

AN AUTHOR MEETS HER CRITICS

Around Birgit Meyer's "Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Toward a Material Approach to Religion"

■ Inaugural Lecture by Birgit Meyer

In the fall of 2011, I was appointed to the Chair of Religious Studies in the Department of Religious Studies and Theology in the Faculty of Humanities.¹ 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'.² This trend echoes a wider process of 'unchurching': as the number of students of theology declines nationwide, religion in new and unexpected guises has become both a hot item and an intriguing socio-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 that, when analyzed carefully, can reveal a great deal about the current state of—and stakes in—the study of religion in the Netherlands, as well as the changing role and place of religion in Dutch society at large. The point here is to interrogate critically 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.³

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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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 toward non-affiliated spirituality and New Age beliefs co-exist. 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; see also Goud 2010). In interaction with this



ever more variegated and plural religious landscape, in northern Europe especially, considerable energy is also devoted to projects of atheism, which, in fighting religion, tend to resuscitate nineteenth-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.⁶ 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 2012; von Stuckrad 2013). This calls for a deep, critical rethinking of intellectual positions and institutional embeddings and of the approaches, concepts, and methods that shape our research praxis. With this programmatic text, I would like to outline how I envision my contribution to this project. In fact, what is often circumscribed as the new visibility of religion should not be taken at face value (as if religion had been invisible before); instead, the current awareness of religion being markedly visible and present in contemporary modern societies should alert us to reveal previously disguised and overlooked aspects of religion. Visibility, after all, depends on the perspective of the beholder. I opt for a post-secularist perspective that no longer views 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).⁷ 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.⁸ Triggered 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 endeavors. Building upon that work, I would like to spotlight 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 this programmatic statement. 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, that is, 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 is supposed to be—about belief in a transcendent God, about inwardness and ‘immaterial’ values, worldviews and meaning-making, to which ‘outward’ manifestations are held to be secondary.⁹ As will be outlined in Part I, 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 defamiliarizing 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 *about* religion occur. The particular modes and forms through which religion materializes in the world are often key issues in these clashes. Part II 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. Lastly, using the example of religious visual culture, Part IV showcases the broadening of horizon entailed by a material approach that takes into account multiple media.

Part I. Critical Genealogies: The 'Protestant Legacy' and Beyond

How has it happened that we tend to think about and analyze religion in ways that privilege the 'inside' (concepts, ideas, beliefs, worldviews) above the 'outside' (rituals, objects, pictures, etc.)? Why do my and other scholars' pleas for a material approach to religion trigger surprise, as if religion should be primarily understood as 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 the phrase 'material religion' appears to be an oxymoron? Posing these admittedly simplistic questions, I seek to highlight 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 concept today originated in the aftermath of the Enlightenment.¹⁰ 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 socio-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.¹¹ Resonating with Romanticist ideas, the essence of religion was found to be located inside people, while the outside manifestations, for example, 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.¹² Colonialism and the spectacular project of Christian outreach in the second half of the nineteenth 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-centered 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 (which claimed a ‘scientific’ approach) 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.

Current debates about the future study of religion often mobilize this distinction, casting comparative religion (with the German and Dutch terms *Religionswissenschaft* and *godsdiens-* or *religiewetenschap* marking its 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.¹³ 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 approach to religion, including a mentalistic bias and a textual focus.

There is, therefore, a need to engage critically with ‘cross-cutting genealogies’ of key concepts and approaches from the standpoint of disciplines such as 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—and questioned the origins and politics of usage—of general concepts including ‘religion’ itself. Their goal is not to deconstruct and reject these concepts, but to assess their formative role in the study of religion. This role can be well-explored by scrutinizing processes of disciplinary ‘canonization’ (Stordalen 2012b) 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 recognize biases, blind spots, and inadequacies in these established and perhaps all-too-familiar ways, enabling us to imagine new, alternative directions for our work.

Of critical interest to me, as already stated, is the rise of a mentalistic understanding of religion, according to which religions that prioritize outward expressions and forms stand intellectually and morally beneath those that value content, meaning, and inner feelings above all else.¹⁴ 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’s psychology of religion (Meyer 2006: 8–13). Both authors are taken as ‘classic’ thinkers and, in my view, are deeply influential exponents of the proverbial ‘Protestant bias’ in socio-cultural approaches of religion. Weber conveyed a liberal-theological and, in fact, Romanticist Protestant idea of meaning as the core substance of religion, with form becoming superfluous the higher a religion develops.¹⁵ One of the big assets of Weber’s sociology (certainly compared to the Marxist approach that sees 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, social scientists need 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.¹⁶ Here we encounter

one of the formative lines that shape current meaning-centered, mentalistic understandings of religion—and of 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, offer authorized forms for having certain religious experiences, over and over again.

Deeming experience and meaning to be mere inward phenomena is a major impediment in the study of religion, and I have recently 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 (see also Vásquez 2011: 321).

Although 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* (acceptable) as a "self-conscious comparative project" (Robbins 2003: 191) alongside the anthropology of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other religious traditions (Cannell 2006; Hann 2007; Robbins 2004).¹⁷ 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 and Tomlinson 2007; Keane 2007; Kirsch 2008; Klassen 2011; Luhrmann 2012).¹⁸ 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 proved to be particularly important research sites for questioning the inward-centered, mentalistic approaches of religion that color—and in fact dematerialize—scholarly analysis.

From the perspective of mainstream Western academia, such frontier areas may be viewed as far away—spatially distant, culturally foreign—and marginal. However, the very idea of such a distance between 'us here' and 'them over there' is a symptom of hierarchical power relations. The 'West' and the 'Rest' relate to each other in a particular configuration, in which the former, to put it crudely, is placed at the center and stands for the norm, while the latter features as the 'other' or the '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, for 'provincializing' 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.

Over the past 30 years, the power-knowledge nexus has been much discussed in anthropology and post-colonial studies. More recently, this issue has 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 (2012: 1) argues 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.” 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 comparative religion during the second half of the nineteenth century. Christianity was framed as Western: its Middle Eastern roots were downplayed, while Judaism was orientalized.¹⁹ Pui-Lan urges scholars in the field to adopt a post-colonial perspective to assess how “the cultural imaginary of empire” (ibid.) still informs seemingly neutral core epistemologies in the study of religion. This looking back is a necessary step in order to move beyond the lingering colonial discursive frame that sets apart ‘West’ and ‘Rest’.

Approached as hotbeds of theory formation, frontier areas of Western outreach 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, 2014; van der Veer 2001).²⁰ This line of inquiry into actual practices of knowledge production is necessary to de- and recenter the study of religion in ways appropriate to producing knowledge and teaching about religion in our globalized—ever more entangled and interdependent—world. My background in Africanist anthropology naturally predisposes me to partake in this endeavor. In my current position as a professor of religious studies, I will continue to stress the importance of such sites as a critical horizon for evaluating genealogies of key concepts and recognizing alternative possibilities.²¹

Before moving on, let me summarize the steps taken so far in the trajectory toward a material approach to religion. I have pointed out that an intuitive, more or less implicit mentalistic approach to religion demands critical revision, rather than being accepted as a standard. This mentalistic approach is grounded in a Protestant bias that slipped into understandings of religion in the aftermath of the Enlightenment. It forms the backbone of evolutionary schemes and underpins the devaluation of practices, materials, and forms, which are seen as merely outward. However, it is hopelessly inadequate in the face of actual everyday religiosities, past and present (Protestantism included), in which inward and outward levels appear to be mutually constitutive. To proceed, I have introduced an approach that views frontier areas of Western outreach as sites that are central to a recentered 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.

Part 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.²² Why, to put it crudely, has it proved to be so difficult for Western people (traders, travelers, missionaries, administrators, 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 reflection on the processes of ethnographic 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 path that questions current apprehensions—one that is more exciting and, for my purposes, more productive—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 fifteenth century (Pietz 1985, 1987, 1988; Spyer 1998). Etymologically, the word 'fetish' can be traced to the Latin term *factitius*, that is, "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 offense' to challenge and transcend the idea of material religion being an oxymoron.

I regard the fetish—ranked first in the category of "bad objecthood" by W. J. T. Mitchell (2005: 188)—as the epitome of material religion. It is a highly charged term that refers to an illicit and wrong human attitude toward 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 the term to claim a superior distance from the former in their writings. As Hartmut Böhme (2006) has pointed out, the notion of the fetish and the ensuing discourse on fetishism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was deployed in the clashes between Christianity and 'heathendom'. Qualifying African usage of fetishes as 'idol worship', Portuguese Catholic missionaries sought to replace fetishes with 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 their own power objects that were despised as 'fetishes' or 'idols' (and hence as devilish superstitions) in Catholic teachings. Importantly, the notion of the fetish thus initially signaled not only a clash between Catholic and African religiosities, but also some kind of shared common ground. Dismissing African cult objects as idols did not imply that a sacralizing attitude toward 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 Catholics all stood on the same level of idolatry. Clearly, European idolatry discourses, including the conflicting stances of Protestants and Catholics, were transposed into the new context of European expansionism and applied to—and ultimately also adopted by—Africans (*ibid.*: 183).

With the rise of the critique of religion in the name of rationalism during 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" (H. Böhme 2006: 185; my translation)—fetishism was to be destroyed as a prerequisite for enlightenment and progress. It was held to sustain an irrational attitude that, in turn, sustained deeply problematic, sticky power structures (not unlike the *ancien régime*).²³ 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. Invoking the notion of fetishism to refer to others—'primitives,' 'neurotics,' laborers with a 'false consciousness'—marked oneself as being in a superior position of knowing better, of refusing to be under the spell of a mere object.

Emerging in the frontier area and applied to claim differences between Africans and Europeans, the fetishism discourse was also mobilized as a script in the evangelizing projects of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Protestant missions. Let me illustrate this process by discussing my own research on encounters between missionaries of the Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft (North German Mission Society) and the Ewe in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in what is today southern Togo and southeastern Ghana (Meyer 1999). 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 more rational positions than the missionaries themselves, many Ewe claimed that they would be prepared to believe in the Christian God only if the missionaries could produce convincing—preferably visual—evidence of his powerful presence. According to Ewe cosmology, in principle all gods—*trɔwo* or *vodun*—by necessity require some material vessel in order to be present and to enact their power, which humans can access and partake in through certain religious acts. These acts begin with the carving or molding of a figure and include its subsequent animation through spitting alcohol and saliva, its regular maintenance through sacrifices and feeding, and its worship through repeated incantations, body movements, and so on (e.g., Blier 1995: 76; Meyer 2010b: 122). Here, human action is indispensable for the gods to be present and to 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 a mere piece of stone or iron? As Pietist Protestants, the missionaries deeply resented the human act of making carved images of gods—forbidden by the Second Commandment (as understood in the Reformed tradition)—as well as the ritual acts to render them present and to serve via 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 viewed as obscene. In ways reminiscent of stereotypical anti-Catholic propaganda, the missionaries saw the fetish-priests as specialists in evil politicking who held the ignorant, fearful people under their sway. Linking up with a widely shared understanding of fetishism as involving an idolatric as well as irrational stance, the missionaries were clearly 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 toward religion and the world at large, on the one hand, and the missionary ideal of an inward-centered, 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')²⁴ expressed surprise at 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 therefore appeared 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 *subo subo* (worship) and thus, to some extent, as 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 toward religion was retained.

The fetishism discourse, employed to signal a mystification that needed to be exposed, itself operated as a kind of smokescreen that, 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 center 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 fully prepared to 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 was struck by the missionaries' proclaimed anti-material, moralizing stance. Their 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 center of (the study of) religion.²⁵ 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?), on the body (which senses are invoked?), and on things and buildings (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.

Such a practical attitude toward 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 to 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 center 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 to get at the abstract meanings behind them, it is key to approach religion as a mundane, practical, and material affair—one that is present in and part of the making of a world.

To do so requires us to stand religion ‘on its feet’. This endeavor 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 challenged, 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, playfully reclaiming 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.

One of the path-breaking thinkers in this field, Bruno Latour (2010) places the fetish at the center of his critique of modernity. His plea for a ‘symmetrical anthropology’ that surpasses the old, distancing use of the fetish as a watershed that separates 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 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” (ibid.: 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” (ibid.: 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 both shape and are shaped by the material world in such dynamics.

Latour’s (2010: 39) intriguing statement that “we help to fabricate the beings in which we believe” could be considered an echo of the view that religion is a human projection 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—a rather instructive one that 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 center of scholarly inquiries the very tangible ways through which humans ‘fabricate’—by mobilizing texts, sounds, pictures, and 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 authorized as suitable?

Through which acts does a sculpture, a building, or any other object become a harbinger of spiritual power? What steps are involved in procedures of sacralization? How is the human body included and addressed? Which sensorial registers are invoked? How are these procedures authorized and controlled and what kinds of relations ensue? Finally, how does a religious fabrication inspire belief? Posing such questions around fabrication allows us to study the genesis of a sense of extraordinary presence—in the sense of being *anwesend* (present) in the here and now—which arises through a complex interrelation of acting and sensing humans, sets of practices, and various materials.²⁶ I understand 'genesis' here in the sense of formation, as a creative process of fabricating, bringing about, or making happen that we may effectively observe and describe, if we only look closely enough.

