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Media, aesthetics, and the study of contemporary religion

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Religious sensations

In the study of religion, no one interested in the question of feelings can bypass the seminal work of the American philosopher and psychologist William James. James (1982: 42) circumscribed religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine”. Although James’s attention to religious feelings and experiences is much to the point, it is also problematic for at least two reasons. First, his emphasis on feelings and experiences is predicated upon a strong distinction between the body, as the locus of senses and emotions, and the mind, as the site of intellectual knowledge. This distinction, which has had repercussions in the study of religion up to the present, reaffirms the Cartesian split between body and mind. Paying attention to religious feelings and experiences would then almost by necessity imply a disregard for more intellectual, rational dispositions (as if these would not also generate and sustain particular feelings and experiences). In my view, this is a vain, unproductive opposition, one that I seek to circumvent.¹

Second, in James’s perspective religious feelings and experiences are by definition private, subjective, and primary, whereas religious organizations such as churches and their doctrines and practices are regarded as secondary. Emphasizing the primary experience of God with the pathos typical of his writing and speaking, James did not realize that the disposition of the lonely individual in search of God is part and parcel of a discursive, and hence shared, cultural construction. The fact that he and those working in line with his ideas take the existence of a primary, authentic, and in this sense seemingly unmediated religious experience at face value is misleading. Indeed, as Charles Taylor puts it in his critical discussion of James’s approach to religious experience: “Many people are not satisfied with a momentary sense of wow! They want to take it further and they’re looking for ways of doing so” (Taylor 2002: 116).²

Without the particular social structures, sensory regimes, bodily techniques, doctrines, and practices that make up a religion, the searching individual craving experience of God would not exist. Likewise, religious feelings are not just

there, but are made possible and reproducible by certain modes of inducing experiences of the transcendental. While from the insider perspective of religious practitioners religion may seem to originate in initially unmediated, authentic experiences of an entity perceived as transcendental, I propose taking as the starting point of our analysis the religious forms that generate such experiences.

In this context it is important to realize that sensation has a double meaning: feeling³ and the inducement of a particular kind of excitement. This inducement is brought about by what I would like to call *sensational forms*, which make it possible to sense the transcendental. Sensational forms, in my understanding, are relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking and organizing access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between religious practitioners in the context of particular religious organizations. Sensational forms are transmitted and shared; they involve religious practitioners in particular practices of worship and play a central role in forming religious subjects. Collective rituals are prime examples of sensational forms in that they address and involve participants in a specific manner and induce particular feelings. But the notion of sensational form can also be applied to the ways in which material religious objects—such as images, books, or buildings—address and involve beholders. Thus, reciting a holy book such as the Qur’an, praying in front of an icon, or dancing around the manifestation of a spirit are also sensational forms through which religious practitioners are made to experience the presence and power of the transcendental. [...]

Let me start to clarify how religious sensations, in the sense of experiences and feelings, are organized by sensational forms, and hence are subject to social construction and power structures, by turning to my own research. A red thread in my work on Christianity, popular culture, and modern mass media in Ghana concerns the connection between local Africans’ conversion to Protestantism and their concomitant incorporation into a modern state and a global capitalist market (Meyer 1992, 1995, 1999). This interest has also pushed me to investigate the current appeal of Pentecostal-charismatic churches (Meyer 1998a, 1998b, 2004a; see also Gifford 2004). By contrast to mainstream Protestantism, Pentecostal religiosity is far more geared to publicly expressing religious feelings. This expressive, public emotionality has pushed me to think about the question of religious sensations.

These churches, to adopt an expression from Bonno Thoden van Velzen, operate as a kind of “pressure cooker—or even microwave—of the emotions” (personal communication), in that they not only generate but also heat up and intensify religious feelings. Pentecostal services are powerful sensational forms that seek to involve believers in such a way that they sense the presence of God in a seemingly *immediate* manner and are amazed by His power. Still, the Holy Spirit does not arrive out of the blue. I have witnessed many such services, in which the pastor and congregation pray for the Holy Spirit to come. After some time, the prayers become louder and louder, and many start speaking in tongues. This is taken as a sign that the Holy Spirit is manifest. At a certain

moment the pastor indicates the end of the prayer session and calls upon the Holy Spirit to heal the sick, protect the vulnerable, and expel demonic spirits. The desire for such a seemingly direct link with the power of God via the Holy Spirit is what made, and still makes, many people migrate to Pentecostal churches and to become born again.⁴ Though in principle all born-again believers are able and entitled to *embody* the Holy Spirit, charismatic pastors are prime exponents of divine power. Indeed, this is what their charisma depends upon and what draws people into their churches.

