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Approaches to Visual Culture and Religion: disciplinary trajectories, interdisciplinary connections, and some conditions for further progress

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Abstract

Written from the point of view of a historian of religion\’s, the article asks why the so-called “visual turn” has not left a major effect on the study of religion\’s as an academic discipline and how things could be improved to that effect. It offers a synthetic account of earlier and contemporary involvements of scholars of religion and scholarly networks with images and visual culture, pointing to a general lack of sustained training and little exposure to relevant methodology and theory developed in relevant neighbouring disciplines. The author argues that the study of religion\’s would benefit from increased attention to images and visual culture, emphasizing the potential of earlier (iconology in the Warburg-Panofsky tradition and the Groningen trajectory) as well as more recent approaches developed in Europe and the U.S., which theorize the visual in terms of visual culture, visual media, visual and scopic regimes, religious aesthetics and material religion.

Keywords: gaze, iconology, image anthropology, material religion, religious aesthetics, Visible Religion, visual culture studies, visual media.

Introduction

The topic of this issue of *MTSR*, “Visual Culture and Religious Studies”, oscillates between the apparently obvious (however largely under-researched and generally under-theorized) and the highly problematic, calling for conceptual clarification: What do we mean by “visual culture” in the first place? Does it designate a potential research object for the study of religion\’s (Harvey 2011), or do we rather hint at “Visual Culture” (capitalized), which may, beyond an object of study, further qualify a particular academic endeavor known as “Visual Culture Studies”? How would the latter relate to “Visual Studies”? Why, by the way, “Religious Studies” instead of, e. g., “Science of Religion” or “Study of Religion\’s” (the term I personally prefer for its inclusive *and* critical potential)? And what about the copula, which calls for a pause in order to reflect on how “Visual Culture” and “Religious Studies” might best be articulated? I have experienced considerable difficulties in writing this article, one of the more decent reasons being the complexity of the task encapsulated in the topic, which is a meeting point of sorts, where many trajectories and debates, disciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary cross – an easy location to get puzzled and lose sight of priorities (epistemological, theoretical, methodological) no less than conceptual innocence.

“Visual culture” may be understood in a non-specific, general sense pointing to any kind of cultural entity, from individual artifact or classes of artifacts through particular media to complex displays,

configurations, settings, formations or regimes that involve visual perception, communication, commodification and consumption. That these should be investigated in relation to religion may seem trivial to some, but a call out in the desert to others who have long been dissatisfied with a study of religion\’s that gives strong priority to language, texts, literary sources and verbal discourse. For dedicated practitioners of an exclusively language-cum-discourse-oriented approach to religion, the extension of the discipline\’s objects beyond the linguistic, verbal and textual will represent an option at best, nice to have but by no means essential to the critical investigation of religion\’s. To be sure, visual culture broadly understood has been granted a place, however peripheral, in the study of religion\’s since centuries. But its status has remained precarious except in a few programmatic undertakings, some of which will be reviewed below. If there ever happened such a thing as an “iconic” (G. Boehm), “pictorial” (W.J.T. Mitchell), “visual” or “visualistic” (K. Sachs-Hombach) turn in the humanities and social sciences, one can safely state that it did not leave a mark on the academic study of religion\’s.¹

Alternatively, “Visual Culture” (capitalized) may refer to a particular theoretical perspective on the study of practices of producing and consuming meaning through images, pictures and other visual media; more than that, a whole field of studies which since the late 1980s develops in competition with, and as an alternative to, established and time-honoured art history. Understood specifically as a *terminus technicus* defining that alternative perspective, Visual Culture implies a series of options regarding the object of study as well as theory and method. In order to be fully appreciated, they must be situated and understood in relation to art history and its increasingly pluri-, inter- and trans-disciplinary exposure to anthropology, sociology, media and communication studies, etc.

This article cannot probe all possible options for articulating “Visual Culture” and “Religious Studies”, let alone review and to evaluate them. I shall start from two questions which startle me ever since I entered the study of religion\’s (in a qualified disciplinary sense) a little more than a decade ago:

- How comes that it is so difficult in our discipline to articulate visual culture and religion, or rather, to establish the systematic study of visual culture as a regular, and indeed necessary, part of the academic study of religion\’s, even under such favourable conditions as should be assumed in the context of the “visual turn”? Can we identify obstacles, both internal and external to the discipline², that have so far prevented the study of religion\’s *as a discipline* to engage more than superficially in the discussion and investigation of visual culture matters?
- If one recognizes the necessity of an articulation of visual culture and the study of religion\’s, which concepts, theoretical horizons, methodological and disciplinary requirements might be considered most promising to be explored by students of religion?

Needless to say, the following explorations and suggestions are conditioned by my personal academic background and guided by my own research interests and options, which have led me to increased exposure to, and thus heightened awareness of, some issues and debates but not others.³ They are

¹ When critical syntheses on Visual (Culture) Studies, *Bildwissenschaft* and related developments register disciplines which in their authors’ perception have been affected and transformed during the second half of the 20th century by a growing interest in visibility and visual culture (see most recently Netzwerk Philosophie 2014), they occasionally include theology (as in Günzel & Mersch 2014) but rarely address the study of religion\’s as a discipline.

² See Uehlinger 2006 (trsl. 2007) for some preliminary explanations.

³ Bibliographic references to studies authored by European scholars will refer to English or American translations when available. As will become clear, my discussion has a European bias, and I regret not to cover ‘non-

written from a relatively conservative, disciplinary point of view, by someone whose primary academic training and readings were and remain concerned with societies long past (of the ancient Levant, Western Asia, Egypt and the Mediterranean), ancient history and archaeology. I have long been interested in interregional and transcultural exchange and communication, both material and intellectual, and in patterns of mobility and connectivity that can be studied through ancient material images and artifacts (Uehlinger 2000; 2005). Working with documents and data whose producers cannot stand up and contradict my interpretations, I am sensitive to precise description, rigorous analysis, strict protocols and critical self-reflection with which to control (literally, to discipline) interpretations of material objects and images (see, e. g., Uehlinger 2014 for a recent study of prehistoric artifacts from Syria in a *longue durée* perspective). My aim in this article is to identify a middle way between sheer indifference towards visual culture and image practices on the one hand (an attitude which tends to be the rule rather than the exception in the study of religion\), and over-interpretation on the other.

As a *historian* of religion working in close cooperation with social-scientifically minded colleagues whose object of study is generally one facet of the present or of a very recent past, I often ask myself whether the questions they pursue, the hypotheses they raise and the theories they develop could or could not be converted into historical research and addressed to an object of the past. As a historian and *comparativist*, moreover, I consider any academic disciplinary arrangement and trajectory as necessarily historical, contingent and context-driven in the first place. But I also defend a conception of the study of religion\ which, while being open to interdisciplinary exchange and transdisciplinary innovation, remains emphatically *disciplinary*. That is to say, I do not conceive the study of religion\ as a more or less haphazard constellation of approaches, but as a discipline in its own right with distinct disciplinary ambitions, critical epistemological standards, specific analytical and explanatory research interests and thus a normative agenda of its own. Considering history and comparison as two necessary, inalienable and critically entangled tasks of the study of religion\, I am skeptical of theoretical and methodological developments which purport to generate all-inclusive, general views on religion and/or visual culture which do not acknowledge their own historicity, contingency and partiality. To venture into such a vast domain as visual culture and the study of religion\ may open up many promises. But the promises will only be to the benefit of our discipline if historical, social scientific, cognition-oriented and other endeavours remain in critical conversation, pursue interests that are subject to comparison, and develop non-parochial concepts and theories that will be useful for the study of religion\ past and present alike.