Let me conclude this section by stating that I have focused on the use of the fetish in order to liquefy thickened scholarly approaches toward religion. I hope that I have been able to convey that the fetish is an eye-opening starting point for a material approach that considers 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. Doing so would simply end in the adoption of a nineteenth-century materialism that rejects religion as a mere fictitious illusion, a perspective that, 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 contention is rather that practices and materials, which are indispensable for religion's existence in the world as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon, 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.

Part 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 center 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 to highlight 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, authorized, and transmitted sets of practices and ideas aimed at 'going beyond the ordinary', 'surpassing' or 'transcending' a limit, or gesturing toward 'the rest-of-what-is', as Mattijs van de Port (2010) poignantly puts it. 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 as well as 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, viewing the everyday as the location where 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 analyzed as a technique of reaching out to—and by the same token generating a sense of—an ‘other-world’ via various kinds of media (see also Weibel 2011).²⁷ As Robert Orsi (2012: 147) puts 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 dimensions and 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 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” (ibid.). 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).²⁸

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 artifacts 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, insisting on an ‘immediate’ link with God. I view 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 (Meyer 2011b; see also Eisenlohr 2009). 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.²⁹

Examples abound of items in the material world that are configured as religious media. In addition to the above-mentioned sculptures that became vessels of the *tr̃wo* for the Ewe, we may consider relics and icons that—while derived from human remains or made by humans, albeit with divine inspiration—become pivotal to devotional practices. An exciting example is Our Lady of Aparecida (Nossa Senhora Aparecida), the principal saint of Brazil, whose mass-produced figurine finds its way into many household altars throughout the country. As João Rickli (forthcoming) shows in his research in the context of our recently completed HERA project on the circulation of Christian imagery (2010–2013),³⁰ pilgrims purchase such figurines in the official shop or informal stalls at the national sanctuary at Aparecida, attend mass in order to charge the figurines 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 sanctuary’s basement. Placed next to votive offerings are photographs of car accidents and, amazingly, remnants of exploded pressure cookers as evidence of the power of the Virgin to safeguard those who are devoted to her, enabling them 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 where people strive to be ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’. In addition, certain utterances, holy texts, and music may operate as religious media, generating a sense of an extraordinary presence.

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 authorization and authentication that are often embedded in long-standing religious traditions. Religious groups may well be distinguished, and may 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-centered religiosity, for instance, differs from a religiosity focused on pictorial devotion—one of the big issues in the (Calvinist) Reformation.

In order to grasp better how religious mediation works, I have coined the notion of 'sensational form' (Meyer 2006). This concept refers to a configuration of religious media, acts, imaginations, and bodily sensations in the context of a religious tradition or group. Authorized 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 its participants an experience of divine presence (Rappaport 2002: 450–451). 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 a particular personal and collective identity, with a distinct ethos and style, emerges and relates to society at large. By guiding researchers to unpack religion without simply focusing on the illusory or non-illusory nature of the beyond and to explore the process of reaching out to it, the notion of sensational form helps to operationalize the material approach I propose.

Using and taking part in the sensational forms that are characteristic of a particular religious group or religious tradition, a believer's sensorium is tuned through distinct, gendered bodily techniques. These techniques 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; Ranci re 2004). Perception is not a mere neuro-cognitive process; it 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 certain stimuli while emphasizing and developing a sensibility toward others, generating certain emotions in the process. 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 to stress the importance of embodiment and sensation and yet to refuse to take into account the fact that the physiological body, including the brain, is the channel 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 an equal footing, research in biology, neurology, cognitive science, and religious studies.³¹ 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 call for full bodily and sensational participation in African Pentecostalism; the triggering of olfactory registers when visiting Hindu temples; or immersion into the rhythmic soundscape of collective recitation of the Qur'an (Hirschkind 2006).

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.³² Offering select, strong stimuli for perception, mobilizing and training particular senses 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 up particular moods, religion is a domain of aesthetics par excellence.³³ A compelling example is the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, who left his followers with a concrete manual telling how to engage the senses when activating the imagination in order to ‘make present’ the suffering of Christ—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 l’œil*, 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 northern European Christianity; and, although 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 another, they entail the sharpening of a believer’s sensorium and the genesis of sensibilities and emotions through authorized, distinctive aesthetic practices that can be described and analyzed in detail.³⁴ 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 that 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; in short, this explains how 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.³⁵

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” (Luhmann 2004: 519; see also Luhmann 2012). In contrast to such joyful encounters, other examples include discipline and even inducement of pain. Modes of religiosity involving body techniques that go beyond mere pleasure seem hard to grasp in the currently prevailing ‘feel-good culture’, in which pain is an exception to be overcome.³⁶ The upheaval in Germany in the summer of 2012 concerning the practice of male circumcision as practiced by Jews and Muslims is a case in point. Secular critics regard circumcision as bodily injury that is believed to engender a traumatic experience in the young child. On the occasion of his visit to Germany, Israel’s highest rabbi, Yona Metzger, described circumcision, taking place on the eighth day, as “the root of the Jewish soul, a seal on the body of a Jew, a pact with God” (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 22 August 2012; my translation). 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. Authorized, 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 analyzed as cleavages between sensational forms and hence between religious aesthetics and broader modes of world-making, which 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—a realm that is 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 and Hobart 2005) that shape shared ideas, emotions, moods, values, and practices and a communal 'common sense' through habitual modes of perception, body techniques, and a material environment or habitat. These formations are not limited to linking people with a beyond but also call 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, neighborhood, 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, the wearing of veils, or the building of mosques,³⁷ 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 Muhammed cartoons published in Denmark and France, to the upheaval caused by a cartoon depicting Jesus in a museum in Germany,³⁸ to the provocative political performance of the female punk band Pussy Riot in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, to the violent protests against the US 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 what is perceived as blasphemy in the public domain (Baumgartner 2007; Plate 2006), rather than simply 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.³⁹

Part 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 transdisciplinary research on religion. Thinking about religious media and practices of mediation is exciting and promising for a variety of reasons. Above all, it opens up inquiries into the plethora 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 rethink the dominance of text-centered analysis grounded in hermeneutics and semantics. It is important to be open to—and to take seriously on their own terms—other kinds of media, such as pictures, things, sounds, and scents, among many others. This requires engaging with academic fields such as material culture, visual culture, music, and media studies. Investigating multiple media and the broader framework of mediation also raises basic questions about how to approach and describe the religious traditions, or world religions, that are at the center 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 2008; Stollow 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. As proposed by Terje Stordalen (2012a) with regard to Christianity, this process mirrors internal power structures that privilege text as the prime medium of transmission, certainly across time, at the expense of other media (e.g., statues, music, the body) and the practices around them.⁴⁰

Indeed, increasing 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-centered, foregrounding the importance of philological expertise and hermeneutics. This is certainly one of the strengths of the field. However, in light of the use of multiple media in practices of religious mediation, it would be appropriate to reconsider the privileging of the book medium and textual study and to be open to alternative materials and, perhaps, alternative modes of scholarly presentation.⁴¹ This, in my view, is the productive potential offered by the material media perspective that I propose for reforming and reformulating the study of religion at large.

Let me call attention to 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.⁴² 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 have explored pictures of Jesus, in particular the motif of the Sacred Heart. Inspired by Pompeo Batoni’s famous painting the *Sacred Heart of Jesus* (1767), which hangs in the chapel of Il Gesù 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 interdict against the worship of idols and fetishes, for many Christians these pictures offer personal sites of prayer and contemplation (Meyer 2010b; Woets, forthcoming). Although 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 long-standing aesthetic practices

of use, the picture is believed 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.⁴³

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 texts and meanings, asking how Christianity has been synthesized with indigenous culture on the level of the imagination. The fact that pictures have long been important in Christian practice and have played a key role in evangelization calls for a serious engagement with past and present Western religious visual culture in (Bynum 2011; McDannell 1995; Morgan 1998, 2005, 2012; Morgan and Promey 2001). In my view, this line of research needs to be further developed by moving into the center of the larger field of visual culture (or *Bildwissenschaft*) and by including a focus on the non-Western world (see, e.g., Meyer 2011a; Spyer 2008). Challenging a text-centered, 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 the book title *What Do Pictures Want?* (Mitchell 2005) playfully refers to the figure of the fetish. It seems that scholars of visual culture, in the early-twenty-first century, are finally prepared to recognize the Western world in the distorted mirror that for so long has been used to reflect others.

The current reappraisal of animism (e.g., Albers and 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, although this may not be 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-established, resilient attitudes toward pictures, objects, and other material forms (Castelli 2012; Korte 2011). As the German *Bildwissenschaftler* Hans Belting (2006: 176) puts it in his intriguing discussion of Jesus paintings, "pictures have always presumed belief, and still presume the necessary belief within our gaze" (my translation). The truth of this statement is, albeit indirectly, confirmed by the international outcry roused by the well-intended yet disastrous restoration of the *Ecce Homo* fresco in Borja (northern Spain) by 80-year-old Cecilia Giménez in 2012. Met with disbelief, the work was quickly renamed *Ecco Mono* (See the Ape) and has been taken as a hilarious, unintentionally blasphemous example of pop art. With regard to contemporary visual iconographies and our attitudes toward pictures, we can certainly state that, at the beginning of the twenty-first 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 text has taken the form of a *diabolo*, the juggling toy brought back from China by European missionaries toward the end of the eighteenth century. Starting in Part I, with a critique of genealogies that foreground a mentalistic, dematerialized 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 on the micro-level of the notion of the fetish as it featured in my historical and ethnographic research. Instead of perceiving the fetish as a mere, ill-conceived sign of primitive religion, I proposed turning this notion around—just as one would juggle a *diabolo* using its thinnest center 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 Parts III and IV was to construct a material approach for the future. Extending our horizon 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, within the religious traditions we study and the disciplinary study of religion.

As my reference to the *diabolo* suggests, the approach I am advocating 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 devil's advocate in order to discuss which research materials and formats to accept as basic materials for our analysis—my intention with this programmatic statement is to trigger a transdisciplinary conversation with scholars in the study of religion and beyond.

■ **BIRGIT MEYER** is a Professor of Religious Studies at Utrecht University. She conducts research on and publishes 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; material religion and the place and role of religion in the twenty-first century. In 2011 she received the Anneliese Maier Research Award of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, which enabled her to set up the project “Habitats and Habitus: Politics and Aesthetics of Religious World-Making” in collaboration with the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO); b.meyer@uu.nl.

■ NOTES

1. This text is a slightly shortened version of my inaugural address, delivered to mark my official acceptance of the Chair in Religious Studies at Utrecht University on 19 October 2012. The thoughts presented here are grounded in a long-standing, 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 Jorada Verrips for being prepared to think along and offer stimulating, critical comments on earlier versions. I am also most grateful to Harriet Impey and Shawn Kendrick for their superb editing. Any shortcomings are my own.

2. 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).
3. 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 program "Religion in the 21st Century" (2003–2007) at the University of Copenhagen, and the SSRC blog, *The Immanent Frame*.
4. 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 et al. (2006).
5. I say "still" because in the face of religious diversity there is a new awareness of a hitherto taken-for-granted Christian heritage in Europe.
6. See the NWO research program "De culturalisering en emotionalisering van burgerschap," chaired by Jan-Willem Duyvendak, Peter Geschiere, and Evelien Tonkens.
7. I refer here to a post-secularist perspective, a new intellectual standpoint outside secularization theory from which 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 a member of the Postsecular Publics working group, which is organized by the Jackman Humanities Institute, University of Toronto, and the Centre for the Humanities, Utrecht University.
8. See Meyer and 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. See also Vásquez (2011).
9. 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) (pers. comm., July 2012).
10. The rise and spread of religion 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 Renaissance, with its rising interest in antiquity as the cradle of civilization. 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) and between the West and other parts of the world. As a generic notion, religion allowed for comparison across diverse varieties (with 'religions' in the plural, as in 'world religions') and their hierarchization in evolutionary models. Obviously, the general apprehension of religion in present-day Europe and the more or less explicit understanding of religion as the object of study in comparative religion are interrelated, both having their origin in post-Enlightenment discourse. See Bergunder (2012) for an illuminating discussion that moves beyond the issue of the definition and definability of religion *per se*.
11. Despite important differences, intellectualist (as developed, e.g., by E. B. Tylor) and experience-oriented (as developed, e.g., by Friedrich Schleiermacher and William James) approaches of religion share a concern with the inside and a neglect or even dismissal of outward forms.
12. 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 exemplifies the mentalistic, liberal Protestant bias that has been central to the study of religion from a non-theological standpoint as well. See also Molendijk and Pels (1998).
13. 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. Since 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 need not fall back into the old theology versus religious studies dualism, which seems to prevail in, for instance, Germany and the United States.