The latest brand of Pentecostal-charismatic churches, which started to thrive in Ghana in the early 1990s, are run in a businesslike fashion by flamboyant pastors. Making skillful use of the modern mass media, which have become deregulated and commercialized in the course of Ghana's turn to a democratic constitution, Pentecostal-charismatic churches have become omnipresent in the public sphere (Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu 2004; Meyer 2004b). Like American televangelism, many of them make use of the mass media to produce and broadcast spectacular church services to mass audiences. Recorded during church conventions yet edited carefully so as to ensure utmost credibility, such programs claim to offer eye-witness accounts of the power of God to perform miracles via the charismatic pastor and his Prayer Force (De Witte 2003). Featured as an embodiment—indeed an objectification—of divine power, the pastor conveys a sense of amazement and wonder. These programs address anonymous viewers, asking them to participate in the televised event with their prayers so as to feel the presence of God. Some people report that they have been truly touched by God when viewing such programs (De Witte 2005a). What emerges is a new sensational form that makes miracles happen on the television screen and seeks to reach out to a mass audience, which is invited to “feel along” with the televised spectacle witnessed on screen.

I find this incorporation of dramatized, mass-mediated performances of divine power and miracles highly intriguing. This phenomenon is not confined to Pentecostal-charismatic churches but is of broader importance. Modern media have become relevant to religious practice in many settings and shape the sensational forms around which links between human beings and the transcendental evolve. Although I will keep returning to my own research throughout this essay, I hope to be able to show that the question of religious sensations far exceeds that particular ethnographic setting. Though sensed individually, religious sensations are socially produced, and their repetition depends on the existence of formalized practices that not only frame individual religious sensations but also enable them to be reproduced. That is, again, why I talk about sensations in the double sense of persons having particular sensations *and* the inducement of these sensations via sensational forms, forms that encompass the objectifications of “the mysterious or ‘supernatural’ something felt” addressed by Marett, as well as Pentecostalism's televised spectacles and all kinds of less spectacular devices designed to link people with the transcendental and each other.

Modern media and mediation

Thinking about the at times spectacular reports in the daily news about the incorporation of television and the internet into religious traditions, one might be led to think that the presence of media is a distinct characteristic of contemporary religion. Pentecostals' televised performances of miracles, of which I have seen so many in Ghana and elsewhere, are no doubt highly remarkable events. Still, it is important to realize that media are not foreign or new, but intrinsic to religion. As Hent de Vries has argued, religion may well be considered as a practice of mediation (De Vries 2001; see also Meyer 2006a, 2006b; Plate 2003; Stolorow 2005). Positing a distance between human beings and the transcendental, religion offers practices of mediation to bridge that distance and make it possible to experience—from a more distanced perspective, one could say produce—the transcendental. Take, for example, the Catholic icon: though it is carved from wood, painted, and set up—thus obviously manmade—to the believing beholder (and possibly to its maker) it appears as an embodiment of a sacred presence that can be experienced by a contemplative gaze, a prayer, or a kiss. In this perspective, the transcendental is not a self-revealing entity but, on the contrary, always affected or formed by mediation processes, in that media and practices of mediation invoke the transcendental via particular sensational forms. These sensational forms not only mediate the transcendental but often, and in our time increasingly so, depend on modern media such as print and electronic audiovisual devices. In order to avoid confusion, I would like to stress that, in this understanding of religion as mediation, media feature on two levels. Not only do modern media such as print, photography, TV, film, or the Internet shape sensational forms, the latter are themselves media that mediate, and thus produce, the transcendental and make it available to the senses.

For a staunch Protestant, for example, the Bible is never just a mass-produced book but is sacralized as the medium through which God has revealed himself. For Muslims the Qur'an is a holy book. Popular images of Jesus, as David Morgan has shown, are regarded not simply as mass-produced representations but as able to intimate the presence of Christ (Morgan 1998). In India, as the work of Christopher Pinney shows, mass-produced chromolithographs of Hindu gods become sites of worship (Pinney 2004; see also Babb and Wadley 1995). Similarly, mass-produced portraits of the early twentieth century Thai King Chulalongkorn play a central role in popular Buddhist worship practices (Morris 2000; Stengs 2007). In Pentecostal circles, television is regarded as exceptionally well suited to screening the born-again message for a mass public (see also Birman 2006; De Abreu 2002; De Witte 2003, 2005a; Hackett 1998; Oosterbaan 2006).

