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**light mediations:
introduction
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ABSTRACT

This introduction argues that the study of light and lighting devices, and the light mediations yielded by them, is important for scholars of material religion. Discussing the four articles on aesthetics of light in Christianity, we argue that synthesizing metaphorical and physical uses of light allows for a deep understanding of the processes through which a professedly immaterial transcendent becomes real for religious practitioners in the material world. Inspired by these contributions and the two essays in the *In Conversation* section, we plead for a methodology of following the light in scholarly research.

Keywords: media and mediation, aesthetics of light, golden retables, stained glass, magic lantern, megachurch lighting, media spectacles

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The term “light” presents some unique opportunities, but also some conceptual challenges, for the study of material religion. Neither strictly material nor immaterial, neither clearly subjective nor objective, light is a key mediator of human perception and experience, of the natural order as well as metaphysics, and of powers of imagination, representation, and knowledge. The term “light mediations,” which we chose as the title for this special issue, points to the use of light as a religious mediator that, even as it gestures towards the unseen, depends on material conditions and affordances of mediation. The recognition that light simultaneously *mediates* and *is mediated* opens up a rich field of aesthetic-theological deliberations that exceeds strictly metaphorical appraisals of light and calls attention to the manners by which light is captured, channeled, projected, or is employed to make things shine or glitter or to cast shadows. Light is embedded in the materiality of the world and yet it is employed as an indispensable means of reaching or pointing beyond it.

Focusing especially on the appraisal and use of light in the Christian tradition, this special issue of *Material Religion* explores a range of modalities of “light mediations.” All four articles take as a starting point that, across Christianity, light is a prime characteristic of the divine, and each article examines particular instances whereby light is deployed to evoke a sense of divine presence, or of the aura of the metaphysical, for beholders. Bissera Pentcheva explores how sunrays and candlelight shaped the experience of medieval beholders of a golden retable (altar shelf) at Stavelot Abbey in Belgium, enabling them to perceive the figures as animated harbingers of the divine. Jojada Verrips traces the use of stained glass in medieval Gothic cathedrals and contemporary art exhibitions, noting how this translucent medium makes a professed transcendent visible in the immanent. Frank Kessler and Sabine Lenk examine the use of the magic lantern to teach the gospel through images in early twentieth-century Belgium and France. Katja Rakow analyses how contemporary light design and sound technologies mediate the presence of God in an American Evangelical church. Together, our contributors raise questions about how precisely distinct forms of illumination and projection are designed to make beholders experience divine presence, to provoke affective states among them, or to facilitate new bases of coordinated action and collective identity.

This is hardly the first attempt to examine the topic of “religion and light.” Our work here is preceded by a longstanding preoccupation, especially within the history and phenomenology of comparative religion, to account for the proliferation of metaphors and symbols of solar and lunar light, darkness and shadows, fire, and color within the cosmological, metaphysical, and ethical discourses of diverse religious traditions (Christopolous et al. 2010; Eliade 1958, 1971; Gruber 2019; Kapstein 2004; Weightman 1996). A recurring motif in this scholarship is the central, perhaps indispensable, role of light

metaphors in larger efforts to imagine and experience the presence of divine or transcendent agencies, or to visualize otherwise formless ideas, whether those be the body of God, the unity of the cosmos, the condition of rational thought, or the capacity to distinguish good from evil. In this comparative vein, scholars have noted how frequently solar light in particular is invoked as the very personification of divine agency, such as in the cases of the Egyptian Sun God, Re, the Greek Apollo, the Incan Inti, the Hindu Surya, and not least, that most infamous of fallen angels, Lucifer (see, *inter alia*, Assmann 1995; Fox 1967; Hornung 2001). Others have noted the many ways the shining of light serves as a metaphor for revelation and knowledge acquisition, not only in the history of religious quests and mystical insights, but also in their putatively secular reworkings, such as in the case of European political philosophers of Enlightenment, whose principles of clarity of thought or transparency in decision-making were typically invoked through appeals to similes of bright daylight or transparent glass (Blumenberg 1993; Koslofsky 2011; Levitt 2009; Mikuriya 2017). Nevertheless, because these lines of scholarship typically focus on the *metaphorical* association of light with divine or sacred presence, and have favored close readings of canonical religious or philosophical texts, they have not offered much insight into the ways in which light is actually employed in religious practices and in directing people's gaze.

