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Religious Sensations.

Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of
Contemporary Religion

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Opgedragen aan mijn ouders Else Meyer en Hans-Jürgen Meyer (†).

Rector, ladies and gentlemen,

Two years ago I was appointed to the chair of Cultural Anthropology, with special emphasis on the study of religion and identity. Having cooperated with my predecessor André Droogers on a part time basis, since last month I have held a fulltime position in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at this university. In this department, the study of religion has for long been a central, distinctive focus. Given my own keen interest in the anthropology of religion, I feel that I am at the right place.¹ As a scholar, I feel challenged to contribute to a better understanding of religion today. With this lecture, through which I officially accept my chair, I would like to share with you some of my ideas about how to study religion in our present-day world.

Whether we like it or not, religion appears to be of utmost importance in the early 21st century. The idea that the public relevance of religion would decline with modernization and development, yielding a disenchanted world, is contradicted by actual developments, from the manifestation of so-called political Islam to the rise of Pentecostal-charismatic movements propagating the Gospel of Prosperity; from wars that mobilize religious convictions to acts of terror in the name of God; from contests over blasphemous representations and sacrilege on the part of Muslims and Christians to the deep entanglement of religion and entertainment; from accusations of witchcraft to the organization of Wicca fairs; from online wonders to magic in adverts; from public crusades dedicated to defeat the Devil to high-tec Evangelical youth conventions; from internet religiosity to the upsurge of religious tourism. Religion, in a variety of guises, is found to thrive not only in the so-called non-Western world, but also in the supposed strongholds of modernity. It is clear that religion has become a matter of concern and a topic of public debate even for those who strongly defend a secular social order, a rational outlook or even, as advocated by Slavoj Žižek in the latest issue of *Lettre Internationale* (2006), reappraise atheism.

Public debates and concerns about what is popularly framed as the 'return of religion' are often based on rather simplistic ideas about the relationship between religion and modernity, as if more education would entail the demise of belief in God, or progress and democracy would yield a secular, more rational attitude, and above all ensure a clear distinction between religion and politics. The study of contemporary religion requires more sophisticated approaches.² By now many scholars state that the notion of secularization³ is inappropriate as a theoretical point of departure (e.g.: Asad 2003; De Vries 2001; Scott & Hirschkind 2006; Thomas 2005; Van der Veer 2001: 14ff). The proposition made by Jürgen Habermas (2001, 2005) in the aftermath of 9/11 to characterize our contemporary era as 'postsecular' is well-taken in that it takes seriously the relevance of religion as a political and social force. However, given the frequent appeal made to secularism in public debates I am hesitant to qualify our contemporary era as post secular. In order to grasp the relevance of religion, we need what I would like to call a post-secularist approach. Post-secularist in the sense that, rather than inscribing into our theoretical frameworks the opposition of secular and religious that has entered our modern social imaginaries, we need to take this opposition as an object of study, as also suggested by Talal Asad in his book *Formations of the Secular* (2003; see also Mahmood 2005), and investigate the question of religion with open minds. We need to develop alternative theoretical frameworks that do not approach contemporary religion as an anachronism that is expected to vanish or become politically irrelevant with modernization, but instead seek to grasp its appeal, persistence and power. This inaugural lecture is meant as a contribution to this larger project.

As the substance, role and place of religion in political and social-economic power structures is subject to historical change, I am not in favour of defining religion in universal terms, as if it had an ever valid essence. Talal Asad (1993) has pointed out that the supposedly universal definitions that have been developed since the rise of the study of religion as a scientific discipline in the mid 19th century are derived from a specific, modern religiosity that does not necessarily fit in with different cultural contexts and other religious traditions (see

also Chidester 1996; Molendijk & Pels 1998; Nye 2000; Van Rooden 1996a). Rather than working with universal definitions, we need to realize that religion is always situated in history and society. Calling for the study of contemporary religion, then, means to situate religious organizations, such as churches, cults, movements, or networks in relation to the economic, social and political power structures that shape our contemporary world. In so doing, we need to be alert to both the specificity of, *and* the manifest and structural similarities between religious organizations.⁴ In this sense, the study of contemporary religion must entail detailed, empirical research *and* comparison.⁵

It may strike you as inconsistent that I reject a universal definition of religion, and yet dare to talk about religion. But it is not.⁶ I take it that, broadly speaking, religion refers to the ways in which people link up with, or even feel touched by, a meta-empirical sphere that may be glossed as supernatural, sacred, divine, or transcendental.⁷ What interests me as an anthropologist is how people's links with this meta-empirical sphere are shaped by, as well as shape links among them and organize them into particular social forms, thus sustaining particular modes of being and belonging. In what follows, I refer to this meta-empirical sphere as 'the transcendental', because this term best captures the sense of going beyond the ordinary that is at the core of religious sensations, the central theme of this lecture. To avoid misunderstandings I would like to stress that, being a social scientist, I do not approach the transcendental from a theological perspective.⁸ My key concern is to grasp how experiences of the transcendental are invoked in the here and now and underpin individual and collective identities. In this sense, my approach of the transcendental is resolutely 'down to earth'.

I have just outlined the vantage point from where I propose to study contemporary religion. From now on my lecture will unfold in the rhythm suggested by its title. In the next part I will call attention to the central theme: the question of 'religious sensations'. Then I will turn to 1) modern media and mediation, 2) aesthetics and aisthesis, and 3) power. It is my sincere hope that after having moved through

this trajectory I will have made clear why and how media, aesthetics and power matter in the study of contemporary religion.

Religious Sensations

In research on modern religion, approaches emphasizing religious sensations have existed somewhat in the shadow of narratives stressing what Max Weber (1864-1920) called the 'disenchantment of the world'. According to Weber (1984), we may recall, Protestantism had played the role of midwife for the emergence of modern capitalism, but its spirit, once upon a time able to overwhelm believers and generate the particular pious attitude and work ethic necessary for the rise of capitalism, had died off.⁹ Modern people were stuck in what he famously called 'ein stahlhartes Gehäuse' (imperfectly translated as 'iron cage'): a disenchanted society in which persons had become subject to the forces of capitalism, its rigid time regime, its devastating consumption of natural resources, and the nervousness of urban life. They might long for a 'return of the gods', deep spiritual experiences, and new charismatic leaders- something Weber increasingly felt in his own life and that may be recognizable also to some of us here- but there was no way back, certainly for an intellectual as Weber who felt driven to mercilessly deconstruct such attempts as vain chimeras.¹⁰

Weber's notion of the disenchantment of the world, and the role which Protestantism played therein, obviously had a far stronger impact on our thinking about religion and modernity than his rather gloomy and dark reflections on the modern condition that give a glimpse of his personal feelings, and the overall mood of the *fin de siècle* that ended with WW I. The former fits in easily with an understanding of modernity in terms of increasing rationalization and the demise of religion.¹¹ For my purposes – contributing to a post-secularist framework – it is useful to at least acknowledge the desperate, somewhat nostalgic longing of the modern person for spiritual fulfilment that thrives in the shadow of disenchantment (a fulfilment that would eventually rejoin a person with his or her own nature or *Kreatürlichkeit*). Nineteenth-century Orientalist searches for

an Eastern spirituality (Van der Veer 2005) and the emergence of movements as New Age or the Wicca in our time (Hanegraaf 1996; Heelas 1996; Ramstedt 2004; Van Harskamp 2000) promise to fulfil as much as nurture such a longing. But this longing also has been found to be at the basis of modern consumerism (Campbell 1987), or modern people's quest for authenticity (see special issue on authenticity, Etnofoor 2004).