During my research in Ghana, I encountered many people who referred to televised miracle sessions as being true depictions of the power of God. Television (and video) are seen as modern media that can be used to prove the existence and efficiency of divine power and sustain the belief that “your miracle is on the way,” as one popular Pentecostal slogan goes. During my stay in

Ghana in 2002, I was told about a Nigerian video that depicted a Pentecostal pastor who brings back to life a dead person, taken to church in his coffin. The idea of making audiovisual technologies reveal the reality and power of God, and affirm His superiority over the power of the Devil, is popularized by local video-filmmakers, among whom I have conducted research on the intersection of Christianity, media, and entertainment. Surfing along with the popularity of Pentecostal Christianity, many of them frame their movies as divine revelations that visualize the operation of the “powers of darkness” with the help of the camera and computer-produced special effects. Although spectators know quite well how these movies are made, many still insist that the audiovisual technologies mobilized for the sake of revelation show “what is there” yet remain invisible to the naked eye. In discussions about witchcraft, those defending the position that witchcraft is real refer to Ghanaian and Nigerian video-films, thus backing up their claims with audiovisual evidence. In this sense, these movies are viewed as offering a kind of divine super-vision that enables viewers to peep into the dark.

What all these examples have in common is a salient fusion of media technologies and the transcendental, which they are made to mediate via particular sensational forms. At the same time, precisely because media are indispensable to, and interwoven with, religious mediation, religious practitioners may find new media to be entirely inappropriate, or at least very difficult to accommodate. This is so with indigenous cults in Ghana, whose priests are adamant that cameras may not be brought into their shrines (De Witte 2005b; Meyer 2005a; see also Ginsburg 2006; Spyer 2001). Conversely, processes of religious innovation are often characterized by the adoption of new media, entailing fierce assaults against older media, as in the case of Protestant missionaries’ dismissal of Catholicism and indigenous cults as “idol worship” that should urgently be replaced by a thorough focus on the true source of God’s Word: the Bible as mother tongue. The sensational form evolving around the icon was to be replaced by a new sensational form evolving around the book.

These examples not only suggest that mediation objectifies a spiritual power that is otherwise invisible to the naked eye and difficult to access, thereby making its appearance via a particular sensational form dependent upon currently available media and modes of representation; they also highlight that mediation itself tends to be sacralized by religious practitioners. By the same token, the media intrinsic to such mediations are exempted from the sphere of mere technology and authorized to be suitable harbingers of immediate, authentic experiences (Van de Port 2006; see also Mazzarella 2004; Meyer 2005b). Religious sensations of a presumably immediate encounter with God, or of having direct access to his power, do not happen just “out of the blue”—however much those experiencing these sensations may think so. Such sensations, it needs to be stressed, are prefigured by existing mediation practices, which make it possible for believers to be touched by God in the first place.

Although I have emphasized that religious mediation happens in the immanent and hence depends on human activities, I would be wary of anchoring

religious mediation in theoretical approaches that affirm a contrast between “real” and “made up.” Certainly in the study of religion, we need to recognize the phenomenological reality of religious experience as grounded in bodily sensations. Since I am a scholar rooted in the social sciences, it is not my professional task to make statements concerning the true or imagined existence of the transcendental, or the ontological status of reality. Above all, as social scientists we have to come to terms with the *mediated* nature of experiences that are claimed to be *immediate* and *authentic* by their beholders and are authorized as such by the religious traditions of which they form part (Meyer 2005b; Van de Port 2005, 2006). It is enough neither to deconstruct and dismiss these experiences as “made up” and “faked” nor to take their authenticity at face value (Chidester 2005). I will return to this point in the section on aesthetics below.