14. The emphasis on content and meaning is also central to semantic approaches that have long been dominant in the humanities but have more recently come under siege with a number of ‘turns,’ including linguistic, body, iconic, and indeed material. What all these ‘turns’ share is a criticism of the approach that sees meaning as abstract and disembodied. They point 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 as a criticism of text-centered, semantic approaches comes with its own problems. The body and the senses are often understood as more grounded and real than language and other symbol systems—a view that I do not share. I regard the body and the senses as also being subject to manipulation and social inscription (see Part III).
15. Weber’s ([1920] 1984) understanding of Protestantism, as evidenced in *Die Protestantische Ethik*, has been identified as ahistorical (van Rooden 1996) and as de facto more indebted to Schleiermacher’s typically nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism than to sixteenth- and seventeenth-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,” Weber ([1948] 1970) 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 toward the world. In line with other authors of his time, Weber argued: “All sublimated religions of salvation have focused upon 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 argument may be true from the internal or emic perspective of the followers of so-called salvation religions, but it should of course not be taken at face value by scholars.
16. As Campbell (1987) points 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).
17. 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 collaboration with the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), I am conducting a research project (2012–2017), entitled “Habitsats and Habitus: Politics and Aesthetics of Religious World-Making,” in which Islamic and Christian movements in Africa are placed in one frame.
18. 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 studies operate as an eye-opener, enabling research into the making of Christian piety to be carried out in a new, more material and embodied way.
19. This reframing of Christianity fueled 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.
20. David Chidester (2014) unpacks the power structures that governed the formation of central concepts in the study of religion, such as animism, fetishism, totemism, belief, faith, and so forth. 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, and 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).

21. This is also the main concern of the recently established Forum for Transregional Studies. As the chair of its Academic Advisory Board, I regard this Berlin-based humanities and social sciences research institution as ground-breaking because it takes actual global entanglements seriously as a starting point for a new vision of knowledge production. See <http://www.forum-transregionale-studien.de/en/forum/homepage.html>.
22. The notion of semiotic ideology is helpful to obtain a clearer understanding of the status attributed to words, objects, and images from the perspective of a particular, historically situated religious tradition. See also Meyer (2011b: 30).
23. 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.
24. Replacing the derogatory 'primitive religion', the term '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. However, the difficulty to account for the dynamic of religion in Africa is not solvable with terminology. The point is that critical analysis needs to unpack the deeper power structures that underpin discourses about 'religion in Africa.'
25. With hindsight, I realize that 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.
26. Engelke (2007) addresses the 'problem of presence' from the anti-material perspective of the Friday Masowe in Zimbabwe.
27. As media scholars have started to recognize, religion is in fact a hotbed for a plethora of practices of mediation (Schüttpelz, forthcoming; Stolow 2013). This reverses the direction of previous religion and media research, in which religion is seen as a pristine sphere that only now, to scholars' surprise, has started to incorporate media.
28. In her compelling media theory, Sybille Krämer (2008) sees media as a 'third party', a messenger (*Bote*) in the literal sense 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 others are modulated—we need to analyze communication as a concrete and material process.
29. This was the main concern of the Pioneer research program on religion and media that I directed between 2000 and 2006 (see Meyer 2009).
30. See <http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/CreativityandInnovationinaWorldofMovement/>.
31. This is one of the aims of the Templeton/SSRC research program "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.ssrc.org/programs/new-directions-in-the-study-of-prayer/>.
32. Aesthetics is a huge field. See Meyer and Verrips (2008). See also Gernot Böhme (1995).
33. 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 at <http://www.religionsaesthetik.de>. See also Prohl's (2010) article, "Religious Aesthetics in the German-Speaking World."
34. Anne Koch generously shared with me her *Religionsästhetisches Protokoll*, which she designed for the use of her students when observing religious events systematically. 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.
35. The research program "Heritage Dynamics," directed by Mattijs van de Port, Herman Roodenburg, and myself, focused on exactly this issue, that is, how artificial, fabricated heritage forms are experienced as true and real.
36. Of course, within the larger context of the Christian tradition there has always been room for asceticism and bodily discipline.

37. See the blog Closer by Martijn de Koning for debates around these and related issues at <http://religionresearch.org/closer/>.
38. The cartoon showed Jesus on the cross and a voice saying, “Eh Du, ich habe deine Mutter gefickt!” (Hey, you, I fucked your mother!).
39. This point is also argued by Frederiks (2008).
40. 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 endeavor that demands multi-disciplinary 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>
41. See the Pentecostal aesthetics project directed by Annalisa Buttici, who is affiliated with the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Utrecht University as a Marie Curie Fellow. Buttici collaborated with photographer and filmmaker Andrew Esiebo to make a documentary, *Enlarging the Kingdom: African Pentecostals in Italy*. See <http://www.pentecostalaesthetics.net/>.
42. Since 1996, I have been conducting research on the rise and development of the Ghanaian video-film industry. Intriguingly, such movies are presented as ‘revelations’ of the ‘spiritual realm’ believed to be behind the surface of things. See my forthcoming book *Sensational Movies: Video, Vision, and Christianity in Ghana* (California University Press).
43. In the realm of popular Christianity, there is a strong preference for a white Jesus. Given that nineteenth-century Christianity was introduced and perceived as a distinctly Western religion, it may not be surprising that for many African Christians the whiteness of Jesus is appealing. They perceive Christianity as a religion that links up with the West.

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■ Comments by Hans Belting

The inaugural speech of Birgit Meyer as the new Chair of Religious Studies at Utrecht University is of considerable importance, as it offers a common ground for an approach to pictures and their place in religion. When I studied pictures of the past that were religious in nature or were fabricated for the religious practice of Christianity, I used to ask myself as an art historian whether my approach toward religious artworks from the outside might express some kind of illegitimate interest in their material side. This feeling of guilt was enforced by the old dictum that pictures or any such kind of mediation would contradict religion's concern with the supernatural and the spiritual and that any true religion stood high above the mundane aspects of its social presence. More often than not, I was confronted with warnings in the texts of Christian theologians about the dangers connected to sensuous experience and to the visible agents of religion. I therefore cannot but welcome Meyer's approach to the material side of religion, which revolutionizes the field and helps to bridge the gap between different disciplines that come together in the study of religion.

The role of material agents was at stake when the Reformation Age questioned the Catholic use of images, which often enough had served purposes other than religious, and when images of the old Church, certainly in the Calvinist branch, were abandoned altogether. Meyer had to cope with such a Protestant bias in the Netherlands, where the faithful usually are radically opposed to any material agency of faith. She would have addressed quite a different audience in Spain, where the Counter-Reformation, with its opposite bias against Muslim *aniconism*, initiated quite another road to the material presence of religion. It therefore was of some importance that Meyer, in her lecture within a Dutch context, had expertise from her previous ethnographic research on popular Christianity in Ghana, where again the constellation had been different. Building upon that experience, she felt confident to spotlight "key aspects of a 'material approach' to religion that revolves around 'mediation' and the 'genesis of presence.'" For this purpose, she argued that "religion becomes concrete and palpable through people, their practices and use of things," a statement that, in a way, includes the Dutch and their social behavior in religion.

Part I of the lecture offers a "critique of genealogies that foreground a mentalistic, dematerialized understanding of religion, epitomized by the Protestant bias," thus acknowledging possible resistance in her audience. Part II focuses on the notion of the 'fetish' (a term denoting deliberate discrimination of the material agents of religion among the colonized in Africa) and re-evaluates the fetish as a means to understand "the dynamics of the fabrication of beings that command belief." In Meyer's argument, which draws on the writings of Bruno Latour, fetishes represent an anthropological commonplace that also continues into the modern age. But the "notion of the fetish," she admits, "is a typical product of the power relations that structured past encounters between Africans and Westerners." The missionaries in southern Togo and southeastern Ghana were scandalized when they observed that the Ewe embodied their gods in lifeless agents that involved worship. Whether or not the notion of the fetish has a general validity, Meyer asserts,

we nevertheless can join a material approach to "practices of fabrication as key to the genesis of a sense of spiritual presence." Such practices, she concludes, "are indispensable for religion's existence in the world as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon."

Meyer foregrounds comparative religion and anthropology as an area to be studied outside of the European branch of theology. In particular, she advocates "the rehabilitation of 'form' in the study of religion . . . not as a vehicle but as a generator of meaning and experience" in all religious practices. I share her view that Christianity is not only an object for theology but also, in various ways, an object for anthropology. The early Christian icons of Christ were fabricated for the purpose of supporting the mainstream claims for his corporality, the reality of his being in the flesh. But even then images were subject to suspicion. Only icons not 'made by human hands' seemed to be authorized as heavenly tools since they did not fall into the problematic category of human fabrication of idols. Generally speaking, as vehicles of worship, these images and other tools, such as relics, their powerful counterparts, also became victims of iconoclasm for that very reason.

Parts III and IV address "the use of multiple media in practices of religious mediation," including music, trance, spirit possession, and other activities. In Part III, Meyer concentrates on what she calls "extraordinary presence," through which religion functions as a practice of mediation. While she has an interest in "theologies of immediacy," she regards immediacy "as not prior to but an effect of mediation." In this view, she convincingly includes the human body as a religious medium, that is, "as a producer, transmitter, and receiver of the transcendent."

The question remains whether this definition of presence and medium should not also be applied to a major part of all pictures, both within and beyond religion—pictures not only of invocation but also of memory, such as memory of the deceased. If this is the case, the notion of the pictorial medium, whether religious or not, has a twofold meaning, as I argued in my book *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*. It is *present* as a medium with a material existence and with a history of its fabrication, thus introducing a past time (or an invisible space) in the space of the beholder, and it *makes present* what it represents, thus connecting absence and presence. Such a widening perspective serves to corroborate a "material approach to religion," which studies materiality not as such but as an agency of mediation.

■ **HANS BELTING** is a historian of medieval and early modern European art, as well as contemporary art and theory; hbelting@hfg-karlsruhe.de.

■ Comments by Pamela Klassen

Let me start by saying that I enjoyed the privilege of attending Birgit Meyer's Inaugural Lecture at Utrecht University, which was a fabulously sensational experience unlike any academic ritual in North America. Birgit's Inaugural Lecture demonstrated that Dutch academia has not forsaken the material. Local and visiting professors alike donned rainbow-adorned academic robes and black floppy hats to process through a chapel-like hall where Birgit delivered her lecture to a capacity crowd. After an elegant wine and cheese reception in a room filled with centuries of portraits of esteemed professors from Utrecht, we repaired to a banquet that to my Canadian sensibilities seemed more like a wedding feast than a university dinner. The seriousness and sensuality of the ritual moved me, mentally, emotionally, materially, and I was honored to be part of it.

This means that any reading I might offer of Birgit's Inaugural Lecture is one that moves through both embodied memory and critical analysis. This is entirely suited for thinking about

her arguments, as it is clear that everything she writes, even at the level of theoretical generalization, has passed through a similarly doubled filter of both memory and critique. My reading is also one written in the wake of Birgit's hospitality, as well as that of Utrecht University. Although my reflections cannot be characterized merely as a gesture of grateful reciprocity, they must in part be understood in that light.

In my comments on Meyer's lecture (please allow me to shift to more formal naming conventions, as befits academic prose), I would like to focus on two points in particular: first, her use of the term 'Protestant bias' and the analytical work that this term does, and, second, her distinction between 'mentalistic' and 'materialist' approaches to religion. These two points are interrelated in that, for Meyer, the Protestant bias is itself a mentalist one, rooted in a "devaluation of practices, materials, and forms, which are seen as merely outward." Understanding the Protestant bias to have shaped the very concept of religion as it emerged as an academic category of analysis, Meyer names Max Weber and William James in particular as thinkers who helped to make religion mental. Weber, Meyer writes, contributed the "idea of meaning as the core substance of religion, with form becoming superfluous the higher a religion develops." With the study of religion understood as a search for meaning "located inside people," scholars largely turned to texts—scriptural, creedal, mystic, hagiographical, or autobiographical—as their primary sources. They mined the written word as if they were mining the soul, finding nuggets of meaning that could then be set in comparative contexts, across time, space, language, and other measures of difference.

If Weber established the notion of meaning, or 'worldview', as a staple of analysis, then James did the same for the concept of 'experience.' As Meyer writes, "James regards experience as ultimately private, while institutions and modes of organization are taken to be secondary, superficial, and even disturbing." Especially in his Gifford Lectures, published in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James ([1902] 2008) cited autobiographical and biographical texts documenting a variety of people's extraordinary visions and sensations to develop his profoundly individualistic, interior understanding of religion as rooted in experience. Yet in other work, James was troubled by the challenge of finding language that could mediate between profoundly interior, individual experience and wider, perhaps universal categories (or even realities) that were at once mental and material. For example, in the first volume of his *Principles of Psychology*, James (1890) described the brain as a material, physical entity housed in an individual, whereas the soul was a similarly mental yet also material unity of these individual brains: "The soul would be thus a medium upon which ... the manifold brain-processes *combine their effects*" (ibid.: 181). Eventually, however, James gave up on the word 'soul,' despairing that its promise to human beings of a portal to cosmic unity was unscientific. At the same time, he acknowledged that his reader should feel "free to continue to believe" (ibid.: 350) in the soul's existence, since he had no definitive evidence to the contrary. Pondering the possibilities of the "phenomena of thought-transference, mesmeric influence and spirit-control, which are being alleged nowadays on better authority than ever before" (ibid.), James was developing an understanding of the mental that was simultaneously material and spiritual.¹

James's popular *Varieties of Religious Experience* is still turned to by some scholars of religion as providing the best possible definition of religion: "the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto" (James, cited in Fuller 2013: 10). On the other hand, this belief-based definition has longed been criticized by scholars as being 'overly Protestant,' and perhaps rightly so. This kind of definition, however, might also be a misreading of James's view of religion when his wider body of work (and experience) is considered. Scholars such as Courtney Bender (2010) counsel us to read James in historical context, both in terms of his own complicated scholarly oeuvre and in terms of the afterlife of his texts within many communities, including the academic study of religion.

