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# Mediation and the Genesis of Presence

## Towards a Material Approach to Religion

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## **Oratie**

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*Opgedragen aan mijn promovendi en postdocs*

## **Mijnheer de Rector Magnificus, collega's en vrienden, dames en heren,**

About a year ago I was appointed to the Chair of Religious Studies in the Department of Religious Studies and Theology in the Faculty of Humanities. As I soon realized, my appointment occurred amid major transitions regarding the institutionalization of the study of religion at Utrecht University. This is part of a broader trend of renegotiating the space between 'theology' and 'religious studies'.<sup>1</sup> This trend echoes a wider process of 'unchurching': as numbers of students of theology decline nationwide, religion in new and unexpected guises has become both a hot item and an intriguing social-cultural and political phenomenon. Over the past year, as part of the process of adapting to my new post, I have grappled with these complicated institutional transformations. I see them as symptoms which, when analysed carefully, can reveal a great deal about the current state of and stakes in the study of religion in the Netherlands, and the changing role and place of religion in Dutch society at large. The point here is to critically interrogate genealogies of the study of religion that inform scholarly work today, in a complex multi-disciplinary configuration that involves not only theologians and religious studies scholars, but also anthropologists and sociologists of religion. However, we must do more than look back. We also need to look around and ahead, so as to develop a programmatic vision for the future study of religion.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, it would be mistaken to see the process of 'unchurching' as being proof of the decline and eventual disappearance of religion, as is claimed by the secularization thesis that has been part of grand narratives of modernization. Instead of evaporating with increasing 'progress' and 'development', religion has transformed.<sup>3</sup> Across the world, processes of democratization have yielded a marked presence of religion in the public domain, as I recorded in my research in Southern Ghana, where Pentecostalism is omnipresent. In Europe too, religion appears to have *again* – and indeed upon closer investigation *still* – an important public domain presence.<sup>4</sup> This challenges the idea of system differentiation that has long been seen as typical for modern societies, where religion occupies a separate domain and is relegated to the private sphere of personal belief. In the Netherlands, alongside unchurching processes in the liberal Protestant mainstream and in the Catholic Church, religion

thrives in various new guises and in new culturally and religiously plural settings, in which Islamic movements, evangelical Christianity and a turning towards non-affiliated spirituality and New Age beliefs coexist. Films, plays, literature, advertisements and other fields of secular culture tap into long-standing religious repertoires, in particular the Christian 'symbol bank' (Van de Port 2005: 10; see also Goud 2010). In interaction with this ever more variegated and plural religious landscape, in Northern Europe particularly, considerable energy is also devoted to projects of atheism which, in fighting religion, tend to resuscitate 19<sup>th</sup>-century polemics around reason and faith. At the same time, the Judeo-Christian heritage of Europe is emphasized as part of a culturalized citizenship that excludes Islam.<sup>5</sup> These complex developments require innovative empirical research and critical reflection.

For me, these are exciting times that demand no less from us than repositioning and reforming the study of religion (see also Bergunder 2011; Von Stuckrad *fc*). This calls for a deep, critical rethinking of the intellectual positions, institutional embeddings, and further of the approaches, concepts and methods that shape our research praxis. With this lecture, through which I officially accept my Chair in Religious Studies, I would like to outline how I envision my contribution to this project. The new visibility of religion should not be taken to signal something entirely new, but rather to potentially reveal previously disguised aspects of religion. Visibility, after all, depends on the perspective of the beholder. I opt for a post-secularist perspective that no longer takes secularization as the standard intrinsic to modernity, being alert instead to the specific ways in which the concept, role and place of religion – and its study – have been redefined with the rise of secularity (e.g. Asad 2003).<sup>6</sup> One of the assets of such a perspective is that it questions taken-for-granted, modernist understandings of religion as being, in principle, an 'inward', 'private' and even 'invisible' phenomenon.

In the face of current debates about the public presence of religion, and increasing awareness by scholars of the transformation of religion itself that occurs alongside the changes regarding its place and role in society, such taken-for-granted, modernist understandings have been subject to substantial critique. Focusing on sets of practices, material

cultures and fabrics of lived, embodied experience, scholars have started to examine how people make religion ‘happen’ in the world and how, in turn, religion plays a part in their world-making. This has entailed a critical rethinking of the relation between religion and materiality.<sup>7</sup> Triggerred and backed by my historical and ethnographic research on the rise and development of Christianity and the way it is enmeshed with popular culture in Ghana, my work over the past years has been part of these critical endeavours. Building upon that work, this lecture spotlights what I regard as key aspects of a *material approach* to religion that revolves around *mediation* and the *genesis of presence*, as indicated by my title.

What is meant by a material approach will be developed in the course of my lecture. It is important to clarify that my intention is not a critique of religion in the name of sheer matter – a standard *Religionskritik* – but rather a critique of the study of religion *from within* that advocates coming to terms with materiality as part of (the study of) religion (see also Meyer and Houtman 2012: 4). The point is not to unmask religion and entities such as God, gods and spirits as fictitious illusions, but to cast doubt on the very distinction between fiction and fact – or illusion and reality – on which such unmasking rests, and instead concentrate on the material manifestation of religion – its *Gestalt* – in the world. To do this, I propose to follow new trails, enabling me to study religion through the vector of practices, i.e. concrete acts that involve people, their bodies, things, pictures, texts, and other media through which religion becomes tangibly present. A material approach takes as its starting point the understanding that religion becomes concrete and palpable through people, their practices and use of things, and is part and parcel of power structures.

In contrast to this, according to common European apprehensions religion is – or supposed to be – about belief in a transcendent God, about inwardness, and ‘immaterial’ values, world-views and meaning-making, to which ‘outward’ manifestations are held to be secondary.<sup>8</sup> As will be outlined in *Part I* of this lecture, this view is a consequence of a particular understanding of religion that is historically situated in post-Enlightenment Europe. I would like to challenge this rather limited and limiting understanding by adopting a de-familiarizing perspective, as

befits a scholar grounded in anthropology – the discipline that aims to ‘make the strange familiar, and the familiar strange’. Such a perspective thrives in the face of ‘frontier areas’: culturally and religiously diverse arenas in which clashes and confrontations occur *about* religion. The particular modes and forms through which religion materializes in the world are often key issues in these clashes. *Part II* of this lecture will lead us to the West African Coast, where Western outreach has generated tensions, controversies and complicated conversion processes. Zooming in on the notion of the *fetish*, I will demonstrate the potential of frontier areas to provoke substantial reflections about the genealogies and politics of use of our scholarly concepts – in particular the downplaying of practices and materials as a key aspect of religion. In *Part III* I explain what a *material approach* is all about and how a focus on mediation opens new possibilities for the study of religion. *Part IV* showcases, by using the example of religious visual culture, the broadening of horizon entailed by a material approach that takes into account multiple media.

### **I Critical Genealogies: The ‘Protestant Legacy’ and Beyond**

How has it happened that we tend to think about and analyse religion in ways that privilege the ‘inside’ – concepts, ideas, beliefs, worldviews – above the ‘outside’ – rituals, objects, pictures, and so on? Why do my and other scholars’ pleas for a material approach to religion trigger surprise, as religion is primarily understood to be an ‘immaterial’ affair, located at some distance from the mundane material realm of the world? Why should the terms ‘material’ and ‘materiality’, when used in relation to religion, have – certainly for Calvinist ears – such strange, or even negative connotations, to the extent that ‘material religion’ appears to be an oxymoron? Posing these admittedly simplistic questions, I seek to call attention to the stubborn resilience of what I call a ‘mentalistic approach’ to religion that still informs a great deal of research and thinking about religion.

Many scholars who have studied the genealogy of the notion of religion agree that, despite its Latin etymology, the way in which we use this notion today originated in the aftermath of the Enlightenment.<sup>9</sup> Critics of religion, including Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud,



approached religion from a mentalistic perspective, seeing it as a fictitious illusion standing in the way of a rational outlook, or an ideology that sustained a ‘false consciousness’ and hence protected the social-economic order. Within academic theology, too, a mentalistic attitude prevailed, according to which religion was framed primarily as an ‘inward’ domain of religious ideas, feelings, and inner convictions.<sup>10</sup> Resonating with Romanticist ideas, the essence of religion was found to be located ‘inside’ people, while the ‘outside’ manifestations, e.g. rituals, creeds, religious institutions, were held to be secondary. This mentalistic understanding, of course, echoes the primacy attributed to the self-conscious mind in idealist philosophy, and is informed by the foundational dualisms of spirit versus matter and mind versus body.

The mentalistic take on religion also underpinned the rise of the new discipline of comparative religion.<sup>11</sup> Colonialism and the spectacular project of Christian outreach in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century facilitated the production and circulation of a huge quantity of data about other religions – so-called ‘world religions’ and ‘primitive religion’ – that formed the basis for systematic comparison and evolutionary approaches. Hierarchies of religious development, from ‘fetishism’ and ‘animism’ to ‘monotheism’, share a view of ‘inward’-centred religiosity as forming the highest level of religion; it is posited as intellectually and morally ahead of and superior to religions that still rely on ‘outward’ forms. The pivot of these evolutionary models is the idea that the human mind can do increasingly better without the baggage of ‘outward’ forms. The institutionalization of comparative religion and anthropology (to which religion was a central topic) as separate academic disciplines marked a distinction from theology, which was understood to explore the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christian traditions from within, whereas comparative religion claimed a ‘scientific’ approach.

Current debates about the future study of religion often mobilize this distinction, featuring comparative religion (the German and Dutch terms *Religionswissenschaft* or *godsdiens-* or *religiewetenschap* tellingly mark the *scientific* grounding) as the ‘secular counterpoint’ to Christian theology. However, in my view we must not overemphasize this distinction, let alone take it as a blueprint for a future vision to simply

‘replace’ the latter with the former.<sup>12</sup> In fact, chairs in comparative religion have long been part of faculties of theology in many European universities, and certain theological sub-disciplines – especially biblical studies – share common ground with philological approaches developed with regard to both ‘world religions’ and anthropological concepts. Moreover, both disciplines share certain basic features in their approaches to religion, including a mentalistic bias and a textual focus.