The status of visual representations in the academic study of religion

The very idea that the comparative study of civilizations, religion\, indeed societies and what was once termed their 'manners and customs' should make reference to visual culture, were it only to provide a reading public eager to learn with a better sense of representation of other societies, has been a feature of publications on 'other' religions ever since the early modern period.⁴ Famous and

Western' academic literature, particularly from scholars working at African and Asian institutions. Recent publications on the academic study of religion\ in Africa or Asia have not struck me by a particular emphasis on visual culture. This may be due to 'Western' myopia, as it seems hardly believable that African and Asian academic constructions of 'religion' should not give more weight to visual culture; alternatively, it might well be that the rules of the academic game as played in African and Asian universities do not differ too much from European and North-American ones with regard to visual culture and religion.

⁴ This is not to say that there were no historical antecedents in antiquity, but they were clearly less systematic, not least because of limited information and probably interest.

effective examples include publications by learned Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680; Von Wyss-Giacosa 2012) or the widely acclaimed and distributed volumes on *Cérémonies et Coutumes religieuses de tous les Peuples du Monde* published between 1723 and 1737 by the Amsterdam-based Huguenots Bernard Picart, a convert, and Jean Frédéric Bernard (Von Wyss-Giacosa 2006). Their seven large and heavily illustrated volumes have been acclaimed as “the first global vision of religion” and “the book that changed Europe” (Hunt et al. 2009; 2010), which may be somewhat exaggerated. But the claim points to the epistemological weight of visual documentation in the early days of European learned confrontation with non-European religion (that is of course, ceremonies and customs classified as such). Such a visual approach appears to be a characteristic of the earlier, 16th-to-18th-centuries development of scholarly investigation. It was largely due to the fact that knowledge of non-European languages remained relatively poor at the time and limited to only a few traditional languages. Visual culture could not impose itself durably as an obvious and indeed indispensable subject matter in the study of religion\\$. In the course of the 19th century, language and philology, supplemented by text-based histories, were established as the essential instruments for putatively more sophisticated forms of knowledge.

That scholarly research was oriented in such a way is symptomatic of a characteristically (though not exclusively) European cultural dichotomy and hierarchy, epitomized in the distinction of *scientia* and *ars*, knowledge and art – and words and images. The dichotomy fuels a conceptual prejudice, nurtured by Platonists and Jewish, Christian or Islamic theologians alike, according to which true knowledge is acquired through *logos*, i. e. word and discourse, but not through images. The idea is well alive in many provinces of academia, including the study of religion\\$. It has long seemed obvious to scholars of religion that students should acquire language skills needed to read ancient texts and converse with the indigenous in their language. Images may be used to illustrate textbooks on religion\\$, but they are rarely studied in their own right. To be sure, their analysis and interpretation would require some equally sophisticated training.

One should not ignore however that, in spite of its language-, text- and discourse-oriented bias, the study of religion\\$ has occasionally accommodated provinces of knowledge where material and visual artifacts were held in higher esteem. Where the study of religion\\$ was coupled with anthropology and ethnography, it was often sustained by local collections of objects and curiosities brought home by explorers of far-away and/or marginalized societies, sometimes with the explicit purpose to document so-called ‘primitive’ or ‘indigenous’ people who had no literature to offer. When ‘higher’ systems of belief were documented through visual artifacts, their interpretation was then assured and improved with reference to literary documents, including treatises on art and aesthetics. As a result, many public and private collections and museums betray until this day a hiatus between ethnographic artifacts (the province of the once primitive illiterate) and art (the province of the more civilized and literate). Today many institutions and scholars try to overcome this unfortunate dichotomy. But collections established over many decades if not centuries do not lend themselves easily to alternative classifications. It requires considerable efforts at conceptual reorientation and methodological reflection to address ‘primitive’ visual artifacts in terms of ‘art’ (take the re-affectation in 2006 of a major ethnographic public collection in Paris to become the *Musée des Arts premiers* at the initiative of President Chirac), or to analyze and display sophisticated objects from elite contexts not as art in the first place but as witnesses to visual culture.

Visual culture has sometimes got a better treatment in disciplines focusing on specific traditions, such as Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish Studies etc., and in disciplines concerned with particular geographical areas or civilizations. But even there, a hiatus between philology and the study of art or visual culture often exists, so that the study of visual culture does often not represent more

than a 'nice to have' rather than a compulsory subject matter for study and research. If construed as a discipline in its own right, the study of religion\ s can learn from these other disciplines but would better accommodate a place for visual culture in its own curriculum.

The Groningen trajectory

Material and visual culture have often enjoyed a certain status and flair in places where ethnographic collections were available on the one hand, and phenomenological approaches to the study of religion\ s favoured on the other. Such was the case, for instance, at the University of Marburg, where the "Religionskundliche Sammlung" was established in 1927 by Rudolf Otto (Bräunlein 2006). At the University of Groningen, where Gerardus van der Leeuw held his chair in Religious Studies between 1918 and 1950, the ethnographic collection was named after him in 1978.⁵ It provided the background for Theo P. van Baaren (1912-1989), van der Leeuw's successor since 1952 and himself a theologian, ethnographer, collector and artist, to launch an ambitious collaborative documentation project entitled *Iconography of Religions*, of which roughly 60 fascicules were published at Brill's between 1970 and 1980. The project was a deliberate attempt to bridge the divide between ethnography and art history and to use expertise from both fields to the benefit of the study of religion\ s. Unfortunately, the project was somehow over-ambitious, could not be brought to an end and did not have the expected effect on the discipline. Due to the lack of expertise among scholars of religion, most fascicules had to be authored by experts in one or another specialized area. As a result, the collection as a whole lacks a unified research agenda, common theoretical basis or explicit comparativist interest. Not only did it make little impression on the study of religion\ s as a discipline, but even the individual fascicules had limited impact, as far as I can judge, on the respective neighbouring disciplines.

The *genius loci*, together with the physical exposure to the Groningen collection continued however to guide research when Hans G. Kippenberg followed van Baaren on the Groningen chair. In hindsight, the yearbook *Visible Religion*, of which seven volumes were published between 1982 and 1990, may be considered a third-generation endeavor of sorts. The project's debt and loyalty to van Baaren is expressed in the first volume, dedicated to van Baaren and entitled "Commemorative Figures" (1982). But *Visible Religion* aimed at more than just continue *Iconography of Religions*. Its aim was to lay stronger theoretical and methodological foundations for the religio-historical study of visual artifacts.

"One of the aims of this annual is to reconstruct the way other cultures see things. (...) The iconographic tradition ["iconographic" is here used in the sense of "pictorial", C.U.], more clearly than the verbal tradition, shows how the world of sense perception is organized by man (...). Contemplation of image-material does more than just revise our ideas about the aim of the image; *it strikes at the roots of our definition of religion*. (...) The meaning which is recognizable in these materials is different: religion functions as a world-picture, a social reconstruction of reality." (Kippenberg et al. 1982: VII, emphasis added)

Moreover, *Visible Religion* was meant to reach beyond iconography:

⁵ The intellectual heritage of those phenomenological projects lives on among theologians. It has been reemphasized in terms of theological aesthetics by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, who has reedited and introduced both Mircea Eliade's *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts* (1985) and van der Leeuw's *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art* (1963 [2006]).

“The annual covers visible objects and visual actions. (...) what should be noticed are the connections. (...) Consecration of images and their revolutionary smashing are the opposite sides of one and the same coin: Visibility in itself is already an action.” (ibid. VIII)

And finally,

“That religion becomes visible either in objects of art or in action is not simply accidental; it reaches to the very heart of religion, for what is visible is public” (ibid. IX).