Both Weber and James were scholars who grappled with the significance of the 'spirit' in their lives and in the world—whether in terms of the spirit of capitalism or the spirit that comes from 'healthy-minded' religion (James [1902] 2008). Christianity—and liberal Protestantism in particular—were differently influential in these men's formation, both in a familial context and within institutional, university settings. But to attribute their emphases on interiority and the inward person to a Protestant bias in particular seems to distort the effects of other aspects of their formation, most notably their commitment to scientific, empirical investigation. In addition to occupying prominent roles in the largely patrilineal genealogy of the study of religion, Weber and James are doubtless more widely known for their formative roles in the fields of sociology and psychology, respectively.² Certainly, we can trace Protestant legacies in these fields as well, but I wonder if the label 'Protestant bias' obscures the effects of these other intellectual formations, shaped by a commitment to find 'meaning' within the logic of the social and the psyche.

And then there is the issue of what the Protestant bias in the study of religion does to the study of Protestants themselves. As Meyer points out, there is a considerable "cleavage between ideal type representations of Protestantism and actual Protestant religious practice." Both anthropologists and historians have shown as much in recent years (Engelke 2007; Finch 2010; Griffith 2004). With a slippage between the Protestant bias as a 'dematerializing' theoretical orientation, on the one hand, and the Protestant bias as an anti-material or iconoclastic sensibility practiced by Protestant groups themselves, on the other, I am not sure that the terms 'Protestant legacy' and 'Protestant bias' are the most clarifying theoretical rubrics for our times. Certainly, troubling and complicating what is included within the category of Protestant are important and necessary endeavors, as is tracing the interrelated genealogies of such (often) taken-for-granted categories as Judaism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and paganism, especially in relation to historical and political forces such as colonialism and nationalism. Labeling a dualism of mind and body or mental and material as a product of a specifically Protestant bias, however, seems to verge on a kind of essentialization or hypostasization of a particular 'religious tradition' that is both ahistorical and theoretically problematic.

So when Meyer writes that "[m]eaning production is not disembodied and abstract, but deeply sensorial and material, contrary to what the Protestant bias suggests," I fully agree with the first claim but find the last clause of the sentence to be too tidy. Does the Protestant bias really have the agency to suggest anything? Many men and some women, influential within the developing field of the study of religion, have drawn on dualisms of spirit versus matter and mind versus body in their writings, to be sure. However, to describe this bias as Protestant—instead of also androcentric, empiricist (perhaps), colonialist, or intellectualist—may skew our genealogical critique in a manner that can be too easily turned into a trope with its own misleading dualisms.

Many other religious formations, whether Catholic, Buddhist, or Hindu (all of which, I realize, are contested categories), make generous use of dichotomies of male versus female, civilized versus primitive, West versus East, enlightened versus ignorant, icon versus fetish, and released-from-matter versus fettered-to-the-worldly. I am not arguing against framing Protestantism as a religious formation with a particular historical responsibility for and influence on our categories of analysis. I share with Meyer the conviction that our task is also to situate these categories in wider networks of power, such as colonialism, capitalism, and hierarchies of gender and race. I am suggesting, however, that such a genealogy of Protestantism must be careful not to make the adjective 'Protestant' too 'special,' unusual, or ahistorical in the process and must be wary of how biography is used to form its objects. Perhaps, for example, in addition to James and Weber, we should include Friedrich Nietzsche, Roland Barthes (1981), and the American dancer and choreographer Martha Graham (see LaMothe 2006) in our exploration of the intersection of Protestantism and theories of religion and materiality.

This brings me to Meyer's distinction between mentalistic and materialist approaches to the study of religion. Meyer's lecture is a call for movement, a shift in perspective and also in sensibilities, as its title ("Toward a Material Approach to Religion") suggests. This is not the materialism of Marxist theory, in which religion is explained away as a superstructural illusion generated by a material base. Instead, we might think of it as the materialism that Marx often pointed to himself: the stuff and practices of sensual living together, interpreted and crystallized through concepts that could just as easily obfuscate power relations (commodity fetishism?) as help us to see them (alienated labor?). Meyer does not propose that we abandon the mental altogether and even urges that religious studies research should collaborate "on an equal footing" with biology, neurology, and cognitive science. She does insist, however, that a material approach to the study of religion will produce more rigorous and more responsible 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 to get at the abstract meanings behind them, it is key to approach religion as a mundane, practical, and material affair—one that is present in and part of the making of a world."

In keeping with her material move, Meyer has introduced the term 'sensational form' to indicate the modes and matter involved in "[i]nvolving, framing and rendering accessible the transcendental" (Meyer 2006: 10). Along with many of my students, I have found this term particularly helpful for the way that it puts material culture and mediation at the forefront of how religion is understood and practiced by many people. Sensational forms—for example, clothing, buildings, offerings, bodily modifications—offer us a site to observe how religious authority does not fall from the sky (although it might do so, on occasion) but is produced with both matter and meaning in dynamic interplay. Without granting full agency to things, Meyer notes how the material is polyvalent and how, in the case of religion, it is a key site for authorizing identity, piety, leadership, and other nodes of power. In my own research, I have long found that attending to the material—whether clothing, land, built environments, or even the child-bearing maternal body—is a very rich tool for both describing and analyzing the ways in which uses and interpretations of matter and its various affordances can reiterate and resist worldly power (Klassen 2001, 2012, 2014). Meyer's concept of sensational forms helps us to see how things, bodies, and the natural environment produce and authorize the very notion of the 'transcendent' at the same time that these material embodiments enable people to give themselves over to the experience of what they feel to be—or sometimes we as scholars label as—the religious. Bringing together *aisthesis* and authority, Meyer furnishes us with an approach to the study of religion that resolves to take seriously people's religious practices, while also affording an angle of analysis that considers power, historicity, and misrecognition. With her addition of the idea of the genesis of presence, Meyer argues for scholars in the study of religion to concern themselves with the process of 'fabrication', not so much as 'making up' in the manner of lying to or duping another, but in the sense of crafting the conditions of sensibility, if not plausibility: "Posing such questions around fabrication allows us to study the genesis of a sense of extraordinary presence—in the sense of being *anwesend* (present) in the here and now—which arises through a complex interrelation of acting and sensing humans, sets of practices, and various materials. I understand 'genesis' here in the sense of formation, as a creative process of fabricating, bringing about, or making happen that we may effectively observe and describe, if we only look closely enough."

Key to this observation, for Meyer, is the notion of mediation, by which we can trace the processes that make up religion, which she bravely defines as "particular, authorized, and transmitted sets of practices and ideas aimed at 'going beyond the ordinary,' 'surpassing' or 'transcending' a limit." Interestingly, here Meyer's definition has a tension at its core—that religious practices and

ideas are authorized by something or someone external to them at the same time that they attempt to transcend a limit. Who does this authorization and which limits can and cannot be transcended without fear of retaliation from those sources of authorization are questions that turn this definition into one that can open up analyses of power, resistance, and accommodation.

As should be obvious, I largely agree with, and find very productive, Meyer's approach to the study of religion, especially in two senses. First, her conceptual frame of sensational forms roots our methods and analyses in questions of materiality, mediation, authority, and historicity. Second, her wider genealogical critique requires us to be self-reflexive about how our very categories of analysis are shaped by particular (and ongoing) colonial histories of scholarship. Her turn to the genesis of presence, however, may have more of an enlivening effect on the mentalistic approach to the study of religion than she desires.

To have the "sense of extraordinary presence" at the heart of one's definition of religion seems to risk privileging the mentalistic approach once again—a return to the Jamesian 'unseen order' that makes itself felt in uncanny ways. As Meyer herself notes, many scholars of religion from both anthropology and religious studies are increasingly turning to tools of measurement from cognitive science—MRIs and other less precise measurements of cognitive function—to achieve their own fabrication of religion (Brown 2012; Luhrmann 2012). Others hope to convince historians of religion that innovations and change within religious communities can be understood through biological evidence adduced from evolutionary theories of the intersection of cognitive function, genetics, and the imperative to sustain life (Fuller 2013). This current turn by many scholars to the cognitive as the key to analyzing religion might in part be traced to the nexus that Meyer refers to as the Protestant bias, but I would hazard that technocentrism, funding opportunities, and academic prestige in relation to 'properly' scientific disciplines may be equally important—and equally misplaced—factors in this turn.

Like Meyer, I am not opposed to thinking alongside new developments in cognitive science. Especially if mediation is key to our analysis, I would argue that humanities scholars also need to think alongside computer science and critical information studies to craft an approach to digital humanities that includes the critical study of religion (Gitelman 2006, 2013; Hayles 2012). But I am concerned that much of the recent work in the cognitive turn pays scant attention to what Meyer calls the "sensation-power nexus." Mixing evidence from an espoused empiricism with little to no methodological reflexivity, these versions of the cognitive turn also largely ignore critical histories of colonialism, race, and gender.³

Meyer is of course not responsible for these versions of the cognitive turn. But I wonder if placing the genesis of presence—and the sense of the extraordinary—at the core of her working definition of religion unduly jeopardizes her goal of materializing the study of religion. We could just as profitably start our study of religion with the question of boredom and dead time as with that of the extraordinary, as one of my students is doing in her dissertation on workers in a homeless shelter. We could easily center a study on how religion requires people to submit to limits as much as, or more than, it enables them to try to surpass those limits. In some ways, giving pride of place to the extraordinary appearing in the mundane and the transcendent manifesting within the material may itself point to Christian legacies in the study of religion. It may also unintentionally give purchase to a decontextualizing version of the study of religion, one that does not take the time to complicate its categories of spirit and matter, mind and body, or to explore their political effects.

In the end, however, my 'debate' with Meyer's Inaugural Lecture is offered in a spirit of intellectual exchange by which I want to note clearly my debts to her thinking and my gratitude for her scholarship. Meyer provides us with clear and useful tools for thinking with mediation and both its affordances and concealments, as well as with materiality and both its possibilities

and constraints. Even more importantly, perhaps, Meyer has seemingly indefatigable energy for fabricating (in the best, most productive sense of the word) networks of scholarship that cross boundaries of nation-state, continent, discipline, and regional focus. She takes seriously her responsibilities as a scholar within intersecting communities of inquiry to prod debate and to introduce boldly new categories of analysis, while doing her own careful and grounded fieldwork and historical study. Her public acceptance of this responsibility for research, teaching, writing, learning, and communicating in her Inaugural Lecture—a generous ritual that was a feast for the mind and the body—is a testament to her remarkable ability to do the work of scholarship in a manner that attends to materiality and also mediates this attention in a multitude of ways.

■ **PAMELA KLASSEN** is a Professor in the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto; p.klassen@utoronto.ca.

■ NOTES

1. This discussion of *Principles of Psychology* has benefited from my collaboration with Sarina Annis, with whom I am co-writing an article entitled “Radio Philosophy: Cognition and the Cosmic in Colonial Spaces.”
2. In a very material example of this, William James Hall at Harvard University is the home of the Departments of Psychology, Sociology, and Social Anthropology.
3. This claim will take another article to substantiate more fully.

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■ Comments by Christopher Pinney

Birgit Meyer makes a persuasive and important claim for a material approach to religion and articulates very clearly the 'mentalist' ideational pitfalls of a theological and Protestant-informed study of religion, which assumes that its object of study is an ensemble of disembodied ideas and theories. Material presence, in her formulation, is the necessary antidote to such idealist delusions. In broad terms, this is unquestionably correct, but the issue I will explore in this short commentary concerns the oscillating visibility of presence. My focus will be the area of central India where I have conducted intermittent fieldwork for several decades, but this text is also inflected by the site of its production, Krakow in Poland, where, as I write this, I am teaching a short course on South Asian material and visual culture at the same time that I am encountering Polish material and visual culture. I have just returned a few hours ago from Kazimierz, the old Jewish center of Krakow, now a magnet for all local hipsters and tourists in search of a pre-Holocaust life-world. The question of visibility and distribution was foregrounded by the sight of the Saturday market stalls in the shadow of the area's three synagogues, selling Nazi helmets, daggers, and a profusion of Wehrmacht and SS medals. Also present were a large quantity of Soviet regalia, a single Seder plate, a couple of Krakow ghetto armbands, and several Stars of David, which Jews were forced to make and wear following their relocation to the new ghetto south of the Vistula. This unsettling ensemble of potent materiality (dramatized perhaps even more forcefully in the Grzegórzecka flea market) seemed to exemplify the "frontier areas" whose study Birgit advocates in the expectation that they will "[stir] up established comfort zones of academic thinking and research."

