

Using Media in Religious Studies

Strategies of Representing Religion in Scholarly Approaches Editorial

As a student in the 1980s, I was first made aware of the existence of different cultures of “doing humanities” by three professors at the University of Göttingen. The medium they used in their lectures and seminars was their own personality and rhetorical style. The philologist reined in the personal, in an uncharismatic but very structured and reflective way of lecturing, as he tackled Islamic cultural history. Only later would I realize that this approach had parallels with the theoretical debate within German religious studies over the cultivation of distance from one’s subject of research, over controlling one’s emotions, which otherwise might hinder objectivity. Another professor, who had a quite good sense of humor, was fond of highlighting the facts of his subject – religious studies – with little narrations: the Hindus he saw one year in a procession in Benares took the exact same route the following year, but as a house had been built on their path, the whole procession entered through the front door and left through the kitchen door toward the garden. This account generated a little laughter and, subsequently, a critical postcolonial debate over whether it was right for the professor to encourage his students to laugh about a foreign culture. Nevertheless, the students had learned that rituals can be characterized by a certain stability. The third professor, with a Near Eastern and Muslim background, liked to display a U.S.-American professorial habitus. A communicative and charismatic person, he used stories from his cosmopolitan daily life to engage students’ interest in a certain topic before teaching his own social-science and theory driven field of Near Eastern politics. Even if these styles of mediating knowledge about religions were different and even contradictory, we certainly learned a lot in every lecture.

Reflecting on styles of teaching can be a starting point for deeper debate about using media in (re)presenting religions in the humanities. Everyday lecturing can be done in very different ways, and anyone who has attended an international conference will be aware of the variety of speech-making cultures. Distinct from personal style or regional culture, younger academics are now

more systematically trained to use didactics and, especially, different media to avoid only talking during a lecture, or simply reading out a prepared text. Does that approach have an impact on the transfer of facts? Or we might ask, with Marshall McLuhan, to what extent is the medium the message even in academic life?¹

The media turn, material turn and body turn have brought added complexity to our debate. There is a growing consciousness of the sensory dimensions within religions, of the “things” believers touch or the sounds they hear, for example. The study of media in religions and cultures is a common practice within disciplines with a focus on religion. The deconstruction of media is multifaceted and performed by analyzing texts, by focusing on material and visual cultures, by dealing with traditional and popular media or with film and mass media like the Internet. When religious studies no longer looks largely to texts as its “material”, the media we explore is more plural, which influences the selection of scholarly representations. When we are working on media within religions, it makes sense for our students to visit a nearby Buddhist monastery instead of just reading or talking about the topic in class; publications about Hindu soundscapes contain recordings;² monographs about material culture visualize their objects in illustrations. We are well aware that religions are perceived and communicated in complex cultures by methods of media use that also evoke emotions.

At the same time, while research on media within religions is extensive and well established, the use of media for representing religion in scholarly work remains rather neglected. This is astonishing, for media can also have various effects and impacts within the scholarly community. The lack of explicit engagement can become evident when formal institutional questions arise. Some years ago, at the University of Zurich a dissertation about a Japanese pilgrimage was done primarily as an ethnographic film,³ which per se comes closer to the reality of the performances researched than could any book. But to have only a written supplement explaining the film’s ideas seemed to underplay scholarly achievement.

We are only at the very beginning of reflection on how the use of media will also change our academic habitus. The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (German National Library) at Frankfurt am Main faced sharp criticism some months ago as some scholars expressed their anger at the library’s new tendency to make available electronic sources instead of the “authentic” books. The library’s responsibilities for preservation and circulation seemed well served by its supply-

1 McLuhan/Fiore 1967.

2 Wilke/Moebus 2011.

3 Arukihenro – Walking Pilgrims (Tommi Mendel and Atsuko Toda, CH 2006).

ing electronic versions for daily use, with works even available to more than one person at a time. But bibliophiles who find pleasure in being present in the library to handle the material book were indignant, even though it is still possible to read the physical copy, despite the extra demand on the library administration this entails.⁴