In the study of religion, for anyone interested in the question of feelings it is impossible to bypass the seminal work of the American philosopher and psychologist William James (1841-1910). James 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' (1982: 42). Although James' attention for religious feelings and experiences is much to the point, it is also problematic for at least two reasons. One, 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 repercussions in the study of religion until now, reaffirms the Cartesian split of body and mind. Paying attention to religious feelings and experiences would then almost by necessity imply a disregard of 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 that I seek to circumvent.¹²

Second, in James' 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 that is typical for 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 put it in his critical discussion of James' approach of 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 to doing so' (2002: 116).¹³

Without the particular social structures, sensory regimes, bodily techniques, doctrines and practices that make up a religion, the searching individual craving for experiences 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 be found to originate in initially unmediated, authentic experiences of an entity perceived as transcendental, I propose to take as a starting point of our analysis those religious forms that generate such experiences.

In this context it is important to realize that sensation has a double meaning: feeling¹⁴ and the inducement of a particular kind of excitement. This inducement is brought about by what I would like to call *sensational forms* that make the transcendental sense-able. 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 as the Quran, 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.

The stance I propose has consequences for how to conceptualize the transcendental. Religious sensations are about human encounters with phenomena or events that appear as beyond comprehension, in a word: a sublime, that induces, as we learned from Kant and Burke, a simultaneous sense of beauty or terror.¹⁵ Such encounters invoke sensations of awe vis-à-vis a transcendental entity, that by definition resists being fully known and yet makes itself felt in the here and now, in the immanent. In his *Threshold of Religion* (1914), R.R. Marett introduced the notion of awe as part and parcel of his theory of 'religion as a whole,' e.g. 'the organic complex of thought, emotion and behaviour' (ibid.: x).¹⁶ What Marett called 'the religious sense', was to be sought 'in the steadfast groundwork of specific emotion, whereby man is able to feel the supernatural *precisely at the point at which his thought breaks down*' (ibid.: 28; my emphasis).¹⁷

I find his thoughts about 'emotions as awe, wonder, and the like' quite stimulating. In contrast to for instance Rudolf Otto (1869-1937), for whom the Numinous (*das Heilige*) exists *sui generis* (1917: 7), and hence prior to, and independent from, the emotions which it arouses in the feeling subject,¹⁸ Marett places at the centre of attention the person facing the limits of understanding. In his view, feelings of awe *yield* objectifications of 'the mysterious or "supernatural" something felt' as something beyond comprehension. As a social scientist, I am highly sympathetic to taking as a starting point the feeling subject rather than a transcendental entity out there. Still, it would be short-sighted to understand objectifications of the transcendental simply in terms of an initial unmediated experience.¹⁹ In the context of religious traditions and in the praxis of religious organizations, objectifications of the transcendental are being more or less fixed, rendered re-approachable and repeatable across time (and possibly space), and determined to be handled in particular ways. Invoking, framing and rendering accessible the transcendental, such objectifications are what I mean by sensational forms. Linking up with the transcendental via sensational forms that form, or even produce, the transcendental in a particular manner, religious practitioners are made to sense a limit of understanding. Indeed, it is the sense of limit that invokes the experience of something beyond, and

organizes feelings of 'awe, wonder and the like'. It is a limit that is not simply limiting, but above all *enabling* the experience of the sublime in the here and now.²⁰ In this sense, the sublime features as an, as it were, 'impossible representation'(Meyer 2006a) that is acknowledged to exceed people's representational capacities and yet can only be rendered accessible via a particular sensational form. Thus, a sense of limit is enshrined in the notion of the sublime. The sense of limit, it needs to be stressed again, is invoked by the particular sensational forms through which religions organize the link between human beings and the transcendental. A sense of awe, wonder, and other forms of amazement, then, is generated in the context of power structures that are located in the immanent (Murphy 1998, see also Larkin *fc*).

Let me start to clarify how religious sensations, in the sense of experiences and feelings, are organized by sensational forms, and hence subject to social construction and power structures, by turning to my own research. As many of you know, I have been studying Christianity, popular culture and modern mass media in Ghana over the last twenty years. A red thread in my work concerns the connection between local Africans' conversion to Protestantism and their concomitant incorporation into a modern state and a global capitalist market (e.g. 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). In contrast with mainstream Protestantism, Pentecostal religiosity is far more geared to publicly expressing religious feelings.²¹ This expressive, public emotionality has actually pushed me to think about the question of religious sensations.

These churches, to take up an expression by Bonno Thoden van Velzen, operate as a kind of 'pressure cooker - or even microwave - of the emotions' (personal communication), in that they do 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.²² 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.

Many Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches, the latest brand of Pentecostalism that started to thrive in Ghana since the early 1990s, are run in a business-like fashion by flamboyant pastors. Making skilful use of the modern mass media that became deregulated and commercialized in the course of Ghana's turn to a democratic constitution, Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches have become omnipresent in the public sphere (Asamoah-Gyadu 2004; Meyer 2004b). Similar to American televangelism, many of them have adopted mass media so as to produce and broadcast spectacular church services to a mass audience. Recorded during church conventions yet edited carefully so as to ensure utmost credibility (De Witte 2003), such programs claim to offer eye witness accounts of the power of God to perform miracles via the charismatic pastor and his prayer force. 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. And some people report that they have been truly touched by God when viewing such programs (see De Witte 2005a). What emerges here is a new sensational form, that makes miracles happen on the television screen and seeks to reach out to a mass audience that 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 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 on returning to my own research throughout this lecture, I hope to be able to show that the question of religious sensations far exceeds that particular ethnographic setting. Though being 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 their reproducibility. That is, again, why I talk about sensations in the double sense of persons having particular sensations *and* the actual 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 representations, 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 (see also Meyer 2006a,b; Plate 2003; Stolow 2005). Positing a distance between human beings and the transcendental, religion offers practices of mediation that bridge that distance and make it possible to experience - and from a more distanced perspective one could say: produce - the transcendental. Take for example the Catholic icon: though carved from wood, painted, and set up - thus obviously 'human made' -, to the believing

beholder (and possibly its maker) it appears as an embodiment of a sacred presence that can be experienced by contemplative gaze, 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 do not only mediate the transcendental, but often, and in our time increasingly so, depend on modern media as print, and electronic audio-visual 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 internet shape sensational forms, the latter themselves are media that mediate, and thus produce, the transcendental and make it sense-able.