For their part, technical arrangements of illumination and light projection have long served as an indispensable instrument of spectacle-making. That relationship is so old that we can readily imagine its origins in the advent of the human species itself, when our earliest ancestors gathered around burning fires that provided not only a source of heat and culinary possibility but also dazzled and seduced their viewers through the projection of an artificial light source, especially in the dead of night (Herrstrom 2017). From the most ancient "media spectacles," epitomized by the parables of Plato's cave and of Moses and the Burning Bush, to the orchestration of data projectors and similar high-tech equipment in the contemporary period, light-bearing techniques and technologies for directing, projecting, intensifying, or even extinguishing light have indeed been deployed in the service of various "spectacular" religious ends, endowing the users of such instruments with the power to attract, to instruct, to excite, to subdue, or even to overpower viewers through the generation and manipulation of colors, projected figures and forms, and other effects.

Nevertheless, studies of such scenarios have for the most part adopted an instrumentalist approach, in which "light" is assumed to be an uncontroversial and thus not a particularly noteworthy aspect of the natural world in which religious actors and their instruments operate. Skirting fundamental ontological and epistemological questions about light itself – as *both* a medium of propagation *and* a subjective perceptual experience

– this research tends to focus instead on the communicational contents that light-bearing technologies deliver. To that extent, rarely have scholars considered how the act of beholding light might itself constitute a kind of religious experience, however empty and contentless: a pre- or non-discursive mode of engagement that lies at the very heart of visual perceptual experience and that, as such, offers important clues about what constitutes religious knowledge and action. What we wish to draw attention to here, in other words, is a fundamental ambiguity in the category of light itself, which we conceive as both immaterial and yet inescapably embedded in the materiality of the world, as both subjective and objective, both phantasmatic and mundane.

For one thing, as even a most rudimentary phenomenological study will remind us, there is no way to separate light from the experience of (audio-)visual perception, since each is a necessary condition of possibility for the other. Without light, there is nothing to see, just as an overabundance of light produces its own form of blindness (Tonda 2015). But without a seeing subject, the very idea of light becomes meaningless, and efforts to produce or make use of objective definitions of light as a physical force must inevitably refer back to an imagined viewer: a subject charged with the task of discerning its propagation in space and registering its transformative effects. Bright or dark, transparent or opaque, colored or colorless, pure or impure, light as a medium operates as an agent that shapes both the perceiving subject and its environment and as such defines the very possibility of their interrelation.

How, then, might the nexus of religion and light be re-examined in a way that attends carefully to the particularities of individual perceptual experience and to the social and political contexts in which individuals act, while at the same time taking seriously the fundamental enigmas of light and its technological mediation? While the studies presented in this special issue are limited in scope, not least because of their predominant focus on the history of Christianity, they point the way to a much larger set of questions about how light-bearing media, architectural arrangements, and related technological forms make their appearance in diverse contexts of religious practice and experience. Highlighting how the conceptual *and* practical uses of light yield specific “light mediations” that may generate experiences of divine presence for religious practitioners, the authors open up new vistas. Three issues that cut across the four articles stand out in particular.

First, in the settings presented in the four articles, the use of light appears to be at the core of theological conceptualizations of the linkage between terrestrial and celestial, immanent and transcendent, or matter and spirit. The authors introduce a number of lighting experts, including the twelfth-century abbots Wibald (Pentcheva) and Sugerius (Verrips), early twentieth-century Catholic priests versed in the use of the magic lantern (Kessler & Frenk), and the early twenty-first-century director of

the Lighting Ministry at Lakewood Church, Tom Stanziano (Rakow). Notwithstanding all their differences, these lighting experts articulate a strikingly constant theological aesthetics of light, in which conceptualizations of the Christian God as the ultimate light merge seamlessly with the use of specific devices that activate and direct beholders' gaze towards the divine – without, however, revealing it in full. Particularly intriguing is the resonance between medieval modes of activating the senses by directing them towards the reflection of light on the surface of an image (Pentcheva) or the play of sunrays through stained glass (Verrips), and present-day modes of production of visual effects, such as the projection of colored clouds in the contemporary Lakewood Church. Always the point is to make beholders see with their physical eyes in the material world, and yet in so doing, to experience an encounter with divine presence. For this mediation to be achieved, light appears to be indispensable.