I have no complaint about the circulation of this material in the market: one can only concede the unavoidable plenitude of this detritus of atrocity and tenacity in so many regions of contemporary Europe. But it did focus my mind on what can be made both more and less visible under the sign of 'presence'. Many things were present with varying degrees of intensity and efficacy. These market traders were mostly making a living through the commoditization of a religion's (and the opponents of that religion's) material culture. In Kazimierz there were perhaps a dozen such workers, at Grzegórzecka several hundred. In South Asia there are certainly many hundreds of thousands (quite possibly one or two million) of equivalent persons who derive their employment through the commoditization of religious presence in its contested histories.

Birgit clearly documents the new forms of visibility through which religion presses its claims. She writes of religion's "unexpected guises" and the manner in which "processes of democratization have yielded a marked presence of religion in the public domain" and of the revelation of

“previously disguised aspects of religion.” Reading this in Krakow, many of Birgit’s observations have a pertinence that resonates beyond my fieldwork experiences in South Asia. Birgit’s comment that “religion becomes concrete and palpable through people, their practices and use of things, and is part and parcel of power structures” made me reflect on the presence of a highly valued ‘bad object’ (to recall the allusion Birgit makes to W. J. T. Mitchell’s characterization of the fetish) throughout Krakow. Our Lady of Częstochowa, also known as the Black Madonna of Jasna Góra, can be seen in many shops and shrines in the form of prints, refrigerator magnets, and, more commonly, icons, which overlay a metallic or plastic surface above a printed image so as to contrast with the dark faces of the Madonna (with distinctive long scars on her right cheek) and Child. Several stalls in the Old Market in the central square specialize in these, and exquisite antique examples are widely available throughout the city. It is a striking example of what Birgit terms “pictorial devotion” in what is ostensibly a religion of the book.

In a fascinating and important study, Anna Niedźwiedź (2010) documents the persistence of belief in the Black Madonna’s *acheiropoietos* (i.e., the notion that it was not made by human hands) and its continual political mobilization over many centuries since its installation in Jasna Góra in the late fourteenth century. Three much more recent entanglements of the images are worth briefly commenting on. The first of these, the Miracle on the Vistula in 1920, helped establish the image’s anti-communist credentials and established Our Lady of Częstochowa as Queen of Poland. Poland’s General Józef Haller was in spiritual contact with Jasna Góra throughout his battle with the Bolsheviks on the outskirts of Warsaw, and Our Lady’s help in protecting the city as a whole as well as individual brave soldiers ensured victory (ibid.: 112–113). In 1939, although she was unable to prevent the Nazi invasion and destruction of much of Poland, Our Lady was able to protect Jasna Góra: numerous bombing missions failed to locate the monastery because of divine cloud cover, mist, and other celestial interventions (ibid.: 116–119). Finally, and perhaps most spectacularly, the Queen of Poland reasserted herself during the dark days of martial rule in the 1980s when her wounds were seen by many to have elongated in response to national suffering (although this was denied by monastery officials). Her image decorated the gates of the Gdańsk shipyards, and an image of her circulated with the caption “Our Lady of Strike” (ibid.: 67). Lech Wałęsa openly sported her wounded face on a small badge, and many others wore what they referred to as “Wałęsa’s Our Lady,” a tiny, barely visible badge “worn under clothes for fear of persecution” (ibid.). Niedźwiedź’s work helps us read the material culture of Krakow in a new light: the images of Our Lady, these emblems of pictorial devotion, were also used in a war of images.

The role of a variable visibility in a war of images has been one of my concerns during fieldwork in central India, where I have been working intermittently since 1982 (totaling perhaps six or seven years over the last three decades). This oscillation of the visibility of presence is certainly acknowledged by Birgit, but I wonder whether it might be stated with more force. She makes clear that visibility is not an automatic consequence of the foregrounding of the material dimension of religion when she remarks that “[v]isibility ... depends on the perspective of the beholder.” But inasmuch as her project is centrally focused on the materialization, the bringing forth in its fungibility, of what a mentalistic theology constructs as “an ‘inward,’ ‘private,’ and even ‘invisible’ phenomenon,” her position appears to affirm the demonstration of visibility per se as an academic goal of the new material study of religion rather than the complex nuances of what Jacques Rancière (2009: 99) termed the “distribution of the visible.”

This question of distribution is implicit in Birgit’s account but needs to be foregrounded as a struggle through which religionists and co-religionists frequently fight their image wars. Thus, the “new visibility of religion” and the revelation of “previously disguised aspects of religion” also need to be understood as marking the space in which what are nominally co-practitioners

of a religion make claims to authority that need to be understood within the logic of distribution. Take, for instance, the case of Dalit Ravidasis (i.e., members of the Chamar, the ex-leather tanner caste) in the village in central India with which I am most familiar. As Dalits or ex-Untouchables, they are ideologically marginalized within orthodox constructions of village Hindu practice. They are the object of archaic Hindu *varna* theory, economically oppressed and still subject to numerous untouchability taboos. From a high caste perspective, Dalits largely embody the inversion of everything that is desirable in good Hindu practice: they are meat-eating, not vegetarian, and worship dangerous, powerful goddesses. But this conflict in values is also fundamentally fought out in terms of materialization and visualization. Brahman priests make a claim to *śruti*, to what was heard—that is, to what the gods whispered into their ears. Their indexical claim to authority is articulated through an almost silent and invisible idiom: they are intermediaries between the sacred and the profane. As such, a large part of their power derives precisely from what we might call the 'cloak' of authority, in other words, from the realm of the invisible.

Ravidasis, on the other hand, mobilize an excessive and effervescent material presence by 'thrashing' with various 'hot' and dangerous gods. Consider the case of Ambaram, once the most energetic *ghorla* (medium) in the village. He is one of a number of Dalit mediums who make essentially political claims that Dalits are the custodians of the gods. In making this claim, they appeal to the radically empirical (and highly visible) nature of their practices, which face opposition from higher castes who maintain that the gods that appear in Dalit bodies are deceptive impersonations.

Several Dalit, and especially Chamar, images provoke complex meditations on the nature of the surface and a politics of equality and citizenship. Some images of the saint Ravidas—after whom Chamars now prefer to be known as Ravidasis, that is, followers of Ravidas—depict him cutting his chest open to reveal a sacred thread, proof of his Brahman status in an earlier life, an event associated with a conservative text, the *Bhaktamala*. This is a key image in articulating the somatic as a fulcrum between different ethical-political worlds. In the *Bhaktamala* version, the outside signifies Ravidas's impossible, putatively Chamar powers. The inside reveals his 'true' high caste identity. The image plays out this materialization of a previously hidden truth and reveals the reactionary political potential of the distribution of the visible. It also suggests that the privileging of the inward and interior is not limited to the "Protestant legacy" that Meyer describes.

The most popular images of Ravidas among Chamars, however, depict him as a cobbler hard at work and visually narrate an anti-*Bhaktamala* politics. A key episode in these images concerns a Brahman who, while in Banaras to make offerings for a Rajput friend and in need of shoes, visited Ravidas, who said he would make the Brahman a pair of shoes if in return he would offer a betel nut to the Ganges. The Brahman made his offering for his friend and almost forgot to offer Ravidas's betel nut. When he did so, tossing it casually into the river, Ganga Mata (Mother of the Ganges) appeared to receive the offering personally.

For Ravidasis, the moral of the story is that the corrupted hierarchy of the quotidian world has an extra-mundane shadow in which the superiority of Ravidasis is recognized. The Brahman may have mistakenly thought that his own status and that of his Rajput friend was higher, but Ganga Mata was under no such illusion. Dalit society as a locus in which gods choose to manifest themselves—to declare their visibility—is a powerful theme in Dalit ideology. This is echoed in the intense and visceral divine manifestations of goddesses. The powerful enfolded aesthetics of Ravidasi shamanism in Dalits is mobilized in claims that it is they who make the presence of the gods more manifest, more visible, and that, consequently it is they who have a more legitimate claim to speak for Hindu practice in this local setting. It is Dalit 'counter-priests' who serve as the main conduits for the extra-mundane. Their power stems from performance and

affect, the outward signs of manifestation, which serves as an index of divine presence. Dhanna thrashes with the goddess Shitala, Amabaran thrashes with the goddess Chamunda, and Mang-ilal thrashes with the goddess Kali.

Holding a bowl of burning coals and a sword, the *ghorla* thrashes—teeth chattering and body swaying—thus enfleshing the printed chromolithographic images in front of which this performance occurs. The more articulate shamans point to the image of the goddess that they have made, and the political lesson of this abundance of manifestation becomes clear. “In every direction, as you know,” Ambaram (who was certainly the most articulate) pointed out, “Kalkaji comes—there’s Mangubhai. Shitala comes—there’s Dhanna. They are in our *samaj* [caste]. And here [gesturing to his own house] Chamunda comes. That’s also in our *samaj*.” In this way, Ambaram conjures the aesthetics of manifestation and superabundance (what Birgit terms “sensational form”) and invokes an empirical method of adjudicating these contesting claims. Ambaram’s point is that higher castes may claim to be conduits to the divine, but they manifest this insufficiently: their indexicality is too ‘weak’. Dalit shamans’ performance of the image of the goddess sustains a political claim to superiority. Higher castes may have political dominance, but they are unable to manifest visually their energized indexical proximity to the gods in an equally impressive way.

The distribution of the visible, its allocation to the outside and inside, and the powers and truths it can deliver are hotly contested. This contestation also applies to evaluations of the manifestation of Ravidasi possession to which Ambaram draws attention. Higher castes, for instance, strongly disparage Chamar patterns of hereditary mediumship, suggesting that *ghorlas* have entered into self-interested economic relationships with their patrons, unlike higher caste mediums (more commonly female) who are liable to thrash unpredictably. Higher castes claim that *ghorlas*—if they are remunerated—will thrash to order (see Pinney 2010). This skepticism is extended to the displays of possession that take place during the twice-yearly public processions in the months of Kuar and Chet on the Nine Nights of the Goddess. Being fanned by the Dalit incarnated goddesses (with either their hand or a peacock whisk) is widely understood to provide preventive protection for all castes, but a common complaint from higher castes is that there is Mataji ‘mimicry’, that is, a mere imitation of the presence of the Goddess. Presence in itself is insufficient for it is always ensnared in politics, in a field of oscillating visibility and legitimacy.

The other immediate frame through which I find myself responding to Birgit’s provocation is that of the 2014 Indian elections. At the time of this writing, polling has just finished, and the results will be announced in a few days. A key issue in the campaign has been corruption, and this has frequently been articulated through the idiom of the distribution of the visible. Narendra Modi, the prime-ministerial candidate of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), occupied every advertising space on the entire Delhi metro system (I was there in March–April of this year) with slogans such as “There has been too much corruption—This time [elect a] Modi government.” Modi stood for election in the holy city of Varanasi where he was opposed by the former tax inspector and Right to Information activist Arvind Kejriwal of the Aam Admi Party (Common Man’s Party). This party had its origins in a movement originally focused on a septuagenarian neo-Gandhian named Anna Hazare, who in late August 2011 fasted in Delhi’s Ramlila grounds underneath a large photographic image of M. K. Gandhi. At this time, Kejriwal was part of “Team Anna” and would subsequently part ways with Hazare, forming a party that to many people’s amazement would briefly run the Delhi Assembly in late 2013.

I have written elsewhere in more detail about the fast, which I attended (see Pinney 2014). One memorable feature of this grand political spectacle was the diversity of self-produced imagery that the audience displayed. In some cases they were simple photocopies, but there were also complex cartoons and paintings, often dependent on the pun that Anna was not *andhi*

(blind) but was Gandhi, and Photoshopped visual allegories. One, captioned *Aj ke Dhritarashtra* (Today's Dhritarashtra), depicted Hazare as a modern-day Krishna, fighting (in a reanimation of the Mahabharata struggle) corrupt figures such as the disgraced head of the Commonwealth Games Committee (Salman Kalmadi) and a politician implicated in a \$40 billion 2G telecom spectrum sales scam (A. Raja), these being presided over by the 'blind' Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who echoes the blind Dhritarashtra. Dhritarashtra, blind from birth, was the father of the Kauravas and uncle to the five Pandavas with whom his sons fought the Kurukshetra War. He was present when Yudhisthira lost the dice game and remained silent when Dushasana tried to disrobe Draupadi (the Pandava's wife) in front of the court. The disrobing of Draupadi—an episode endlessly visualized in early lithography and then film and subsequently television (Mankekar 1993)—became perhaps the archetypal trope of a subjugated India whose chastity was threatened by colonizers.

Other imagery on display mobilized maps of India with Mother India at the center flanked by images of Gandhi and Anna Hazare and slogans such as "Brashtachar, Bharat chhodo!" (Corruption, Quit India!) or maps of India in front of which were depicted three monkeys, illustrating the (originally Japanese) visual proverb "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil." Gandhi was very attached to a small wooden carving of three monkeys given to him by Chinese devotees. These visual images creatively reshaped the original East Asian motif into a warning about the dangers of a government that chooses not to see what is occurring in front of it: the images served as demands to look at and confront evil in the form of corruption. In other words, they were demands *for* visibility. One protester attending the post-fast 'victory' celebrations at India Gate had brought his own placard: it depicted a blindfolded Manmohan Singh unable to see his ministers scurrying away with briefcases filled with cash under the slogan "Yeh hai hamari andhi sarkar. Puri bhrast" (This is our blind government. Completely corrupt).