For example, for a staunch Protestant, the Bible is never just a mass reproduced book, but sacralized as the medium through which God has revealed himself. For Muslims the Quran is a holy book. Popular images of Jesus, as David Morgan (1998) has shown, are not simply regarded as mass reproduced representations, but as able to intimate the presence of Christ. In India, as the work of Christopher Pinney reveals (2004), mass reproduced chromolithographs of Hindu gods become sites of worship (see also Babb and Wadley 1995). Similarly, mass reproduced portraits of the early 20th century Thai King Chulalongkorn play a central role in popular Buddhist worship practices (Morris 2000; Stengs *et al.*). In Pentecostal circles, television is regarded as exceptionally well-suited to screen the Born-again message to a mass public (see also Birman 2001; 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 a Nigerian video circulated that depicted a Pentecostal Pastor who brought back

to life a dead person, taken to church in his coffin. The idea to make audiovisual technologies reveal the reality and power of God, and affirm His superiority regarding the power of the Devil, is popularized by the 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 remains invisible to the naked eye. In discussions about witchcraft, those in defense of 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 that they are made to mediate via particular sensational forms. At the same time, exactly because media are so indispensable to, and interwoven with, religious mediation, religious practitioners may find new media to be entirely inappropriate, or at least very difficult to accommodate, as is the case 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 mother-tongue Bible. The sensational form evolving around the icon was to be replaced by a new sensational form evolving around the book.

These examples do 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 on 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 again, are pre-figured by existing mediation practices that 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 to anchor 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. As 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 authorized as such by the religious traditions of which they form part (Meyer 2005b; Van de Port 2005, 2006). It is neither enough 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.

The adoption of new media does not happen in a vacuum, but is linked with broader social and cultural processes. For example, by instigating the shift to the new medium of the printed book during the Reformation, 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, that occurs not only in Christianity but also appeals to members of other religious traditions (e.g. regarding Islam: Öncü 2006; Schulz 2003), can be viewed as an attempt to rearticulate religion in what Walter Benjamin called the 'era of technical reproducibility' (1977). 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 (De Certeau 1984: 186ff), miracles and special effects (De Vries 2001: 23ff), or truth and illusion. The accommodation of such new media, and the new sensational forms that go along with them, ensure the up-to-date-ness of Christianity and its public presence. We could even say that television is called upon so as to authorize religious sensations as true (see also van de Port 2006), whilst on the other hand the body of the spectator brings televised images to life, as is the case with the Venezuelan Maria Lionza Cult studied by Rafael Sanchez who shows that cult members are possessed by the spirits of TV-personae and personalities (Sanchez 2001). The entanglement of religion, media and the forces of commercialization, though allowing for the public presence of religion, erodes the possibility to maintain a clear distinction between religion and entertainment (Moore 1994; see also Guadeloupe 2006). In this sense, as Jeremy Stolow put it, media and mediation always constitute 'inherently unstable and ambiguous conditions of possibility for religious signifying practices' (Stolow 2005: 125), and thus challenge the maintenance of religious authority.

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 still have to be careful not to overestimate the power of media *per se* to change the world.²³ The adoption of modern media, as we found in the context of the research program *Modern Mass Media, Religion and the Imagination of Communities* that I directed between 2000-2006,²⁴ 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' - that 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' (2006: 457).

Exactly because media are intrinsic to religion, in the study of contemporary religion we need to pay utmost attention to attitudes towards, and the adoption of, modern media into established practices of religious mediation. And 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 to make images of God, as found in Judaism, Islam and Christianity, and the dynamics of contemporary visual culture that 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 dimension of religious mediation becomes a focal point of attention. For me, this understanding implies the need to pay attention to aesthetics. My understanding of aesthetics exceeds the more 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 the suggestion made by

anthropologists Christopher Pinney (2004, 2006) and Jojada Verrips (2006a) to link up again with Aristotle's notion of *aisthesis*, which is understood as organizing 'our total sensory experience of the world and our sensitive knowledge of it' (ibid.: 27). It would lead too far here to trace such an understanding of aesthetics in terms of aisthesis or sense experience back to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception (2002),²⁵ or to relate it to the phenomenology of religion as developed by Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, or Mircea Eliade,²⁶ not to speak of discussing the ins and outs, and pros and cons of Phenomenology at large. Let me briefly explain on the basis of some examples why I deem it useful to consider the aesthetic dimension of religion.

In order to account for the richness and complexity of religious experience, we need theoretical approaches that can account for its material, bodily, sensational and sensory²⁷ dimension. The problem with, for example, interpretative approaches in the study of religion is that they tend to neglect the experiencing body at the expense of a focus on religious representations that are submitted to a symbolic analysis. While it is of course undeniable that symbols feature in religious mediation, I find a focus on symbolic representations as the key entry point into 'the interpretation of religion' quite problematic for at least two reasons.

One, a symbol is understood, as we learned from Clifford Geertz (1973a) and others, as a 'vehicle of meaning' that stands (in the tradition of De Saussure's Structural Linguistics) in an arbitrary relation to its referent in the outside world.²⁸ Such a view fails to grasp the possible blurring of a representation with what it represents. In other words, it fails to conceptualize the power that a religious artefact - be it an image, a text, or any other objectification - may be perceived to wield over its beholder (see also Freedberg 1989). For example, during my own research in Ghana two Born-again young girls made me understand that a painted image of *Mami Water* that we had bought from a local artist and displayed in our living room was a threatening demonic presence (Meyer 2004c). They urged me to take away immediately this image of Satan's most seductive demon, who

is held to lure even unsuspecting beholders right into her sensual, scandalously immoral consumer paradise at the bottom of the ocean. Their fear that this image might not be just a piece of popular art - and thus not a mere representation - , but invoke the actual presence of this dangerous spirit right into our lives, highlights the point: the visceral power of such images can only be grasped if we do not just read them as, and reduce them to, mere symbols of something else (such as, in the case of *Mami Water*, the eroticism of wealth), but see them as an embodiment of a spiritual presence.²⁹

Second, a focus on the symbolic usually goes hand in hand with 'textual' modes of analysis that regard 'cultures as texts', as famously elaborated in Geertz analysis of the Balinese cockfight (1973b). Such approaches fail to appreciate religious objects as constitutive elements of the religious life worlds of their beholders, and hence as key to the possibility of 'authentic' experience. For example, in his analysis of the Jewish Orthodox Artscroll publishing house, Jeremy Stolow (2006) has shown that copies of sacred texts sold via internet are made to embody a sense of gravity that seeks to anchor readers in a tactile, rather than merely intellectual relationship with the text. The heaviness and tactility of these books is part and parcel of a religious sensory practice in which religion is not so much about interpreting as about being in the world.

Thus, 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 invoke 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'.