The adoption of new media does not happen in a vacuum, but is bound up with broader social and cultural processes. By instigating the shift to the new medium of the printed book during the Reformation, for example, Protestantism also associated itself with new, modern techniques of the self and modes of perception, that is, with the emerging print capitalism that has been crucial to the genesis of the modern nation-state (Anderson 1991). The shift to televangelism, which not only occurs in Christianity but also appeals to members of other religious traditions, can be viewed as an attempt to rearticulate religion in what Walter Benjamin called the “era of technical reproducibility” (Benjamin 1977; see also Öncü 2006; Schulz 2003). If only what is shown on TV truly exists, then the power of God has to appear on TV. As belief becomes thus vested in the image, it becomes hard to distinguish between belief and make-believe, miracles and special effects, or truth and illusion (De Certeau 1984: 186ff; De Vries 2001: 23ff.). The accommodation of such new media and the new sensational forms that go along with them ensure the up-to-dateness of Christianity and its public presence. We could even say that television is called upon to authorize religious sensations as true, while the body of the spectator brings televised images to life, as in the Venezuelan María Lionza Cult studied by Rafael Sánchez, who shows that cult members are possessed by the spirits of TV personae and personalities (see Van de Port 2006; Sánchez 2001). The entanglement of religion, media, and the forces of commercialization, though allowing for the public presence of religion, erodes the possibility of maintaining a clear distinction between religion and entertainment (Moore 1994; see also Guadeloupe 2006). In this sense, as Jeremy Stolow puts it, media and mediation always constitute “inherently unstable and ambiguous conditions of possibility for religious signifying practices,” and thus challenge the maintenance of religious authority (Stolow 2005: 125).

While the adoption of modern audiovisual media certainly transforms practices of religious mediation and the sensational forms through which the transcendental is rendered accessible, we must be careful not to overestimate the power of media *per se* to change the world.⁵ The adoption of modern media, as we found in the context of the research program *Modern Mass Media, Religion, and the Imagination of Communities*, which I directed from 2000 to

2006,⁶ always involves complicated negotiations, yielding processes of transformation that cannot be attributed either to media alone or to the persistence of a fixed religious message. The adoption of modern media allows for the reformation and reactivation of religion in our time. As Mattijs van de Port shows in his study of Brazilian Candomblé, cult members' practices of "visualizing the sacred"—which is supposed to remain secret—in soap-opera-style videos reveal an "inextricable entanglement of religious and media imaginaries that should guide studies of religion in contemporary societies" (Van de Port 2006: 457).

Precisely because media are intrinsic to religion, in the study of contemporary religion we need to pay utmost attention to attitudes toward modern media and their adoption into established practices of religious mediation. Given the strong visual orientation of such modern media, we are well advised to link up with the recent interdisciplinary field of research on visual culture. Important questions for further research are: how does the availability of modern media change religious mediation, and hence the ways in which the transcendental is expressed via particular sensational forms? Are there significant differences between the ways in which different religious traditions, groups, or movements adopt and appropriate different kinds of modern media? What contradictions and clashes arise from the coexistence of the interdiction on making images of God, as found in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, and the dynamics of contemporary visual culture, which thrives on visibility? What kind of religious sensations, in the sense of feelings, are generated when religions adopt new sensational forms, such as the spectacle?

Aesthetics and *aisthesis*

Understanding religion as a practice of mediation that organizes the relationship between experiencing subjects and the transcendental via particular sensational forms requires that the material and sensory dimensions of religious mediation become a focal point of attention. For me, this understanding implies the need to pay attention to aesthetics. My understanding of aesthetics exceeds the narrow sense advocated by Baumgarten and Kant, in which aesthetics refers to the beautiful in the sphere of the arts, more or less confined to the disinterested beholder. Instead, I follow a suggestion made by anthropologists Christopher Pinney and Jojada Verrips, namely, that we link up again with Aristotle's notion of *aisthesis*, understood as organizing "our total sensory experience of the world and our sensitive knowledge of it" (Pinney 2004, 2006; Verrips 2006a: 27). To trace such an understanding of aesthetics in terms of *aisthesis* or sense experience back to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception (Merleau-Ponty 2002),⁷ or to relate it to the phenomenology of religion as developed by Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, or Mircea Eliade,⁸ would be outside my present scope, not to speak of discussing the ins and outs, pros and cons, of phenomenology in general. Let me briefly explain, on the basis of some examples, why I deem it useful to consider the aesthetic dimension of religion.

[...] My plea to acknowledge the aesthetic dimension of religion is grounded in my realization of the shortcomings of more conventional interpretative or symbolic approaches in the study of religion. Sensational forms, though produced and in a sense “made up,” appear as situated beyond mediation exactly because they are—literally—incorporated and embodied by their beholders. These forms evoke and perpetuate shared experiences, emotions, and affects that are anchored in a taken-for-granted sense of self and community, indeed, a *common sense* that is rarely subject to questioning exactly because it is grounded in shared perceptions and sensations. Common sense is what gets under the skin, enveloping us in the assurance “this is what really is.”