There is, therefore, a need to critically engage with *crosscutting genealogies* of key concepts and approaches from the standpoints of disciplines including comparative religion, anthropology, sociology, Islamic studies and theology (in particular biblical studies, ecumenical studies, church history and philosophy of religion) – a dazzlingly huge project that has just begun. For some time now, scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds have debated the validity of general concepts, including ‘religion’ itself, and interrogated their origins and politics of usage. Their aim is not a mere deconstruction and rejection of these concepts, but an assessment of their formative role in the study of religion. This role can be well explored by scrutinizing processes of disciplinary ‘canonization’ (Stordalen 2012) that shape how scholars think about religion and treat their materials in a more or less taken-for-granted, yet nonetheless ‘disciplined’ manner. The point is to grasp the specific dynamics of power that constitute and ‘normalize’ the academic study of religion within historically and socially specific formations, showing how ways of studying religion reflect ways of perceiving the world at large. We need to spotlight biases, blind spots and inadequacies in these established and perhaps all-too-familiar ways, enabling us to imagine new, alternative directions for our work. In my present environment in the humanities and with my own background in the anthropology of religion I feel well positioned to contribute to making this happen.

Of critical interest to me, as noted already, is the rise of a mentalistic understanding of religion, according to which religions prioritizing ‘outward’ expressions and forms stand intellectually and morally lower than those valuing above all content, meaning and inner feelings.<sup>13</sup> Obviously, as authors in anthropology and religious studies have noted, this modern take on religiosity echoes liberal Protestantism, which

has been identified as offering a normative *and* theoretical template for how religion is understood, studied and valued. In short, the study of religion is haunted by a Protestant legacy and bias that needs to be deconstructed (Asad 1993; see also Pels 2008).

To do so, in my own work I have critically engaged with Max Weber's sociology of religion (Meyer 2010a: 743-750) and with William James' psychology of religion (Meyer 2006: 8-13). Both authors are taken as 'classic' thinkers, who are, in my view, deeply influential exponents of the proverbial 'Protestant bias' in social-cultural approaches of religion. Weber conveyed a – liberal-theological and, in fact, Romanticist Protestant – idea of meaning being the core substance of religion, with form becoming superfluous the higher a religion develops.<sup>14</sup> One of the big assets of Weber's sociology (certainly compared to Marxist approaches of religion as 'opium' for and of the people) is the argument that religious worldviews need to be taken seriously as social variables because they shape actual conduct; hence the need for social scientists to take believers' ideas as a starting point. However, the Weberian interest in religious ideas overemphasizes the level of meaning at the expense of the forms through which these meanings are expressed.<sup>15</sup> Here we encounter one of the formative lines that shape current meaning-centred, mentalistic understandings of religion, and semantic approaches at large, in the social sciences. Another line runs through the work of William James. While the attention paid to the level of religious experience is important, it is also problematic. James regards experience as ultimately private, while institutions and modes of organization are taken to be secondary, superficial and even disturbing. By contrast, I insist that religious experience does not occur in an immediate and, as it were, raw manner, but is a product of religious framing and mediated forms (Meyer 2006). Religions, as I will elaborate in Part III of this lecture, offer authorised forms for having certain religious experiences, over and over again.

Regarding understandings of meaning and experience as mere inward phenomena as a major impediment in the study of religion, in a recent article I advocated the rehabilitation of 'form' in the study of religion (Meyer 2010a). We need to acknowledge the *indispensability of form*, understood not as a vehicle but as a generator of meaning and

experience, in all religious practice, irrespective of whether this is fully acknowledged or neglected from within. Doing so does not imply a simple reversal, a substitution of mentalism for materialism. Rather, I am aiming for an integrated approach that includes the mental dimension within a material approach, but without prioritizing the former.

Though the critique of the Protestant bias has been important in addressing genealogies of the study of religion, we need to resist taking this bias at face value. The cleavage between ideal type representations of Protestantism and actual Protestant religious practice has become a central research issue in the ‘anthropology of Christianity’. The rise of this subfield signals that the study of Christianity – long taken by many anthropologists as too Western to be worthy of attention – has become fully *salonfähig* as a ‘self-conscious comparative project’ alongside the anthropology of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and other religious traditions (Robbins 2003: 191; see also Cannell 2006; Hann 2007; Robbins 2004).<sup>16</sup> Historical and ethnographic studies of Protestant religiosity in everyday life have yielded intriguing insights that question the privileging of ‘inward’ belief above ‘outward’ ritual practices, content above form, texts above objects (Engelke 2007; Engelke & Tomlinson 2009; Keane 2007; Kirsch 2008; Klassen 2010; Luhrman 2012).<sup>17</sup> Much of my own work, prompted by puzzlement and alienation experienced in the face of alternative ways of being Christian in the frontier area of West Africa, as discussed later, has also engaged in critiquing the Protestant legacy. Indeed, the frontier areas that emerged through Western outreach into the non-Western world have proven to be particularly important research sites for questioning the inward-centred, mentalistic approaches of religion that colour and, in fact, de-materialize, scholarly analysis.

From the perspective of mainstream Western academia, such frontier areas may be taken as being far away – spatially distant, culturally foreign – and marginal. However, the very idea of such a distance between ‘us here’ and ‘them there’ is a symptom of hierarchical power relations. The ‘West’ and ‘Rest’ relate to each other in a particular configuration, in which the former, to put it crudely, is placed at the centre and stands for the norm, while the latter features as Other or exotic (see

the critique by Fabian 1983). This Eurocentric configuration impinges on the power-knowledge nexus at the heart of the academic study of religion, even though scholars may not necessarily be aware of it. It is important to spotlight how seemingly universalistic claims camouflage typically Western sensibilities and understandings, as is the case with the Protestant bias. At the same time, in order to avoid a paradoxical affirmation of the very power structures that critical analysis seeks to uncover, the imposition of Western notions on the non-Western world has to be put in perspective. As sites of actual contacts, colonial frontier areas offer a wealth of materials that call for decentralizing the study of religion away from Europe or, even better, to 'provincialize Europe' (Chakrabarty 2001). It is precisely for this reason that they are such important foci for the project of repositioning and reforming the study of religion to which this lecture seeks to contribute.

Over the past 30 years, in anthropology and postcolonial studies the power-knowledge nexus has been much discussed. More recently, this issue also started to feature prominently on research agendas in the study of religion at large. In her presidential address delivered at the 2011 meeting of the American Academy of Religion, the theologian Kwok Pui-Lan argued that 'the origin and development of the study of religion have been shaped by the social and political forces of empire in Europe and the United States' (2012: 1). To illustrate her point, she refers to the De-Judaization and concomitant 'whitening' of Christianity and the figure of Jesus that occurred in theology in response to evolutionary views of religion developed in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in comparative religion. Christianity was framed as Western; its Middle Eastern roots were downplayed, while Judaism was orientalized.<sup>18</sup> Pui-Lan urges scholars in the field to adopt a postcolonial perspective to assess how 'the cultural imaginary of empire' still informs seemingly neutral core epistemologies in the study of religion. This looking back is a necessary step for moving beyond the lingering colonial discursive frame that sets apart 'West' and 'Rest'.

Frontier areas of Western outreach are excellent locations to yield insights into the 'making of' the study of religion, as well as of anthropology, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Approached as hotbeds for theory

formation, the frontier areas that were hitherto regarded as marginal have now become central to a critical engagement with the genealogies of key concepts in the making of the study of religion (Chidester 1996, fc; van der Veer 2001).<sup>19</sup> This line of inquiry into actual practices of knowledge production is necessary to de- and re-centre the study of religion in ways appropriate to knowledge production and teaching about religion in our globalized – ever more entangled and interdependent – world. Obviously, my background in Africanist anthropology predisposes me to partake in this endeavour. Referring to my research on the frontier area of the West African Coast, in my present environment I will keep on stressing the importance of such sites as a critical horizon for evaluating genealogies of key concepts and spotting alternative possibilities.<sup>20</sup>

Before moving on, let me summarize the steps taken so far in the trajectory towards a *material approach* to religion. I have pointed out that an intuitive, more or less implicit *mentalist approach* to religion demands critical revision, rather than being taken as standard. This approach is grounded in a Protestant bias that slipped into understandings of religion in the aftermath of the Enlightenment. It formed the backbone of evolutionary schemes and underpins a devaluation of practices, materials and forms as merely ‘outward’. However, it is hopelessly inadequate in the face of actual everyday religiosities in past and present, Protestantism included, in which ‘inward’ and ‘outward’ levels appear to be mutually constitutive. To proceed, I introduced an approach of frontier areas of Western outreach as sites that are central to a re-centred study of religion that has transcended the outdated West-Rest binary. Stirring up established comfort zones of academic thinking and research, these areas are not only interesting empirically. For developing a material approach to the study of religion, they are above all important in a *methodological* sense. Focusing on these and other frontier areas is productive because, by virtue of the conflicts, tensions, misunderstandings and matches occurring there, they invoke the sense of confusion and the fresh insights on which innovative theoretical understandings depend.

## II Beyond the ‘Fetish’ – Fabricating Belief

Frontier areas of Western outreach were, and still are, rife with struggles and tensions about how to be and behave as a Christian. Studying them can help to ‘crack’ what is taken for granted in the ‘emic’ perspectives – or, as Webb Keane (2007) puts it, the ‘semiotic ideologies’ that underpin the attribution of value – of Westerners and local populations.<sup>21</sup> Why, to put it crudely, has it proven to be so difficult for Western people – traders, travellers, missionaries, administrators, and scholars – to understand non-Western religions on their own terms? What made and makes it so challenging to appreciate ‘material’ as a valuable dimension of religion, instead of taking it as a sign of a somehow backward, mundane orientation? Could the view of ‘material religion’ as an oxymoron be transcended by turning to frontier areas, taking this turn as a ‘historical detour toward critical knowledge’ (Fabian 2000: 10)?