On the level of theory, there are more and more attempts that no longer privilege the symbolic above other modes of experience. Susan Buck-Morss (1992) has argued that the aesthetic way of knowing the world, involving all the senses, has been pushed to the background with the rise of what has been called modern ocularcentrism, that induced a mode of knowing the world through a distant, objectifying gaze (see also Fabian 1983). Ocularcentrism means that the sense of seeing is understood to dominate people's perception of the world, which appears as a kind 'picture' to be looked at (as suggested by Heidegger), rather than experienced in full, with all the senses. The exposure of the faults of modern ocularcentrism, and the regimes of surveillance implied by it (Jay 1994), yielded much important work on the anaesthetizing implications of Western visual regimes, for example in the colonized world. Currently we find ourselves in the midst of what is being called 'the pictorial turn' (Mitchell 1994, 2005) that calls attention to the visceral impact of images on their beholder.³⁰ Scholars have developed a keen interest in other senses than, and alternative understandings of, vision. Critical of the capacity of so-called 'modern representationism' (and its twin sister ocularcentrism) to completely govern modern modes of thinking, they seek to reappraise the relevance of the senses and the body.³¹

My ideas about the aesthetic dimension of religion have been particularly stimulated by the work of David Morgan (1998, 2005). On the basis of his highly original investigation of the role of mass produced images in popular American Protestantism, he proposes to understand religious images as artifacts that attribute reality to representations of the divine, making it appear as if the picture possesses 'its referent within itself' (1998: 9). Such religious images are important examples of what I call sensational forms. Being part and parcel of religious mediation, such religious images 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 to see not only the image, but 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 by themselves, religious images work in the context of particular grammars and traditions of usage which invoke religious sensations by teaching particular ways of looking and induce particular dispositions and practices towards them. In other words, such images are part and parcel of a particular religious aesthetics, that governs believers' sensory engagement with the transcendental, and each other.³²

Morgan's work is not only useful for the study of religious images per se,³³ 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 image-rich and foregrounds vision or image-poor or even iconoclastic and foregrounds listening.³⁴

Of course, the aesthetics that goes along with particular sensational forms does not only 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 (1993), Charles Hirschkind (2001) and Saba Mahmood (2001) have argued, it is by instigating specific bodily and sensory disciplines that particular sensibilities are raised. These sensibilities induce a particu-

lar sense of the self and one's being in the world - if you wish: a particular identity.³⁵ 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.³⁶ This process not only entails a strong emphasis on specific, privileged sensory and extra-sensory perceptions, but also the tuning down or anaesthization of other senses or sensory perceptions (Verrips 2006a; see also Buck-Moors 1992). We are all familiar with the fact that 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 neglect such distracting perceptions and concentrate on what 'really matters'. Charles Hirschkind has argued that Islamic reform movements (2001) incorporate the use of mass reproduced cassette sermons into an 'ethics of listening', that emphasizes the importance of the ear as the key site for raising of the pious Muslim subject (see also Schulz 2003, 2006). In the midst of the soundscape of the city of Kairo, 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 (2005) 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 that induce a particular ephemeral feeling.

My plea to pay more attention to sensational forms and aesthetics is driven by the wish to better understand the genesis and sustenance of religious experiences and feelings. Of course, religious aesthetics do not operate in an, as it were, automatic manner, but are transmitted in concrete social situations. Not all people are prepared to open themselves up in the same way, and there are different degrees of participation, ranging from the striving to emulate the ideal religious subject to a more casual and diffuse affiliation. Such differences, and the extent to which religious aesthetics do or do not work, need to be investigated in concrete research settings. We also need to realize that the creation of religious subjects in our contemporary world occurs in a broader context that is more often than not characterized by experiences of fragmentation and distraction. The extent to which

religious followers are actually prepared to fully adopt the sensory regimes and bodily disciplines that characterize particular religious organizations varies very much. This also depends on the will and capacity of religious authorities to influence and control believers' behavior, either via external authority structures or internalized modes of self-control. Religions also differ in the degree to which they advocate sensory regimes that are conducive to generate intense religious sensations, and also regarding the kind of sensations – from joy and bliss to terror and fear - that are predominant.

Still it seems that, to many people, religious sensory regimes allow them to make sense of – and regain their senses in - our increasingly fragmented and distracted world. Conversely, given the plethora of sense impressions ventured via the mass media, religious authorities appear to find it increasingly difficult to tune the senses and form the bodies of their members and link them in a durable manner.³⁷ In our contemporary world many people seem to crave for the kind of existential security that is one of the trade marks of religion, a point that also receives attention in our department's research program *Constructing Human Security in a Globalizing World*. However, as explained in the previous section, by adopting modern media and new sensational forms, religions themselves become subject to the very forces of fragmentation and distraction that they claim to remedy.

The bodily and sensory disciplines that are implied in making religious subjects are also key to invoking and affirming links among religious practitioners. In this sense, aesthetics is also 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 – materializing in, for example, collective prayer, a shared corpus of songs, images, symbols, rituals, but also a similar clothing style 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 yields 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 none of identity. Sharing a common aesthetic style via a common religious affiliation generates not only 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.

Attention for the aesthetic dimension of religion enables us above all to grasp the perspective – or should I say: perception - of the insiders. This kind of *Verstehen* has of old been one of the central concerns in the anthropology of religion (see also Morris 2006: 5-6). Paying attention to religious aesthetics and sensory regimes in a comparative manner, of course, highlights the relativity of each of these regimes. And yet, as suggested earlier, I would find it shortsighted to circumscribe these regimes and the religious subjects and communities they create as ‘mere constructions’. Such a qualification has an all too derogatory slant, in that it makes it seem as if what is ‘constructed’ might not really exist. But, as Bruno Latour (2002, 2005: 88ff) has pointed out, there is nothing beyond construction, and thus we better take constructions seriously.³⁸ The fact is that, religious aesthetics, and the sensory regimes entailed by it, modulate people of flesh and blood, seeking to inscribe religion into their bones. In the context of their religion, believers are not only subject to bodily disciplines and particular sensory regimes, but their bodies may also be authorized as harbingers of ultimate truth and authenticity (Van de Port 2006). Exactly for this reason, believers are able to perceive and by the same token authorize the *mediated* experiences of their encounter with the transcendental as *immediate* and *authentic*.³⁹ Conversely, the perceived failure to have certain religious experiences – for instance the feeling of being in touch with God - may yield skepticism and doubts, and ultimately make a person say farewell to his or her religion.

Interestingly, once implanted in a person, religious aesthetics may endure independent 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 that it may be impossible to shed off entirely (see Verrips 2006b). A good many of ex-Protestants are still gripped by a diffuse feeling of awe when hearing the sound of a church organ. Here 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 that 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.⁴⁰

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 were sucked into the sensory modes of the religion they studied, without even being aware of it - as in the case of Susan Harding (2000), who found her mind to be occupied by the voice of the Baptist pastor who had been preaching to her for more than four hours. 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 about desecrating images of Mary (Verrips 2006c) or the crucifixion staged by pop singer Madonna in her new performance, to Muslims’ distress over illicit representations of the prophet about which we now hear so much in the news.

Precisely because religious mediations objectify the transcendental in sensational forms (as argued in the section on media), that call upon the body and tune the senses of religious practitioners so as to vest these forms with ultimate truth (the key point of this section), emphasis on the aesthetic dimension of religion is indispensable. Indeed, the point is that 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 2006). Important

questions for further research are: What kinds of bodily disciplines and sensory regimes are peculiar to particular religious organizations, including those that belong to big world religions but also 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 reproduced posters, address? What impact do religious aesthetics have on the making and appeal of religious identities, and 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?

