios, US 2021). This visual impression is reinforced by the music. Its oscillation between the individual motifs, which are taken up in scenes of the protagonists, is a reflection of the music of the Ainur. The menacing-sounding Sauron motif has the clearest melody, in a horn line, but this melody also culminates in the epic main motif.

The interpretation of the figure of Sauron is the driving force behind The Rings of Power so far: the Valar (the elite of the Ainur angelic beings), who is in rebellion against Eru-God, sees himself not as an agent of evil but as a reformer and visionary of creation. His agenda is to eradicate discord through the elimination of ambivalence. The idea of creating a utopia by unleashing violence to overcome shades of grey is reminiscent of the motto of the 16th-century radical reformator Thomas Müntzer, "Make order in the world!". However, Sauron is limited by a theologically important motif in Tolkien's world: only good can create something new, evil can only degenerate what already exists. This can be seen in the creation of the rings, the eponymous artefacts in The Rings of Power. Although Sauron assists the elves in their creation, neither the idea nor the material comes from him. He can only corrupt rings and deform them to his own ends in order to gain power over their bearers.

In the creation mythology of Tolkien's work, the craftsmanship of the Elves plays a special role: immortal, but bound to Middle-earth and more closely connected to the good, the true and the beautiful than other beings, the Elves harbour a desire to preserve and reproduce these values through art and culture. But the immortal Elves fade, fade, fade over the ages of Middle-earth. The first season of The Rings of Power summarises this process of fading, depicting it as an event that cannot be delayed. The solution: rings crafted with the magical metal mithril and the arcane knowledge of

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2   The cosmology is reminiscent of, amongst others, Boethius, *De institutione musica*, see Wicher 2021.

their wisest blacksmith, Celebrimbor. He describes them as "pure, unadulterated beauty". The three elven rings created in the last episode of the first season – without Sauron's participation – initially fulfil their purpose. They stop the decay of the Elven world and heal the destroyed nature. But does this self-empowerment for *conservatio mundi* not violate the harmony of creation by Eru-God?

This leads to the second aspect that reveals the religious background of the second season of THE RINGS OF POWER – apocalypticism. The tradition of Christian-Jewish apocalypticism finds expression in the end-time visions of the protagonists and the appearance of an anti-Christ figure. As in the first season, Regent Miriel of Númenor, the mighty island kingdom of the people of Middle-earth, has visions of the collapse of her empire. The downfall of Númenor's highly developed civilisation is reminiscent of Atlantis, Miriel herself of Cassandra and the equally blind seer Teiresias in Greek mythology. She has apocalyptic visions in dreams – often interpreted as a medium of religious revelation – or through a palantir, a magical object similar to a crystal ball, which also shows other actors Númenor's clairvoyant visions. The extent to which this future can be prevented or is only made possible by these actions remains open to both the protagonist and the viewer.

From the perspective of Christian-Jewish apocalypticism, the interpretation of Sauron as a type of anti-Christ in THE RINGS OF POWER so far is striking. This religiously connoted interpretation is well established in Tolkien research.[3] Several motifs evoke associations with Christian-Jewish traditions: Sauron is a fallen angelic being (Ainur), which is reminiscent of the angelic rebellion in Revelation 12:4–7. The series reinforces the seducer motif and portrays him as charismatic, attractive and (sexually) seductive. The figure of Sauron thus has echoes of John Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*, while his behaviour corresponds to Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*. The series reinforces this impression with Sauron's snake-like armour, in which he reveals himself to his followers and enemies in the eighth episode of the second season.

A scene from the second episode of THE RINGS OF POWER, Season 2, represents the climax of the series' religious sensibility so far. The elven smith Celebrimbor doubts the identity of his partner in forging the rings, who the viewer already knows is Sauron. To rekindle his belief that he is a messenger of the gods, he reveals himself to the elf in a godlike form: a voice like the

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3   For deeper insight into Tolkien, the most accessible work is still Shippey 2001.

one Moses heard in the burning bush is heard from the forge fire (Exod. 3:1–4:17). Like the transfiguration of Jesus (Matt. 17:1–13), Sauron emerges from the fire in fair form. Celebrimbor falls to his knees and worships the being, overwhelmed by this self-revelation of the holy figure. When he asks it for its name, Sauron utters in disguised form, "I have many names", evoking traditions of name-mysticism. Only then does he introduce himself as Annatar, the Lord of Gifts, and ambassador of the Valar, who has chosen the elven smith to support him in his sub-creation of the rings. Like Faust, who is seduced by Mephisto, Celebrimbor ultimately falls victim to his own ambitions – not only he, but his entire kingdom is destroyed by Sauron in the final episode of the second season.

The island kingdom of Númenor is also threatened with destruction: a power-political tension leads to a split between the kingsmen and the faithful. The latter worship the Valar in continuity with the traditions of Númenor and are persecuted by the kingsmen. The way in which the second season of The Rings of Power shows this is reminiscent of scenes of the persecution of religious minorities such as the first Christians in the Roman Empire. Queen Miriel, leader of the faithful, even submits to a judgement by the Valar in the sixth episode of the second season: she steps into the sea near a monster, from which only the intervention of the Valar could save her. The act is reminiscent of Greek mythology, among other things. But she is saved: like Jonah, the fish spits her ashore, which the bystanders interpret as a sign from the gods.

Even religious practices of the orcs are depicted, in particular their ancestor worship and dignified treatment of their dead. This reinforces the series' narrative that the orcs are more human and less animalistic than in Peter Jackson's trilogy, a decision that raises questions about the future of the series. So far, feedback on Amazon's adaptation has been very mixed among fans and critics, partly due to such controversial decisions that deviate from Tolkien's work and thus the expectations of the fans. Three seasons of The Rings of Power remain to be seen. The greatest hope for the series is that it still has the potential to inspire viewers for the world of Tolkien.

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