I have discussed elsewhere (Uehlinger 2006; 2007) the vicissitudes of this important and promising project which, alas, did not survive more than a few years and was discontinued in 1990 after Kippenberg had left Groningen for Bremen. According to personal memories shared with me by Hans Kippenberg, one major reason why the annual could not be continued was the fact that the editors did not receive enough quality manuscripts. The discipline whose reformation the annual was meant to trigger proved relatively inert and only moderately receptive to the suggested systematic expansion of focus towards visual artifacts, methodologies, and theory. Even the volumes which the Groningen group was able to produce look uneven in terms of focus and theoretical sophistication. That Vol. II should address “Representations of Gods” (1983) reflects and, ironically, perpetuates a time-honoured tradition in Western scholarship of perceiving other religions in terms of their ‘idols’ (the annual does of course not use such polemic terminology). Vol. III, focusing on “Popular Religion” (1984), raised some provocative claims which would not resist closer scrutiny (for instance, that pictures were as such less exposed to censorship and institutional paternalism); but it also offered statements which, after 30 years, retain an almost prophetic quality (for instance, when the link between images and experience is addressed or when different channels of knowledge transmission are postulated for theologians and craftsmen; see Kippenberg et al. 1983: VII). Vol. VI addressed “The Image in Writing” (1988). But the most ambitious and rewarding volumes, from a disciplinary point of view, were Vol. IV-V on “Approaches to Iconology” (1986) and Vol. VII (1990) on “Genres in Visual Representation”. Both are proceedings of conferences which engaged in the discussion of theory and method as much as in the study of individual artifacts and artifact classes. Kippenberg had been joined to that end by Hubert Cancik and Burkhard Gladigow, the two main editors of the Tübingen-based *Handbuch der religionswissenschaftlichen Grundbegriffe* which at the time served as the flagship for the promotion in Germany of a *Religionswissenschaft* that would address religion in resolutely culturalist and anthropological terms. Volumes IV-V and VII of *Visible Religion* also tried to connect the study of religion\’s with theories and methods developed by influential art historians such as Erwin Panofsky, Ernst Gombrich, Nelson Goodman and others.

Due to the annual’s early discontinuation, however, this task was left to others, and it still remains to be carried out in a different time and research environment. Not only the study of religion\’s is no more the same as it was 30 years ago, but the study of art, images, and visual culture have also in the meantime experienced considerable diversification and pluralization.

Why should students of religion care about the visual and visual culture in the first place?

Before discussing further theoretical and methodological developments, we should pause and ask why academics studying religion\’s should take an interest in images and visual culture in the first place. The question may seem trivial to some and there is always a risk that it leads to some kind of

pro domo discussion. Answers will depend on our understanding of 'religion' (as rightly pointed out by Kippenberg in the quote given above). I can hardly conceive of a definition of religion that would not require heightened attention to the visual. Yet only a minority of colleagues working with whatever concept of religion systematically include visual evidence and issues concerned with visuality in their views on the discipline, and as a matter of fact, only a few academic programs offer courses on methods and theory for studying visual culture and religion as part of their regular curriculum.

Why should students of religion care about the visual and visual culture? The most simple answer for a historian focusing on ancient religion is that our study of past societies should include as many different sets of documentary evidence (or in other words, potential source material) as possible. The further one goes back in history and the more one cares not only about elite discourse but about ways of life and worldviews from different strata of past societies, the more precarious it is to work primarily, let alone exclusively, with textual evidence (epigraphic or literary). This holds particularly for early periods and societies with limited literacy: Non-literary societies of the past cannot be studied otherwise than through their material culture, of which visual culture is a rewarding if tricky part (see Conkey 2010 on the problem of using prehistoric imaginaries for definitions of 'us'; contrast the enactive methodology suggested by Malafouris 2013). But the epistemological principle should be extended to any period, society and religious tradition. To restrict oneself to written data alone severely restricts the range of possible research questions and strategies. Historians are familiar with caveats lamenting the scarcity of available sources on which their research is based; to draw attention to scarce documentation is part of responsible historical scholarship. But the logical consequence should be to extend one's documentation as much as possible and not to ignore entire sets of evidence such as visual and material culture. The latter attitude prevails, however, in many provinces of the historical study of religion. That archaeology and the study of visual evidence are both necessary and rewarding when dealing with past societies, in the study of religion as much as in general history seems obvious, but this insight is far from having entered the disciplinary consciousness let alone scholarly habitus of historians of religion. I presume that more often than not, this state of affairs is not the result of a critically reflected epistemological option but simply due to a lack of reflection, scholarly tradition and poor acquaintance with relevant methodology.

Another answer to the question raised above would be that in many religious contexts and traditions, images are invested with highly significant functions, for instance when used as objects in ritual or as means to qualify ritual space and thus to frame rituals performed in that space. If one task of the scholar studying religion is to describe, analyze, explain and compare particular ritual practices and their frames, not to engage in the study of such images would mean to miss an important aspect of the object under scrutiny, even in contexts and traditions where peculiar ways of abstinence from image practices are observed.

Research in the social-scientific study of religion, too, is usually discourse-oriented and does not, unfortunately, grant attention to the visual. It is therefore ill-prepared to deal with the peculiarities of the visual, which often functions on a pre-discursive level of individual, habitual dispositions and/or social order. I have personally experienced that even when they address conspicuously visual topics such as religion-related ways of clothing, or ways of placing and marking religious buildings in public space, social scientists operate with research methods that retrieve verbal statements and discursive attributions of meaning, but remain blind, so to speak, to the visual as such. I suspect (but I am not an expert in this field) that social scientists too would benefit from more appropriate research methodologies which could adequately integrate visuality and visual culture (see, e. g., Jongmanns 2003; Breckner 2010; Burri 2012). Visual anthropology has certainly much to say and to offer to that effect, but again, there is no regular training for it in the study of religion curricula I know.

Let us return to the point where the study of religion\’s was left when *Visible Religion* was discontinued in 1990. As mentioned above, Vol. IV-V had addressed “Approaches to Iconology”. The modern understanding of iconology as the study of meaning in visual art owes much to Aby Warburg (1866-1929)⁶ and Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968), two of art history’s most ingenious classics. In this article I shall emphasize the legacy of Panofsky because of its stronger potential for methodology. This is not the place to review Panofsky’s early career in Germany, closely connected to Warburg and to a circle of German intellectuals among which Ernst Cassirer and Karl Mannheim; nor to follow his career as a leading expert in Renaissance art at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Princeton. It must suffice to refer to what has undoubtedly become Panofsky’s most widely received, applauded and contested piece far beyond the limits of art history, a study in which he offered a methodological reflection on the adequate description and content-cum-meaning-oriented interpretation of figurative art. First published in German as a revised version of a lecture delivered to a meeting of philosophers at Kiel (Panofsky 1932), the paper was reworked several times and published twice in English as introductory essays to Panofsky’s *Studies on Iconology* (1939) and *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955). In one or another version, it has been translated into many other languages and reprinted in scores of textbooks and anthologies on art theory and method (among which Kaemmerling 1979). There is even today hardly a college or university program in art, visual culture or media studies where students are not exposed to Panofsky’s classic three-level schema of analysis and interpretation:

	Object of interpretation	Act of interpretation	Equipment for interpretation	Controlling principle of interpretation	
I	Primary or natural subject matter – (A) factual, (B) expressional – constituting the world of artistic motifs.	Pre-iconographic description (and pseudo-formal analysis).	Practical experience (familiarity with objects and events).	History of style (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, objects and events were expressed by forms).	HISTORY OF TRADITION
II	Secondary or conventional subject matter, constituting the world of images, stories and allegories.	Iconographical analysis in the narrower sense of the word.	Knowledge of literary sources (familiarity with specific themes and concepts).	History of types (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, specific themes or concepts were expressed by objects and events).	
III	Intrinsic meaning or content, constituting the world of ‘symbolical’ values.	Iconographical interpretation in a deeper sense (Iconographical synthesis; alternatively: Iconological interpretation).	Synthetic intuition (familiarity with essential tendencies of the human mind), conditioned by personal psychology and ‘Weltanschauung’.	History of cultural symptoms or ‘symbols’ in general (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, essential tendencies of the human mind were expressed by themes and concepts).	