Power

The last theme I will address concerns the vast issue of power. In his valedictory lecture, delivered just a couple of months ago at this very place, André Droogers (2006) explained that, whether we like it or not, religion and power are inextricably bound up with each other.⁴¹ I agree. In a sense, I have been talking about power throughout this lecture. As we saw, religious aesthetics deploy, affirm and sustain particular sensory perceptions, experiences and thoughts, even granting them the status of ‘truth’, at the expense of other experiences and thoughts. If closing off other possibilities that may not even have been conceived, and vesting particular sensory perceptions, experiences and thoughts with truth is what power achieves, then religion is power *pur sang*.⁴²

Rather than focusing on religion from a perspective from ‘within’, as I have done so far, in this section I wish to briefly situate contemporary religion in society, that is, as embedded in political and economic power structures. Let me begin with political power and the question of the nation-state. You may recall that in the introduction to this lecture I intimated that what we mistakenly take for a universal definition of religion, actually mirrors the (ideal) role and place of religion in modern times. Many scholars have argued that religion as we know it in the West today arose gradually in the aftermath of the Reformation. With the rise of modern-nation states a new power

balance between religion and the political emerged. Increasingly, religion was held to be placed outside of the domain of power, devoted to the task of assigning believers with symbols that help them make sense of and orient themselves in the world. The idea that modern religion is subject to secularization, and hence confined to the private sphere and the inner self, expresses an ideology more than a historical reality. But it is still true that religion’s place and role in society became subject to the power of the modern nation-state. Here in the Netherlands, for example, until the 1960s religion offered the grid for the organization of society in pillars, the remains of which are still with us today. Indeed, this very University testifies to the public impact of modern Protestantism as embodied by Abraham Kuyper.

In the course of colonization the modern state was introduced all over the world. While the notion of the ‘imagined community of the nation’ (Anderson 1991) certainly could not be implemented into entirely different political contexts as if it were a transportable module (as critiqued by Van der Veer 1994), the claimed right on the part of the colonial and later postcolonial states to wield control over religion, and the supernatural or transcendental at large, instigated new relationships between religion and politics all over the world.⁴³ In his recent inaugural lecture, my colleague Oscar Salemink (2006) has pointed out how the Marxist Vietnamese state carefully orchestrates the coexistence of different religious affiliations in public national rituals. While it seems that the state is still more or less in charge, there are indications that it proves increasingly difficult to hold religion in check.

Ironically, religion thrives in the wake of IMF-instigated policies in favour of ‘democratization’, and plays a major role in current politics of belonging. The balance of power between religions and states seems to be changing. In a host of contexts, politicians make sincere attempts to negotiate and even surf along with the appeal of Fundamentalist or Pentecostal Christianity, Islamic Reform Movements, or Hindu nationalists. How religious identities, formed as they are by distinct bodily disciplines and sensory regimes and vested with the aura of truth, relate to national and other identities is a question that

calls for our utmost attention in the future. Is it that religious identities, as called into being by, for example, Pentecostalism or Islamic Reform movements, are so compelling because they entail a religious aesthetics that does not only form subjects in a way that goes under the skin, but also vests them with the power of God? To what extent can secular identities at all compete with this strong appeal made to the sublime? What does it mean for our understanding of politics that politicians as George Bush, in their post 9-11 speeches, tap into religious language all the time?

The transforming relation between religion and politics cannot be analyzed without taking into account the global spread of capitalism, that ensues new ways of organizing production and consumption and brings forth, as much as requires, new ethics and aesthetics (Bayart 2004). We need to investigate how all kinds of practices of religious mediation and the sensational forms produced and sustained by these mediation practices are situated in those broader power structures that characterize neo-liberal capitalism (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000). My point here is, of course, not to launch an outdated view of capitalism in terms of a simplistic (so-called vulgar) Marxist economic determinism. It is entirely inappropriate to regard religion as a mere ideology that reflects and sustains a particular mode of production. This, of course, was the key point made by Max Weber in his *Protestant Ethic*. While Weber stressed the elective affinity between the Protestant work ethic and the rise of capitalism, he neglected the sphere of consumption, as has been pointed out by Collin Campbell (1987).⁴⁴ In our time, it is of eminent concern to investigate how religion organizations of all kinds relate to the spheres of both production and consumption.

Let me return to Pentecostalism once again. As David Martin (2001) has argued, Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on a 'mobile self' and a 'portable charismatic identity', is a religion that speaks to experiences of dislocation, fragmentation and increasing mobility. While one can certainly discern an extraordinary consonance between Pentecostalism and neo-liberal capitalism, the question still is how both are thought to be related. One proposition that one often comes across in

the study of Pentecostalism is that conversion to this religion would help people *cope* with the intricacies of modern life. With its emphasis on an individual, Born-again religiosity, that severs people from family based networks of mutual obligations, its strict morality that rejects alcohol, sexual promiscuity and other vices, and its overall *methodologische Lebensführung*, Pentecostal churches are found to empower members to improve their social-economic position in society. While I would not deny that conversion to Pentecostalism may be of help in solving everyday problems, I still find it problematic to explore the consonance of Pentecostalism and capitalism merely through the prism of coping.

This view of religion as a reactive force is problematic because it fails to consider the extent to which Pentecostalism, or other contemporary religions, may actually be formed by and partake in the culture of neo-liberal capitalism. I have already pointed out that, far from retreating into the sphere of religion, in the sense of a relatively autonomous, semi-private realm, Pentecostals instigate a Christian mass culture that inevitably gets caught up with the forces of entertainment as well as politics. Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches are run as global business corporations and feature as icons of ultimate presence and success. Embracing the Gospel of Prosperity, wealth is regarded as a divine blessing. All this suggests Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches' easy adoption of, and incorporation in, the culture of neo-liberal capitalism, so much so that it becomes impossible to state where religion begins or ends.

I have invoked Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches simply because they are part of my own expertise, not because I would like to suggest a specific elective affinity of this religion with neo-liberal capitalism. Examples of the entanglement of other religious organizations with capitalism abound. In the press we read all the time about the seamless articulation of Confucian or Buddhist work ethics into capitalist labour in South East Asia, an issue that was also addressed by Heidi Dahles in her inaugural lecture (2004). It is of great importance to develop comparative research that investigates how religious groups and movements in different localities do not only

relate to and 'help people cope with', but are also formed by, the culture of neo-liberal capitalism.

But what, then, is capitalism, we may feel pressed to ask? In a fragment that has only received much attention quite recently, Walter Benjamin has characterized capitalism itself as a religion that 'essentially serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion'.⁴⁵ In his view, capitalist consumer culture has developed into a new kind of undogmatic cult that makes people worship the secret God of debt. This is more an intuition than a conclusion that is based on sound analysis. Benjamin, indeed, found it difficult to 'prove capitalism's religious structure', given that 'we cannot draw close the net in which we stand' (2005: 259). The fragment remained unfinished. The big question raised by him is from which standpoint it is possible to grasp power – as that which underpins everything that is – in our contemporary world. There may be good reasons to agree with Frederic Jameson's idea of capitalism as a sublime power that resists representation, yet all the more requires to be understood (1991; see also Helmling 2000). Research on religion, conducted along the lines as outlined here, may be of some use in helping us unmask this sublime power, without however denying its capacity to capture as much as puzzle us.