One could argue that, apart from the Aam Admi Party, the Hazare movement's chief legacy is mass public support for the Aadhaar, a unique identification scheme that is currently being trialed in various states including Madhya Pradesh. This system will eventually attach a 12-digit number to a facial photograph, retinal scans, and finger- and thumbprints of every citizen of India. Once all resident are enrolled, it will impossible, it is claimed, to activate a cell phone or SIM, open a bank account, or travel in any reserved category on the railways without this 12-digit number. Aadhaar is an astonishingly ambitious database with huge potential for state misuse (as was brought to my mind when looking at ghetto armbands and Nazi and Soviet regalia in the markets here in Krakow). Yet every village and small-town resident in India with whom I have spoken embraces this project warmly. Their self-willed interpellation into the state appears to promise a freedom through visibility. As one lowly paid laborer (in whom I had hoped to find evidence of subaltern resistance) told me, once he has his number, he will be able to travel the whole length of India without *rok-tok* (obstacles or obstructions). Others stress the manner in which the 'number' (*nambar*) will prevent those without entitlement from claiming Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards that would give them access to subsidized rations. State surveillance, in other words, promises to regulate corruption.

The (perhaps surprising) enthusiasm for Aadhaar expressed by those who see in it the utopian possibility of finally achieving a citizenship of proper entitlement and free passage expresses a desire for a new form of contract between citizen and state. This willing embrace of the necessity of making oneself visible to the state can be seen as a response to the persistent discourses around state blindness that have emerged in recent anti-corruption agitations. In choosing to see only the benefits of Aadhaar, rather than its potentially huge disciplinary capability, Indians might be understood to be seeking the rectification of an imbalance in the distribution of the visible and taking their positions in the politics of presence.

Finally, let me raise another form of visibility that returns us to the more conventionally religious. In the central Indian village, whose Dalit mediums I have discussed above, mobile phones have facilitated the dissemination of cameras among a rural population who were previously entirely dependent upon professional studio photographers for their images. This new apparatus has facilitated the creation of images, but only of what everyone already recognizes as part of an enchanted world. A famous five-headed cobra has finally been photographed, and its photographic image is widely worshipped. Better still, villagers themselves are now able to capture events that the disenchanted world has long dismissed as rural and backward. Kishor Sharma, for instance, was walking down the main lane in the village and saw a group of three men struggling to affix the brass *kailash* on top of the new temple to the god Shiva. He then saw a beam of light, emitted from Shiva's third eye, pulsing down from the heavens, energizing the *kailash*. This is what always happens when temples are inaugurated, but it so happened that Kishor had his cell phone with him, and he snapped a clear image that showed a diagonal beam of light bouncing off the top of the temple. The cell phone camera can also capture unanticipated enchantment, such as Ganga the cow's birthing of twin calves earlier this year. This unprecedented event brought many amazed villagers to worship her and photograph this *ascharya* (wondrous) event with their cell phones. Here apparatus and media (with which Birgit has had a deep engagement) facilitate a new distribution of the visible. What commercial and 'official' photography rendered marginal is now foregrounded through this new subaltern techne.

To suggest, as Birgit does, that this should be analyzed in terms of processes of "fabricating" and "generating" is perhaps too etic (despite her protestations), for it does not sufficiently grasp how media is seen to make visible a world that was always like this in its wondrousness. "Material religion," its Latourian lineage notwithstanding, perhaps stresses too much the "making" involved in religious activity, whereas those who are inside that system are more likely to think of signs as shadows, transfers, or imprints of the beyond made available through specific media. Indeed, the memorable examples she provides from Rickli's research in Aparecida of photographs of car crashes and fragments of exploded pressure cookers are perfect instances of indexes in the Peircean sense. Emically, these are media to which things 'have happened' (although Birgit of course acknowledges that, for believers, sensation is "real"), and semiotically too we may well be justified in suggesting that their presence cannot be exhausted through an understanding of their fabrication. As a general point, material religion might focus more on media (and medium specificity, in a much narrower sense that Birgit would endorse) and semiotics as dimensions of what Birgit rightly identifies as the crucial question of how the "beyond" comes to be "authorized." Additionally, we need to recognize that while people often share media, they are frequently also divided by media, and that cleavage exists not just between but within religions. Birgit stresses how mediation is a bridging concept, but as a character in Yash Chopra's classic 1975 Hindi movie *Deewaar* says to his brother, the wall separating them is higher than the bridge that they are standing underneath.

My discussion, inspired by Birgit's great insights, has tried to point to the desirability not only of "concentrat[ing] on the material manifestation of religion," but also of examining, perhaps in a more elementary manner, the material manifestation of the (political) possibility of manifestation. Equally, I hope to have provided some supporting evidence, however meager, of her suggestion that the "conflicts, tensions, misunderstandings, and matches" occurring in frontier areas—such as Polish flea markets and Indian villages—make them fruitful sites for investigation. I certainly affirm Birgit's observation that "[m]eaning production is not disembodied and abstract, but deeply sensorial and material." I would also add that it is deeply political.

■ **CHRISTOPHER PINNEY** is a Professor in Anthropology and Visual Culture at University College London; c.pinney@ucl.ac.uk.

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■ Comments by Monique Scheer

In this lecture, which draws together themes that she has emphasized in many highly stimulating publications over the last several years, Birgit Meyer calls for the field of religious studies to take an 'ethnographic turn'. Furthermore, she calls for an ethnography of religion that does not 'read' culture as a text, in which symbolic behaviors are viewed as vehicles for the 'meaning' that is the actual target of the anthropologist's interest. Meyer wants us to take the vehicles themselves seriously, to think about how they contribute to the meanings they represent as well as to the experience of that meaning. Furthermore, she urges us to examine just exactly how certain vehicles acquire the authorization to generate religious experiences and how they become compelling and convincing. In so doing, Meyer finds herself in the company of a number of religious studies scholars, anthropologists, and cultural historians who approach religious practice from the perspective of material culture, including visual culture. As I consider myself to be part of this group, my comments on Meyer's lecture will be from the standpoint of someone who is in whole-hearted agreement with the fundamentals of her argument: the critique of the 'mentalist' conceptualization of culture and of religion (echoing Asad 1983), which in religious studies can be traced back to the discipline's origins in 'liberal' Protestant theology (Kippenberg 2002), and the concomitant rejection of the separation of form and content, of semiotic vehicle and meaning, which can be shown to be the result of Protestant semiotic ideologies (Keane 2007).

I find Meyer's call to turn the tables on the anthropology of religion, making the non- or anti-modern theory of mediation the analytic for all religious practice (even the 'modern' kind), very appealing. Instead of pointing to the importance of media in 'other' religions as signs of deficient modernity, we should assume that all religions rely on media, and that the modern ones are merely using them in a certain way, one that is felt to minimize their impact. Their valorization of this (from the non-modern perspective rather strange) choice as 'more civilized' or 'more liberating' has reasons internal to the specific history of European Christianity, which, from the perspective offered by Meyer, can be defamiliarized, unpacked, and reread, bringing even the study of liberal, modern Protestantism into the purview of the anthropology of religion.¹ But because a laudatory endorsement of Meyer's convincing arguments would make for a tedious commentary, in the following I will pick out a few points that might profit from some more detailed reflection and offer a critical reading of those issues.

The table turning in the anthropology of religion that Meyer advocates in this lecture relies on a definition of center and periphery that reflects her background as an Africanist. She rightly decries the Eurocentrism of academia and promotes the decentering of the Western perspective by including the “colonial frontier” in the study of religion—a shift that her own move from a department of anthropology to a chair in religious studies represents. But it is not only the mission encounter outside of Europe that offers “a wealth of materials” for the anthropology of Christianity. In the rapidly expanding cities of nineteenth-century Europe, Christian clergy rehearsed the patterns of interpretation they were to bring to the colonies and brought the template of the colony to bear on their own lower classes. William Booth’s famous analogy between ‘darkest London’ and ‘darkest Africa’ is often cited in this regard, but even in the German-speaking lands not (yet) engaged in the colonial project, the parallels were drawn. Mission was not only ‘outer’ but also ‘inner’, and these efforts were intertwined as early as the 1840s (Habermas 2007). That is to say, the study of the margins need not be limited to the geographically non-European but should also include the subaltern of Western societies, lest the analytical frame be too exclusively culturalist and neglect the socio-economic dimension.

The missionaries traveling to Africa, India, the South Pacific, and the North American frontier not only embodied ‘the West’ or ‘Protestantism’, but also a socio-economic inflection of that category. In many cases, they brought a decidedly bourgeois sensibility to their work. The ‘bourgeoisie’ is, of course, itself a heterogeneous category, but a center of gravity can be found in the notion of pedagogy, of an increasing self-containment and self-mastery. This ideal was shared throughout the middle classes but perhaps was nowhere more at home than in the *Bildungsbürgertum*, the educated classes, which included the teachers and Protestant pastors who were the typical candidates for missionary work in the inner cities as well as the outer reaches of the empire. The conflictual encounters that Meyer identifies as “important foci for the project of repositioning and reforming the study of religion” are so because they are productive of observable data. This is particularly valuable for historical cases where participant observation is not available as a method of data generation. When encounters take place in Europe, the ascription of ‘primitivity’ to the subaltern proceeds no less smoothly than in the colony. Part of moving beyond “the lingering colonial discursive frame that sets apart ‘West’ and ‘Rest’” is a decentering from ‘high’ to ‘low’. As the work on religious ‘kitsch’ has shown (e.g., McDannell 1998: 164–197; Morgan 1999: 23–26), the devaluing of certain kinds of sensory stimulation has also taken place along class lines, whereby the upper-class aesthetic standard is considered to coincide with the characteristics of the ‘strong’ Christian faith, while the popular aesthetic is associated with ‘weak’ Christians (McDannell 1998: 8).

Meyer herself points out that we must “resist taking [the Protestant] bias at face value.” Reflecting on the socio-economic position of the specific Protestant habitus purveyed in a specific mission encounter can aid us in that endeavor. This is because there is not only a “cleavage between ideal type representations of Protestantism and actual Protestant religious practice” all over the world (where the anthropology of Christianity is a thriving field of study), but also a cleavage between ideal types and actual practice within the very countries from which the missionaries come (where the anthropology of Christianity has yet to be firmly established as a technique for observing mainstream practice). Keane’s (2007) account of Christianity in Sumba, for example, is more precisely one about the encounter between Sumbanese practices and a specific kind of Dutch Calvinism—only one of the many kinds of Protestantism explored in the work of Ernst Troeltsch, on whom Keane draws heavily. As another example, German missionaries were frequently recruited from Pietist circles (or Protestant milieus sympathetic to Pietism), who themselves had an embattled position in the established Protestant churches of the German lands. This is certainly not irrelevant to the kind of Protestantism they ‘taught’

outside Europe. In some ways, Pietism is far more 'immaterial' than orthodox Lutheranism, for which—in spite of the rhetoric of 'universal priesthood'—the clergy, the institution of the state church, the liturgy, and other materialities were central and a constant source of conflict with the Pietists. High-church Protestantism could be considered to have represented a much more 'Catholic type' of Christianity than one might generally assume. It makes sense, therefore, to look closely at the intersections of confessional commitments (Lutheran, Reformed, Pietist) and socio-economic locations that specific bearers of 'Protestantism' bring with them into the mission encounter and how this has interacted with the local situation.

Regardless of variations within Protestantism from the standpoint of theology and practice, all denominations share a distinctive feature compared to Catholicism: the fact that the pastor is practicing a profession and leading a middle-class family life. Thus, when taken as a whole, it is hard to say how much of the sensibility and semiotic ideology that make up the Protestant bias originates in religious doctrine and how much is due to class-based sensibilities. For this reason, it might be more helpful to use the category 'modern'—as a fusion of 'Protestant' and 'bourgeois'—rather than blame Protestantism alone for creating the immaterial approach to studying religion.

My next point concerns the role of emotions in the approach Meyer is proposing. Her appeal to 'materialize religion' focuses on the interface of the material thing and the perceiving subject—thus, the introduction of the term 'sensational forms' to highlight the function of media, not only as bearers of information, meaning, or messages, but also as things that impinge on the senses in a particular way. In so doing, they invite engagement in specific patterns that are not incidental or peripheral to what is 'actually' important, but indeed are central to the engagement with what the medium conveys.

Insofar as it highlights the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of media and mediating practices, this perspective brings out a strand of thought with a long tradition in the anthropology of religion, beginning with Durkheim, who theorized that the function of religious rituals was to produce a 'collective effervescence' that reinvigorated social cohesion and recharged religious symbols with the emotional power that made them convincing and binding. Victor Turner also argued that symbols were endowed with an 'orectic' dimension that made them compelling (see, e.g., Turner and Turner 1978: 247). And although he is usually invoked as the *spiritus rector* of a mentalist culture concept, Clifford Geertz (1973) also argues in his article on religion as a cultural system that the bodily engagement with religious symbols in the context of ritual is necessary in order to give them the requisite 'aura of factuality'. In a rather vague way, the sensual side of religious practice has been linked to constructing the reality of the transcendent and to its emotional force for a long time.