[...] My ideas about the aesthetic dimension of religion have been particularly stimulated by the work of David Morgan (Morgan 1998, 2005). On the basis of his highly original investigation of the role of mass-produced images in popular American Protestantism, he proposes understanding religious images as artifacts that attribute reality to representations of the divine, making it appear as if the picture possesses “its referent within itself” (Morgan 1998: 9). Such religious images are important examples of what I call sensational forms. Being part and parcel of religious mediation, they can best be understood as a condensation of practices, attitudes, and ideas that structure experiences of the transcendental and hence “ask” to be approached in a particular manner. Far from resembling Kant’s disinterested beholder of an aesthetic object, believers (have learned to) expect that images mediate the transcendental in a process that miraculously vests them with divine presence. Believers are led to engage in particular religiously induced “looking acts” so as not only to see the image but to sense the divine power that shines through it. Such “looking acts” are not confined to seeing alone but induce sensations of being touched. In this sense, religious images do not just meet the eye but have a thoroughly carnal dimension (cf. Sobchack 2004). Thus, rather than being persuasive in and of themselves, religious images work in the context of particular grammars and traditions of usage, which evoke religious sensations by teaching particular ways of looking and induce particular dispositions and practices toward them. In other words, such images are part and parcel of a particular religious aesthetic, which governs believers’ sensory engagement with the transcendental and with each other.⁹

Morgan’s work is not only useful for the study of religious images per se,¹⁰ but can be extended to religious sensational forms in a broader sense, that is, the whole range of religious materials conveying a sense of the sublime, from images to texts, from objects to music. Mediating the transcendental and raising religious sensations, these material sensational forms require our utmost attention. They are the anchor points from which religious aesthetics unfold. At the same time, it is important to realize that significant differences exist between the sets of sensational forms (and the religious aesthetics that go along with these sensational forms) that are at the core of particular religious traditions, groups, or movements at a given time. Different media appeal to the senses in different ways: it makes a big difference whether a religious organization is rich in

imagery and foregrounds vision or poor in imagery, or even iconoclastic, and foregrounds listening.

Of course, the aesthetic that goes along with a particular sensational form does more than just organize vertical encounters of religious subjects with the transcendental. Aesthetics is also key to the making of religious subjects in a broader sense. Religious organizations can be characterized as having distinct sensory regimes. As Talal Asad, Charles Hirschkind, and Saba Mahmood have argued, specific bodily and sensory disciplines give rise to particular sensibilities (see Asad 1993; Hirschkind 2001; Mahmood 2001). These sensibilities impart a particular sense of the self and one's being in the world—if you wish, a particular identity.¹¹ Religious subjects are created (ideally, that is) by a structured process—a religious didactics—in which the senses are called upon and tuned in a way that yields a habitus.¹² This process not only entails a strong emphasis on specific, privileged, sensory, and extra-sensory perceptions but also the tuning down or anaesthetization of other senses or sensory perceptions (Verrips 2006a; see also Buck-Morss 1992). We are all familiar with the fact that an overabundance of sensory perceptions may impede our—and our children's—concentration and attention (Crary 2001); techniques of meditation, for instance, are called upon to overcome such distracting perceptions and concentrate on what “really matters.” Charles Hirschkind has argued that Islamic reform movements incorporate the use of mass-produced cassette sermons into an “ethics of listening,” which emphasizes the importance of the ear as the key site for raising a pious Muslim subject (Hirschkind 2001; see also Schulz 2003, 2006). In the midst of the soundscape of the city of Cairo, seated in taxis or in noisy environments, young Muslims create their own soundscape by listening to cassettes. In her work on the Catholic charismatic renewal in Brazil, Zé de Abreu has shown that the priest and pop star Marcello Rossi is able to tune tens of thousands of people into “the aerobics of Jesus,” which entails distinct breathing techniques to induce an exhilarating, albeit ephemeral, feeling (De Abreu 2005). [...]