As noted, anthropological works on local appropriations of Christianity in the course of colonization have revealed the inadequacy of the notion of belief, taken in the narrow sense of the Protestant bias, to contain converts’ religiosity. A related – though even more exciting and for my purposes more productive – path to question current apprehensions goes via the notion of the fetish (Keane 2007). Deconstructing the use of this term opens up the issue of religion and materiality – or even more concretely: ‘materials’ (Ingold 2007) – at large, as I will show in this section. The ‘fetish’ is a hybrid or border phenomenon that emerged in the mercantile encounters between Portuguese and Africans in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century (Pietz 1985–1988; Spyer 1998). Etymologically, ‘fetish’ can be traced to the Latin term *factitius* (‘what is made’, H. Böhme 2006: 179). The term refers to objects that have been made by human hands and yet are held to have some life of their own (see also Latour 2010: 3). Arising in actual commercial and cultural exchanges between Africans and Westerners, and indexing a scandalous blend of ‘human-made thing’ and ‘spirit’, the ‘fetish’ is a perfect starting point for my project of sketching a material approach to religion. Indeed, from my perspective as an anthropologist, I take the ‘fetish’ as a proverbial rock of offence to challenge and transcend the idea of ‘material religion’ being an oxymoron.

Ranking first in the category of ‘bad objecthood’ (Mitchell 2005: 188), I regard the ‘fetish’ as the epitome of ‘material religion’. It is a highly charged term that refers to an illicit and wrong human attitude towards a thing: as a rule, ‘fetishes’ are worshipped by Others. The notion of the fetish is a typical product of the power relations that structured past encounters between Africans and Westerners. The latter employed ‘fetish’ to claim a superior distance from the former in their writings. As Hartmut Böhme has pointed out, the notion of the fetish and the ensuing discourse on fetishism in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century was deployed in the clashes between Christianity and ‘heathendom’. Qualifying African uses of ‘fetishes’ as ‘idol worship’, Portuguese Catholic missionaries sought to replace the latter by images of Christian saints, relics and suchlike, and launched iconoclastic crusades. What they overlooked was that Africans understood Catholicism’s sacred objects in the same way as they understood the ‘fetishes’ that were despised as ‘idols’ (and hence as devilish superstitions) in Catholic teachings. Importantly, initially the notion of the fetish thus signalled not only a *clash* between, but also some kind of *common ground* shared by Catholic and African religiosities. Dismissing African cult objects as ‘idols’ did not imply that a sacralizing attitude towards religious objects, as in Catholic practice, was wrong as such. This looked quite different, of course, from a polemical Protestant perspective, according to which native ‘fetishes’ and the sacred objects and relics of the Catholics all stood on the same level of idolatry. Clearly, European idolatry discourses, including conflicting stances of Protestants and Catholics, were transposed into the new context of European expansion and applied to – and ultimately also adopted by – Africans (H. Böhme 2006: 183).

With the rise of the critique of religion in the name of rationalism in the Enlightenment, the fetishism discourse transformed. Held to represent religion in its rawest and most primitive form – ‘as it were, African Catholicism and Despotism in one’ (ibid., 185, translation BM) – fetishism was to be destroyed as a prerequisite for enlightenment and progress. It was held to sustain an irrational attitude which, in turn, sustained deeply problematic, sticky power structures (not unlike the *Ancien Régime*).<sup>22</sup> Here lie the roots of the discourse of fetishism as an irrational attribution of life, agency and will to a ‘mere’ thing.



This discourse inspired Marx to develop his notion of commodity fetishism and is the basis of Freud's idea of sexual fetishism. Whether the 'fetish' is regarded as a symptom of alienation or of neurosis, it signals a problem of the mind that failed to get it right. More neutral evolutionary schemes identified fetishism as a low – or even the lowest – stage in the development of religion. Invoked to refer to 'primitives', labourers with a 'false consciousness' or 'neurotics', in all three cases the use of the notion of fetishism marked a superior position of knowing better, refusing to be under the spell of a mere object.

Emerging in the frontier area and applied to claim difference between Africans and Europeans, the fetishism discourse was also mobilized as a script in the evangelizing projects of 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Protestant Missions. Let me illustrate this process by discussing my own research on encounters between missionaries of the *Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft* and the Ewe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in what is today Southern Togo and South-eastern Ghana. The encounters confirmed pre-existing assumptions: the Ewe were viewed as deplorable 'heathens' in need of salvation and exponents of 'primitive' religion in need of development – or as it was then called, 'civilization'. Clearly, missionary discourses about 'heathendom' and emergent scholarly discourses about the evolution of religion partly overlapped, offering rather distorted accounts of Ewe culture and religion. In religious matters the Ewe stood with their feet on the ground. Espousing de facto more rational positions than the missionaries themselves, many Ewe claimed that they would only be prepared to believe in the Christian God if the missionaries could produce convincing – preferably visual – evidence of his powerful presence. According to Ewe cosmology, in principle all gods – *trɔ̀wo* or *vodu* – by necessity require some material vessel in order to be present and enact their power, and humans can access, and partake in, this power through certain religious acts. These acts begin with the actual carving or moulding of a figure, its subsequent animation through spitting alcohol and saliva, its regular maintenance through sacrifices and feeding, its worship through repeated incantations, body movements, and so on (e.g. Meyer 2010b: 122; Preston Blier 1995: 76). Here, human action was indispensable for the gods to be present and act on people.

For the missionaries, this complex texture of human engagement with the spiritual realm in a relation of mutual dependency was clear evidence of ‘fetishism’ – and hence a dramatic sign of superstition. How could people be so deceived as to worship a human-made sculpture, or mere piece of stone or iron? As Pietist Protestants, the missionaries deeply resented the human act of making carved images of their gods – forbidden by the Second Commandment (as understood in the Reformed tradition) – as well as all the ritual acts to render them present and serve them by food offerings, libations and drumming. This was satanic. They were scandalized by the fact that Ewe ‘fetish’-priests and -priestesses embodied their gods in situations of trance that involved dancing, including gestures qualified as obscene. In ways reminiscent of stereotype anti-Catholic propaganda, the missionaries saw the ‘fetish’-priests as specialists in evil politicking that held the ignorant, fearful people under their sway. Clearly, linking up with a widely shared understanding of fetishism as involving an idolatric as well as irrational stance, the missionaries were captivated by the distancing logic of the fetishism discourse. According to this logic, there was a huge difference between the Ewe, with their materialistic attitude towards religion and the world at large, on the one hand, and the missionary ideal of an inward-centred, anti-ritualistic religiosity and of modesty and humbleness regarding worldly matters, on the other.

However, as captives of the script through which they represented the Others, the missionaries overlooked important aspects of their own work. If one reads between the lines, the historical sources reveal that many Ewe (converts as well as exponents of what came to be called ‘traditional religion’)<sup>23</sup> expressed surprise about the lack of a mundane outlook on the part of the missionaries – at least on the level of self-representation. After all, the colonial enterprise within which the mission operated brought about massive changes with regard to politics, the market, and education. To many Ewe it appeared therefore quite hypocritical that the missionaries would downplay all these concrete manifestations of Christian civilization as being secondary to spiritual life. Regarding with suspicion the missionary emphasis on an invisible and unrepresentable God who rejected rituals, converts recognized quickly that in fact Protestant religious practice, with the attention to daily prayer and Bible reading, the use of pictures and

illustrations such as the lithograph of the Broad and the Narrow Path, the powerful songs, the Sunday services and, of course, restricted access to the Holy Communion for only the inner circle of converts, had a practical and material dimension (Meyer 1997). Every now and then, the missionaries even appeared to engage in some kind of ‘magic’ – for instance when making use of the ‘magic lantern’ or displaying the capacity to transmit information silently, by using pen and paper. While many Ewe would bemoan the relative dearth of rituals within missionary Protestantism – epitomized by the ban on drumming – they still identified its practical dimension as *subɔ subɔ*, worship, and thus as to some extent analogous to ‘traditional religion’. Even though the dismissal of local gods as ‘fetishes’ and ‘idols’ became an enduring feature of Ewe Christian discourse, the practical attitude towards religion was retained.

The fetishism discourse, employed to signal a mystification that needed to be exposed, itself operated as a kind of smokescreen which, by claiming a fundamental distance between Protestant and Ewe religiosity, mystified the centrality of the mundane missionary activities that were central to constructing the new Christian world. Mission posts, located at the centre of newly built Christian villages, told their own story about the importance of material goods as harbingers and signs of progress. This mystification is an effect of the strong mentalistic emphasis on belief and inwardness as the essence of religion and the downplaying of a concern with health and wealth as mundane. The Ewe were not prepared to fully accept this mystification because religion was for them a more practical – and thus, in my view, a more down-to-earth – affair. Pondering the cleavage between the way in which religion – both Christian and so-called traditional – actually ‘happens’, on the one hand, and modern mentalistic understandings of religion, as propounded by missionaries and colonial officials (as well as – on a more theoretical level – by scholars of religion), on the other, I have been struck by the missionaries’ proclaimed anti-material, moralizing stance. This stance felt increasingly strange to me, and hence in need of explanation. This realization made me rethink and revise what I initially and intuitively took to be at the centre of (the study of) religion.<sup>24</sup> I shifted from my own rather mentalistic orientation that focused on language (what do people say and what does it mean?)

to a more inclusive focus on practices (what do people do?) and on the body, things, buildings (which senses are invoked? Which materials are used?). Turning away from a mentalistic orientation, I would like to stress, does not imply a dismissal of the mental level; the point is to acknowledge that 'there is an element of the mental in all (social) reality' (Godelier 1986: 151). Here lie the roots of my passionate plea for a material approach to religion; it prompts better research questions that ultimately question the limitations of the scholarly concepts through which we try to understand religion.