⁶ In Uehlinger 2006 (and 2007) I have argued, following others, that Warburg (on whom see Gombrich 1986; Ginzburg 1989; Woodfield 2001) should also be counted among the classics for the study of religion\’s, whether for his theoretical intuitions on pictorial memory (*Bildgedächtnis*), codified gestures in art (*Pathosformeln*) or the combination of anthropology and cultural history, for his ground-breaking studies on the European Renaissance or for his ingenious project of a pictorial atlas (*Mnemosyne*). Due to personal, political, and institutional circumstances, his impact on the study of religion\’s as a discipline remained limited at the time. His legacy was mainly carried on in art history, by Panofsky in the U.S., Gombrich and others in Britain, and only rehabilitated in Germany since the 1980s.

According to this schema, the ultimate aim of the historical(!) interpretation of any given work of art (figurative art!) is the thick reconstruction of its “intrinsic meaning”, which Panofsky considers as essentially context-related. As pointed out by art historian Irving Lavin, “it was this insistence on, and search for, meaning – especially in places where no one suspected there was any – that led Panofsky to understand art, as no previous historian had, as an intellectual endeavor on a par with the traditional liberal arts” (Lavin 1995b: 6; cf. Summers 1995). Needless to say, the schema would require extensive discussion. Many concepts used by Panofsky have been subject to severe criticism and can only be fully appreciated against the intellectual environments of pre-WW II Germany and post-WW II Princeton. The article itself is an illuminating document of 20th-century intellectual history, not least for the historian of religion\’s. Many of the concepts here deployed (take ‘symbol’, ‘meaning’, ‘value’, or *Weltanschauung*) are typical expressions of a secularizing humanistic vocabulary struggling with a religiously affected object perceived as intellectually committing heritage. To be sure, Panofsky’s schema appears utterly idealistic to us. From a 21st-century point of view, virtually every box in the schema needs to be updated and corrected: think of the distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘conventional’ subject matter; the problematic status granted to experience, familiarity, or intuition; or the very notion of ‘essential tendencies of the human mind’... Art historians have particularly criticized the weight given to literary sources and other epistemic resources external to the primary object of study. But others have rightly stressed that Panofsky did not consider the schema to provide sufficient instructions for a full art-historical analysis (e. g., Thürlemann 2009).

Still, the schema has impressed generations of scholars from various disciplines because of its internal theoretical coherence, plausibility on each level of interpretation and a strong sense of articulation between the three levels.⁷ I contend that when viewed as a classic, Panofsky’s schema can still operate as a straightforward, but sufficiently sophisticated tool of orientation even for the contemporary student of religion. Isn’t it precisely the role of a classic to provoke critical thinking and to challenge the student’s awareness of the historicity and contingency of theoretical and methodological reflection itself? It is for this reason that I recognize several definite methodological qualities to the schema (and hence like to use it in the classroom): its clear distinction of descriptive, analytical and interpretive operations; its insistence on tools and skills which need to be responsibly employed in order to keep the object of study at the distance required (not least to avoid a phenomenological-hermeneutical ‘blending of horizons’); its potential for a study based on almost constructivist premises combined with an emphasis on analysis and interpretation that need to be critically controlled and disciplined; its sensitivity for cultural artifacts (not only images) and practices (e. g., drawing a hat) as symptoms of particular social, cultural and ideological contexts, conditions and circumstances; and, not least, the vigorous stress put by Panofsky on history and on tradition, an emphasis that implies the recognition of a contingency not only of the object of study, but also of the study itself – and indeed, the student.

As mentioned, however, Panofsky’s biases need to be addressed, reoriented and corrected if we want to use iconology as a useful and productive tool for the study of religion\’s. Corrections should take into account at least three trajectories of scholarly discussion after Panofsky: First, Panofsky’s heavy reliance on textual information both as a means to guide and to correct interpretation misses important aspects of genuinely visual and/or iconic properties of the images and pictures under scru-

⁷ An alternative model distinguishing seven levels or steps of interpretation from physical perception to modal understanding in a process of communication (Scholz 2004) may be more differentiated in many respects, but it remains vague in others, especially regarding context-and-culture-related parameters which are of foremost concern to the student of religion.

tiny. Second, the critical study of images and visual culture needs to address more explicitly matters of pragmatics, rhetorics, ideological and other mundane interests driving visual communication and the consumption of visual culture, and it needs to be studied in relation to other dimensions (politics, economy, ideology) of the social fabric. In sum, Panofsky's idealistic and humanist bias must be supplemented by more anthropologically and socially minded questions (which might still fit within the three levels of description, analysis and interpretation/explanation). Third, we must take into account a number of critical modifications of the very concept of "iconology", which touch on its theoretical foundations.

Authors as diverse as W. J. T. Mitchell (1986, 1994), Gottfried Boehm and Horst Bredekamp (2009), Hans Belting (2005b, c, 2006) and many others have retained the concept of "iconology" while further extending its theoretical ambition, combining it with semiotics and critical theory, philosophical hermeneutics or social history, media theory, anthropology etc. In my own view, most of these suggestions add complementary rather than alternative concerns to Panofsky's. Among the critics of Panofsky, Max Imdahl (1980; 2002) deserves to be mentioned for his heightened attention to peculiarly 'iconic' qualities of images, their 'iconicity' and the latter's effects on image, perception and viewer (but see Thürlemann 2009 on the problematic relationship of Imdahl's intuition to Panofsky's iconology). Michael Baxandall (1972) has stressed the crucial importance of social and historical context for a fuller understanding of how art works, how it informs us on past experience and can reveal a peculiar "period eye". In a ground-breaking study entitled *Patterns of Intentions* (1985), Baxandall suggested that pictures are products of, as well as agents in, particular chains of causation, and invited art historians to further explore the pragmatics of images (what kind of labour images are meant to perform, and for what purpose). A similar approach was suggested, in a slightly different vein, by Ernst H. Gombrich (1999), one of the most prominent followers and innovators of iconology along the trajectory initiated by Aby Warburg. In a famous monograph which appeared just too late to inspire *Visible Religion*, David Freedberg (1989) explored the potential "power of images", that is their capacity (under certain historical conditions and circumstances as Panofsky would have added) not only to represent but also to impress individual viewers and viewing/using communities, provoking specific patterns of response that range from image veneration to iconoclasm. Alfred Gell (1998) has offered an anthropological theory which further accounts for the attribution of agency to statues and other images. Last but not least, Hans Belting has been particularly prolific and innovative to explore such religion-affine topics as the meanings and uses of images before they were considered in terms of art (1990), or the career of icons meant to represent the 'true face' of Christ (2005a). He has enlarged the notion of iconology through anthropology-minded studies on the 'iconology of gaze', whether gaze directed and conditioned by images (2006) or gaze conditioned by particular cultural regimes (2009; 2008; 2009). Yet another of his approaches to iconology concerns the ability attributed to images since prehistoric times to confer not only form and shape, but presence to bodies otherwise absent (2005b). Belting's concept of an anthropology of images (2001) has got considerable response both in Europe and the U.S. and is now being further explored by anthropology-driven scholars of religion such as David Morgan and Birgit Meyer (see below).

In many of those more recent studies, the concept of "iconology" has detached itself from the more restricted sense given by Warburg or Panofsky and developed towards an overarching concept integrating a plurality of approaches to images (see Boehm & Bredekamp 2009; Baert 2011 and others), to the extent that it is sometimes held as virtually synonymous to German *Bildwissenschaft* or "image science" (on which see Sachs-Hombach 2005; 2009; Netzwerk Philosophie 2014). Moreover, as European scholars have increasingly interacted with colleagues in the U.S., borders and distinctions between different approaches have become fuzzy as theories expanded and different theoreti-

cal universes were brought into conversation with each other. Still, I would like to draw attention to one significant difference: Most iconological approaches developed by European art historians aim at a somehow 'positive', affirmative understanding of images, their meaning and their role in culture and society. In contrast, theoretical trajectories known as Visual (Culture) Studies explore images and pictures in a more skeptical mode, indebted to critical theory. Their aim is to disclose and demystify underlying ideologies of image discourse, image practices and image anxieties and to critically identify *and oppose* power issues at stake.

