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Unexpected synergies

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One might assume that the sophisticated philological and exegetical commentary on biblical texts characteristic of biblical studies would stand worlds apart from current debates about material religion as they take place within and outside of this journal. And yet, biblical studies itself is a complex field hosting scholars with different modes of working and divergent attitudes towards the status of texts. Terje Stordalen's compelling essay offers intriguing, and in my view unexpected, interfaces for further conversation across disciplines. Before fleshing out two issues that I deem particularly important, let me briefly sketch the position from which I join this conversation.

In my work over the past twenty years I have explored the use, appropriation, and interpretation of the Bible and Christian discourse by African Christians (especially in my book on the emergence of a Christian vocabulary among the Ewe in Ghana, Meyer 1999), as well as broader religious practices and bodily sensations evolving around material forms such as architecture, dress, religious pictures, movies, and objects at large in missionary Protestantism and Pentecostalism (e.g. Meyer 2010). In a way, I moved from an emphasis on text and translation towards foregrounding the body and material objects. Inspired by my ethnographic and historical investigations that alerted me ever more to the level of "lived religion" as the anchor point of my analysis, together with colleagues I have sought to contribute to developing a material approach of Christianity, asking how religion "happens" on the ground, on the level of everyday practice (e.g. Meyer, Morgan, Plate, and Paine 2010). Posing this question is not a mere empirical issue. It also implies a critical

interrogation of modern concepts of religion that, as I sought to point out in previous publications, are indebted to a particular "Protestant" theological legacy that narrows religion down to text, meaning, and interior beliefs and tends to neglect—or dismiss as problematic or irrelevant—other religious forms. The challenge I see for the study of religion today is to critically engage with and move beyond this legacy. We need to develop more suitable methodologies and concepts that help us grasp how and why "religion" mattered and still matters to people in past and present in a concrete sense. Materiality and media are key terms in this endeavor, and Stordalen raises issues that are right at the heart of it.

The first issue that I would like to address concerns the juxtaposition of textual and non-textual sources in a social-religious field. The fact that transmission across time and space to a large extent depends on writing does not, as Stordalen points out, imply that scholars of ancient Hebrew religion can afford to rely on texts alone. Tellingly, archaeological records spotlight the importance of figurines and other items that suggest a far more materially oriented religious practice than modern scholars' sole reliance on textual sources and their explicit condemnation of idolatry might suggest. As Stordalen points out, there is a cleavage between what the text says about the use of objects, and what the archaeological record seems to imply about their actual use in ancient Hebrew religiosity. This remarkable dissonance calls for "a better-integrated interpretation, recognizing cohesion as well as diversity in religious practices and in their accompanying objects, thoughts, feelings, and words." While biblical scholars face the difficult question how to make transmitted textual and non-textual sources "speak" *together* in a way that is "representative for the world out of which the sources emerged," scholars like myself who work on the present and recent past have far easier access to complex worlds of everyday lived religious experience. Nonetheless, the question of how to grasp the role, position, and value of, as well as the relations between, various religious forms—including texts, figurines, pictures, and other objects—poses

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itself also in more recent settings. Especially in studying Protestantism and Pentecostalism (as I experienced in my own research), researchers may easily be misled to neglect or even overlook non-textual items, and to overestimate the authoritative power of texts and the spoken word. This may partly reflect self-representational statements made by practitioners themselves, and partly echo a longstanding textual bias in the study of religion (that was accentuated also through the “literary turn” that approached cultures and religions as “texts”). Asking how different, coexisting religious forms are authorized, valued, and used differently by different players in a given discursive and medial setting is a fruitful starting point for understanding everyday religious practice as embedded in structures of power. In other words, taking text as a material medium that exists next to other religious material media opens up a fresh perspective that allows us to relativize texts without silencing them, and to even make them “speak” in surprising ways. The point here is to work towards an intermedial approach that teases out how diverse media relate and speak to each other.

The second issue concerns Stordalen’s critique of the “textual gaze” for unduly fashioning text as the key “medium of revelation.” The privileging of textual media pertains not only to an insider’s perspective within the Christian tradition (and for that matter, other so-called book religions). As he points out, it also stems from an academic appraisal, grafted upon a longstanding textual fixation and sustained by modern philosophical ideas about epistemology, of sacred books as being central to the modern study of religion. This raises not only the question, addressed above, of how to avoid being blindfolded with regard to other non-textual religious media in actual research, but also invokes fundamental conceptual issues in the study of religion at large. How far does the transmission of a religious tradition, such as Christianity, across time and space through the medium of text depend on excluding vital aspects of religious everyday practice? How does one get at the “little traditions” that are prone to be neglected and forgotten because text is privileged as the prime medium of transmission and (self-)representation, and controlled by those in power? How might shifts in the availability of media—such as

current ICT—impinge on these processes (cf. Meyer 2009)?

What I find most intriguing about Stordalen’s essay is that it makes me realize that the agenda that comes with modern research on religion does not only receive critique from scholars in anthropology and religious studies, as mentioned above, but also from scholars in biblical studies whom I had, albeit mistakenly, taken as occupying the high ground of textual study. The modern way of doing research on religion—and one could add: the reframing of religion as a modern category, as Talal Asad put it—appears to be limiting with regard to the study of both ancient and contemporary religion. Stordalen’s essay alerts us to the fact that across disciplinary divides, there is a shared interest to retrieve other media next to text, to analyze religious practices as embedded in social structures of power, to critically examine authorized modes of transmission, self-presentation, and remembrance, as well as to constantly interrogate the disciplinary terms that shape the modern study of religion. As he points out, the solution to the critique of modern religion as being biased towards texts is not to abandon the use of modern concepts, let alone turn away from texts altogether, but to raise new questions. Clearly, this approach makes room for new synergies to evolve from a conversation among scholars across disciplinary fields such as anthropology of religion and biblical studies which so far, at least in my scholarly experience, have been more or less unrelated. It is promising to note, and fitting for this journal, that a shared focus on religious material media appears to bring about new connections.

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