Second, developing these aesthetics involves active negotiation of available technologies and lighting devices. Stained glass windows only became possible with Gothic architecture, and access to an expensive reflective metal such as gold was required to make an altar image shine. Moreover, these same material conditions also set the terms for their possible destruction; golden retables could be melted down, due to the precious material they are made from, as was the case with Wibald's altar at Stavelot (Pentcheva), and for their part, many stained glass windows were smashed during sixteenth-century Calvinist Protestant iconoclastic attacks (Verrips). Not only could existing arrangements of light mediation be turned into targets for destruction, evolving technological possibilities could become the subject of heated contestation and controversy. Among Catholic priests in Belgium and France, the magic lantern provided the pretext for one such debate. While it was situated in a long genealogy of employing lighting devices such as golden retables and stained glass as harbingers of divine vision, its specific adoption occurred in a secular age, in which Christianity was under pressure. The lantern was feared to profanize faith, while at the same time offering superb possibilities to counter the modern world's secularity through powerful projections of faith (Kessler & Lenk). Interestingly, by contrast, the Lakewood Church sees no problem investing in high-tech lighting and sound devices (designed by Philips Corporation) for its worship services, which it understands as a reliable means of securing divine presence. The Lakewood Church's use of light reverberates with earlier medieval uses of light, as for instance in the abbey of Stavelot. In medieval Christianity light was employed to animate images, whereas current Evangelicals strongly reject such use. And yet, underneath these different stances towards the prospect of an "animated image," there is a stunning similarity in the aesthetics of light employed; in both cases, light provides the essential element for evoking an atmosphere that lures people into perceiving and experiencing divine presence.

Third, in their attention to the minutiae of instrumentally-mediated techniques, the articles collected here offer crucial insight into the ways religious actors organize space and time, knowledge and power in the service of distinct religious goals, whether this take form as the strategic placement of candles, lamps, lanterns, windows and curtains, or in the uptake of technologies endowed with the capacity to control or direct light for the purposes of recording, projecting, or otherwise disseminating visual images, including cameras, magic lanterns, cinematic projectors, or television and computer screens. The point here is that a focus on light is not confined to the study of practices of lighting and affordances of light media as such. More than this, it offers an entry point into multi-sensorial and multi-medial religious spectacles in which beholders, objects and environments are interlinked. Seeing and following the light by way of method allows one to grasp the making of religious sensations across a range of sites in past and present, such as medieval monasteries in which the light shining on the figures of a golden retablo renders them alive for its monks (Pentcheva), Gothic cathedrals with their stained glass windows that offer beholders glimpses of heaven (Verrips), “exceedingly dignified” illustrated lectures in which the display of magic lantern slides was embedded in musical performance and preaching (Kessler & Lenk), or the use of light and sound to create a highly charged, atmospheric space in the American Lakewood church seating 16,000 persons (Rakow).

Our *In Conversation* section offers two grounded reflections about uses of light outside of the Christian spectrum, in a Candomblé temple in Bahia, Brazil (Van de Port), and among Muslims in Cairo for whom the prophet Muhammad is the light (*nur*) (Suhr). Both authors think about their own stances vis-à-vis the religious light regimes they encounter. Van de Port works through the clash he feels between his personal aesthetics of light and the ways in which his interlocutors in the temple readily make use of bright and cold LED-bulbs. Christian Suhr introduces film – the modern medium of light par excellence – as a means to develop a microphenomenology of the intersections between physical and spiritual light, asking how subjective experiences of and with light could be represented. The pieces by Van der Port and Suhr offer intriguing examples of the merits of following the light and trying to see by way of method in research.

In sum, the use of light in religious settings offers an excellent opportunity to study religion from a material angle, in ways that recognize the physicality of religious media and, at the same time, their capacity to gesture towards a professed beyond. A focus on how lighting devices – from gold, jewels, and glass to modern high-tech apparatuses – are employed to transform, as Sugerius put it more than 800 years ago, “that which is material to what is immaterial” (Verrips), suggests fruitful new avenues of investigation for scholars of material religion.

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