Art history, the study of visual culture, and Visual (Culture) Studies

It would be ironic if a Swiss scholar set out to explain to readers of *MTSR* the development of Visual (Culture) Studies, since these developed in the late 1980s in North America as a robust alternative to conventional art history.⁸ "Family relations" between so-called 'new art history', Visual (Culture) Studies and *Bildwissenschaft* are tricky (Von Falkenhausen 2007), and the trajectories overlap as often as they follow different paths.⁹ But if the study of religion\’s wants to address matters of visual culture consistently and systematically, in a theoretically and methodologically self-reflective and reasonably sophisticated way, it will have to engage with the major theoretical writings on visual culture and Visual (Culture) Studies (see Bryson et al. 1994; W.J.T. Mitchell 1994; 2002; Mirzoeff 1998; Bal & Bryson 2001; Elkins 2010; Davis 2011; convenient orientation is provided in the four volumes edited by Morra & Smith 2006: [1] What is Visual Culture Studies?, [2] Histories, archaeologies and genealogies of visual culture, [3] Spaces of visual culture, [4] Experiences in visual culture).

In the process, we should remind ourselves that sheer novelty is neither a prerequisite nor always a quality in the transdisciplinary cross-pollination of theories and methods. The criteria by which to evaluate appropriateness of a given theory or method to another discipline's aims and needs have to be defined by the recipient discipline in line with its own epistemological requirements, particular research interests and research strategies. The transfer of theories and methods from one discipline to another is always selective, and it must be so: the principle applies to the study of religion\’s and Visual (Culture) Studies as much as to the study of religion\’s' long-standing involvement with history, anthropology, sociology etc.¹⁰

At this juncture, North American and European perceptions and constructions of what the study of religion\’s should be all about, and particularly how far it should or should not engage on political, culturalist, community-driven and other normative agendas, may not always follow the same lines. The comparative study of religion\’s as practiced in Europe generally emphasizes the scholar's commitment to methodological agnosticism, objectivity and neutrality, requiring necessary distance toward one's object of study for the sake of sober observation. Many scholars may have 'leftist' inclina-

⁸ Visual (Culture) Studies' distinct rhetoric of disruption from humanistic art history reminds me of tensions and debates in the study of religion\’s, between 'religion' vs. 'science of religion' scholars and professional societies (AAR vs. NASSR), where similar issues of power, class, race, gender, and civil values seem to be at stake.

⁹ Major differences between Visual (Culture) Studies and *Bildwissenschaft* but also common aims have been neatly exposed to German readers in a recently-published anthology of influential and diagnostic articles (Rimmele, Sachs-Hombach & Stiegler [eds] 2014).

¹⁰ Let me specify this point: Art history is not always practiced with an analytical concern for culture- and socio-historical contextualization, but sometimes engages in a experiential quest based on phenomenological premises, which aims at understanding works of art in terms of disclosure and of a hermeneutical blending of horizons of meaning. Hermeneutical approaches in the phenomenological tradition are favoured by such eminent European art historians as Oskar Bätschmann (1984), Gottfried Boehm (2007) or Georges Didi-Huberman. They may be in tune with theological and religio-philosophical concerns, but of limited use to an analytical and explanatory, historical or social-scientific study of religion\’s.

tions, but the articulation of so-called minority commitments and political issues within the discipline remains rather exceptional. In contrast, Visual (Culture) Studies have generally entertained a close relation to critical theory and to issues of power and politics, expressing commitments which many European scholars of religion may share intellectually without necessarily addressing them in their writings or teaching. When it comes to re-direct the focus of attention from art to visual culture, or to consider art as one subset of a larger social reality conceptualized as visual culture, this inevitably *does* imply an epistemological commitment with a normative, and potentially political, effect. Deconstruction and extension of focus are the main concerns of Visual (Culture) Studies.

The genealogy of Visual (Culture) Studies should not be restricted to its branching off from art history (Dikovitskaya 2005), but that parting of the ways is certainly important for the study of religion\'. For the study of religion\', too, the extension of focus from art to visual culture is first an epistemological requirement because our discipline cannot be exclusively concerned with the world of elites and virtuosi (Plate 2002). The move from the iconographical and iconological concerns of *Visible Religion* to contemporary Visual (Culture) Studies therefore seems almost natural. The very notion of 'art' is loaded with problems. Any use of the concept needs to be both contextualized and deconstructed (Shiner 2003).¹¹ We should not, however, throw the baby out with the bath. Certain works of art (think of the Michelangelo's *Sistine Chapel*, Botticelli's *Venus* or Leonardo's *Last Supper*) have made a more powerful impact in Western art and intellectual history than others and continue to do so not only in upperclass circles but, thanks to modern "mechanical reproduction" (W. Benjamin), well into popular mass media, commercials etc. until this day. The contemporary student of religion should not feel inhibited nor ashamed to investigate the careers of such literally extraordinary classics. However, he or she will be generally sympathetic to approaches which conceive even exceptional masterpieces like the ones just mentioned, in terms of visual culture rather than art.

There is more to visual culture. The very legitimacy of images as such (generally understood as figurative representations), their use especially but not exclusively in ritual contexts and/or the representation of particular objects of religious concern (such as deities, angels, prophets or other metaphysical entities, let alone 'God' in monotheistic traditions) have been a matter of debate and social conflict (Bredenkamp 1975) in many societies throughout history and continue to be hotly disputed until today in what have now become globalized conflicts. Societies, institutions, social movements and communities have developed a great variety of distinctive visual regimes. Some of them use icons to mobilize attention, adhesion and aggregation, while others operate with a conspicuous exclusion of or a ban on figurative representations from ritual or even public space, whether three-dimensional statuary, two-dimensional pictures or both. The latter regimes may, under certain conditions, be classified as 'aniconic' or 'anti-iconic' (although both terms are problematic and should not be used in our discipline with any theological overtone), but even the strictest 'aniconic' Calvinism or the most 'aniconic' version of Shinto (and not only their figurative propaganda spread through pious images and tracts) produce and display conspicuous visual cultures of their own. Considered as a normative regime structuring what may and may not be seen, under which circumstances and conditions, by any given society, group or individual, and even more, the variety and multitude of visual regimes between and within societies, co-existing at times but often clashing with each other: all these represent most challenging objects of analysis and explanation for the comparative study of religion\'.

¹¹ The concept of "art" is used in several entries of the *Encyclopaedia of Religions*, especially on iconography, but it is absent from the critical terms discussed in Taylor 2005.

To study regimes of visual culture, whether iconic or 'aniconic', may be in some productive tension but is not in my view irreconcilable with the more conventional study of art, as long as the latter is taken as one aspect or dimension of a given group's or society's visual culture, not necessarily the most important though often a dominant one in the sense of socially hegemonic power structure. Visual culture extends beyond but also encompasses art. Methodologically speaking, its study may build on many reliable foundations laid earlier by art historians. Visual (Culture) Studies may have disenfranchised themselves successfully from art history in many ways, and legitimately so. But they have also, and for good reasons, retained a robust connection to art-historical methodology and theory. I know hardly an introduction to the study of visual culture that does not include a reference to iconography and iconology in the Warburg and Panofsky tradition, be it to treat them as a model, a classic or a starting point for critical revision (see, e. g., van Leeuwen & Jewitt 2011; Howells & Nogueiros 2012, ch. 1).

The study of religion would be equally well advised to integrate such references and basic tools in its regular analytical instrumentarium. Only if a minimum of formal training in iconographical and iconological methods and visual studies is added to the curricular toolbox, students of religion will acquire practical skills for critical visual analysis. Such analysis may address individual artworks as such, but be even more concerned with religious visual cultures broadly understood, both in terms of historically contextualized data and for the purpose of proper theory.