I understood that such a practical attitude towards religion, widely shared among converts in the region, motivated so-called 'backsliding', as well as the emergence of African Independent Churches and, since the 1990s, Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches. These African-founded churches owe a great deal of their appeal to the fact that they offer people concrete religious forms and patterns to act on and access the power of the Holy Spirit. Today the exuberant this-worldly orientation of Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches with their flamboyant pastors, spectacular church buildings and prosperity Gospel attracts a lot of criticism for 'watering down' what critics regard as the essence of Christianity. At the same time, these churches challenge scholars, including myself, to come to terms with the explicit emphasis on bodily sensations and material benefits that characterizes Pentecostal-Charismatic religious practice (Meyer 2007, 2010a). Indeed, it was the early converts' criticisms of the missionary project and the tangible presence of Pentecostal-Charismatic churches in the public domain that alerted me to the importance of placing materiality at the centre of my research. Instead of allowing moral dismissals of 'outward' forms and materialist worldliness to slip into scholarly analysis, and instead of prioritizing semantic approaches that look *through* concrete manifestations so as to get at the abstract meanings behind, it is key to approach religion as a mundane, practical and material affair – as *present in* and *making* a world.

To do so requires us to stand religion 'on its feet'. This endeavour is served well by a critical exploration of the use of the fetish-notion. The discourse about fetishism offers a distorting mirror – a *Zerrspiegel* – of European stances and concerns (H. Böhme 2006: 185). A closer

look into that mirror reveals an ideology of fierce anti-fetishism. Over the past decade or so, in the aftermath of the postmodern critique of the subject, this stance has been questioned, raising fundamental questions about human-object relations. In the framework of the so-called material turn, scholars have stressed the generative power and even 'agency' of things, and playfully recuperated notions hitherto employed for purposes of Othering, such as fetishism. However, a simple reappraisal of 'fetishism' as universal misses the point. What is at stake is a deeper critique that questions the notion of the fetish itself.

Bruno Latour, one of the path-breaking thinkers in this field, places the 'fetish' at the centre of his critique of modernity. His plea for a 'symmetrical anthropology' that surpasses the old, distancing use of the 'fetish' as a watershed separating modern Westerners from Africans and other alleged 'primitives' fits in well with my methodological use of the West African frontier area to rethink religion. The 'fetish' was so problematic to modern Westerners because it violated distinctions between human-made fabrications and God, between subjects and objects, between spirit and matter, between construction and reality. Anti-fetishism, Latour explains, is 'the prohibition on understanding how one passes from a human action that fabricates, to the autonomous entities that are welcomed by that action and revealed through it. Conversely, we can define "symmetrical anthropology" as that which lifts the prohibition and gives the factish a positive meaning' (2010: 35). The positive meaning of the 'factish' (a mix of 'fact' and 'fetish'), Latour argues, lies in recognizing that 'in all our activities, what we fabricate goes beyond us' (2010: 22-23). Making or fabricating something is not simply an instrumental act in which the maker is unaffected and in control; it is a generating process in which subjects and objects are mutually constituted, becoming enmeshed and indistinguishable from one another, and which also creates surplus or excess. Humans are shaped by and shape the material world in such dynamics.

Latour's intriguing statement that 'we help to fabricate the beings in which we believe' (2010: 39) could be considered as an echo of the view of religion as being a human projection that is to be unmasked. However, this is beside the point. While the idea of unmasking presupposes an objective reality that exists behind the illusionary world

of religion, Latour's statement pertains to *all* spheres of life, from science to religion. From this perspective religion is one sphere among others – and in fact a rather instructive one – which engages in fabricating a constructed and yet very real world. Taking 'fabrication' as a starting point in the study of religion involves an exploration of religious modes of 'making belief' – rather than simply 'make-believe' – as a serious object of research (Morgan 2010). This allows a restoration of the balance between 'inward' belief and 'outward' forms, which was lost with the rise of the Protestant bias and semantic approaches at large.

I propose to place at the centre of scholarly inquiries the very concrete ways through which humans 'fabricate' – by mobilizing texts, sounds, pictures, or objects, and by engaging in practices of speaking, singing, being possessed and so on – a sense of the presence of something beyond. Foregrounding 'fabrication' prompts very concrete empirical questions about the specific practices, materials and forms employed in *generating* a sense of something divine, ghostly, sublime or transcendent. Which materials are used and how are they authorised as suitable? Through which acts does a sculpture, a building or any other object become a harbinger of spiritual power? Which concrete steps are involved in procedures of sacralization? How is the human body involved and addressed; which sensorial registers are invoked? How are these procedures authorised and controlled and what kinds of relations ensue? How, finally, does a religious 'fabrication' command belief? Posing such questions around 'fabrication', in other words, allows us to study the *genesis* of a sense of extraordinary presence – in the sense of *anwesend* in the here and now – which arises through a complex interrelation of acting and sensing humans, sets of practices and various materials.<sup>25</sup> I understand genesis here in the sense of formation, as a creative process of fabricating, bringing about or making happen that we may very effectively observe and describe, if we only look closely enough.

Let me conclude this section by repeating that I zoomed in on the use of the figure of the fetish to liquefy thickened scholarly approaches of religion. I hope that I have been able to convey that the 'fetish' is an eye-opening starting point for a material approach that explores

practices of fabrication as key to the genesis of a sense of spiritual presence. I would like to stress once again that my aim in proposing a *material* approach is *not to reduce religion to sheer matter*. That would simply end in the adoption of a 19<sup>th</sup> century materialism which rejects religion as a mere fictitious illusion and which, as I see it, has long been surpassed by Hegelian dialectics and Marxian dialectical materialism. For the academic study of religion such a stance would be as useless as a theistic point of view. My point is rather that, as practices and materials are indispensable for religion's existence in the world as a social, cultural and political phenomenon, they need our utmost theoretical and empirical attention. Thus, far from constituting an oxymoron, the phrase 'material religion' brings to the fore an irreducible relation. Intended as a provocative shout to signal the need for a new approach, 'material religion' is in fact a pleonasm that will become obsolete once the study of religion has been materialized.

### **III Religion as Mediation: How to Study the Genesis of Presence**

Deconstructing the notion of religion as it emerged with the rise of the study of religion does not mean that the term itself should be abandoned. A critical engagement with its genealogies and shortcomings, as well as with the social, political and legal dimensions of its actual use, is at the core of the study of religion. This, however, is not all. Even though it may be impossible to offer a universally valid definition, as scholars in this field we need at least a minimal agreement on what the term religion refers to. For the sake of comparison and scholarly conversation we need a broader, albeit provisional, vocabulary that exceeds the specificities that are at the centre of our ethnographic, sociological, historical, philosophical or philological inquiries. So let me, as part of my attempt to critique past mentalistic approaches of religion *and* spotlight the contours of a fresh material approach that includes but is not reduced to the mental dimension in the study of religion at large, put my cards on the table. I take it that 'religion' refers to particular, authorised and transmitted sets of practices and ideas aimed at 'going beyond the ordinary', 'surpassing' or 'transcending' a limit, or gesturing towards, as Mattijs van de Port (2010) put it poignantly, 'the rest-of-what-is'. I hasten to emphasize that, just as I

oppose the reduction of the ‘fetish’ or other religious items to mere human-made artifacts so as to expose religion as a fictitious illusion, I do not take what is held to be ‘beyond the ordinary’ as self-revealing – as is claimed in various versions of the phenomenology of religion (and in Protestant theology, whenever God is spoken about as the Wholly Other, as suggested by Rudolf Otto and Karl Barth). I take a path that slides between these big positions, taking the everyday as the location whence a sense of getting ‘beyond the ordinary’ is generated. This occurs through actual, empirically observable practices. Aimed at transcending the limit that sets apart what lies ‘beyond’, these practices are nonetheless easily accessible to researchers.

In this section, I would like to probe a bit deeper into the process of religious ‘fabrication’, through which a sense of extraordinary presence is generated by and in people. To do so, I employ the conceptual framework of mediation. As explained in a number of my publications, like many scholars I find it useful to think of religion as a practice of mediation through which a distance between the immanent and what lies ‘beyond’ it is posited and held to be bridged, albeit temporarily. From this angle, religion may well be analysed as a technique of reaching out to – and by the same token generating a sense of – an ‘otherworld’ via various kinds of media.<sup>26</sup> As Robert Orsi put it evocatively: ‘Religion is the practice of making the invisible visible, of concretizing the order of the universe, the nature of human life and its destiny, and the various possibilities of human interiority itself, as these are understood in various cultures at different times, in order to render them visible and tangible, present to the senses and in the circumstances of everyday life. Once made material, the invisible can be negotiated and bargained with, touched and kissed, made to bear human anger and disappointment [...] But the question remains: how does this happen?’ The answer is, as Orsi puts it, by offering ‘multiple media for materializing the sacred’ (2012: 147). Media, here, are not understood in the narrow, familiar sense of modern mass media, but in the broad sense of transmitters across gaps and limits (see also de Vries 2001; Krämer 2008).<sup>27</sup>



It is telling that Orsi, who studied everyday Catholic religiosity, appears to spotlight with great ease the role of media in Catholic practice. While Catholic theology is prepared to acknowledge acts and artefacts as incarnations that make the ‘invisible’ *materialize*, theologies of other religious traditions – for instance Calvinist Protestantism – are more reluctant, or even fiercely refuse to do so and insist on an ‘immediate’ link with God. I take these theologies of immediacy as intriguing objects of my research. However, on the level of analysis I regard immediacy as not prior to, but an effect of mediation (Eisenlohr 2009; Meyer 2011a). The purpose of taking mediation as a focus for research is to explore the actual process of generating a sense of an extraordinary and immediate presence.<sup>28</sup>

Examples abound of items in the material world that are configured as religious media. In addition to the abovementioned sculptures and pots that became abodes of the *trôvo* for the Ewe, we may consider relics and icons which, while derived from human remains or made by humans – albeit with divine inspiration – become pivotal to devotional practices. An exciting example is *A Nossa Senhora da Aparecida*, patron saint of Brazil, whose mass-produced figurine finds its way into many household altars throughout Brazil. As Joao Rickli (fc) shows in his research in the context of our HERA project on the circulation of Christian imagery,<sup>29</sup> pilgrims purchase such figurines in the official shop or informal stalls at the national sanctuary at Aparecida, attend mass so as to charge them with divine power, and then take them home. The capacity of these figurines to operate as transmitters of divine power, which protects their owners, is demonstrated plastically in the museum in the basement of the sanctuary. Next to votive offerings, photographs of car accidents and – amazingly – remnants of exploded pressure cookers are placed as evidence of the power of the virgin to safeguard those devoted to her to survive disasters. However, it is not only pictures and objects that can become religious media. The human body, too, may be configured as a religious medium, as is the case not only with spirit possession, but also in Pentecostal settings in which people strive to be ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’. In addition, certain utterances, holy texts, and music may operate as religious media through the use of which a sense of an extraordinary presence is generated.

