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Religion-ing/Religion: Tempting Since Aesthetically Irresistible: A Response to Susan Henking* by Anne Koch

was originally published in

What is religion? / Aaron W. Hughes. – New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021. – pp. 77–82

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190064976.003.0005>

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Religion-ing/Religion*: Tempting Since Aesthetically Irresistible: A Response to Susan Henking

Anne Koch

My respondent, Susan Henking, puts the work of defining into a performative “religion-ing,” similar to the “mystagogue didactics” in cultural study of religion classes in which students have to complete the phrase “Religion is . . .” before and after the course. This reiterated practice and “disruptive classification”—she cites here Susan Mizruchi—is vital on both levels, the object level of historical and political negotiation on religion and the scholarly metalevel of religion-ing leading to understandings about the theoretical issue under changing frameworks. Religion-ing is a contested *practice*. It is an axiom of present social theory to self-imagine as permanently negotiating. Since populations are “societies” of autonomous, individual “citizens,” anything and everything has to be evolved from these atoms of power or smallest “systems.”

Another aspect that could be relevant is the historical emic ascriptions of religion within a population and reciprocal ascriptions of religion equivalents between groups, nations, and cultures, which are as much actions of “nam-ing” as they are reactions on a practical level situated in commerce, marriage laws, dietetics, hospitality routines, etc. They all constitute this discourse around “religion” and reiterate and innovate pattern thereby. With “deconstruction” as the overall way of approaching historical issues, there seems no other way—at least in Western post/colonial scholarship—but to work and overwork, revise and counter-read definitions and central conceptualizations. To mark this fluidity of the conceptual field—that “religion” is an empty signifier to be filled again and yet again—I will take up Henking’s suggestion to talk of “religion-ing,” the performance, and add the suggestion to put an asterisk next to the term, i.e., “religion*,” highlighting the semantic pattern or *topoi* we observe in this deconstructive work, involving fields beyond and other than the “religious.” In this way, with the asterisk-term, we are well equipped to look for even more expanding cultural patterns or to follow their way across societal domains independent from their being named “religion.”

To fulfill this task, scholars of meaning-making in the study of religion have come up with a certain understanding of this object and dissect this imagined theoretical entity into parts to handle them one by one in their complex intertwining of (a) semantics, (b) social structures, and—as I want to add and also expand on a bit more here—(c) aesthetics. Each of these fields has several specialized theories at hand.

Semantic and Structural Dimensions of the Defined

Let's briefly start with the first two: semantic and structural particularities of religion-ing and religion* today. My own research professorship is titled "for interreligiosity"—a title by which we are immediately catapulted into the middle of postmodern times and their somehow typical quarrels over pluralism, especially since monotheism became the paradigm against polytheism. The wording of the title may have derived from such common ways of talking of interreligious dialogue/initiatives (semantics)—a mostly lopsided action format in which religious institutions were guided to arrange themselves in the context of a more and more secular society (structure). Peace building and (postwar) reconciliation work are common tasks ascribed to religious organizations and initiatives engaging with other such organizations. One could even say that it is a kind of civil and public expectation toward religious agents to engage in this type of religion-ing. Toward this background, the title may be perceived as a rather wishful denotation of the fact of religious plurality with the felt obligation or responsibility to work for peace and stability by knowing more about "interreligion-ing." This seems probable as I work at a university college of education subordinated to the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science, and Research, being at the same time a private university college run by a Catholic diocese. Therefore, there is a double interest of understanding interreligion-ing by yielding data and interpretations on current transformations.

Here already are two perceptions of religion-ing/religion*: first as plural and, as a second important feature in the sense of sociological differentiation theory, of religion* that is distinct from other societal domains like law, politics, science, education, and quite generally from mere complementary delineations like the "secular" or "nonreligious." As with the example of my title, I name only the distinctive features of special moral, perhaps only functionally imagined, tasks and the special knowledge of religious agents about

their own tradition and an assumed interest in other religious traditions. Further features of religion-ing/religion* occur within the discourse of 9/11—a cultural icon by itself—that brings some old conceptual connections anew into the game: religion* is violent; religion* is irrational, at least with some then near-threatened groups; and religion* that is pure, peaceful, and impeccable may (easily) be “misused” by politics.

From the many and interesting aspects my respondent lays out for relevant links of definitional work, let us step further only in one direction that might be promising and that is somehow neglected and maybe even old-fashioned at first glance: aesthetics in the context and as part of philosophical anthropology. Let us introduce an aesthetic subject and revise the “good old” hermeneutical subject that for so long drove academia (at least from its empowerment in the emerging natural sciences in early modern times and then even more clearly playing a role during the Enlightenment). Let us ask: Who—which subject—is doing science? How do we imagine ourselves when engaging in science? And, connected to this, is our imagination of our observed subjects the same as the image we make up of ourselves?