From images to (visual) media, media practices and media history

While the afore-mentioned extension of the field concerns the types, social locations and sheer quantity of images that may be considered valuable data to be researched by the student of religion, another, exponential extension of the field is related to the increasingly common understanding of images and visual culture as media (Sachs-Hombach 2003). To consider images not simply as artifacts re-presenting something or someone, but as media implies another redirection of focus. The image as such ceases to be the primary object of analysis; instead, the researcher's attention turns to messages conveyed by images and to processes of communication involving senders and recipients. Many different theories have been offered to conceptualize the ways in which medium and message may relate to each other, ranging from strict distinction (where the medium is viewed as a mere carrier of an independent message) through entanglement (where media and message shape and condition each other in a reciprocal relationship) to virtual identity (where, according to Marshall McLuhan's famous saying, the medium itself is the actual message).

This interest in visual media¹² has a number of consequences for the study of religion's interest in visual culture. To begin with, two- or three-dimensional images that once were the primary object of *Iconography of Religion* or *Visible Religion* now appear as just one particular kind of visual media among many others. Other kinds of images, particularly animated ones, and media operating with such images, particularly modern mass media such as TV, film, video and the internet have since the 1990s come to the forefront of scholarly concern and caused a real hype of studies on religion and media, leading to a blossoming of new research fields such as religion and film, religion and the internet, religion in computer games, etc. It should be clear to any observer that the new media and related media practices, which change with ever-growing pace due to technological innovation, have strongly affected the understanding of religion in contemporary societies all over the world. As the

¹² Mitchell has argued that there are no visual media, since even pictures are not exclusively visual and appeal to more than just the sense of vision (2005b). Not every media, however, requires vision; "visual media" is here used shorthand for those which do.

new media open up new virtual spaces to their practitioners, they do not only specify, transform or add new aspects to traditional cosmologies and other-worlds. They claim to hold a promise of their own, offer a “second life” or any number of additional lives and thus become a location *sui generis* of religious experience for many. And as new digital media are taking a firm hold on contemporary societies and individuals, they have also become major ‘inner-worldly’ powers, indeed one of the most effective driving forces of globalization triggering increased cultural entanglements and tensions. Not surprisingly then, media and mediatization figure among the main topics of contemporary social debate and self-reflection, with religion being attributed a major role (Jansson 2002; Engelke 2010; Hjarvard 2012; Morgan 2012; 2013).

The quantity of visual data that could potentially be studied in the field of religion and media is unprecedented and virtually unlimited. Working with such data, however virtual and volatile they may be, provides a particular thrill to many a student, since it promises to better understand his or her own present (if not the putative, ultimate real) while actively participating in its development and benefitting from its virtual blessings. When observed from a distance (and in my case admittedly a slightly conservative viewpoint of someone who has witnessed incredible changes in media technology during his lifetime), this development – a global warming of sorts – raises numerous questions in terms of method and theory. At the very least, the new multi-media environments call for a redefinition of what was once called participant observation.¹³

A historian typically engages the present changes in media technology with a double concern: First, the thrill and attraction exerted by new media (including the so-called ‘social media’ – as if media could be anything else than social!), and the emphasis put by public education discourse on ‘media competence’ rather than critical thinking about media and their use, may swallow up many a contemporary student’s attention; in comparison, the more solid study of media that shaped social communication in historic societies look rather old-fashioned indeed, however suited it may be for patient, ideology-critical deconstruction. Second, the more a discipline’s attention is captured by the present and (*horribile dictum*) so-called ‘relevance’ to the present, the less attention it pays to reflect on the historicity and contingency of that very present itself. The result, in the case of the study of religion\, may be short-sightedness of analysis¹⁴ and/or anachronism in the way the very concept of religion is construed. Alternatively, contemporary changes in media technology and their impact on society and social discourse could, when critically reflected, give scholars a heightened awareness of religion’s changeability and plasticity, of its constructedness, reliance and dependence on media and communication (Stolow 2005). That media, broadly understood, and media technologies always had and continue to have an essential role to play in religion, as constructive devices without which religion would at best be an invention of the mind, is an anthropological insight that may shield off the critical study of religion\ against potential phenomenological inclinations. Viewed in such terms, religion can be theorized as the aggregated result of a variety of media operations pointing towards meaningful, collectively looked for social goals. The aggregate may be coextensive with the full range of media opportunities available to a community or individuals in their particular social and cultural

¹³ Contemporary studies on religion and media rarely operate on theoretical foundations that are as robust as conventional art history, were it only because their notion of media is generally limited to modern mass media. For this and other reasons, I wonder whether the new media and concomitant media talk leave the students as much space for critical thinking as was the case with the slower, more measured and demanding procedures of iconographical research or literary analysis. Admittedly, though, such skepticism is a typical concomitant of any revolution in media technology.

¹⁴ Think, for instance, of all the fashionable talk on so-called post-secularism in Western societies. This discourse has little empirical foundation but results from an optical illusion created by modern mass media, more specifically, the massive mediatization of religion (especially religion-related conflicts) by both media professionals and a limited number of religious agents.

location; or it may represent a particular selection of that larger media economy. Whether in the latter case, a selection is consciously reflected and mediatized itself or not, particular media formations and arrangements will probably be considered by insiders and/or outsiders alike as one conspicuous aspect of a tradition's, a community's or even an individual's religious identity.

The historian's task is to get some measured understanding of how media economies, visual and otherwise, contributed to create, sustain and transform social order and imaginaries in past societies, what role religion played in these processes and how religion was in turn shaped by media economies (Lundby 2013). Related questions are how particular groups or individuals participated in the larger media economy of their time, and to those parts of the media economy which supported religion; which features of that economy would have been available to whom, which power relations would have ruled access to particular media; and how the religious media economy might have provided a sense of community to believers and/or allowed for imagining different worlds. How did changes in media technology and economy affect religion and religious communication at any given time and place? And finally, what space and function were, in any given context, specifically allotted to visual media (see Günzel & Mersch 2014, 151-278, for an intriguing summary of the history of visual media, and Leja 2011 for ultra-brief type scenes from a history of images)?

More than ever, the historical study of media technologies and practices, that is the basis of social communication, religious and otherwise, represents an essential field of inquiry without which the contemporary study of religion's can hardly do. Were it not against the background of modern media revolutions, and the growing impact of theoretical reflection about media and mediatization, we would hardly ask historically-minded questions such as these. But the critical study of visual culture and religion will deploy its full potential only at the condition that our research interests reach beyond the horizon of a hyper-mediated present.

New approaches to (religious) aesthetics

A different use of the concept of media, visual and otherwise, can be observed in yet another field of studies on religion, namely religious aesthetics or *Religionsästhetik*. Such studies are burgeoning in Germany, where a research network has been put up under the auspices of the *Deutsche Vereinigung für Religionswissenschaft*, with international participation from other European countries. In the perspective of scholars related to this initiative, among whom Susanne Lanwerd (2002) and Hubert Mohr (2005) should be singled out as real pioneers, the notion of aesthetics does neither hint at the beautiful or sublime, nor at particular theories or normative value systems developed in different religious traditions with regard to the beautiful or the sublime. Rather, building on Greek *aisthesis* understood in the Aristotelian sense of perception through the senses, scholars dealing with religious aesthetics have developed approaches to religion which emphasize the link between human bodily perception (including proprioception as felt in pain, grief or exaltation) and religious experience. Sensory perception and experience tend to be induced and conditioned by particular aesthetic settings that activate some aspects of bodily sensation while restraining others (and thus tend to discipline both). Some scholars thus conceptualize religion's as such as "spaces of perception" (Mohn 2012). I am reminded of Albert Levy's (2003) concept of spatial arrangements as *machines à faire croire* ("machines to foster belief") and earlier theorizations of images as material tools for the "production of the sacred" (Dunand et al. 1991). Whenever a particular bodily practice requires a standardized environment governed by peculiar rules and expectations regarding spatial arrangements, light and colour, sound or silence, visual culture etc., prone to generate a particular (syn)aesthetic experience, the overall arrangement can be theorized and studied as an "aesthetic formation" (a term coined by

Birgit Meyer, perhaps following Foucault's "epistemic formation") or, as I would add by putting additional emphasis on matters of power, as an *aesthetic regime*. In standardized ritual environments, for instance, to operate according to rules of proper aesthetic formation or regime may be instrumental in conveying to participants both a sense of validity and of success of the ritual. In such a perspective, material, visual and other aspects of a given aesthetic setting (what an intellectualist theorization of religion might condescendingly regard as mere asides without proper meaning nor function) can be of crucial importance for the participants' evaluation of their religious experience. Studying religion in terms of aesthetic formation or regime requires that the researcher pay attention not only to the 'game' that is being played but to its underlying, governing rules.