But in all of these research traditions, the emotional force of symbols was taken more or less for granted and was therefore less intensively interrogated. Meyer urges us to think harder about just exactly how this emotional force comes about, to look more carefully at the interactions between subjects and their media for religious experience and what work the media do in generating the kind of 'presence' that a particular religion calls for. In the case of the Pentecostals she has worked with, this presence is distinctly 'physical', in the body of the practitioner. This is true of Pentecostals the world over (Coleman 2000; Lindhardt 2011). It is also true for medieval mystics (Caciola 2003; Largier 2003) and for possession cults (Boddy 1994). In other contexts, presence is mediated not through physically intense activations of the body but as emotions, ranging from those that are intensely felt to those felt without much bodily activation and which can be viewed as relational acts. For Roman Catholics, presence is often generated by and located in the thing that they are engaging with, which they relate to as to a person (Orsi 2005), or in the bodies of suffering individuals (Kane 2002), toward whom they experience feelings that connect them to the divine.

Among Protestants of a modern or liberal persuasion, such as those with whom I have worked in Germany, feelings are highly important—those generated by reciting prayers together, hearing sermons, singing Paul Gerhardt hymns, or listening to church music by Johann Sebastian Bach. When asked directly, they have difficulty articulating just how they feel God's presence. Their tradition biases them—as Meyer has shown in detail—against making such a claim at all, for their belief is fundamentally based in doubt. Only the cultivation of doubt can facilitate the specific kind of knowing that they call 'belief' or 'hope' or 'consolation'. Meyer urges us to find, nevertheless, the media that facilitate this specific experience of 'absent presence', and like the Pentecostals, these Protestants locate the presence within themselves. Unlike the Pentecostals, it is not in their bodies but in their hearts, souls, spirits, or minds, that is, in the immaterial parts of themselves. As Meyer points out, the specific materials used to generate a sense of "something divine, ghostly, sublime, or transcendent" in modern Protestantism are authorized by virtue of their being conceived of as immaterial (which they arguably are not, since they rest upon activations of the perceptive apparatus of the body). Claims made by Christians who feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in the tingling of their fingertips are not accepted by this group, because they do not authorize such bodily sensations. They gear their ritual practice to a quieting of the senses in order to be able to perceive the immaterial presence in their hearts (Morgan 2012).

Coming from the perspective of someone who studies liberal Protestantism not (only) as the smokescreen of bias that has dominated the anthropology of religion and must be cleared away, but as a lived practice, Meyer's program strikes me as strongly centered around the body and the senses and only secondarily around feelings and emotions. Perhaps this has to do with her work with Pentecostal Christians, who themselves prioritize bodily experiences of the Holy Spirit. From my point of view, as someone who has worked with both Pentecostals and Lutherans, feelings—the joy of salvation, the sense of being loved by God, loving Him back, trusting Him, being consoled by that trust—are central to Protestant religious experience. They are often described and performed by Pentecostals in a more bodily fashion than among Lutherans, who seek to experience them more privately. But for both, inward feelings seem to be among the most important media for the religious practice. What exactly does Meyer propose that we do with these statements? Does she consider emotions to be media for the genesis of presence, or only as epiphenomena of sensory experience? Does she view emotions as a sensational form or a material practice? I believe her argument could be more fully developed with regard to how feelings and emotions fit into the notion of materiality that she presents.

When Meyer laments the "mentalistic attitude" in academic theology, she defines the 'mental' as "an inward domain of religious ideas, feelings, and inner convictions." That is to say, approaches that prioritize thoughts are lumped together with those that prioritize feelings or experience. William James, who was very interested in the role of emotion in religious experience—indeed, showing dismay in the conclusion of the *Varieties* that his lectures had been so thoroughly "bathed in sentiment" (James [1902] 2008: 353)—is put by Meyer into the same category as Friedrich Schleiermacher, both ostensibly having only "concern with the inside." For Meyer, then, feelings appear to be immaterial, like thoughts. Later in the essay, however, 'feeling' is used in a manner more closely aligned with 'emotion' when Meyer notes that sensational forms mobilize the body in different intensities, "inducing more or less intense feelings" based on a practitioner's learned habits of directing attention toward certain stimuli, "mobilizing and training particular senses to invoke more or less intense emotions." Emotions here are connoted as somewhat more physical, it seems, particularly when Meyer cites Tanya Luhrmann's work on American evangelicals, for whom emotional and bodily states are signs of God's presence. By virtue of their physical nature, emotions appear to be 'material' and 'outward', not least because their "triggering" is carried out by mechanisms in the physiological body. Here Meyer seems to

be following the neo-Jamesian distinction—popularized by the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, among others—between emotions, conceived of as physiological processes, and feelings as the mental representations or perceptions of those physical processes. By separating the mental from the physical dimensions and giving them different labels, this definition has proved to be useful, as it can reconcile the traditional philosophical/theological view of emotions as inward and subjective with a secular/biomedical view of them as objective and physiological.

This distinction does not seem to be intentional in Meyer's essay, nor is it consistently made. My suspicion is that her slippage between the terms 'feeling' and 'emotion' reflects our everyday parlance. Sometimes, when we talk about feelings, we mean them in the sense of something we 'do', that is, we 'think' and we 'feel' something. Sometimes, however, we mean them in the sense of something we passively experience, as something that happens 'to' us. There is a tendency in our discourse on emotions to associate physical emotion with passivity and mental feeling with (somewhat more intentional) activity, for which we also have responsibility. I would like to suggest that this slippage is indicative of our everyday experience that emotions are neither primarily passive nor active, neither primarily physical nor cognitive, but always a bit of both. Religious actors can mobilize one or the other characteristic more strongly in the way they perform and understand emotions so that they can fulfill their function as appropriate, authorized media for generating presence. In the conversion experiences typical of Pentecostal and other revivalist Protestant traditions, for example, emotion can function as a medium for the Holy Spirit only if it is experienced as something that overcomes a person. A conversion experience must, in the understanding of this strand of Christian tradition, be experienced passively, so this way of having the emotion is appropriate in those circumstances. In religious practices oriented not around conversion but around a daily discipline of mind and body, emotions are practiced much differently, cultivated in a more intentional fashion for which one is considered to have responsibility. Emotions in this practice might be considered more inner than outer because they are 'done' that way.

Meyer's focus on the body and the senses rehabilitates them from their devaluation in the mentalist or Protestant scheme, but it could go further to undermine the mind-body split that underlies it. The residual dualism in her argument becomes particularly evident when she discusses emotions. Because they bridge, or unite, sensation and cognition, emotions are simultaneously inner and outer and thus both material and immaterial, in varying admixtures, depending on their execution. This hybrid nature would explain why Meyer focuses on the senses and marginalizes emotion and feeling in her argument. Emotion's status as material is in question, whereas sensation is more clearly aligned with the body and can be decisively opposed to the mental.

'Sensation' as an analytic term has some drawbacks, however. If conceived of as unconnected to emotion, it reduces the complexity of perception to two categories: positive and negative, pleasure (Meyer calls it 'feel-good') and pain. An ethnography that draws only on such categories would be a very thin one, indeed. Furthermore, the pleasure-pain hermeneutic of the Enlightenment tradition naturalizes pain as something to be avoided, making anyone who willingly submits to it, or even sees value in it, as deviant and/or pathological—a secular logic that will not fit well with many areas in which anthropologists of religion do their research. Sensation alone runs the risk of producing flat descriptions that overwrite subjective interpretations of sensory experience, which by necessity will cross the boundary into more complex emotions and feelings. The study of sensational forms will inevitably engage emic conceptions of what emotions are that are different from those implicit in Meyer's essay. If, as Meyer suggests, the Pentecostals' full-body involvement, Hindus' olfactory stimulations, and Muslims' rhythmic soundscapes should be the door through which we go to understand their religious practice, then we will be talking with them about their feelings—those subjective experiences that fuse

the inner and outer, the mental and physical. Emotions are the bridge between sensation and meaning, and it is important to understand how they are talked about in a particular discourse and experienced in a particular practice.

It is somewhat surprising that Meyer does not speak of ‘affect’ in her lecture. This term for emotion is more decisively bodily and outward and has become the preferred term in cultural studies, media studies, and other fields concerned with how media ‘affect’ us. When understood in the sense proposed by the philosopher Brian Massumi (2002), affect denotes the physiological dimension of emotion, the ‘pure intensity’ that is devoid of signification, not yet ‘captured’ by the culturally determined meaning that turns an affect into an emotion. It is my guess that Meyer would object, as do many anthropologists and historians, to the notion of a pre-cultural affect. I have observed that many of them do not follow Massumi’s definition, but instead use the term ‘affect’ to emphasize the physical nature of the emotion without implying that it is by necessity pre-cultural. In this usage, affect becomes something more closely aligned with the Bourdieuan concept of habitus: a conditioning of the body to produce certain feelings and emotions habitually, or a predisposition to a certain emotional reaction. In this sense, emotion can be ‘triggered’ and thus experienced passively, but the body that provides the mechanisms for this process has *learned* to do so. The kinds of responses that the body produces to what Bourdieu terms ‘symbolic force’—and these responses can be emotions—can thus be viewed as the release or awakening of “dispositions that the work of inculcation and embodiment has deposited in those who are thereby primed for it” (Bourdieu 2001: 38). No priming, no trigger. Part of the work of understanding affect, therefore, is accounting for the “immense preliminary labour that is needed to bring about a durable transformation of bodies and to produce the permanent dispositions that it triggers and awakens” (ibid.). The aesthetic practices that Meyer describes are part of the habitus-formation that predisposes subjects to the kinds of emotions sought in encounters with the divine presence. Using a term like ‘affect’ in this sense of habitus (not in Massumi’s sense) to emphasize the bodily dimension of emotion—or as I have phrased it elsewhere, to denote an emotional ‘practice’, a particular way of ‘doing’ emotion (Scheer 2012), one that mobilizes physical sensations and processes more strongly—might allow Meyer to integrate emotions and feelings more fully into her concept of mediation. The ways that emotions are practiced, as well as the practices implemented to trigger or awaken certain emotions in the body, could be considered as repeatable, transmissible, circulating ‘forms.’ This can be observed in the very tradition Meyer studies: Pentecostal practices of experiencing the force of the Holy Spirit in tears, falling to the ground, shouting and rejoicing. All of these hybrids of thought and sensation have a long history (Taves 1999) and have moved around the globe.

Looking at the various ways in which emotions are practiced could also lead to a more nuanced conceptualization of sensation, which in this argument is quite unequivocally linked to ‘materiality’, which is in turn quite directly linked to ‘reality’. As Matthew Engelke (2007) has argued, materiality is not solely a given, self-evident property but is also a result of the socialized process of perception and of cultural authorizations. The status ‘material’ is bestowed on some media and not on others, and in some traditions the immaterial essence is considered to be more ‘real’ than fleeting material ephemera. Perception, sensation, feeling, emotion—in a word, experience—have a long and varied history (cf. Jay 2005). Meyer’s inspiring and evocative essay urges us to think carefully about our own assumptions regarding these seemingly natural processes.

■ **MONIQUE SCHEER** is a Professor of Historical and Cultural Anthropology at Tübingen University; monique.scheer@uni-tuebingen.de.

NOTES

1. This has hardly been the case up until recently, particularly in northern and central Europe, where 'folk' Christianity was by and large construed as a 'pre-modern' form of belief to be studied as folklore and religious studies departments were charged with attending to non-Christian religions. A recent turn to New Age spirituality as a modern religion in these same departments still sidesteps the study of the largest denomination, the mainstream Protestant churches, which in some countries finance and govern the theology departments at public universities.

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■ Response to Comments by Birgit Meyer

Many thanks to Hans Belting, Pamela Klassen, Christopher Pinney, and Monique Scheer for engaging so generously with my text by expressing agreement, thinking along, raising critical issues, and making suggestions for further exploration. This is more than the kind of engagement I had hoped for when preparing the Inaugural Lecture on which this text is based. As noted by Klassen, who was present on the spot, in the Netherlands the formal acceptance of a professorship involves a heavily ritualized setting. It is a festive event, in which the speech delivered is expected to present a vision for further research to a broad academic audience. The genre forces the holder of a chair to think beyond her or his own specific expertise, and this implies an effort to translate one's work and put it in perspective. With hindsight, I would say that the text documents the reconfiguration of myself as an anthropologist against the horizon of the multidisciplinary field of the study of religion in the Netherlands. Grounded in a strong Protestant past with its own strengths and limitations (as pointed out perceptively by Belting), it is now a field in transition with regard to its institutional structure¹ as well as its theoretical and methodological presuppositions. Situated in this specific context, my plea for a material approach to religion and a critique of the proverbial Protestant bias is a provocation intended to evoke new conversations and collaborations. Understanding my text as a point of departure that calls forth critical debate, rather than as a fixed standpoint that needs to be defended, I happily take up three important issues raised by my readers: (1) the Protestant bias, (2) religious emotions, and (3) images and the politics of presence. Obviously, more intriguing issues have been raised, but to me these three are the most burning ones. A full treatment of each of them would warrant detailed articles, but in this brief response I will only sketch some ideas.