The scholarly identity perhaps makes it no wonder that the written and physical text is still predominant in the humanities. As every perception is a multi-layered sensory experience, an article in a book never simply transports neutral mentefacts. An article is, for example, framed by its appearance in either an established book series that signals seriousness or a paperback that seems more easy going. The electronic publication is perhaps more neutral as it lacks certain layers of sensory perception. All this has much to do with our embodied routines as scholars.⁵

The *Journal for Film, Religion and Media (JFRM)* is a good example of a contemporary development that sees the regular use of texts in combination with, for example, film stills that hint at the medium of film. While such practice expands the horizons of media representation, it also raises tricky theoretical and methodological questions, for illustrations are not simply supplemental, but must be read critically, just like any sentence, especially when interwoven with text. Every representation always transports its own logic and perspective. René Magritte joined others in engaging this question when, decades ago, he depicted this problem using humor: he drew a horse, a painting of a horse, and a man speaking the animal's name and added a line that reads "An object never does the same as its name or its image".⁶

The November 2017 issue of *JFRM* explores the possibilities for using media in representing religions. David Morgan has proposed that scholarly deployment of certain media is intended to signal objectivity. For example, charts might be used to display empirical "truth" or a photograph to "demonstrate" a position in an argument: to that end figures and pictures are often introduced without explanation of the perspective in which they lie or analysis of their production and context.⁷ This issue of the journal analyzes media as a crucial part of research, as a means of both producing and representing scholarly results.

In this issue, contributors have been invited to participate to an interdisciplinary debate about the significance and impact of media within academic work on religion. This self-reflection about producing and transmitting data in analyzing, deconstructing and representing religion through media also considers

4 Representing the position of the traditional readers: Thiel 2016. For the library see Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, n.d.

5 Reckwitz 2003, 282–301.

6 Magritte 1975, 33.

7 Morgan 2005, 39–47.

the emotional impact of media upon scholarly research as well as the different genres used in academic work. Reflection on our own perspectives and awareness of the recipients' possible perceptions are necessary if our aims are to inform and to make our methods transparent and suitable for what we want to express.

The topic of religion adds another layer to the scenery. Working on religions, we are fully aware of the different emic and etic perspectives. Scholars regularly adopt an intersubjective approach, but we work on topics that are normally highly subjective. Noting that a bird's eye view may still be limited, Russell T. McCutcheon suggests we leave space for an inner perspective as well, for example in the form of direct quotations of "original voices". He also asks us to consider what happens if the scholar working on religions has a religious faith. And we are also to reflect on how religions influence the cultures of the humanities.⁸

Orientalist Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003) provides an example that runs counter to common contemporary theoretical and methodological positions. Schimmel was a member of the German school of *Verstehende Religionswissenschaft*, or religious studies of understanding, and adopted an interreligious approach. Working on Sufism, she came so close to Islam that she might have been Muslim herself. Many Muslims admire her work for this inner sympathy. Even if the mainstream of contemporary religious studies does not want to follow her academic direction, where it is sometimes not possible to separate description from belief,⁹ from a didactic perspective her techniques of representation of religious content provides a surplus, in a marked comparison with a very rational presentation of facts. Schimmel was able to convey and mediate an emotional dimension within mystical poetry. Her approach, a product of her personality, combined the emic and the etic.

About 30 years ago, the University of Göttingen's ethnographic collection was the focus of a protest by Australian Aboriginals who wanted to stop a *churinga*, a sacred object, from being displayed as an illustration of their young men's initiation rituals. This wooden piece represented the virility of the young men, a power threatened if the object was viewed by a woman. In this case the emic perspective caused an academic institution to change its mode of exhibition. The *churinga* was returned to storage.¹⁰

This issue of *JRFM* contains three reflections on the theoretical and methodological use of media in religious studies.