Scholars interested in visual culture will ask what place and status any particular aesthetic formation attributes to the visual. Let us take the physiological equipment of human beings as a starting-point: Optical and visual perception occupy a place of special importance in the regular sensory apparatus of human beings. Mechano-, thermo- or chemosensors, which govern balance, the perception of temperature, the haptic, olfacto-gustative or auditory system, number between tens of thousands and millions. In comparison, the sheer number of photosensors (7 million rods and 120 million cones) and their capacity to treat physical stimuli (3 million bits/sec.) exceeds the capacities of any other senses by far (Mohr 2005: 1446).¹⁵ Not surprisingly then, distinguishing lighter from darker zones for purposes of orientation is one of the most elementary operations of the human brain. Light zones are perceived as more attractive as long as luminescence does not exceed a level above which it will be experienced as unpleasant or even become painful. In contrast, dark zones are perceived as a relative obstacle to spatial orientation, unless other factors create particular conditions under which a person will consider dusk, dim or total dark agreeable. Colours range among the most universally used devices to signify status, acceptance of social rules, aesthetic and moral values, etc. Building on the physiological apparatus and on social conventions alike, the visual thus represents one of the most differentiated and powerful fields of orientation and codification in the religious domain as in society in general.

Needless to say, socio-cultural systems do not follow straightforwardly from physiological antecedents, although they cannot do without 'human nature'. Aesthetic regimes may value what is known in a given society to be 'natural' as man's ultimate destiny, or they may, in contrast, have an ambiguous view of 'human nature', and conceive much of it, including bodily perceptions and sensory-induced inclinations, as problematic and in need of correction or salvation. Consequently, the 'natural' is not necessarily the normative for any given social group; but it represents an inevitable starting point, or raw material of sorts, on which social rules and conventions are construed and sedimented in terms of tradition and habitus. Applying this insight to the study of religion's, the researcher's task is to analyze whether and how particular groups deal with various dimensions of sensory perception, whether and how they hierarchize, arrange and direct different senses, which particular sensory formation or regime they favour and try to obtain in order to maximize among participants the peculiar kinds of religious experience they are promoting. Within such a general framework, sight, the visual, visuality and visual culture represent one important dimension of religious aesthetics. It is also the very foundation on which religious imagination (on which see most recently

¹⁵ Interestingly enough, a main impetus for progress in digital media technology came from the need to accommodate visual information (still and animated images) which requires far greater storage and treatment capacities than sound or text. There is a paradox in the fact that visual media allow the simultaneous treatment of highly complex information but are often considered to significantly *reduce* complexity in communication. It may well be that the sheer speed of mental information treatment creates an illusion of lesser complexity, and thus of little need for reflective post-processing.

Traut & Wilke 2015) can operate – and certainly one of the most powerful conditioners of religious emotions and experience.

Gaze, scopic regimes, and image practices

I may mention one further topic of study which relates to the sense of sight as much as to cultural convention and rules of sociability. Studies in art history have theorized long ago the “period eye” (Baxandall 1972) as much as various “ways of seeing” (Berger 1972; Guins, Kristensen & Pui San Lok [eds] 2012), thus connecting perception with historically contingent conditions of seeing and looking. This has given rise to a plethora of critical reflections on “gaze” (Olin 2003; see Morgan 2005), “practices of looking” (Sturken & Cartwright 2001) as well as ethical and political commitments in viewing and looking (Bal 2005). What we see and how we look at it is much more than mere perception the result of particular, socially negotiated, conditioned and acquired habits. It relates directly to the visual regime of a given society and to its negotiation of the boundaries between public and private.

Languages distinguish between and often hierarchize different types of seeing (in English: to behold, notice, regard, sight, view, witness etc.) and of looking (to contemplate, eye, gaze, glance, glimpse, inspect, scrutinize, search, stare etc.). Social groups define and regulate what may or may not be seen as much as what should or must be seen, by whom under what conditions or circumstances, and which way of seeing and of looking may be considered compulsory, desirable, tolerable, inappropriate or transgressive. To paraphrase and modify one famous sentence of Molière’s *Tartuffe*: *Cachez ce voile que je ne saurais tolérer*.¹⁶ Dealing with the religious field, socially-minded scholars of religion may ask whether and how they can observe particular regimes of seeing, looking and gazing within particular religious groups, traditions, and cultures, and how society disciplines and regulates the ways members with particular religious orientation may, should or must not appear in the public sphere.

Much in the manner of ritual systems, visual and, in this regard, *scopic regimes* may be reinforced through emphasis and repetition. They may shape the ways of showing, seeing and gazing of many on the level of a largely unreflected habitus. Alternatively, they may be very consciously conceived and directed by some in the interest of producing and promoting a sense of truth, ritual validity, community etc. Think of how important TV screenwriters are for conditioning and packing up for global consumption mass liturgies at Saint Peter’s in Rome, to mention but one example. Such image policies and politics are of course not a phenomenon restricted to modern mass media. They can be studied in any context where the notion of ‘polity’ or community applies, and they represent just one among many types of practices operating with and through images or visual culture in general, practices that have been aptly theorized as “image acts” by Liza Bakewell (1998) and others (Bräunlein 2004; Bredekamp 2010). Needless to say, when it comes to acting with images and visual artifacts, scholars should not only study the *visual* features of images, but also their material characteristics and, indeed, their actual materiality, which lends substance and reality to religious belief and practices (Finke 2014).

¹⁶ « Couvrez ce sein, que je ne saurais voir. Par de pareils objets les âmes sont blessées; et cela fait venir de coupables pensées. » (*Tartuffe*, III, 2, vv. 860-862) – notice the emphasis put on religious vocabulary and emotion (the breast being disqualified as a transgressive object violating the soul and stirring up a sense of fault).

Material Religion as a sequel to Visible Religion?

Fifteen years after the last volume of *Visible Religion* had been published, a new academic journal made its appearance which, while obviously representing an important initiative in itself, may be considered from a distance to be a sequel of sorts to the once Groningen-based project. The new initiative was first launched in the U.S. before reaching out to old Europe. It owes much to the seminal work of David Morgan (see his numerous studies listed at the end of this article) who since the 1990s has studied the visual culture especially of North American religion and coined such incisive terms as “visual piety”, “sacred gaze” or “embodied eye”, which immediately resonate with many issues outlined in this article. Morgan has edited *Key Words in Religion, Media and Culture* (2008), a standard reference for easy conceptual orientation on many matters here discussed. A few years earlier, he contributed an entry on “Visual Culture and Religion” to the *Encyclopedia of Religion’s* second edition (2005), which nicely compares to Hans Kippenberg’s 1987 entry on “Iconography as Visible Religion” reprinted in the same edition.¹⁷ Whether we should assume a direct filiation from *Visible Religion* to *Material Religion* or not, it is quite obvious that the new journal reoccupies, develops and extends academic territory that had remained untilled when the Groningen initiative was discontinued.