The point I want to make by invoking these diverse examples is that, in principle, anything, from language to the body, from book to computer, from sculpture to icon, can become a religious medium. Of course, the religious use of something as a medium is subject to processes of authorisation and authentication that are often embedded in longstanding religious traditions. Religious groups may well be distinguished – and distinguish themselves from others – by the specific media used in mediating access to what is beyond the ordinary. Since media entail their own qualities or ‘affordances’, they prompt distinct kinds of engagement, involving various senses and sensibilities. A primarily text-centred religiosity differs, for instance, from a religiosity focused on pictorial devotion – one of the big issues in the (Calvinist) Reformation.

In order to better grasp how religious mediation works, I have coined the notion of ‘sensational form’ (Meyer 2006). This notion refers to a configuration of religious media, acts, imaginations and bodily sensations in the context of a religious tradition or group. Authorised and authenticated as harbingers of what lies ‘beyond’, sensational forms have the double aspect of streamlining or shaping religious mediation *and* of achieving certain effects by being performed. Thus, sensational forms are ‘formats’, in that they direct those taking part in them on how to proceed, as well as being ‘performances’, in that they effect or make present what they mediate. Take, for example, the sensational form of the liturgy of a church service: it stipulates the appropriate steps and, in the course of being performed, induces in participants an experience of divine presence (Rappaport 2002: 450–51). The notion of sensational form is intended as heuristic. Stressing a material take on mediation, it is a methodological tool that makes it possible for researchers to discern via participant observation the micro-practices through which the ‘beyond’ becomes present and through which particular personal and collective identities with a distinct ethos and style emerge, and relate to society at large. Guiding researchers to unpack religion without simply focusing on the illusory or non-illusory nature of the ‘beyond’, but rather exploring the process of reaching out to it, the notion of sensational form is of help to *operationalize* the material approach I propose.

Using and taking part in the sensational forms that are characteristic for a particular religious group or religious tradition, a believer's sensorium is tuned through distinct, gendered techniques of the body. These techniques of the body may be more or less accentuated, inducing more or less intense feelings, but they are always key to the genesis of presence. Humans are sentient beings who relate to the world and themselves through perception (e.g. Braungart 2012; Rancière 2006). Perception is not a mere neuro-cognitive process, but is also always subject to cultural framing. In the face of the infinite range of possible sense stimuli, people learn to direct their attention, tuning out from certain stimuli, whilst emphasizing and developing a sensibility towards others, generating certain emotions. I do not wish to become embroiled in a discourse in which culture and biology/cognition are opposed; what I am against is a reductive view that brings everything down to the level of the brain as it appears in an MRI scan. At the same time, I find it short-sighted of many scholars in the humanities and social sciences that they stress the importance of embodiment and sensation, and yet refuse to take into account the fact that the physiological body, including the brain, is the ground on and through which the cultural organization of perception and sensation, and the triggering of emotions, occurs (Taves 2011; Verrips 2010). Exploring this further requires substantial collaborative research efforts that bring together on *equal* footing research in biology, neurology, cognitive science and religious studies.<sup>30</sup> Further comparative study in different religious groups is needed in particular with regard to the relation between specific sensorial profiles and the invocation of more or less intense and captivating religious experiences and emotions. Obviously, huge differences exist between, say, the rather intellectualist profile of 'high church' Protestantism, with organ music inducing stirring, but sober, religious feelings; the heated calling for full bodily and sensational participation in African Pentecostalism; the triggering of olfactory registers of visitors to Hindu temples; or immersion into the rhythmic soundscape of collective recitation of the Qur'an (Hirschkind 2007).

Focusing on sensational forms, we reach the sphere of aesthetics, understood in the basic Aristotelian sense of *aisthesis* as the sensorial engagement with the world.<sup>31</sup> Offering select strong stimuli for perception, mobilizing and training particular senses so as to invoke

more or less intense emotions, providing an imaginary that pulls together various sense impressions into some kind of whole, and creating particular ‘atmospheres’ (G. Böhme 1995) that conjure particular moods, religion is a domain of aesthetics par excellence.<sup>32</sup> A compelling example is the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, who left his followers with a concrete manual of how to engage the senses in activating the imagination so as to ‘make present’ the suffering of Christ, aiming to ‘bridge the gulf in time separating the modern individual from the biblical event’ (Smith 2002: 36). Other examples include: the body techniques of medieval mystics (Largier 2009); Muslim prayer practices; baroque church interiors that invoke, via *trompe d’œils*, a sense of the divine; new hybrid meditational practices that have a special appeal in a New Age context, possibly as a compensatory strategy propelled by the narrow spectrum of sensorial engagement in North-European Christianity; and, though less spectacular and therefore harder to recognize, Protestant practices of Bible reading, psalm singing, religious speech and contemplative prayer techniques. What all these examples have in common is that in one way or the other they entail the sharpening of a believer’s sensorium and the genesis of sensibilities and emotions through authorised, distinctive aesthetic practices that can be described and analysed in detail.<sup>33</sup> These aesthetic practices are the material basis for making sense. Meaning production is not disembodied and abstract, but deeply sensorial and material, contrary to what the Protestant bias suggests.

Importantly, focusing on sensational forms draws our attention to the triple role of the body as a producer, transmitter and receiver of the transcendent. Sensational forms induce in people, in a repeated and repeatable manner, sensations of reaching out which they experience as real. Therefore, the (physio-cultural) body is the key to understanding how fabrications that reach out to what is posited as ‘beyond’ eventually conjure a being (or beings) that command belief: how, in short, the genesis of extraordinary presence occurs. Effecting via bodily sensations what they guide people to reach out to, sensational forms operate as a generator that ‘makes belief’. For believers, sensation is what ultimately authenticates religious mediation, with all the work of fabrication that goes into it, as real. Ultimately, it is by generating immediate bodily sensations – over and over again – within structures

of repetition that religious worlds, and worlds at large, are effected and vested with truth and reality.<sup>34</sup>

The involvement of the body may involve pleasure or pain. The former is true of the transformation of religiosity in our current Western *Erlebnisgesellschaft*, where personal, immediate, happy experience of God is in high demand. Pentecostal churches, in particular, offer quite spectacular possibilities for ‘metakinesis’, through which born-again Christians ‘learn to identify bodily and emotional states as signs of God’s presence in their life’ (Luhrman 2004: 519, see also 2012). In contrast to such joyful encounters, other examples involve discipline and even inducement of pain. Modes of religiosity involving body techniques which go beyond mere pleasure seem hard to grasp in the currently prevailing ‘feel-good-culture’, in which pain is an exception to be overcome.<sup>35</sup> The recent upheaval in Germany concerning the practice of male circumcision as practised by Jews and Muslims is a case in point. Secular critics regard circumcision as bodily injury that is held to engender a traumatic experience in the young child. On the occasion of his recent visit to Germany, Israel’s highest Rabbi Yona Metzger described circumcision, taking place on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, as ‘the root of the Jewish soul, a seal on the body of a Jew, a pact with God’ (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, dd 22 August 2012, translation BM). This statement captures quite well what I would like to convey through the notion of sensational form, taken as a format to be followed and a performance to effect a particular reality: authorised, transmitted acts and body techniques are the existential grounding of an embodied religious subjectivity and identity. Tensions and clashes over body techniques between religions, or between secular and religious identities, may fruitfully be analysed as cleavages between sensational forms, and hence between religious aesthetics and broader modes of world-making, that need to be unpacked through our research.

I use ‘world’ here in a phenomenological sense, as a culturally constituted realm, structured through social relations and practices of transmission, across vertical and horizontal axes, constructed and real at the same time. By virtue of sharing media and practices of mediation, people are drawn into religio-aesthetic formations (Meyer 2009; see also Kapferer & Hobart 2005) which shape shared ideas, emotions,

moods, values, practices, and a shared ‘common sense’ through habitual modes of perception, body techniques and a material environment or habitat. This is not just limited to linking people with a ‘beyond’, but also calls forth modes of conduct and an ethos of how to act in the world (as pointed out by Weber). The shared partaking in religious mediation sustains collective identities (as Durkheim posits) within a particular material environment on the level of the household, religious space, the neighbourhood, the city, or even a much larger context. In our research, therefore, the sensation–power nexus needs to be taken seriously.

Certainly in the current era, where different – religious and secular – worlds rub against and interfere with each other in arenas of diversity and pluralism, it is of central importance to concentrate on the micro-level of religious world-making. Tensions often evolve around material manifestations of religion, from the aforementioned criticism of male children’s circumcision in Germany, to debates about ritual slaughter in the Netherlands, to the wearing of veils or the building of mosques,<sup>36</sup> and so on. In turn, religious people may feel offended by what they perceive as a violation of their valued religious media through ‘blasphemous’ acts – from the turmoil around the Mohammed cartoons, to the recent upheaval around a cartoon in a cartoon museum in Kassel, depicting Jesus on the cross and a voice saying ‘Eh Du, ich habe deine Mutter gefickt’<sup>37</sup>, to the provocative political performance of the female punk band Pussy Riot in the orthodox Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, to the violent protests against the film *Innocence of Muslims*. These events call for research that helps us understand how the feelings of being offended by outsiders’ abuse of cherished religious media are grounded in embodied religious subjectivities (Verrips 2008), as well as the political potential of targeting such feelings as an intended emancipatory – or simply amusing – act. The point here is to understand what generates the high sensibilities and strong emotions that underpin tensions about ‘blasphemy’ in the public domain (Baumgartner 2007; Plate 2006), rather than just making judgments about its (il)legitimacy.