Conclusion

It may perhaps surprise you that, although I am an anthropologist, in my title I have invoked the study of contemporary religion rather than the anthropology of religion. I hope that my lecture has been able to make clear that anthropology has much to offer, but can also gain from, interdisciplinary exchanges with scholars in the broader social sciences, but also religious studies, visual culture, philosophy and theology. We need to ground our understanding of contemporary religion in thorough ethnographic studies and broader comparisons. It is my sincere hope that with this lecture I have been able to convey to you why and how media, aesthetics and power matter in this endeavour. All three are useful points of entry that allow us to explore the making of contemporary religious experience. I use the term

'matter' not by accident. My plea to pay attention to 1) the modern media that play a role in objectifying the transcendental into material, sensational forms, 2) the particular religious aesthetics that modulate the body and tune the senses in a particular way, and 3) power as bringing into being subjects and communities with distinctive religious identities and styles, stresses the importance to approach religion from a material angle. Clearly this is not a materiality that is opposed to, but rather a condition for, spirituality. Indeed, the fact that religion matters so much in our contemporary world is grounded in the very concrete, material dimension of religion that I tried to outline here. Inducing sensations through sensational forms, contemporary religion is not just about ideas and interpretations, but relevant to our being and belonging in a more basic sense.

Afsluitend

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Binnen onze afdeling wordt boeiend antropologisch onderzoek verricht naar hedendaagse religies. Ik zal participeren in lopende projecten en mijn best doen om nieuwe programma's te entameren. In de toekomst zal ik mij ervoor inzetten om de bestudering van religie niet alleen binnen onze faculteit, maar ook in samenwerking met andere faculteiten sterker te profileren. In dit verband kijk ik uit naar samenwerking met Ruud Koopmans, Kees van Kersbergen, Sawitri Saharso, Halleh Ghorashi, Ineke de Feijter, Ruard Ganzevoort en Hijme Stoffels. Ik hoop dat we er samen in zullen slagen om de bestudering van hedendaagse religie als een multidisciplinair VU-thema nationaal en internationaal op de kaart te zetten.

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Notes

- ¹ Having studied pedagogy for handicapped children and comparative religion at the *Universität Bremen*, in 1985 I came to study anthropology at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam*. Between 1990 and 1995, I have been affiliated as a PhD student with the *Amsterdam School for Social Science Research*; my dissertation was devoted to a historical study of the appropriation of Protestantism into an African context. Since 1995 I have worked at the *Research Centre Religion and Society* (Department of Sociology and Anthropology, UvA). Between 2000 and 2006 I have chaired the NWO-Pionier research program *Modern Mass Media, Religion and the Imagination of Communities*. I am also a member of the program board of the NWO program *The Future of the Religious Past*, and one of the editors of the journal *Material Religion*.
- ² This is a point that is recently being made in public discussions, see NRC articles *De Sociologie is van God los* (23/5/06) and *Waarom God aan de winnende hand is. Modernisering, democratisering en globalisering hebben Hem sterker gemaakt* (12/04/06). Both argue that secularization is *passé* as a theoretical framework.
- ³ Increasing modernization is supposed to yield a decline of the public importance of religion and its retreat into a sphere proper to itself. To be religious, or not, becomes a matter of personal choice. Secularization theory, as defended by Steve Bruce (e.g. 2002: 3ff), does not proclaim the end of religion, but its retreat into the private sphere. The extent to which religion has been privatized even throughout the Western world is subject to debate. José Casanova (1999), for example, has stressed the deprivatization of religion, without, however, giving up secularization theory entirely. As eminent sociologists of religion as Peter Berger and others (1999) have argued in their critique of secularization theory, rather than viewing Western Europe as the norm and other contexts, in which religions do assume public roles - including the United States - as deviations, it is more appropriate to regard ourselves as the exception that needs explanation. However, given the upsurge and public presence of religion on a global scale, it has become clear that secularization theory is unsuitable as an intellectual tool. Debates about secularization have become repetitive and dull, discerning exceptions and

explaining them (away). See also Marc Taylor 1998. For a thought-provoking attempt to think about religion after 9/11, see Lincoln 2003.

- ⁴ I use 'religious organizations' as an umbrella term that encompasses different social formations characterized by peculiar organizational forms, that can be distinguished by degrees of institutionalization, modes of participation, internal coherence, and so on. Within established religious traditions as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism there exist a host of different organizational forms.
- ⁵ My understanding of comparison follows Lambek's: '... anthropology is also resolutely comparative, insofar as the particularistic ethnographic accounts must be made to speak to each other and to a developing (and frequently debated) analytic language...' (2002:2).
- ⁶ Of course, the very fact that we engage in the study of religion constructs the object of our research in a particular manner. As this is an unavoidable effect of scientific discipline (in the double sense of the term), we need to be all the more critically aware of the ways in which the theories and concepts developed in the study of religion shape the very phenomena we seek to grasp. See Lambek (2002) for an excellent overview on a host of different definitions developed in the anthropology of religion, and the critique of definition as a particular intellectual operation. See also Morris (2006), who insists that we at least need a working definition of religion. In my view, all we need are sensitizing concepts that guide our approach towards religious phenomena and are subject to critical reflection and revision in the light of our findings.
- ⁷ All these terms function in specific discourses, and are problematic. Of course, in particular research settings it is best to stay close to the terms used by people themselves. But this does not relieve us from the necessity to have more general terms. How otherwise can we exchange ideas with colleague researchers?
- ⁸ I would like to stress that the point is neither to dismiss nor assert the existence of God or other spiritual beings. It is simply not the task of the anthropology of religion to make this kind of ontological statements. The question how a personal belief in God and anthropological research on religion can and cannot co-exist has been addressed in the farewell symposium *Playful Religion* that has been organized on 23 June 2006 in honour of the retirement of André Droogers. During this symposium, Droogers' suggestion of a more ludic attitude towards both belief and research has been extensively discussed. See also the latest issue of *In de Marge* (2006, vol 15 (3)).
- ⁹ Weber's thinking about the nexus of Protestantism and capitalism was heavily influenced by work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1786-1834), who

addressed the emotional and experiential dimension of religion, and in so doing articulated a basic aspect of modern Protestant religiosity (Van Rooden 1996b). Schleiermacher's understanding of religion as 'das Gefühl der schlechthinigen Abhängigkeit', that was inspired by Romanticism, asserted the difference between – and hence the compatibility of – religion and knowledge. Religion, for him, was not about knowing, but about 'das Betrachten des Universums' that happened via different sensory registers and yielded a particular kind of piety. However, Weber temporally displaced Schleiermacher's typically early nineteenth-century understanding of religion by attributing it (mistakenly so, as Peter van Rooden [1996b] argues) to the 17th century Calvinists that are the heroes of his *Protestant Ethic*. In Weber's own time, as he realized with increasing agony, this kind of religiosity had become obsolete without being substituted.