The bodily and sensory disciplines implied in making religious subjects are also key to invoking and affirming links among religious practitioners. In this sense, aesthetics is central to the making of religious communities. Style is a core aspect of religious aesthetics (Meyer 2006c; see also Maffesoli 1996). Inducing as well as expressing shared moods, a shared religious style—materialized in, for example, collective prayer, a shared corpus of songs, images, symbols, and rituals, but also a similar style of clothing and material culture—makes people feel at home. Thriving on repetition and serialization, style induces a mode of participation via techniques of mimesis and emulation that yield a particular habitus. In a world of constant change, style offers some degree of continuity and stability (though style is at the same time subject to change, as styles come and go). In this sense, style is the *sine qua non* of identity. Sharing a common aesthetic style via a common religious affiliation not only generates feelings of togetherness and speaks to, as well as mirrors, particular moods and sentiments: such experiences of sharing also modulate people

into a particular, common appearance, and thus underpin a collective religious identity. [...]

Interestingly, once implanted in a person, religious aesthetics may endure independently of exterior religious regimes or an active religious affiliation. Anyone having decided to step out of a particular religion may be puzzled about the resilience of particular religiously induced bodily disciplines and sensory practices, which it may be impossible to shed entirely (see Verrips 2006b). A good many ex-Protestants are still gripped by a diffuse feeling of awe when they hear the sound of a church organ. In Holland there are many post-Calvinists who regard themselves as secular and yet espouse an aesthetics that is deeply rooted in Calvinism. In situations of religious change, people may feel torn between the sensory modalities of the religion they embrace and those of the religion they have left behind. African converts to Christianity may still feel touched—or even get possessed—by the sound of “pagan” drums.

Conversely, encounters with a new religion often work through the body, making it difficult for researchers to maintain an outsider’s position. Many anthropologists have reported how they have been sucked into the sensory modes of the religion they have studied, without even being aware of it—as in the case of Susan Harding, who found her mind to be taken over by the voice of the Baptist pastor who had been preaching to her for more than four hours (Harding 2000). Such examples stress the importance of aesthetics in underpinning people’s sense of belonging and being in the world. But taking into account the aesthetic dimension of religion may also help us realize why it is that religious people may feel offended, or even hurt, when they are confronted with blasphemous images or sacrilegious acts, from Christians’ being shocked by desecrating images of Mary or the crucifixion staged by pop singer Madonna in her 2006 performance, to Muslims’ distress over illicit representations of the prophet, about which we now hear so much in the news (Verrips 2006b).

Precisely because religious mediations objectify the transcendental in sensational forms that call upon the body and tune the senses of religious practitioners so as to invest these forms with ultimate truth, emphasis on the aesthetic dimension of religion is indispensable. Indeed, focusing on mass media and religious mediation calls for attention to the senses and the body. Therefore, in our research we need to explore how modern media and the body, the audiovisual and the material, intersect (Spyer 2005). Important questions for further research are: what kinds of bodily disciplines and sensory regimes are peculiar to particular religious organizations, including both those that belong to major world religions and new modes of spirituality, as in New Age? What are the differences? Which senses do specific sensational forms, from the Bible to virtual sites of worship in cyberspace, from icons to mass-produced posters, address? What impact do religious aesthetics have on the making and appeal of religious identities, and on the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion of which they are part? How do religious aesthetics relate to other identities, and why and how do they survive, even though a person may leave a particular religion?