In many respects, our current religiously plural and culturally diverse environments are extensions of the setting of historical frontier areas

of Western outreach. In the contemporary setting I also opt for taking cleavages and tensions between members of different religions, or between religious and secular positions, as occasions for learning. Resisting a lazy imposition of dominant epistemologies, we should use these sites as instructive for questioning taken-for-granted concepts. While I would certainly not wish to encourage some kind of extreme relativism, I am convinced that understanding what matters in our contemporary world requires a serious and critical encounter with difference.<sup>38</sup>

#### **IV Multiple Media – Pictorial devotion**

Mediation proves to be a bridging – indeed, literally, a mediating – concept that cuts across various disciplines within the study of religion, and beyond. It should be clear by now that I employ this concept not for the sake of a philosophical exploration, but for the practical purpose of formulating fresh perspectives and methodologies for trans-disciplinary research on religion. Thinking about ‘religious media’ and practices of mediation is exciting and promising for various reasons. Above all, it opens up inquiries into the plethora of kinds of religious media encompassed by sensational forms. The broad range of media available and used in religious traditions should make us ponder the privileging of text as the prime medium of religion (if it is indeed acknowledged by its users as a medium), and to re-think the dominance of text-centred analysis grounded in hermeneutics and semantics. It is important to open up and take seriously in their own terms other media, such as pictures, things, sounds, scents, and many others. This requires engaging with academic fields such as the study of material culture, visual culture, music and media studies. Opening up to multiple media and the broader framework of mediation also raises basic questions of how to approach and describe the religious traditions, or ‘world religions’, that are at the centre of the study of religion. What does it mean when we identify Judaism, Christianity and Islam as ‘religions of the *book*’? What does ‘book religion’ practically entail (Kirsch 2007; Stolorow 2010)? Are there no other media – things, pictures, music – involved? With hindsight, it may appear that the notion of ‘book religions’ is in fact a product of a particular process of canonization within these religious traditions themselves which, as

is proposed by Terje Stordalen with regard to Christianity (fc), mirror internal power structures that privilege text as prime medium of transmission, certainly across time, at the expense of other media such as statues, music, and the body, and the practices around them.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, raising our sensibility as scholars to the plethora of religious media used even within one religious tradition on the level of the everyday raises fundamental questions about how to define the core objects of research and the appropriate methodologies in the study of religion. What are the materials that matter for research on religion; which kinds of alternative ‘archives’, in addition to those storing texts, could be unlocked? Traditionally, both comparative religion and theology (as well as Islamic studies, and the study of other ‘world religions’) have been strongly text-centred, foregrounding the importance of philological expertise and hermeneutics. This is certainly one of the strengths of the field. However, in the light of the use of multiple media in practices of religious mediation, it would be appropriate to ponder the privileging of the book medium and textual study and to open up towards alternative materials, and, perhaps, alternative modes of scholarly presentation.<sup>40</sup> This, in my view, is the productive potential offered by the material media perspective proposed in this lecture for reforming and reformulating the study of religion at large.

Let me spotlight the potential and implications of such opening up by turning, once again, to my own work as an Africanist anthropologist. Over the past years I have been much intrigued by the preponderance of pictures, and the use of visual metaphors, in Pentecostal, and, more broadly, popular Christian practice in Ghana.<sup>41</sup> My interest in pictures emerged, as it were, in the aftermath of my ‘conversion’ to a material approach, as outlined earlier. In the aforementioned HERA project, together with Rhoda Woets I explore pictures of Jesus, in particular the motif of the Sacred Heart. Following Pompeo Batoni’s famous painting *The Sacred Heart of Jesus* (1767) in the Il Gesu church in Rome (Morgan 2012: 111-136), there are endless recycled versions of this picture, many of them now mass-produced in China. While the *Sacred Heart* initially circulated globally alongside Jesuit missionary efforts, in Ghana it has long been incorporated into popular non-denominational



Christian practice. We find the motif on car stickers, canoes, posters and murals. Despite ongoing debates about the interdiction of the worship of ‘idols’ and ‘fetishes’, for many Christians these pictures offer personal sites of prayer and contemplation (Meyer 2010b; Woets *fc*). Though virtually everybody would insist that the picture as such is not the object of veneration, it is nonetheless understood that the picture somehow re-*presents* the power of Jesus. Through longstanding aesthetic practices of use, the picture is held to become a transmitter of divine *supervision* that will protect and safeguard the beholder. The picture is taken as a medium that generates the spiritual presence of Jesus through a mutual gaze of seeing and being seen. In other words, it is through specific acts of looking (Morgan 1998; Pinney 2004) that people engage with the picture and eventually regard it as a powerful presence.<sup>42</sup>

Working on the circulation of the *Sacred Heart of Jesus* made me realize that the spread of Christian visual culture is a highly intriguing research field that offers new insights into the politics and aesthetics of Christian practice on a global scale. So far, however, the study of the spread of Christianity has mainly concentrated on the level of texts and meanings, asking how Christianity has been synthesized with indigenous culture on the level of the imagination. The fact that in Christian practice pictures have long been important and have played a key role in evangelization calls forth a serious engagement with Western religious visual culture in past and present (Bynum 2011; McDannell 1995; Morgan 1998, 2005, 2012; Morgan & Promey 2001). In my view, this line of research needs to be further developed by moving into the centre of the larger field of visual culture (or, in German, *Bildwissenschaft*) and by including a focus on the non-Western world (e.g. Meyer 2011b; Spyer 2008). Challenging a text-centred, semantic approach according to which pictures are taken as mere representations of something else, scholars of visual culture take pictures seriously as material media that render present what they depict. The provocative question posed by W.J.T. Mitchell – ‘What do pictures want?’ (2005) – playfully refers to the figure of the ‘fetish’. It seems that scholars of visual culture, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are finally prepared to recognize the Western world in the distorted mirror used for so long to reflect others.

The current reappraisal of animism (e.g. Albers & Franke 2012), fetishism, magic and enchantment in the study of visual culture – and beyond – signals a reprise of themes that have long-standing roots in the study of religion, even though this may be ill-recognized by scholars on both sides. I see two major benefits in engaging with visual culture as a scholar studying religion. One concerns the aforementioned broadening of the horizon of the study of religion that follows from taking visual media seriously as full-fledged religious sensational forms. The other benefit concerns the move into the heart of debates around visual and material culture in the humanities. I see a task for scholars of religion who are knowledgeable about our ‘religious past’ to discern and explain the religious roots of long-standing, resilient attitudes towards pictures, objects and other material forms (Castelli 2012; Korte 2011). As the German *Bildwissenschaftler* Hans Belting puts it in his intriguing discussion of Jesus paintings, ‘pictures have always presumed belief, and still presume the necessary belief within our gaze (2006: 176, translation BM). The truth of this statement is, albeit indirectly, confirmed by the hype-like commotion around the well-intended, yet disastrous restoration of the *Ecce Homo* fresco in Borja (Northern Spain) by 81-year-old Cecilia Yimenez. Met with disbelief, the work has quickly been renamed *Ecco Mono* (See the Ape), and been taken as a hilarious, unintentionally blasphemous example of Pop Art. With regard to contemporary visual iconographies and our attitudes towards pictures, we can certainly state that, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it becomes increasingly difficult not only to delineate where religion stops and begins, but also to define the limits of the study of religion.

## **To Conclude**

With hindsight, this lecture has taken the form of a *diabolo*, or *diaballo*, the toy brought back from China by European missionaries towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Starting, in Part I, with a critique of genealogies that foreground a mentalistic, de-materialized understanding of religion, epitomized by the Protestant bias, I introduced the frontier area of Western outreach as a site of fresh vistas and ideas. In Part II I focused in on the micro-level of the notion of the ‘fetish’ as it featured in my historical and ethnographic research. Instead of taking the ‘fetish’

just as an ill-conceived sign of ‘primitive religion’, I proposed turning this notion around – just as one would juggle a *diabolo* using its thinnest centre point. Seeking to make the ‘fetish’ speak in another way, inspired by Latour, I proposed concentrating on the dynamics of the fabrication of beings that command belief. Part III then stretched out again by sketching what I mean by a material approach, and this was followed up by Part IV, in which I spotlighted the potential of pictorial research. If Part I was intended to *deconstruct* the mentalistic approach enshrined in dominant genealogies, the aim of Part III and IV was to *construct* a material approach for the future. Extending our horizon so as to include the use of multiple media in religious mediation, I argued, enables both more adequate descriptions and analyses *and* a thorough reflection on the social embeddedness and politico-aesthetic impact of the media that have been privileged in our scholarship, through canonization both within the religious traditions we study and the disciplinary study of religion.

As my use of the simile of the *diabolo* suggests, the approach I suggest has a playful dimension that reflects my own pleasure in conducting research. The juggling associated with the *diabolo* is conducive, in my view, to a creative and critical attitude with regard to theories, methods and epistemologies. Presenting why and how I envision a material approach to religion – and in so doing, perhaps even playing the role of the devil’s advocate so as to discuss which research materials and formats to accept as basic materials for our analysis – I am using this lecture as an opportunity to trigger a trans-disciplinary conversation with scholars in the study of religion, and beyond. Alongside pursuing my research and organizing my teaching along the lines I have sketched here, I very much look forward to further conversations with my colleagues in the department, the faculty, and in wider national and international settings.