Stimulated by Talal Asad's critical genealogy of modern understandings of religion, scholars use the term 'Protestant bias' as a shorthand to critique a stance in the anthropology of religion and beyond that takes belief and meaning as being at the core of religion, while regarding body techniques, material objects, and larger issues of (embodied) power as secondary. This critique has yielded inquiries into the archaeology of knowledge production about religion and the development of new, material approaches that seek to identify blind spots and correct shortcomings. In my Inaugural Lecture, I try to do both. While Klassen largely agrees with the approach I propose, she questions the usefulness of the notion of the Protestant bias to come to terms with the past: "Labeling a dualism of mind and body or mental and material as a product of a specifically Protestant bias, however, seems to verge on a kind of essentialization or hypostatization of a particular 'religious tradition' that is both ahistorical and theoretically problematic." Scheer makes a similar point. In other words, there is a paradox here, in that a notion intended to trigger a critical genealogy is found to be itself essentializing and thus contradicting the very archaeology of knowledge it seeks to initiate. Have we reached a point at which the critical potential of the Protestant bias has become exhausted and itself needs to be subject to critique?

I think that Klassen and Scheer, both accomplished scholars of various brands of modern, 'lived' Protestantism in Europe and America, have a point in questioning the ease with which

the attribute 'Protestant' is used to refer to 500 years of a complex global history, or at least to modern post-Enlightenment Protestantism. I note misgivings similar to those articulated by Klassen and Scheer among colleagues trained in sub-disciplines of Protestant theology (biblical literature, church history, world Christianity). It strikes them as misguided and weird to invoke Protestantism in such a generalizing manner—and they are right! I agree that it is high time to unpack what we mean by 'Protestant'; we should be posing questions rather than claiming to know the answers already. This is one of the themes with regard to which anthropologists of religion can certainly benefit from deeper conversations with scholars who are, by virtue of their training, experts in studying Protestantism from many angles. Certainly, and I allude to this in my text, there is the need for more detailed studies of Protestant religiosities in a long-term, historical-comparative perspective.

So what future is there for the notion 'Protestant bias' if, after all, it does not apply—or does so only partially—to the ways in which Protestantism actually happens in the world? Is the spotting of a Protestant bias in the conceptual foundations of the modern study of religion ultimately ill-founded because it distorts Protestantism as a historical phenomenon? Does such a bias exist at all? Problematizing a cleavage between a historical and a 'systematic' (in the sense of conceptual) take on Protestantism, these questions need further attention. Nonetheless, I think that it is warranted to identify a particular bias—whether we call it 'Protestant' or more broadly 'mentalistic' or perhaps something else—in the modern conceptualization of religion. This bias refers to a particular, usually ill-reflected perspective that emerged in critical debates about religion in the context of the Enlightenment and that yielded understandings of religion in terms of "an inward domain of religious ideas, feelings, and inner convictions" (as stated in my Inaugural Lecture), on the level of liberal Protestant theology, in the study of religion, and in society at large. Backed by idealist philosophy and predicated on the problematic dualisms of spirit and matter, mind and body, this mentalistic attitude has arguably informed the way in which the study of religion defined its object and modes of inquiry. Intriguingly, this bias even appears in some form in art history, as highlighted by Belting's report about his "feeling of guilt" for showing "some kind of illegitimate interest" in the material side of religion. And in my everyday exchanges with colleagues and students, as well as with a wider public, I still encounter the predominance of an understanding of religion as a worldview (*levensbeschouwing*, in Dutch) and the lingering idea of 'material religion' being on oxymoron. While this mentalistic attitude is not applicable to Protestant religious practice as a whole, I insist that it can be identified in certain strands of post-Enlightenment Protestant theology (especially Calvinism) as well as in secular attitudes toward religion and in the work of scholars on religion (Max Weber being a prime example).

Critical exploration of the genealogy of religion should avoid using the idea of the Protestant bias as a straw man. At stake is a thorough engagement with the broader genealogy of the dualism of material and mental in all social spheres, paying special attention to how this dualism impinges on the study of religion and, conversely, is indebted to specific Christian repertoires. Let me note here that, as pointed out in my text, I do not wish to privilege material at the expense of mental. I call attention to the former so as to work toward an understanding that encompasses, and ultimately transcends, these opposites for a new synthesis, the terms of which are still to be developed. After all, the idea behind pleading for a material approach to religion is not to finally reach an understanding of what religion really is—or what it is not (and unmask it as an illusion). Materiality is a (still fuzzy) concept that, by directing attention to assemblages of bodies, things, pictures, sounds, and so on, gives new directions to research. So far there is a mismatch between the enthusiastic engagement with the material turn across several scholarly fields, on the one hand, and a clear idea of what materiality—or 'new materialism'—means, on the other. In this situation, reductive versions of materialism, especially with regard to research on the

human brain and cognition, become prominent and receive much funding (as also noted by Klassen). This situation is problematic, but it cannot be resolved by scholars of religion simply rejecting such approaches. As scholars studying religion from a material angle, we also need to partake in rethinking and thinking further what materiality means—a somewhat dazzling task that certainly demands collaboration across the humanities and sciences.

With regard to religious emotions, the second issue I would like to address in response to my readers, Scheer states that my program strikes her “as strongly centered around the body and the senses and only secondarily around feelings and emotions.” She suspects that this may be due to my work on Pentecostal Christians “who themselves prioritize bodily experiences of the Holy Spirit.” By contrast, in her work with Lutherans, Scheer noted a strong emphasis placed on feelings (joy, love, trust, and the like). Scheer is right in observing that my use of these terms stems from “everyday parlance.” I very much agree with her that my approach should be improved and refined by giving further thought to feelings and emotions, making explicit how I conceptualize these two terms in relation to each other, as well as in relation to perception and signification in the framework of ‘sensational form.’ This is an issue yet to be developed, for which Scheer’s important work on religious emotion—and ways of ‘doing’ emotion—serves as a source of inspiration. I would also like to note that I share her critique of a take on affect as pre-cultural and follow her in aligning affect and emotions with Bourdieu’s concept of habitus.

However, I find the contrast Scheer draws between sensation and feeling/emotion somewhat misleading. Invoking the notion of sensational form, my point is to deploy ‘sense’ in three inter-related dimensions: perception, feeling, making sense/signification. In my understanding, sensation is not unconnected to emotion, as Scheer suspects, nor is it more ‘physical’ and ‘bodily’ than emotion. Sensation is not reducible to perception understood as a mere cognitive, neurobiological process, but—as Jacques Rancière also insists—is subject to a ‘distribution of the sensible’ that is at the core of dynamics of power and that is shaped by and shapes authorized (and desired) structures of feeling. In other words, perception is not primary; it is informed by socially transmitted processes of tuning the senses and the cultivation of a religious self. Instead of regarding emotions as less bodily and physical and, by the same token, more social and political than sensations, I want to stress that both emotions *and* sensations are always bodily and physical, as well as social and political. In other words, I would like to propose to Scheer to extend her stance toward emotions to sensations. As for her question whether I consider “emotions to be media for the genesis of presence, or only as epiphenomena of sensory experience,” I can be brief. Of course, emotions are not mere side effects. The fact that this impression may be generated is due to a shortcoming on my part that needs to be overcome. Scheer’s idea of analyzing emotions as media is intriguing; it fits in well with my view of sensation as culturally informed. However, I would be wary to privilege emotions at the expense of sensation and sense-making. I still prefer to place sensational forms (which I regard as material media of religion) at the center of analysis and regard emotions as an integral—albeit alas so far undertheorized—dimension.

So how to integrate all of these dimensions—from the physical or bodily to the social and political—in the study of religious sensations? The problematic opposition of body and mind is now being transcended in favor of an equally problematic synthesis, developed in certain strands of the cognitive turn, that risks reducing research to matters of biological evidence. I do not at all agree with this trend (also criticized by Klassen), which raises complex issues with regard to the philosophy of knowledge. Backed by insights developed in German aesthetics of religion (by, e.g., Alexandra Grieser, Anne Koch, and Jürgen Mohn), I would like to stress that the notion of sensational form pertains to an integrated, holistic understanding of human experience, extending in principle from neurocognitive processes on the level of the brain to politics. I use the term ‘holistic’ in the sense of multi-dimensional and non-reductive. In my view, it would be as

mistaken to break down religion to the functioning of the brain as to deny that the perceptions, emotions, and thoughts cultivated via religious sensational forms involve cognition. One need not do research on this level to acknowledge the relevance of the study of culture and cognition and engage with the insights developed. For me, the adoption of a material approach to religion that takes the body seriously needs to refrain from either paying lip service to a vague idea of embodiment or reducing religion to sheer physical processes. All this certainly requires more fundamental thinking and critical debate in the near future. Again, for me, a material approach does not imply the claim to finally get at what is really there; what is taken as 'real' and 'objective' is necessarily subject to mediation through concepts, terms, and models, also in the natural sciences. Scholars of religion, in particular, may have a role to play in showing how what counts as real is generated (e.g., by showing similarities between scientific and religious fabrications, in the sense of Latour).

With regard to the third issue raised by my readers, images and the politics of presence, I would like to address two interrelated aspects of what I call the 'genesis of presence'. The first concerns the extraordinary. In analyzing my work, Klassen wonders "if placing the genesis of presence—and the sense of the extraordinary—at the core of her working definition of religion unduly jeopardizes her goal of materializing the study of religion." She also suggests that paying so much attention to the emergence of the transcendent in the immanent may betray a Christian legacy (an instance of Protestant bias?). This is a thorny issue about which I am thinking a lot, and which I admittedly have not entirely resolved. While in my view religion certainly is not limited to a concern with what I—pragmatically and provisionally—circumscribe as 'extraordinary' or a sense of a 'beyond', I do think that this concern is a *sine qua non* aspect of religion. Hence my attempt to develop a method to explore how a process of fabrication yields a sense of 'wow' (as I put it in my recent Marett Lecture), how religious mediation makes present what is absent. Intriguingly, Belting asks whether my "definition of presence and medium should not also be applied to a major part of all pictures, both within and beyond religion." So while Klassen seems to wonder whether my take on mediation and the genesis of presence might be too limited and limiting, Belting suggests that it extends to the study of pictures at large. In his volume *Anthropology of Images*, to which he alludes in his comment, he develops a detailed understanding of pictures as media that re-present a mental image that is not present as such. Pictures, he points out, are characterized by a fundamental ambiguity that evolves around the gap between what they represent and the audio-visual codes mobilized for the sake of representation, between absence and presence. To me, this indicates a joint interest across at first sight distant fields, such as the study of religion and art history/*Bildwissenschaft*, to address the difficult-to-grasp capacity and inclination of humans to generate presence rather than take it for granted. In view of increasing conflicts and tensions about the use of images in our globalized world, with its multiple arising 'frontier areas', this conversation should certainly be pursued.

The second aspect concerns what Pinney calls "the oscillating visibility of presence." Using a host of fascinating and diverse examples from his long-standing fieldwork in India and his visit to Krakow, he makes clear that presence has "varying degrees of intensity and efficacy" and is subject to politics and visual regimes. He is right with his observation that in my eagerness to make a convincing argument for a material approach to religion, my position "appears to affirm the demonstration of visibility per se as an academic goal." Indeed, at the core of my Inaugural Lecture is a plea for an understanding of religion as a multi-media phenomenon. Given the centrality of wars about images between Calvinist Protestants and Catholics and the, until recently, indifferent or even dismissive attitude toward images in the study of religion, I believe that the relevance of visual and material culture cannot easily be overemphasized. However, I am thankful to Pinney for raising his critique because this allows me to pre-empt a possible

misunderstanding. Just as what we see is not simply a physical process but depends on “the distribution of the visible,” as Pinney puts it, how we see is mediated through visual regimes. What a picture shows (and conceals) is sensorial, material, and indeed “deeply political,” in Pinney’s words. His pioneering work has been a source of inspiration for me for many years. In fact, in my work on religious visual culture in Ghana (now brought together in a just completed manuscript), I pay detailed attention to clashes between different, partly overlapping visual regimes—involving Pentecostals, proponents of traditional culture and heritage, cultural entrepreneurs, and state representatives—and the ensuing dynamics of revelation and concealment.

I also agree with Pinney’s reminder not to allow an etic perspective on religion-as-mediation—notwithstanding its importance in alerting scholars to easily overlooked aspects of religious practice—to overrule how people themselves use media (in the narrow sense of the term) and deal with images. Of course, this is the hallmark of good ethnography. To do it well, we need to find a balance between concepts that help us unlock complex worlds of lived experience, on the one hand, and deep immersion in such worlds that ultimately challenges these concepts, on the other: an ongoing negotiation between being and representation.

■ NOTES

1. Most public universities in the Netherlands, including my own, have closed down their theology departments and replaced them with religious studies.