¹⁰ Weber, though positing the disenchantment of the world, can certainly not be charged with a simple idea of secularization. On the contrary, for him religion played a crucial role in bringing into being modern capitalism. It seems that, quite mistakenly, Weber's work has been read through the lens of progress as an apology of capitalism (and even the superiority of the West). A careful reading of the end of the *Protestant Ethic* makes us know better. See Joachim Radkau's marvellous biography *Max Weber. Die Leidenschaft des Denkens* (2005), and also Lehmann (1996) and Peukert (1989).

¹¹ For a critique of this rather facile reading of Weber (and Marx and Durkheim) see Pels (2003). Here in the Netherlands, disbelief in modernity as being disenchanted, has motivated Peter Geschiere's provocative *The Modernity of Witchcraft* (1997), Bonno Thoden van Velzen's notion of 'collective fantasies' (e.g. 1995) and Jojada Verrips' suggestion to acknowledge and research the Wild (in the) West (2001).

¹² In anthropology, so-called intellectualist approaches that reduce religion to a quest for knowledge (as developed by E.B.Tylor and, later, Robin Horton) and so-called expressivist or symbolist approaches that emphasize the importance of feeling and experience have long been at loggerheads with each other. While the former tend to predominantly focus on 'words' and 'meaning', the latter tend to foreground 'images' and 'experience'.

¹³ He says this in his discussion of the appeal that James's work has today. One of the things missed by James is his misrecognition of formal spiritual practices. Peter van Rooden critiques Schleiermacher along similar lines (1996b). A host of approaches of religion as experience can be critiqued along the lines suggested by Taylor and Van Rooden.

¹⁴ As the term 'sense' that is contained in 'sensation' also denotes 'Sinn' or 'meaning', it is important not to confine sensation to feeling alone, but to encompass the formation of meaning (not as a purely intellectual endeavour,

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 endeavour, on the other (see also note 12). In my understanding, the production of meaning always involves bodily experiences and emotions.

¹⁵ In the context of this lecture it is impossible to give an overview of the question of the sublime from the perspectives of Kant, Burke and Herder to that of Lyotard and Jameson.

¹⁶ He stated: '... we must, I think, in any case admit the fact that in response to, or at any rate in connection with, the emotions of awe, wonder, and the like, wherein feeling would seem for the time being to have outstripped the power of 'natural', that is, reasonable explanation, there arises in the region of human thought a powerful impulse to objectify and even personify the mysterious or 'supernatural' something felt, and in the region of will a corresponding impulse to render it innocuous, or better still propitious, by force of constraint, communion, or conciliation' (ibid.: 11).

¹⁷ The idea that religion starts at the limits of understanding (and the experience of evil and pain) is also key to Geertz' well-known definition (1973a). For Geertz, religion offers ways to deal with such limits. In my understanding, the point is not so much that religion helps people deal with a perceived limit, but rather induces such a sense of limit via sensational forms (see below).

¹⁸ Otto's perspective presupposes the existence of the supernatural, albeit as a never fully graspable, and thus imperfectly representable transcendental entity, the *mysterium tremendum*, the *fascinatum*. The Numinous makes itself sensed through particular overwhelming emotional experiences, which can, according to Otto be circumscribed with awe (ibid.: 15), a term encompassing a range of sensations from *Grausen* and *Furcht* to *Scheu* and *Entzücken*. Religious sensations – among them goose bumps – reveal the power of this mysterious, fascinating entity, while mystifying it at the same time as the completely different (*das Ganz andere*).

¹⁹ This suggests, again, a view of religion as originating in an, albeit in the first instance, immediate feeling of the presence of the transcendental. This stress of a primary, individual moment, as already pointed out in my critique of James, is problematic because it neglects the social construction of the transcendental via what I call sensational forms.

²⁰ I borrow the notion of the enabling limit from Samuel Weber (1996).

²¹ But it would be wrong to simply oppose Pentecostalism and mainstream (Presbyterian) Protestantism, for in many respects the former builds upon the modern religiosity introduced by nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries

with its strong focus on the individual believer. This implied not only new modes of piety, but also the submission into the regime of the church, the adoption of a modern life style, and of course, the diabolization of traditional religion and the social formations sustained by it. Interestingly, although the missionaries themselves were part of a Pietist revival movement that emphasized personal spiritual experiences, the mission paid far more attention to the strict implementation of rules and regulations than creating a space for such experiences. While, certainly in the wake of colonization, many Africans felt attracted to this new religiosity, they also found severe shortcomings that made them, as the missionaries put it, 'relapse into heathendom' in times of crisis. Notwithstanding the fact that the religiosity conveyed by the mission was translated into the local context – and hence appropriated and transformed – converts were limited in shaping their Christian beliefs and practices in line with their own needs. The foundation of a sheer endless stream of African Independent and, later, Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches, testifies to the persistence of local attempts to reinvent Christianity so as to suit local expectations and needs. One important concern was, and still is, the question of the efficacy of belief. A religion that would mainly induce believers to read the Bible and participate in rather boring church services – elders used to go round with a stick so as to wake up those fallen asleep – was found to be an imperfect substitute for traditional cults, that offered rituals of trance, possession, and dance, involved human beings in spiritual gift exchanges with their gods, and helped people get around in a far more practical, material manner. Though intrigued by the promise of developing an individual relation with God, African converts nevertheless expected to feel the presence of this supernatural omnipotent power in their own bodies, and to witness its effects in a material way, in everyday life.

²² As the Holy Spirit does not enter 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 so-called prayer cells (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 not to be vulnerable to evil spirits and empowered to lead an overall happy, prosperous life.

²³ We find such a stance not only condensed in Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum 'The medium is the message', but also, for example, in the thinking of Manuel Castells. In Castell'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 (1996: 406). Referring to an eternal truth

that cannot be mediated via the technologies of the information age, religion is in Castells' 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 religions' legitimacy: when 'all wonders are online', 'societies are finally and truly disenchanting' (ibid.). I disagree with Castells' view of religion as a reactive force that, by taking up modern mass media, can only be corrupted, and rendered obsolete. It is entirely mistaken to categorically understand the rise of public, mass mediated religion in this manner (see also Meyer & Moors 2006; De Vries 2001).

²⁴ For more information on this program see www.pscw.uva.nl/media-religion

²⁵ For Merleau-Ponty perception has priority over reason. 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.

²⁶ As intimated in the section on religious sensations, one of the big problems with phenomenological approaches in the study of religion is the strong bias towards an inward 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*, Thomas Czordas (2004) 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 in the analysis. I agree with the point raised by Lambek in his discussion, that Czordas 'has some way to go now to link alterity with the social and the moral' (Lambek 2004: 179).

²⁷ I use sensational as referring to feelings, and sensory as referring to the senses. Of course, the senses play an important role in raising particular feelings. This is why anthropological work on emotions is very close to work on the senses (as argued by Brenneis 2005).