According to the journal’s programmatic mission statement published in the first issue, *Material Religion* was put forward as a

“new project in the study of religious images, objects, spaces, and material practices. (...) *Material Religion* sets out to consider religion through the lens of its material forms and their use in religious practice. (...) This journal represents a widespread discernment that religion is fundamentally material in practice and that a fruitful approach to studying this aspect of religion will be robustly interdisciplinary. (...) In the spirit of their interdisciplinary effort, the Editors of this journal believe that the study of texts should be joined to the study of objects, spaces, images, and all the practices that put these items to use in order to arrive at a more robust account of how religion works in the lives of its adherents and in the societies that shape and are shaped by a religion.” (Editorial Statement 2005: 5-6)

The editorial statement emphasized that the journal should be concerned with meaning and meaning making, but that the concept of meaning transcends preoccupation with texts and communication through language:

“Material things, places, and practices evoke modes of experience that are not equal to the reading of texts. ‘Meaning’ may be reduced simply to the parsing of words or their conceptual interpretation. Things and practices mean in ways that texts do not. Moreover, words combine with

¹⁷ The 2005 edition has two pages of “Further Considerations” (with additional bibliography) by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, who notes that scholars of religion (among them Morgan) have “begun a transfer of interest from the traditional focus of iconographic analysis to new categories of engagement”, of which she mentions “popular culture” and “visual culture”. She also points to “the significance of optics and vision as communicators of cultural values and ideas” (Apostolos-Cappadona 2005). Only a few entries on iconography in particular religious traditions were significantly updated (most notably, the one on Jewish iconography), but those on Buddhist and Daoist iconography were rewritten and an entry on Confucian iconography added. Taken together, the comparison of the first and second edition of the *Encyclopedia* demonstrates very uneven developments from 1987 to 2005 in the various areas considered, and a major conceptual switch of attention from “iconography” to “visual culture”.

things to create even richer, more embodied forms of experience that must be scrutinized in order to capture the complex sense of religious meaning-making.” (ibid. 6)

Complexity invites interdisciplinary study and discussion, and the editors expressly wished “to help build bridges” (ibid. 7-8) between various approaches to and accounts of religion. Yet they were also anxious to stress originality and innovation, making clear that they were pursuing another goal than earlier, more conventional endeavours:

“Iconography is a highly useful way of reading images by setting them beside texts of various kinds, but it is limited to ascertaining the intentions of the image-maker or the patron. As important as that is, it is far too narrow for the scope this journal as well as much scholarship and exhibition practice over the last several decades. Stylistic analysis, long the mainstay of art history and museum curators, while an essential tool in the study of objects, is unable to conduct the kind of cultural interpretation that many wish to undertake. The undertaking to collect, evaluate, and exhibit masterpieces and works of artistic genius remains a major role of museums and galleries around the world, particularly as art and artists are nationalized and regarded as the patrimony of ethnic peoples or nation-states. But this filter completely misses – indeed, deliberately ignores – popular and mass-produced imagery and objects and the host of religious practices that rely on such items. It has also often reduced religious images to historical or aesthetic artifacts, failing to account for their role in the living tradition of a community’s life.” (ibid. 7)

The statement calls for a few comments. Iconography is here considered in a very narrow sense, and iconology not even hinted at; hence the statement does neither fit nor hit the study of images along the Warburg-Panofsky-Gombrich lineage. To be sure, iconography generally insists on the production side of artistic practice, studying intentionality of patrons and image-makers rather than image-users. But as a matter of fact, there *are* good reasons not to disregard patrons and their intentions, and image-makers and their skills, lest we ignore what Baxandall so aptly theorized as “patterns of intention”. Moreover, as I have mentioned earlier, scholars of religion as much as other historians are sometimes left with no other data than the artifacts themselves. Should we keep hands away from such evidence only because we do not know what role the object may have played “in the living tradition of a community’s life”?

On the other hand, to be interested in iconography and iconology does not prevent per se the student of visual culture to be equally concerned with processes of reception and the attribution of new meanings and functions to images in primary or secondary contexts of consumption – as far as data and evidence can possibly carry. I readily agree that religion-minded visual culture studies should not content themselves with stylistic analysis or the valuation of so-called masterpieces only. But why should we exclude the Sistine Chapel from the historical study of visual and material culture relating to religion? To be sure, one’s scholarly interest may be more attracted by the perspective of studying popular response to contemporary trivia (the term being used here without any value judgment). But mass-produced objects also deserve to be studied in terms of iconography and iconology, production interests, patterns of intention, meaning and function. As a matter of fact, it would be mistaken to reserve such methods only for so-called masterpieces. To extend our attention to popular visual culture, to matters of agency and to the many responses on behalf of viewers and users, to generally conceive visual culture in terms of communication, media and the pragmatics of meaning making does not force us to throw out the baby with the bath and to disregard what useful and valuable methods earlier approaches to iconography, iconology, and stylistic analysis have to

offer. Wouldn't that result in a deliberate choice of ignorance? In my view, the above-quoted statement opens mistaken alternatives, which I am not prepared to step in since the path it invites to follow seems narrower than the one it rejects.

"We understand by 'material religion' not only great works of art and temples, but all the things believers do with them. We understand material religion to include pilgrimages, image-guided meditation, the spaces that house shamanistic transport, spirit possessions, divination, or liturgical worship, the objects to which memory and genealogy are keyed, the costumes in which ancestors are invoked, the images that make aesthetic experience a spiritual encounter, the devotional paraphernalia that grandparents and priests give as gifts to the young, the bumper stickers that invoke deities, and the objects that serve as amulets to ward off evil or summon benevolence. All of these objects and their uses constitute examples of lived religion. Their 'meaning' is not contained merely in the object or its imagery, but in how they are used, and reused, forgotten, broken, salvaged, or ensconced in museums. Meaning, as we understand it, is dynamic and forever unfinished. The proper approach to its study, therefore, will be practice centered, focusing on reception no less than production, and perpetually asking socially minded questions about objects and practices." (ibid. 7)

I could not agree more and think that what is here presented as *Material Religion's* programmatic aim promises valuable progress beyond the results of earlier *Visible Religion*. The main stress of the critical study of religion should indeed be on "socially minded questions". However, if we should "focus on reception *no less than* production" (my emphasis), it remains legitimate, indeed obligatory to investigate production. This is of particular concern to the historian anthropologist, who cannot easily set out to interview the masses, nor, for that matter, talk to long-passed patrons or image-producers. In many instances, he or she cannot but to patiently concentrate on the single stuff at hand, that is, material and visual artifacts themselves. Needless to say, they should whenever possible be critically investigated within their ancient context carefully documented.

One further statement should perhaps also be reconsidered:

"By material religion we intend not simply what people think about their images, but what the images or objects or spaces themselves do, how they engage believers, what powers they possess, and in what manner a community comes to rely on them for the vitality and stability of belief." (ibid. 7)

Again, the alternative offered to the readers is mistaken if it excludes the more conventional concern with what people might think about their images – after all, thinking is a social practice and one should indeed ask socially minded questions about that practice, too. But my major skepticism concerns the way this quote tends to attribute independent agency to images, objects and spaces, that is to say without explicit reference to the social fabric of agency attribution. The *Sprachspiel* is of course well known to the student of religion since routinely uttered by believers. But unless we become believers ourselves in New Age epistemology, we should not let such neo-metaphysical jargon enter the critical study of religion.

The latter comment may sound unnecessary harsh, or to betray some epistemological dogmatism. Let me make clear that I am most sympathetic to *Material Religion* and the "mission" (see Meyer et al. 2011) it performs to the benefit of our discipline. I should also point out that a more recent editorial statement (Meyer et al. 2014) spells out a number of difficulties which the journal, to which one can only wish many returns, met during its first decade of existence. My only concern is to

raise a *caveat* against mistaken alternatives, since they may produce new exclusions instead of building bridges. As mentioned in the introduction, the critical study of religion's has yet to perform its visual (and, for that matter, material) turn. Unless a real paradigm shift occurs, academic progress is very much a matter of extension, correction and reconfiguration of steadily adapted methods and insights, however perfectible they may be, rather than of revolutionary enthusiasm. Consequently, if we want to move on in the large field of visual culture and religion, we should neither reinvent nor break the wheels that will be needed for further transportation.

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