In "Using Media to Teach Religious Studies: Reflections on Second-order Mediatization of Religions", Mirko Roth addresses media in higher-education learn-

8 McCutcheon 1999.

9 Schimmel 1994. The book's structure and argument lead its readers finally to a non-rational sphere where God can only be experienced.

10 Beinbauer-Köhler 2010, 129.

ing contexts. Although a foundational task, the teaching of students has to date garnered only limited systematic consideration. Roth explores both the use of media within religions and the use of media with a class. He seeks a strict differentiation and deconstruction of media contexts, exploring, for example, ways to let students hear a recitation of the Qur'an and acknowledge its plural forms. In general, he pleads for media to be used, but with sensitive integration within a university setting. He presents examples of teaching situations, and of steps in the learning process. The emic and etic perspectives, along with the emotions a certain medium might evoke, are always part of his deliberations and part of his approach to our discipline. In Germany there is no institutionalized tradition of didactic training for scholars at universities, although over recent decades optional training has been available. Roth is highly qualified in this field and combines his knowledge of teaching with a theoretical instrumentarium for dealing with media and religion.

In their article, entitled “*SinnRäume – An Exhibition on Contemporary Religion in Germany. Exhibition Practice as a Medium in Religious Studies*”, Celia Fitz and Anna Matter write about the creation of an exhibition at the Museum of Religions at the Philipps University of Marburg in 2015. The exhibition was an outcome of a student project which involved an empirical study of private homes as religious spaces. Interviews, documentary photographs and religious objects were combined and displayed on movable modules that formed rooms, as in a house. Visitors of all ages can explore and experience this space in a sensory combination of moving, looking, touching and hearing, while inspired and guided by texts that shape their encounter with homes and religions. The authors explain the project's outward appearance as a product of scholarly approaches to research on lived religion. Again, the insider and outsider perspectives are significant, in both distinguishing and combining the representation of the examples chosen. The result is an ongoing and thoughtfully designed exhibition that received an award from the University of Marburg.

Larissa Carneiro focuses on an example that tackles the topic of this issue from the perspective of American Evangelicalism. In “*Emulating Science: The Rhetorical Figures of Creationism*” she explores Young-Earth Creationists' techniques for convincing people using media of natural science – in particular with charts and models displayed at the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky – that are well known from Darwin's presentation of the theory of evolution. She deconstructs the visualization and modeling of scientific results, going back to the *Rhetoric* of Aristotle. These tools are deployed at the Creation Museum to demonstrate to visitors – to “persuade” them – that the earth was created by God in six days and that Darwin's species development is baseless. The staging of the Creationists' explanation draws from a common well of mediatic forms in natural science. Carneiro also interprets this installation in terms of the spatial

dimension, noting that rhetorician John Lynch characterized the Creation Museum as a “spatial sermon”. Carneiro explains her observations as evidence of the “emulation” of scientific techniques and a scientific culture of visualization. She consciously decided not to challenge the Creationist visualizations in her article.

These authors inspire us to consider what more might be done in this field of media and religious studies. For instance, international or regional cultures of media in studying religions might be more systematically researched, and the aesthetic effects of different media on scholars addressed. And readers of this interdisciplinary journal will likely be intrigued to see how this predominantly religious studies perspective might bring reactions from neighboring disciplines.

Uwe Wirth contributed an inspirational editorial article to the edited collection *Im Zwischenraum* (Inside the In-between Space).¹¹ He analyzed the content and layout of scholarly texts from the perspective of the study of literature, and he distinguished layers of argumentation, found principally in the main text, in paratexts at the beginning and end of books, and in subordinate or broader discourses in the footnotes. Even different versions of headings can guide the reader through textual spaces. An introduction – like this one – can be characterized as an in-between space, as a bridge that leads the reader to the articles, but it can also function as an open space, leaving room for the development of further discussion.

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