²⁸ It should be noted that other theories of semiotics do not necessarily propose an intrinsically arbitrary relation between sign and referent. Peirce's notion of the index does not have an arbitrary relation to its referent. – Following Fabian (1991 [1971]), I consider as problematic approaches towards language (and culture) that posit an arbitrary relation between language and its referent, because they suggest an ultimate rift between language and the outside world. Instead, I understand language in constructive terms. Language, or more precisely: speaking, is a material performance, a practice of

signification that construes the world (rather than alienating speakers from the world).

- ²⁹ From experience we all know that certain images may have a strong, fearful, or even awesome impression on the beholder. During our last family holiday, my son Sybren (11) and his friend Bram (11) created a ghost house inhabited by a Cyclopes. This creature was made up by a piece of cloth, a torch and a dress-hanger. Nevertheless, the boys found their own creature too fearful to let it stay in their bedroom throughout the night.
- ³⁰ See Pinney (2006) for a very helpful, thought-provoking overview on four different ways of framing the study of visual culture.
- ³¹ Of particular importance to my concerns is recent work in the interface of the anthropology of the body and the senses (e.g. Howes 2003; Hirschkind 2001) and the field of visual culture studies, which addresses the ‘power of images’ to touch people in our media saturated environments (e.g. Freedberg 1989; Mitchell 2005; Sobchack 2004; Marks 2000).
- ³² His ideas resonate remarkably well with recent approaches developed in the field of cinema studies, that challenge the association of vision and the visual with the eye alone, and its concomitant disassociation from other senses. In particular Laura Marks (2000) and Vivian Sobchack (2004) have stressed the need to develop a more visceral, carnal approach of the visual, that is rooted in the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (and Mikel Dufrenne, 1973) and takes notice of the multi-sensory, synaesthetic impact of images in constituting a sense of being in the world.
- ³³ See Allen and Polly Roberts’ (2003) exploration of the power of images of Sheik Amadou Bamba to sacralize space in the city of Dakar, 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 so as 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, BM] (...) as the central criterion of value’ (2004:194), Pinney’s understanding of corpotherics and my understanding of aesthetics in terms of aisthesis converge.
- ³⁴ Here I see interesting ways to link up with work on religion in cognitive anthropology, for example the work by Harvey Whitehouse.
- ³⁵ Identity is a central concept in current debates that refers to a host of meanings. I understand identity in terms of belonging to a particular social formation that is inclusive as well as exclusive. Identity, as Peter Geschiere and myself argued (1998), creates boundaries and promises clarity and security in a world characterized by distraction and fragmentation. In this sense, identity needs to be placed in a dialectics of flow and closure. I suggest that it is important to take into account the importance of the senses and

sensations in invoking and sustaining identities that people feel to be natural and thus beyond questioning. I do of course not wish to claim the existence of primordial, essentialized identities, the point is to understand why and how personal and collective identities, though constructed, are perceived as ‘natural’ and ‘real’. See also Meyer 2006c.

- ³⁶ For an illuminating discussion of habitus (and hexis) in the thinking of Bourdieu (and Mauss) see Roodenburg (2004).
- ³⁷ See in this context Stewart Hoover’s important work (2006) on the ways in which religious and non-religious audiences look at mass mediated programs. He suggests a trend towards an increasingly individual, autonomous search for spiritual experience, in which media consumption plays a central role. See also Oosterbaan (2006), who shows how Pentecostal sensory regimes shape the ways in which Born-again believers relate to mass mediated entertainment.
- ³⁸ Bruno Latour (2002, 2005) is deeply critical of a facile constructivist stance, that, in its eagerness to deconstruct essentializing power claims (as such an important critical project), tends to miss the concreteness and materiality of ‘construction’. He urges us to think about construction rather as a building site on which solid structures emerge that cannot be de-constructed by critical analysis alone. We need an understanding of construction that acknowledges its- at times scary - materiality. Critiques of construction need to take its material dimension as a starting point.
- ³⁹ It needs to be stressed that calling attention to the question of embodiment and the appeal made to the body as a harbinger of truth does not at all imply a romanticist understanding of the body as an ultimate reality. Rather, I argue that in our research we need to come to terms with the fact that the body is tuned via particular social practices, and in this sense ‘constructed’, but that this ‘construction’ tends to be naturalized and perceived as ‘natural’ and ‘real’. See also Spronk 2006.
- ⁴⁰ For instance, the late Agnes Binder, a staunch member of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, a former mission church, told me that in her youth, though she was from a Protestant family living in the Christian part of her village, she had gotten possessed by a local family god when she passed by her family house at the occasion of a ‘pagan’ funeral. Hearing the particular drums that were beaten for this god, she was caught by its spirit, started to dance, and ran off to the bush. Through this humiliating experience she realized the need to be spiritually strong, ‘to have the Holy Spirit in you’.
- ⁴¹ Droogers states that religion and power intersect with regard to three dimensions: a) in relation to transcendental power, b) in relation to internal power relations intrinsic to religious organization, and c) in relation to society. My main concern in this section is to address the last dimension.

Droogers leaves no doubt about the fact that, whilst power and religion are 'forced into marriage', he still is much in favour of a religion that is as far removed from power as possible. In my understanding, religion and power always intersect, and therefore I see no way to even think religion without power.

⁴² This understanding of power is indebted to Michel Foucault. According to Foucault, power does not so much work *upon* people – via coercion - as *through* them, by inducing particular ideas, belief systems and sets of practices (this ensemble he calls discourse). In this understanding, power is what creates, underpins, and legitimizes our sense of being, as individuals, but also as part of larger social formations. The resonances between this understanding of power and my plea to focus on the aesthetic dimension of religion are obvious. The individual religious subject is not simply there, but produced in a complicated process of subjectivation that entails both subjugation and the assertion of subjectivity. It is telling to note the point made by Jean-Francois Bayart that Foucault's notion of subjectivation, and Weber's notion of *methodologische Lebensführung* more or less converge, in that they make persons subject to powerful disciplinary regimes that induce a particular ethics and view of the world that is posited beyond questioning (2000).

⁴³ The idea of the secular entered popular social imaginaries, often in conjunction with modern religiosity as it was advocated by Protestant missionaries. They struggled to transmit this particular religiosity – against all odds - to their hitherto heathen converts (cf. Chidester 1996; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Keane 2002; Meyer 1999). But even members of other religious traditions as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam or indigenous cults sought to accommodate modern religiosity as part and parcel of a modernizing venture (e.g. Larkin & Meyer 2006; Van der Veer 1994).

⁴⁴ In his well-known book *The Romanticist Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, Collin Campbell (1987) has argued that in modern society, consumerism has come to stand in for romanticist religion, in that it promises ultimate satisfaction through consumption yet at the same time induces an 'inexhaustibility of wants' that steams up the capitalist economy, thus leaving people chronically dissatisfied.

⁴⁵ He stated: 'One can behold in capitalism a religion, that is to say, capitalism essentially serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion. The proof of capitalism's religious structure – as not only a religiously conditioned construction, as Weber thought, but as an essentially religious phenomenon – still today misleads one to a boundless, universal polemic' (Benjamin 2005: 259).

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