### **Tot slot**

Religie is voor mij een boeiend onderwerp dat mij al lang voordat ik in 1979 aan de Universiteit Bremen met mijn studie religiewetenschap begon heeft bezig gehouden. Die studie was het begin van een traject dat me van Bremen naar Amsterdam leidde om antropologie te studeren bij Johannes Fabian, naar promotieonderzoek onder de bezielende

leiding van de laatste en Bonno Thoden van Velzen, naar mijn eerste baan in het onderzoekscentrum Godsdienst en Maatschappij bij Peter van der Veer, naar mijn positie als hoogleraar culturele antropologie aan de VU en tenslotte naar mijn hoogleraarschap in de religiewetenschap hier aan de Universiteit Utrecht. In de loop van dat traject heb ik intense en duurzame relaties kunnen ontwikkelen met collega's hier in Nederland en in het buitenland, vooral in Berlin, Cape Town, London, New York, Oslo en Toronto. Velen van hen zijn hier aanwezig. Ik beschouw onze samenwerking als een groot privilege en ben intens dankbaar voor alle steun en stimulans. Mijn bijzondere dank gaat uit naar de jonge onderzoekers – promovendi en postdocs – in de verschillende onderzoeksprojecten waarin we gezamenlijk zijn geïnvolveerd. Ik heb onnoemelijk veel geleerd van hun frisse kijk, kritische vragen, en werklust, en daarom draag ik deze oratie aan hun op.

Zoals uit deze oratie blijkt, ben ik antropoloog in hart en nieren. Dat neemt niet weg dat ik er diep van doordrongen ben dat vruchtbaar en hoogwaardig religieonderzoek multidisciplinair hoort te zijn. Precies daarom beschouw ik mijn hoogleraarschap in het Departement Religiewetenschap en Theologie als een boeiende uitdaging om mijn onderzoek opnieuw te positioneren. Gaarne bedank ik het College van Bestuur van de Universiteit Utrecht en de decaan van de Faculteit Geesteswetenschappen, Wiljan van de Akker, voor het in mij gestelde vertrouwen. Mijn dank gaat ook uit naar mijn collega's in het departement voor hun hartelijke ontvangst. In het afgelopen jaar heb ik door participerende observatie en gesprekken veel van hen geleerd. Ik ben diep onder de indruk van hun enorme, over een lange reeks van jaren opgebouwde expertise met betrekking tot christelijke en islamitische tradities. Voor mij, als antropoloog die zich in ieder geval tot nu toe vooral met het christendom in Afrika heeft bezig gehouden, zijn de gesprekken met mijn nieuwe collega's zeer inspirerend. Zoals uit deze rede blijkt, zie ik nieuw geopende vensters voor me waardoor nieuwe vergezichten verschijnen. Al verkeert het departement helaas al jaren in een welhaast permanent transformatieproces – een reflectie van de kritieke positie der theologie in der Nederlandse samenleving en dus ook binnen de universiteiten – er is niettemin sprake van indrukwekkende gedrevenheid voor onderzoek en onderwijs. Die inzet is het echte kapitaal waarop de universiteit teert – daar zouden

universitaire bestuurders zich meer van bewust mogen zijn. Voor mij zijn de medewerkers op de werkvloer de basis voor goed onderzoek en onderwijs. Ik zal mijn best doen om bij te dragen aan een uitdagende en levendige werkomgeving. Voor mij betekent dat heel praktisch het scheppen van laagdrempelige en informele contexten voor het voeren van stimulerende gesprekken rond een tafel. Ook binnen de faculteit zie ik allerlei mogelijkheden voor verdere samenwerking, met name met collega's van filosofie, geschiedenis, mediastudies, literatuurwetenschap en het Centre for the Humanities. Zoals ook wel uit mijn oratie blijkt, schep ik er veel genoegen in om allerlei circuits met elkaar te verbinden die grenzen overschrijden tussen disciplines, instituties en landen. In zekere zin zie ik mij als een soort electricien die allerlei kabels waar energie doorheen stroomt met elkaar verbindt, en het leuk vindt als er zo nu en dan de vonken van af vliegen.

De in mijn oratie geschetste visie op religieonderzoek heeft uiteraard implicaties voor de manier waarop ik doceer. Ook in het onderwijs ga ik voor een post-secularistische en materiële benadering van dat fascinerende fenomeen religie in al zijn facetten. Ik probeer om zowel een veeleisende als ook stimulerende docente te zijn, die de studenten uitdaagt om de – ook letterlijk – kostbare tijd van hun studie productief te benutten. Het geven van onderwijs houdt me scherp en daarvoor ben ik de studenten dankbaar.

Tenslotte bedank ik mijn familieleden en vrienden in Nederland en Duitsland, die er altijd voor mij zijn, ook al heb ik veel te weinig tijd om samen leuke dingen met hen te doen. Mijn man Jojada Verrips bedank ik uit het diepste van mijn hart voor zijn inspirerende aanwezigheid, zijn vlijmscherpe edoch altijd opbouwende kritiek op mijn werk en zijn praktische steun. De frisse, soms absurdistische kijk op de wereld van onze zoon Sybren bepaalt mij bij de betrekkelijkheid van mijn bezigheden en daar ben ik blij om. Thuis is de warme bron van mijn bestaan. Ik heb gezegd.

## Acknowledgements

This text is a fruit of a longstanding, fertile research environment in which young and established scholars in anthropology and beyond engage in intense conversations about the role of media, religion, and the body in various politico-aesthetic formations. The text itself was written at various locations during the summer of 2012. My thinking gained much through conversations with family members – young and old – in my mother’s house in Emden and with friends and colleagues in Berlin. My heartfelt thanks go to Christoph Baumgartner, Terje Stordalen, Mattijs van de Port and Jojada Verrrips for being prepared to think along and offer stimulating, critical comments on earlier versions. I am also most grateful to Harriet Impey for her superb editing. Any shortcomings are mine.

## Notes

- 1 This trend, which occurs throughout Europe, materializes in line with the specific ways in which the relation between the state and (Christian) religion has been configured institutionally, legally, and culturally on the national level. Specific for the situation in the Netherlands is the reduction of the number of faculties of theology at state universities, and their replacement by religious studies departments. However, it is important to realize that a great deal of research within theology faculties of state universities in the Netherlands has been much closer to what is now regarded as ‘religious studies’ than the idea of ‘replacement’ suggests. See Bos 2012.
- 2 Important initiatives include the NWO project *The Future of the Religious Past* (2001–2011) the inter-faculty research network PluRel (*Religion in Pluralist Societies*) at Oslo University, the inter-faculty programme *Religion in the 21st Century* at Copenhagen University, and the SSRC blog *The Immanent Frame*.
- 3 For an excellent overview of the relevance of the works of authors such as José Casanova, Jürgen Habermas, Hent De Vries, and others for a critique of secularization as guiding analytical framework see van de Donk & Plum (2006).
- 4 *Still*, because in the face of religious diversity there is a new awareness of a hitherto taken-for-granted Christian heritage in Europe.
- 5 See the NWO research programme *De culturalisering en emotionalisering van burgerschap* chaired by Jan-Willem Duyvendak, Peter Geschiere and Evelien Tonkens.

- 6 A post-secularist perspective, so as to indicate a new intellectual standpoint outside secularization theory to explore the role of religion in contemporary public spheres. Since Jürgen Habermas launched the term 'post-secular' in 2001, it has been subject to much debate. I find this term somewhat confusing and would be reluctant to take the new visibility of religion in Western societies as an indication of *post*-secularity (understood as going beyond secularity). The implications of the transformation of religion, as sketched above, raise numerous, complicated questions. I engage with them as part of a joint working group on 'Postsecular Publics' (organized by the Jackman Humanities Institute, University of Toronto and the Centre for the Humanities, Utrecht University).
- 7 See Meyer & Houtman (2012: 4-9) for a brief overview of relevant literature. Also important to mention here is the journal *Material Religion*, of which I am one of the editors.
- 8 My nephew Julian Meyer, recently confirmed into the Evangelische Kirche (Hamburg), captured this idea very well, in his – critical – statement: 'Religionen sind die Ausreden für den Sinn des Lebens' ['Religions are excuses for the meaning of life'], personal communication, July 2012).
- 9 Its rise and spread is situated in major transformations in Europe after 1500, including the Reformation, the discovery of the New World and contacts with Asian Empires, and the rising interest in antiquity as the cradle of civilization with the Renaissance. The notion of religion evolved as part and parcel of encounters, embedded in power structures, that involved the recognition of difference in religious terms, within the West (Protestantism versus Catholicism) as well as between the West and other parts of the world. As a generic notion, religion allowed for comparison across diverse varieties (religions in the plural, as in 'world religions') and their hierarchization in evolutionary models. Obviously, the general apprehension of religion in current Europe and the more or less explicit understanding of religion as the object of study in comparative religion are interrelated, and both have their origin in post-enlightenment discourse. See Bergunder (2011) for an illuminating discussion that moves beyond the issue of the definition and definability of religion *per se*.
- 10 Despite important differences, intellectualist (as developed, e.g., by E.B. Tylor) and experience-oriented (as developed, e.g., by F. Schleiermacher and W. James) approaches of religion share a concern with the inside, and a neglect or even dismissal of 'outward' forms.
- 11 See Arie Molendijk's (1999) insightful exploration of Cornelis Tiele (1830–1902), internationally acclaimed scholar and founding father of the study of religion (within theology) in the Netherlands. Tiele's discourse is exponential for the mentalistic, liberal Protestant bias that has been central also to the study of religion from a non-theological standpoint. See also Molendijk & Pels (1998).
- 12 Rather than taking these categories for granted, I suggest a critical exploration of how they are used to mark distinctions in situations of conflict and

collaboration between scholars in the different disciplines that study religion. Once national specificities are taken into account, the picture becomes more complicated than the categories suggest. As religious studies has never been strongly developed as a separate discipline in the Netherlands, we face an excellent opportunity to reconfigure the study of religion in a future-oriented manner that needs not fall back into the old theology versus religious studies dualism, which seems to prevail in, for instance, Germany or the United States.