Notes

- 1 In anthropology, so-called intellectualist approaches, which reduce religion to a quest for knowledge (as developed by E.B. Tylor and later Robin Horton), and so-called expressivist or symbolist approaches, which emphasize the importance of feeling and experience, have long been at loggerheads. While the former tend to focus on “words” and “meaning,” the latter tend to foreground “images” and “experience.”
- 2 Taylor says this in his discussion of the appeal that James’s work has today. James misrecognized formal spiritual practices, however. Peter van Rooden critiques Schleiermacher along similar lines (Van Rooden 1996). A host of approaches to religion as experience can be critiqued along the lines suggested by Taylor and Van Rooden.
- 3 Given that the term *sense*, contained in *sensation*, also denotes *Sinn*, or “meaning,” it is important not to confine sensation to feeling alone but to see it as encompassing the formation of meaning (not as a purely intellectual endeavor, but as enshrined in broader processes of “sensing”). This allows us to transcend the infelicitous opposition between approaches in the study of religion that focus on feelings, experiences, and the body, on the one hand, and the production of meaning as a purely intellectual endeavor on the other [...]. In my understanding, the production of meaning always involves bodily experiences and emotions.
- 4 Because the Holy Spirit does not enter into and stay in a person just like that, Pentecostalism teaches a set of religious disciplines, such as Bible study, extensive fasting, and intense individual and collective prayer in small prayer cells. (See Van Dijk 2005.) To be filled with and express the Holy Spirit is not only a question of inward, contemplative spirituality but also a question of power: only those filled with the Holy Spirit are held to be invulnerable to evil spirits and empowered to lead a happy, prosperous life.
- 5 We find such a stance not only in Marshall McLuhan’s famous dictum “The medium is the message” but also, e.g., in the thinking of Manuel Castells. In Castells’s view, religion stands separate from the “integrated communication system based on digitized electronic production, distribution and exchange of symbols” that generates the social networks that characterize the information age (Castells 1996: 406). Referring to an eternal truth that cannot be mediated via the technologies of the information age, religion is, in Castells’s view, a conservative force, and thus a matter of the past, doomed to disappear in favor of secularization. The adoption of modern mass media by religion—Castells invokes the example of televangelism—ultimately destroys religion’s legitimacy: when “all wonders are online,” “societies are finally and truly disenchanted” (*ibid.*). I disagree with Castells’s view of religion as a reactive force, which can only be corrupted and rendered obsolete by taking up modern mass media. For how mistaken it is to understand the rise of public, mass-mediated religion in this manner, see Meyer and Moors (2006) and De Vries (2001).
- 6 For more information on this program, see www.pscw.uva.nl/media-religion (accessed November 4, 2010).
- 7 For Merleau-Ponty, perception has priority over reason (Merleau-Ponty 2002). Thinking is grounded in the perceived world, that is, in experiences that precede reflection. This means that the body is central: via the body, humans are both part of and able to experience the world. This experience mobilizes all the senses.
- 8 As intimated in the section on religious sensations (pp. 159–61), one of the big problems with phenomenological approaches in the study of religion is the strong bias toward interiority and the assumption of a transcendent reality out there. This entails a neglect of the social construction of the transcendental in the immanent. In his stimulating article “Asymptote of the Ineffable: Embodiment, Alterity, and the Theory of Religion” (2004), Thomas Csordas critically discusses the phenomenology of religion. While his ideas about the importance of embodiment resonate with my

plea to take into account the aesthetic dimension of religion, I still find his claim that alterity forms the “phenomenological kernel” of religion problematic because it fails to include the social dimension. I agree with the point raised by Michael Lambek, that Csordas “has some way to go now to link alterity with the social and the moral” (Lambek 2004: 179).

- 9 Morgan’s ideas resonate remarkably well with recent approaches developed in the field of cinema studies, which challenge the association of vision and the visual with the eye alone, and the concomitant disassociation from other senses. In particular, Laura Marks (*The Skin of the Film*, 1999) and Vivian Sobchack (*Carnal Thoughts*, 2004) have stressed the need to develop a more visceral, carnal approach to the visual, one that is rooted in the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (and Dufrenne 1973) and can take note of the multisensory, synaesthetic impact of images in constituting a sense of being in the world.
- 10 See Allen and Polly Roberts’s exploration of the power of images of Sheik Amadou Bamba to sacralize space in the city of Dakar (Roberts and Roberts 2003), or Christopher Pinney’s analysis of how a visual engagement with printed images of Hindu gods yields a particular “corpotherics.” Pinney coins the term *corpotherics* to avoid confusion with conventional understandings of aesthetics in the Kantian sense. Entailing “a desire to fuse image and beholder, and the elevation of efficacy [of beholders’ encounter with the image] ... as the central criterion of value” (Pinney 2004: 194), Pinney’s understanding of corpotherics and my understanding of aesthetics in terms of aisthesis converge.
- 11 *Identity* is a central concept in current debates. It refers to a host of meanings. I understand “identity” to mean belonging to a particular social formation that is inclusive as well as exclusive. Identity, as Peter Geschiere and I have argued in *Globalization and Identity*, creates boundaries and promises clarity and security in a world characterized by distraction and fragmentation (Meyer and Geschiere 1998). In this sense, identity needs to be placed in a dialectic of flow and closure. I would suggest that we should take into account the importance of the senses and sensations in invoking and sustaining identities that people feel to be natural and thus beyond question. I do not, of course, want to claim the existence of primordial, essentialized identities. The point is, rather, to understand why and how personal and collective identities, though constructed, are perceived as “natural” and “real.” (See Meyer 2006c.)
- 12 For an illuminating discussion of habitus (and hexis) in the thinking of Bourdieu (and Mauss), see Roodenburg (2004).