The Aesthetic Temptation of Religion-ing/Religion*

The aesthetic subject is gifted with *aisthesis*, which means “perception” in ancient Greek philosophy. Perceiving of a world is so basic that most concepts of space, valuation of social status, and self-image are sensorially imprinted. Philosophy of mind calls this view enactivism. Susan Henking cites George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s (1980) book *Metaphors We Live By*, which lays out how basic aesthetic patterns—spatial and motor-sensorial perceptions—still lead a life in language. Quite a few of our metaphorical concepts still carry their origin in the senses and have an impact even on epistemic reasoning. The book was an early popularization from cognitive linguistics of what is theorized now as “embodied cognition.” From the perspective of embodied cognition, the subject—the observed subject, same as the scholarly one—deeply changes and has deeply changed the paradigm of knowledge compared to the rational subject or the hermeneutic subject. In phenomenology of religion, for instance, a hermeneutic subject was preeminently in use that, on the one hand, is aware of its constitutive role in conceiving the world in relation to its interests and its limited perspective of a life-world (horizon), but, on the other hand, reconstructs phenomena, experiences, and its world

in a propositional way. That is, the hermeneutic subject autonomously sketches the world according to its ability to emphasize, verbalize, and discover rules and regularities—even if not in an arbitrarily subjective but socially instructed way.

As compared with this, the aesthetic subject—as we will deploy the term—is inextricably entangled in its sensorial-social-material situatedness (“situated cognition”) that does not come wholly into explicit awareness and is not wholly propositional. According to Manuel A. Vasquez (2017: 413), religion is “in the flesh,” and the “efficacy of religion” cannot be explained without taking the senses and the lived body into account. He explains this with the help of the so-called ecological theory of perception that especially focuses on the enacted environment, a method called “emplacement.” The communication with supernatural beings or forces from gods or goddesses to the universal grid and healing energies is perceived and learned within sensorial worlds. The “meeting point” with these forces is referred to in numerous ways, including “material forms” of mediation with media (Meyer and Verrips 2008: 25), “sensational forms” (which only means those learned perceptive patterns that mediate with the “divine” or “transcendental” [Meyer 2009]), or—as I would suggest as a less ambiguous term—“interface” (Koch 2007: 217–220). The interface between the aesthetic subject and the world/energies/forces is conceptualized as a transit zone and an in-between that can come along with a desubjectivized feeling or the transferring of agency to the spiritual forces or material surroundings that “afford” the acting subject in a particular way (like cowering against tree branches, adapting eyes to sudden shade between buildings).

The aesthetic subject has a key position in aesthetics of religion. This recent approach of an aesthetics of religion views “religion as a sensory and mediated practice” and an “*interplay* of sensory, cognitive and socio-cultural aspects of world-construction” (Grieser and Johnston 2017: 1–2). It asks “how religions in their variety become ‘effective’ on the levels of intellect, emotions, intuition and sensation” (2) and how “the senses [are] stimulated, governed and disciplined” (2). Putting an interpretive priority on the aesthetics of religion over the semantic, “perceiving and meaning making are viewed as a continuum” from this perspective, but, at the same time, the aesthetics of religion yields results “beyond a symbolic understanding of aesthetic forms” (2). This endeavor of joining cultural and cognitive studies in aesthetics of religion is taken up by the contributions of more than twenty international scholars in a recent handbook that “historize[s] perceptual

categories and sensorial figurations, revealing a *longue durée* of the history of aesthetic formations and corresponding institutional features” (Koch and Wilkens 2019: 1).

In this sense very briefly outlined here, the real temptation of religion-ing/religion* is its aesthetic attractiveness and the challenge to theorize it. Religion-ing is a sensorial process that is set on a timeline with a rhythm, a pathway of sensory stimulations and the reward by body-produced substances like cortisol, adrenaline, and oxytocin. It is the chronological order of ritual action, the fine-tuned dramaturgy, the synchronization of a body of people in joint speech, and the successful closing and applauding of the narrative that strongly satisfies participants and motivates them to repeat these practices over and over again (Koch 2019). Understanding body practices as psycho-techniques, the intertwinement of social cognition, and the dimension of body knowledge are prerequisites to reconstructing religion-ing/religion,* as is the analysis of its semantics and social structure.

Besides the decision of how a theory conceives of and pictures the cognizing subject, a second aspect is especially crucial for the aesthetic epistemology in focus here, that is of a more general and power-critical relevance. With the rise of the study of culture and the need for a cultural hermeneutics, epistemology broadened the smaller scope of philosophical standard epistemologies that mainly employ formal logical and mathematical categories. Cultural studies has significantly demonstrated the requirement to expand the analysis of knowledge beyond explicit, “known” knowledge to embodied and situated forms. These situated conformations can endure in historical and institutional arrangements. By this, one understands that institutions mirror convictions of a society that are anchored in the manner these institutions perform basic cognitive procedures. An example would be the gendering and segregation of seating space in religious buildings that sometimes mirrors a sexual binary and reflects opinions on dominance by visibility and access options or privacy by being visually or even acoustically shielded. Michel Foucault famously outlined such embodied forms of governance in his oeuvre. In this sense, cultural studies epistemology becomes a theory of genealogical *epistemes*, which are historical frameworks of the thinkable/effable/knowable/practicable. Epistemology at present cannot be thought of except as the outcome and permanent performance of social negotiation (Fricker 2009) and, I would add, of aesthetico-social negotiation.

So, we see, how much depends on how we imagine the subject when religion-ing!

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