- 13 The emphasis on content and meaning is also central to semantic approaches that have long been dominant in the humanities, but have come under siege with a number of 'turns' – linguistic, body, iconic, and indeed material. What all these 'turns' share is a criticism of understanding meaning as abstract and disembodied, pointing out instead that language, bodies, pictures and objects are not mere vehicles for the expression of abstractions, but matter in a concrete sense. I would like to stress that the strong emphasis placed on the body and sensations so as to criticize text-centred, semantic approaches comes with its own problems. Often the body and the senses are understood as more grounded and real than language and other symbol systems. I do not share this view, and regard the body and the senses as also being subject to manipulation and social inscription (see Part III).
- 14 Weber's understanding of Protestantism, as displayed in the *Protestant Ethic*, has been identified as ahistorical (Van Rooden 1996) and as de facto more indebted to Schleiermacher's typically 19<sup>th</sup>-century liberal Protestantism than to historical 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Calvinism. His depiction of Protestantism in terms of a focus on belief at the expense of ritual exposes an ideal type understanding that is problematic both historically and in relation to current Protestant practice. In his essay 'Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions' (1948) Weber sketched a developmental scheme according to which salvation religions – epitomized by Protestantism – are on the highest level. While aesthetic forms – artifacts, music, dance, buildings – had been important in earlier stages, salvation religions espouse a distancing attitude towards the 'world'. In line with other authors of his time, Weber argued that 'all sublimated religions of salvation have focused on the meaning alone, not upon the form, of the things and actions relevant for salvation. Salvation religions have devalued form as contingent, as something creaturely and distracting from meaning' (ibid., 341). This may be true from the internal or 'emic' perspective of the followers of so-called 'salvation religions', but should of course not be taken at face value by scholars.
- 15 As Campbell (1987) pointed out, Weber overlooked not only the importance of consumption for the rise of Capitalism, but also the Romanticist religious roots of modern consumerism. See also Aupers (2012).
- 16 Despite my own research focus and expertise, I am hesitant about the framework of the 'anthropology of Christianity'. Rather than focusing on a single religious tradition, I prefer to work with the broader notion of a religious field in which several religious groups co-exist. In the coming five years, I will develop a



- research project in collaboration with the Zentrum Moderner Orient (Berlin), entitled *Habitats and Habitus. Politics and Aesthetics of Religious World-making*, in which Islamic and Christian movements in Africa will be placed in one frame.
- 17 Importantly, a great deal of excellent work on the anthropology of Christianity has been inspired by the work of Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood on Islamic groups in Egypt. Pointing out the importance of the body and ritual for the formation of piety, their work operates as an eye-opener enabling research into the making of Christian piety to be carried out in a new, more material and embodied way.
  - 18 This fuelled a lingering anti-Semitism, with all the disasters that ensued. In the face of this, we should not miss the bitter irony of current claims of Europe's Judeo-Christian heritage.
  - 19 In an exciting forthcoming publication, David Chidester unpacks the power structures that governed the formation of central concepts in the study of religion, such as animism, fetishism, totemism, belief, faith, etc.. Following levels of knowledge mediation from Africans, via the missionaries, to scholars, he shows that academic knowledge – as published by authors such as Max Müller, E.B. Tylor, James Frazer, Andrew Lang, A.C. Haddon, W.E.B. Dubois, among others – depended on missionary reports which, in turn, depended on knowledge provided by local interlocutors (who actually were a far cry from the 'primitives' they were taken to represent in academic publications).
  - 20 This is also the main concern of the recently established *Forum Transregional Studies*; as the chair of the international advisory board I regard this Berlin-based initiative as groundbreaking for the humanities and social sciences because it takes actual global entanglements seriously as a starting point for a new vision for knowledge production. See <http://www.forum-transregionale-studien.de/> .
  - 21 The notion of semiotic ideology is helpful to obtain a clearer understanding of the status attributed to words, objects, or images, from the perspective of a particular, historically situated religious tradition. See also Meyer (2011a: 30).
  - 22 By contrast, if approached in terms of the sacred, as proposed by Émile Durkheim, to represent the core values of a given social group, the socially constructive role of the 'fetish' would become evident. The despised 'fetishes' were, indeed, central to the formation of social connections on the level of the household, the lineage, the village, and the native state.
  - 23 Replacing the derogatory term 'primitive religion', 'traditional religion' has its own shortcomings. Most importantly, by invoking an opposition to 'modern', 'traditional' suggests a static timelessness which fails to register the actual creativity and historicity of indigenous religiosity. As I have argued throughout my work, the problems are not solvable with terminology: the point is that critical analysis needs to unpack the deeper power structures that underpin discourses about 'religion in Africa'.

- 24 With hindsight I realize that in so doing, I have been a captive of my own background in the sober, hyper-rational version of Calvinism that prevails in Ostfriesland, my native area of Northern Germany.
- 25 See Engelke (2007) who addresses the ‘problem of presence’ from the anti-material perspective of the Friday Masowe in Zimbabwe.
- 26 As media scholars now start to recognize, religion is in fact a hotbed for a plethora of practices of mediation (Schüttpelz fc; Stolow fc). This reverses the direction suggested by the recent rise of religion and media research, in which religion is seen as a pristine sphere that only now, to scholars’ surprise, starts to incorporate media.
- 27 In her compelling media theory, Krämer takes media as a ‘third party’ – a messenger in the literal sense (*Bote*) – that engages in acts of ‘putting across’. What people share – the ‘social’, their ‘culture’ – is produced through practices of transmission in which media are made to bridge, but by the same token affirm, the distance and difference between those involved in communication. As communication cannot occur internally or just in spirit, but necessarily depends on *external* media – language being the prime medium on which all other are modulated – we need to analyse communication as a concrete and material process.
- 28 This was the main concern of the Pionier research programme on religion and media directed by me between 2000 and 2006; see Meyer (2009).
- 29 See <http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/CreativityandInnovationinaWorldofMovement/>
- 30 This is one of the aims of the Templeton/SSRC research programme *New Directions in the Study of Prayer*, in which I participate as a working group chair and member of the program committee. See <http://www.src.org/programs/new-directions-in-the-study-of-prayer/>
- 31 This is a huge field, see Verrips and Meyer (2008); see also G. Böhme (1995).
- 32 Especially important in developing this field is the work by German scholars of religion Anne Koch, Alexandra Grieser, Jens Kugele, Jürgen Mohn, Hubert Mohr and Inken Prohl. See the website of the Arbeitskreis Religionsästhetik: <http://www.religionsaesthetik.de>. See also the ‘In conversation’ section in *Material Religion* featuring German aesthetics of religion, put together by Prohl (2010).
- 33 Anne Koch generously shared with me her ‘Religionsästhetisches Protokoll’, designed by her for the use of her students to systematically observe religious events. This protocol is in fact a checklist that draws attention to the interrelation between sensorial systems, perception, body movements, emotions, materials, media, and so on, in religious settings.
- 34 The research programme *Heritage Dynamics*, directed by Mattijs van de Port, Herman Roodenburg and myself, focuses on exactly this issue: how artificial, fabricated heritage forms are experienced as true and real: <http://heritage-dynamics.com/>.

- 35 Of course, within the larger context of the Christian tradition there has always been room for asceticism and bodily discipline.
- 36 See the Blog *CLOSER* by Martijn de Koning for debates around these and related issues: <http://religionresearch.org/martijn/>
- 37 'Hey, you, I f\*\*\*ed your mother!'
- 38 As is also argued by Frederiks (2008).
- 39 Obviously, being alert to both the use of multiple media within a religious tradition *and* the processes of power through which text became the privileged medium of transmission across time is a complicated endeavour that demands multidisciplinary collaboration (e.g. biblical studies, archaeology, anthropology and history). I much look forward to participating in the project *Local Dynamics of Globalization* (directed by Terje Stordalen) in 2014/15: <http://www.stordalen.info/LDG/Home.html>
- 40 See the Pentecostal aesthetics project directed by Annalisa Butticci, who is affiliated with our department as a Marie Curie fellow. Studying Pentecostal aesthetic practice, Butticci collaborated with photographer and filmmaker Andrew Esiebio: <http://www.pentecostalaesthetics.net/>.
- 41 Since 1996, I have been conducting research on the rise and development of the Ghanaian video film industry. Intriguingly such movies are presented as some kind of 'revelations' of the 'spiritual realm' held to be behind the surface of things. I am currently finishing the manuscript of my book *'Your World is About to Change!' Videos, Spirits and the Popular Imagination in Ghana*.
- 42 In the realm of popular Christianity, there is a strong preference for a white Jesus. Given that 19<sup>th</sup>-century Christianity was introduced and perceived as a distinctly *Western* religion, it may not be surprising that for many local Christians the whiteness of Jesus is appealing. They perceive Christianity as a religion that links up with the West.

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Jesus and the devil between cameras (Sybren Verrips, March 2012).

## Curriculum Vitae

Birgit Meyer (1960, Emden) studied religious studies and pedagogy (for disabled children) at Bremen University and cultural anthropology at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). After her PhD defence in 1995 she was affiliated with the Research Center Religion and Society (UvA). Between 2004 and 2011 she was professor of cultural anthropology at VU University Amsterdam; since September 2011 she has been professor of religious studies at Utrecht University. Between 2000 and 2006 she directed the NWO Pionier programme *Modern Mass Media, Religion and the Imagination of Communities*. She has conducted research on and published about colonial missions and local appropriations of Christianity, modernity and conversion, the rise of Pentecostalism in the context of neo-liberal capitalism, popular culture and video-films in Ghana, the relation between religion, media and identity, as well as on material religion and the place and role of religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Her book publications include *Translating the Devil. Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh University Press, 1999), *Globalization and Identity. Dialectics of Flow and Closure* (edited with Peter Geschiere, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), *Magic and Modernity. Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment* (edited with Peter Pels, Stanford University Press, 2003), *Religion, Media and the Public Sphere* (edited with Annelies Moors, Indiana University Press, 2006), *Aesthetic Formations. Media, Religion and the Senses* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), and *Things. Religion and the Question of Materiality* (edited with Dick Houtman, Fordham UP 2012). Currently, she finishes her book manuscript “Your World is About to Change. Videos, Spirits and the Popular Imagination in Ghana.” She is vice-chair of the *International African Institute* (London), a member of the Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences, chair of the international advisory board of the *Forum Transregional Studies* (Berlin), and one of the editors of the journal *Material Religion*. In 2010–2011 she was a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study (Wissenschaftskolleg), Berlin. In 2011 she was one of the 7 recipients of an Anneliese-Maier-Forschungspreis awarded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation; this implies research collaboration with the *Zentrum Moderner Orient*, Berlin, over a period of 5 years.

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